



# HIDE AND SEEK

US Marines use a satellite phone to make contact with their families

**Rupert Godesen** explains the importance of having a decent tracking device and highlights four models worth considering

**S**ometimes the greatest lessons come from a disaster, as you're forced by circumstances to sit up and take notice or action. In an ideal world, it would be better to learn from others' mistakes, but life doesn't always work that way. When I began working for myself I put a memo on my phone to back up my hard drives at the end of every week. I did it once (felt smug) and then the reminder just became another annoying buzz in my pocket, which I came to ignore, until down the line and "bang" an electric surge went through my hard drive. The cold sweat crept down my neck as I did the maths and I realised

that this disaster wasn't going to be measured in months, but a year or even two. When I took it to the computer guy he sagely nodded and said: "Well sir, you're not alone, it happens to most people only once". Very helpful, thanks.

Years later (and a bit wiser) I was chatting with a client on a pleasant sunny afternoon, cups of tea in hand. Not far off his staff were being shouted at, at a vehicle checkpoint at the culmination of a HEAT course. The Arab Spring was ongoing and stories were circulating that one or two crisis responders had been caught out when they couldn't get their clients' staff out of Libya.

The result had been red faces and some very annoyed

clients whose staff had been left stranded. My client asked me if we had an ops room full of serious looking ex-soldiers (like some scene from a Jason Bourne movie) who were just waiting to kick into action once one of his team got into a sticky situation. I replied: "No, we concentrate on the situational awareness side of the training. But I can certainly recommend a couple of very good companies that I like and who have watched over me when I was overseas".

I must confess, in the past I had always been a bit dubious about how useful tracking gadgets and ops rooms really were. After all, even if you knew where your charges were last seen or heard from, what practical use was it to you half way around the world looking at a screen? Was travel tracking just a case of the emperor's new clothes? We all went along with it because the alternative was to admit (to our client) that there was precious little we can do in certain situations. If we had done, they probably wouldn't have been our clients for much longer. So I thought it was high time to look into some of the gadgets responders recommend and how useful they are.

It must be said that tracking devices in isolation, are not the silver bullets that some clients believe them to be, they first need to get some professional advice as to what's right for them. They need to be tested and used in conjunction with other platforms to support the traveller.

## PRESS FOR HELP AND THE RESPONSE TEAM WILL BE FURNISHED WITH YOUR NAME AND CO-ORDINATES

I did some consulting for an organisation sending their staff to work in a dodgy part of the world. I was tasked with briefing the team before they travelled to the site, conduct some first aid and security training, look at their plans and contingencies and advise them on the next steps.

I set off from Heathrow at some ungodly hour of the morning, three flights and a 12-hour mountainous drive later I dropped my grip in the foyer of the office. Only to discover that the team had grown impatient (keen to win favour with and impress the pushy boss) and had gone ahead a week earlier and were now missing and uncontactable.

There had been a contingency plan, but it had more holes than a sieve. The leader had insisted they push further on past their stated objective, he had brow beaten the younger members who had little appetite (despite being scared) for making an enemy of him so early in their careers with the company.

It didn't end well for the team or the company sadly. Sifting through the evidence later I found the packaging and instruction booklets of the sat phones along with half the phones in the foot well of the car they'd used. The handsets weren't charged and I suspected the staff didn't know how to use them anyway. Later one of the staff confidently told me that they'd not taken them because they wouldn't have worked anyway in the cloud.

It must be partly our responsibility if we recommend or provide these devices, that our clients know how to

use them and are clear about their capabilities and limitations. We don't want them thinking that they can just press the button and seconds later will feel that hot Avgas down draught of a helicopter as Seal Team Six fast rope in to rescue them.

**So, what kind of devices do people go for?**

### PEARL POCKET BUDDY

One of the most commonly used personal trackers is the Pearl Pocket Buddy. Mercifully it is very easy to set up for an individual traveller and has an astonishing number of features for such a small device. With current GPS wizardry inside its sleek lightweight shell, it can lay a breadcrumb trail refreshed every minute and is accurate down to just 5 metres.

