

COMMENTS SHARE PRINT  92 TWEET



# HOSTAGE CAMP

BY MITCH MOXLEY







The day I fly from New York to Miami to attend a kidnap prevention and survival course, I read an article about a [foiled abduction](#) of two Americans at a barbershop in Yemen. The kidnappers, it turned out, had chosen their victims poorly: One was a United States Special Ops commando, the other a CIA officer, both attached to the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, Yemen's capital. The Americans shot and killed their would-be abductors. They had followed Andy "Orlando" Wilson's Golden Rule of surviving a kidnapping: Don't get kidnapped.

Wilson, a 43-year-old British Army veteran who once served in Northern Ireland, picks me up on a swampy morning at a Motel 6 in Dania Beach, a

suburb of Miami. He is the founder of [Risks Incorporated](#), a private security firm that offers a three-day kidnap and ransom course in which I'm enrolled. A skeptical man with a dark sense of humor who has worked in the security industry for two decades, Wilson moved to South Florida 13 years ago with his then-wife and never left. He has slicked-back hair, blue eyes, and stubble; he looks a bit like a world-weary Ralph Fiennes, with a few extra pounds.

As we drive to an office in nearby Pembroke Pines, Wilson briefs me on the burgeoning business of international kidnapping. The White House's [recent acknowledgment](#) of the accidental killing of two al-Qaida hostages in Pakistan in January, as well as the dark news from Syria in recent months, both overshadows and underscores the fact that kidnappings are a global scourge. As incidents have increased worldwide, a parallel industry has emerged, one that includes insurance companies, negotiators, lawyers, and security firms like Risks Inc. In a 2010 investigation, London's *Independent* newspaper [dubbed this the "hostage industry,"](#) and estimated its worth at about \$1.6 billion a year.

“You don’t have to be rich. People will kidnap you for next to nothing,” Wilson says. “Venezuela is out of control. Mexico is out of control.” Most of his clients for the Florida course are executives or wealthy individuals who live in high-risk areas, primarily in Latin America. (Wilson also offers the course in Belgrade, Serbia.) Other students have included American businessmen who travel to potentially dangerous locations, security contractors, and an international yacht captain. (Lambros Y. Lambrou, a trial lawyer in Manhattan and a father of two, took Wilson’s kidnap course to help ensure his family’s safety when they travel to countries like Mexico and Serbia, where his wife is from. “We live in a very uncertain world sometimes,” Lambrou says. “Unfortunately, most of the time the only person you have to protect you is yourself.”)

Risks Inc. is one of a few dozen private companies I had found that offer kidnap prevention and survival courses. Costs range from about \$600 to a couple thousand dollars. Some are entirely in a classroom; others include role-playing. (In one course I found, instructors take students into a forest, cover their heads with pillowcases, and shock them with Tasers during a

[mock interrogation](#).) Wilson’s course is somewhere in between: part tutorial, part field exercise, tailored to the needs of the client. The company’s [website](#) promises to “take you into the real world of terrorism and kidnap and ransom!”

In the car, Wilson tells me that the first part of the course stresses his Golden Rule. Many people end up kidnapped, he says, by putting themselves in vulnerable situations—getting into an unmarked cab at the airport in Caracas, Venezuela; visiting dangerous neighborhoods without protection; associating with criminals in any way—and by not being adequately prepared to handle those situations. Once you’ve been kidnapped, your life is completely in the hands of criminals who view it as a commodity, or worse, a statement. At that point, survival depends on luck, money, and some basic knowledge about kidnappings the course’s latter part purports to teach.

In a chilly conference room he’s rented, Wilson hands me a copy of a [book he wrote](#) about international security and a binder filled with printed news articles about him and his company. Among them are stories about an

incident in Mexico a few years ago when videos emerged of Wilson and his colleagues subjecting Mexican police to [forms of torture](#), including waterboarding. News outlets interviewed human rights advocates who accused Wilson of teaching Mexican cops how to torture. Wilson says it was the opposite: He was partly trying to teach them how to *resist* torture, but mostly he was attempting to convey to them the reality of the world they inhabit. “If we can break you with water, what the fuck do you think the cartel is going to do to you?” Wilson says. “It’s getting across to people: This isn’t a game.”

