

Jason Donaldson, former Platoon Sergeant and Founder of Equilibrium Risk, discusses the skills required to become a successful close protection officer and the adverse situations to be prepared for

VIP PROTECTION

In order to become a highly effective VIP or close protection officer (CPO), an individual must be professional, discreet, client-focussed, adaptable and media focussed. A close protection service encompasses a variety of elements, including keeping a close eye over others and protecting them against life-threatening emergencies. Keeping a low profile and remaining as unobtrusive as possible is also vital, along with a high level of integrity and trustworthiness.

There is a wide range of reasons why an individual may require close protection services. Once seen as the preserve for a person of high net worth, a celebrity, political figure or business person, private close protection officers are now in demand for an increasing range of clients. Since there is a certain degree of danger linked to the profession, a bodyguard should ideally have experience gained from the military, police or other security-related environment. A person with capabilities gained from these professions will likely be able to adapt to the role quickly and perform his or her duties to the highest standard.

Many service leaders view close protection as a natural progression after serving on the frontline. This is likely due to the advanced skills obtained with military training and the familiarity with extended periods of time away from home. Familiarisation with firearms, covert operations and strategic planning also makes them ideal candidates.

As well as the hard skills of vehicle searching and operating in hostile environments, former military personnel have soft skills such as teamwork and discipline, which are transferrable to close protection work. After spending a significant amount of time in the army, an ex-soldier working in the private security sector will recognise a similar camaraderie and sense of achievement; this is often what attracts personnel into the close protection industry.

Excellent communication skills, verbal and gestural, are also a requirement. Making speedy decisions and acting fast in times of crisis inevitable. Hiring a bodyguard with a weak sense of judgement could be detrimental to a client's wellbeing and safety in an emergency situation. A good CPO can spot an opportunist a mile away; they are well trained to understand people's psychologies and predict dangerous behaviours. Equally, a CPO will come into contact with a range of different people from varying backgrounds; for this reason, they must be sensitive to different cultures and customs.

Being physically fit and in good health is also essential. Due to the nature of the job, if an attack does take place, the close protection officer must be fit enough and trained to a standard where they can deal with any situation. Though not required to be physically large, a CPO must be strong enough to defend their

client and ward off potential threats.

In today's current political climate, the role of the close protection officer has never been more relevant. A rise in terrorist threat has led to a boom in the close protection industry; but the actual role of the bodyguard is somewhat different to the image portrayed in the media.

Body guarding is highly dramatised in action films and television and as a result the life of a close protection officer is often misinterpreted by the general public. Close protection is not all glamour and glitz. In contrast, the role of a real-life bodyguard consists mainly of pre-planning safe routes and escorting clients on their day-to-day activities. In reality, VIP protection is far removed from the romanticised ideal depicted in Hollywood movies.

When CPO's visit a venue in advance they will check security, plan entrance and exit routes and occasionally check for bugging and explosive devices. If they spot a threat, they will calmly steer their client away from danger as discreetly and safely as possible.

Close protection reduces the threat of harm against an individual; providing a high level of security against theft, assault, harassment, kidnapping and much more.

Wealthy clients face the threat of kidnapping or the kidnapping of their children, so some protection officers are employed to do the school run. There is also the risk of attempted assassination if they are a well-known figure. In some cases it may be more about a perceived threat than an actual one.

A close protection operative can also take on other not-so glamorous roles including a driver, a PA and sometimes even protect clients in their own home. When providing protection out of a client's home, a CPO will monitor mail deliveries, visitors, telephone calls and alarm systems.

Although much of a CPO's time can involve periods of inactivity, they must be constantly alert and ready to respond to a threatening situation. To achieve this, they liaise constantly with other security professionals. They may work in teams, using specialist communication equipment to maintain contact.

Ultimately, the job is to do exactly as the client says, use confidentiality and offer protection. This may mean waiting by the car for hours, standing by their side, or carrying their shopping bags.

The first step to becoming a close protection officer includes truly understanding the varied nature of the work. Putting yourself in danger is a prerequisite of the role and unlike the stereotype that is often assumed, an aggressive personality is certainly not desirable. This position requires an avoidance of conflict and a good grasp of threat and risk mitigation.

The UK law requires that any close protection professional must have been through approved training



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Barack Obama is closely flanked by close protection officers



and been granted a licence from industry regulator, the Security Industry Authority (SIA). No minimum educational qualifications are required for entry into this industry. However, some employers do specify a Maths and English GCSE. There is a growing number of companies running training courses; the key is to research to find a suitable and reputable provider. Training with a well-established company with a good reputation will help gain a foothold in the industry.

Many break into the industry through personal contacts already within the close protection circuit. With many close protection officers working for themselves, contract lengths can vary considerably. Networking will often aid the search for opportunities

in close protection.

Many CPOs go on to progress their careers in close protection, becoming security consultants, where their role involves the planning and management of operations. Continuing to focus on personal development is also worth the time, effort and expenditure; allowing an operative to become more competitive in the workplace and highly employable. Enhancing a CPOs expertise can include undergoing medical training, weapons disarming, anti-terrorism techniques or surveillance.

Largely dominated by male operatives, the close protection profession is always in need of female officers. The SIA recently stated that there is a small

VIP PROTECTION

but growing number of women now entering this profession. Additionally, female CPOs are often used in covert situations or where the client requires an operative to easily blend in as a member of the family or a girlfriend. Many Middle Eastern clients in London often prefer female bodyguards to accompany their wives, and it can also be easier for women to work with children.

Close protection is not for everyone. A CPO can expect unsociable hours, early starts and late finishes, along with last minute calls to work, requiring them to drop everything and head to wherever duty calls.

Often, people mistake other security professionals such as security guards for having identical skills to a bodyguard. However, these are two completely different professions, requiring an entirely separate set of skills.

A security guard will perform low-level security procedures, within a car park, shopping mall, nightclub

etc. Whereas a CPO will risk their lives to protect clients, confronting hazardous and potentially harmful situations.

Body armour for CPOs can vary between posts. Available in covert and overt styles, a CPO's uniform exists in multiple levels of protection. They also have the advantage of being customisable with pockets for extra equipment, logos and insignia. Whatever the choice, options are available to ensure that operatives remain flexible, comfortable and protected.

Employing a CPO is an extremely smart measure for ensuring safety and protection. There are around 5,000 close protection officers working in the UK. Although demand is steady, there are more applications for jobs than vacancies; meaning the industry is highly competitive. Being mostly freelance, employment stability for CPOs can vary. Ultimately it all comes down to reputation and experience.

Jason Donaldson is the founder and managing director of Equilibrium Risk, a specialist security and risk management company. His extensive military background has provided him with a wealth of knowledge in hostile and threatening situations

The key to being a good CPO is understanding the varied nature of the work