It can geo fence your route so if you have approved routes or indeed out of bounds areas, your monitoring station will be alerted if your colleagues stray into one of these areas. If your team are unfamiliar with their surroundings, their driver didn't listen to the brief or if something more sinister happens, the ops room will know. The alert can be followed up with a phone call or message, which will enable the response team to escalate their actions until you're located.

Pocket Buddy has an internal motion sensor, triggered if you fall over suddenly or stop abruptly (in an RTC or an ambush) in which case a message will be sent to the Ops Room. A covert one-button alert so you can activate it without any telltale beeps. In some cases it might be more sensible/useful to alert someone locally rather than in London or New York, so Pocket Buddy has four reprogrammable phone numbers so you can choose who you alert. Unlike a bulky phone or GPS, you can secrete it about your person if abducted or subject to a brief or long detention.

Should the worst happen and you press for help, the response team will be immediately furnished with your name, number, date, time and lat/long co-ordinates. All of which is vital information that they can utilise to start a search. You can just imagine how difficult it would be without this head start.

### INREACH SE

Holding it in the palm of your hand, the inReach SE feels a lot like a cross between a classic handheld GPS and a mobile phone, with the addition of a stubby antenna on the top. But users must remember that it isn't in fact a satellite phone even if it looks like one. You can communicate via text and email, but you can't make or receive calls. Like the smaller Pocket Buddy it has a four-day battery life, but also comes with some other cool features. Users are able to send and receive 160-character messages and can even access Twitter.

It has that all-important one-button alert that will immediately send your coordinates along with the time and date and your name to your responder. But you'll also get a message that will follow an activation just in case you've pressed it in your pocket by mistake and want to stand down the response.

I have heard of very expensive call outs where ski-mountaineers (safely back at their desks in the city)



▶ have had their beacons accidentally activated in their homes by luggage being moved around. This resulted in a knock on the door of their home in the small hours with a puzzled responder who was none to pleased, along with a follow-up bill that probably made the eyes water.

**IRIDIUM GO**

If you'd prefer to just take your smartphone and don't want a daysack full of additional handsets and chargers, you could add to its capability by turning it into a satellite phone. The Iridium Go is a sturdy no nonsense device, which is ruggedised to a military specification and water resistant to Ingress Protection (IP65). Simply flip open the antenna, pop it on the dashboard, balcony, rock or roof, turn it on and wherever you are (providing it can see the sky and you're not at the bottom of a well) it will connect to Iridium's network of 66 Low Earth Orbiting (LEO) satellites, allowing you to connect all your devices to the outside world as if you were sitting at your desk.

**IRIDIUM 9575 EXTREME**

Or you could just go for a good old-fashioned satellite phone, like the 9575 Extreme, which is in fact not in the least bit old fashioned. Weighing only 247g, it is fully programmable to your spec and can be

transformed with an extra device into a Wi-Fi hotspot as long as you're within sight of the aforementioned LEO satellites. The 9575 with its breadcrumb trail tracker and emergency button, is the all-singing all-dancing data, SMS and voice solution for a traveller that's not on too tight a budget.

Tracking devices such as the ones we've looked at are useful tools if your teams are going to areas where

**UNLIKE A BULKY PHONE OR GPS, YOU CAN SECRETE IT ABOUT YOUR PERSON IF YOU'RE EVER ABDUCTED**

they need to stay connected, but only if your staff are trained in their use. If the devices are looked after, if they are accompanied by a fully supported web-based travel safety system, a set of realistic protocols and procedures which are taken seriously, adhered to by the staff on the ground and of course supported by the stay-behind team. And all of this requires work, effort, planning and money.

Sometimes the greatest learning can come from a disaster, just make sure you learn from someone else's and it isn't them learning from yours ●

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**Pearl Pocket Buddy**

