

A GUIDE TO BODY ARMOR FOR JOURNALISTS AND REPORTERS



2015 JOURNALIST
PROTECTION

Introduction

Front line reporting places journalists in some of the most extreme, dangerous and volatile environments on the planet. It is essential that before entering a potentially threatening situation, you ensure that you have suitable, effective protection. There is more to body armor than initially meets the eye and there are certain considerations that must be made to ensure that your body armor is providing the right function for you. This guide will discuss the different threats that body armor is designed to guard against, as well as stylistic features that will allow you to perform as safely and efficiently as possible.

Background

Body armor is made by layering extremely strong, light and flexible materials such as Aramids (e.g. Kevlar) or UHMWPE (Ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene e.g. Dyneema). The treatment and quantity of the materials used will vary depending on the type and level of protection that each vest offers. Institutions such as CAST (Centre for Applied Science and Technology) in the UK and the NIJ (National Institute of Justice) in the USA are responsible for testing and grading the protective levels of body armor. As the most globally recognised standard, we will use the NIJ ratings in this guide. The level of protection that a piece of armor offers is representative of the severity of the threat that it should be used to guard against.

Types of Protection

There are 3 primary types of body armor that are designed to counter different threats. These are ballistic (bullets), stab (edged blades), and spike (needles, ice picks etc...). **It is important to note that each vest is designed and manufactured to counter a specific threat and that a bullet proof vest will not guarantee protection against edged blade, or spike weapons and vice versa.** You can, however, obtain multi-threat vests that are designed to guard against numerous types of attacks. Each type of protection has its own grading system:

Ballistic

The ratings for bullet proof vests range from soft level IIa (ideal for low level handguns such as a 9mm) to soft level IIIa (ideal for high powered handguns such as a .44MAG). For ballistic protection against higher calibre weapons, such as rifle rounds or armor piercing bullets, it is necessary to supplement your vest with hard armor plates. These can be rated at level III (standard AK47, 7.62 NATO round) and level IV (armor piercing rounds such as the .3006 AP).

Stab

The ratings for stab proof vests are based on the level of energy behind a blade and also the strength and construction of the blade. For instance, a larger blade will often exert a larger amount of force. These are available at either level 1 (24 joules), level 2 (33 joules) or level 3 (44 joules).

Spike

Similarly to stab, spike proof vests are rated based on the energy behind a pointed weapon, along with the strength of the weapon. Again, they are available at level 1 (24 joules), level 2 (33 joules) or level 3 (44 Joules).

Risk Assessment

With reporters covering stories all over the world, the range of threats that journalists face is extremely varied. It is necessary to carry out a risk assessment and tailor your body armor to suit your own personal situation. You should research both the type and level of threat that you are likely to encounter so that you know whether ballistic, stab, and/or spike protection is required. For low-violence areas, it is often preferable to wear lighter soft vests that offer a lower level of protection but are more practical for extended periods of use. In high risk environments such as a warzone, where there is a chance of rifle fire, it is imperative that you equip yourself with hard ballistic plates as a rifle round will pass straight through soft armor.

One of the biggest risks we see is journalists choosing the wrong solution to suit their personal situation. Two common cases to keep in mind:

1. Journalists who have armor that offers a lower level of protection than what they require. The dangers here are obvious; their equipment will not be sufficient to effectively counter the threat that they face and they will be in serious danger of getting hurt.
2. Journalists who have armor that offers an unnecessarily high level of protection i.e. full military armor in non-military situations. The issue here is that the armor is bulky, heavy and uncomfortable, and often it will not be worn due to this. The biggest risk is no armor at all being worn.

Multi-threat vests that protect against a combination of threats are ideal for those who cannot guarantee what kind of danger they might encounter. **There is a trade off between the following three variables: protection level, weight/comfort, and cost.** For a higher level of protection more materials are used, which increases the weight and price of your vest. For an additional cost, it is possible to get lighter solutions for any given protection level. It is important to ensure that your body armor is as well suited to your situation as possible: your safety must be prioritised above all else.

Choosing the correct level of protection is vital and should mirror the threats that you will face.

Style and Systems

There are two main styles of vest:

1. Overt: to be worn over clothing. These are often hard wearing, offer high levels of protection and are slightly bulky.
2. Covert: to be concealed beneath clothing. These are commonly lightweight, thin and offer varying levels of protection.

The choice is a personal one but each style is suited to different circumstances. Covert vests are ideal for periods of extended wear and it is often preferable for your body armor to be discreet, so as not to draw unnecessary attention.

However, in areas of high conflict, such as warzones, overt vests are often the more practical solution as they tend to offer high levels of protection and it is easier to attach additional protection to them. Evident protection can, in some instances, help to diffuse potentially volatile situations as would-be aggressors can see that you are well prepared to counter a threat.

A modular system may be the best option for a journalist who moves between high and low threat situations. Pouches on the soft vest allow you to supplement it with hard armor plates so you can strike a balance between comfort and high levels of protection as and when required. A modular system can be used with either overt or covert vests but the very nature of adding bulky plates to your vest may make your covert armor noticeable anyway. In high conflict areas, a potential solution is to wear

a covert ballistic vest at all times and to supplement it with an external hard plate carrier that can be put on when necessary.

Hard Armor Plates

Soft vests are very effective against handguns but they will not protect you from rifle rounds or other high powered fire that is common in areas of high conflict. In environments such as these, hard armor plates are a necessity. These hard ballistic plates can be manufactured from different materials, each with their own pros and cons. Two popular materials are:

1. **Ceramic Plates:** these offer a high level of protection and are the most cost efficient option. They do, however, require maintenance. They can be damaged during use and must be checked for cracks that may reduce their effectiveness. The ceramic plate stops the bullet by breaking it up before catching it with its backing materials. There are a range of backings to choose from and these help to increase absorption and protect the plate from accidental breakage. The standard weight of a 10"x12" plate is about 6.6lbs.
2. **Polyethylene Plates:** these are one of the lightest hard ballistic plates available. The weight of a Level III 10"x12" plate is approximately 2.6lbs. As a result, these plates can be expensive. They work by engulfing bullets. The heat caused by the friction from impact melts the plate which then, effectively, swallows the bullet. This method of protection means that these plates can withstand multiple hits.

IMPORTANT: In some non-NATO countries hardened steel cores may be used in some of their ammunition. In these instances, a weapon that is usually ranked at threat level III should be reclassified at level IV. When it comes to hard armor plates we would always recommend that you equip yourself with level IV unless you know with certainty that level III will suffice.

Conclusion

Body armor is constantly saving lives around the world. Choosing the right body armor to suit you is a personal decision and not one that should be taken lightly. Comfort and efficiency are both important considerations but, ultimately, your safety is the most important factor. This guide has discussed the fundamental differences between various types of armor but for any additional information or help from an expert please contact journalist@safeguardarmor.co.uk



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