The day’s lecture begins with Wilson reinforcing that very point, presenting a slideshow of the bloody aftermath of a gangland shooting in Mexico. As I contemplate a photo of a man slumped in the driver’s seat of an SUV with his face shot off, the course’s second student arrives. He’s skinny and pale, dressed in a pastel polo and khaki shorts. I’ll call him Tommy. He shakes my hand, and I note a generous application of cologne.

“

**THE BEST KIDNAPPERS ARE NOT  
DUMB. THEY ARE SOPHISTICATED  
AND WELL ORGANIZED.**

”

---

Tommy takes a seat at the conference table, chewing loudly on a piece of gum. He tells us that he drove from his home across the Florida peninsula last night with his wife, who is pregnant with the couple’s second child. He’s previously attended one of Wilson’s firearms classes and has enrolled in the kidnap course in order to learn how to better protect his family—he considers it a Mother’s Day gift to his wife. He takes several small knives from his pockets and tosses them on the table. He had sent out a GPS flare from this phone to record his whereabouts upon arriving at the office, just in case.

Hunched over the conference table and flipping through slides on his computer, Wilson walks us through the nuts and bolts of personal security: Be aware of your surroundings; keep a low profile; don't wear anything flashy; always have an escape route; mix up your daily routine; watch for people watching you. "The basics of personal security is awareness and counter-surveillance," Wilson says. "One thing I want you to get in the mindset of during this course is how to think like the criminals." The best kidnapers, he says, are not dumb. They are sophisticated and well organized; they will trail targets for days and know exactly who they're after. The better you understand their methods, the better you can protect yourself. Periodically Wilson pauses and asks in his workingman's British accent, "Any questions?"

Although it's in his business interest to present the world as an inherently hostile place, he clearly believes it to be so, and his computer is filled with evidence to back it up. He turns his laptop screen toward us and plays a short documentary about the rise of kidnappings in Venezuela, where gang members throw captives off highway overpasses if their families don't pay

within a few days. He then presents a ghastly slideshow of more Mexican drug war violence: a severed head with bulging eyes, a hand with missing fingers, a body whose head had been dipped in acid.

My palms are clammy, and I find myself groaning audibly at the images. *Is this necessary?* I wonder. I'm already feeling queasy when Wilson loads a video in which four women are bound and kneeling facing a camera. Three of them are topless. A dozen or so men dressed in black surround them, speaking Spanish. Some hold guns, others axes. I start to feel like I might throw up.

I ask Wilson what's about to happen.

“They get chopped. Axed.”

A journalist I admire told me once that you lose a piece of your humanity watching videos like this. The quote comes to mind, and I stand to leave the

room.

“All right, all right, all right,” Wilson says. “This is why I tell people”—he lowers his voice—“*do not ... get ... kidnapped.*”

**I**ncidents of kidnapping have soared globally in the past 10 years—a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, of Somali pirates and Mexican drug wars, and, most recently, the rise of ISIS. The list of problem countries is long and growing, ranging from Trinidad and Tobago to India to the Philippines. Upward of 20,000 people around the world are reported kidnapped each year, but the true number is likely far higher: Experts say many kidnappings in high-risk countries go unreported because of distrust of police or fear of reprisals from the kidnappers.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram’s kidnapping of almost 300 schoolgirls in April, 2014, is the tip of the iceberg. According to [estimates by NYA International](#),

a crisis management consultancy, the country accounted for 26 percent of *all* kidnappings globally in the first half of 2013. In North Africa, armed gangs are known to kidnap and torture migrants trying to get to Europe for ransoms as small as a few thousand dollars. Meanwhile, the Somali group al-Shabaab, responsible for the horrific Westgate mall hostage crisis in Nairobi, Kenya, continues to terrorize East Africa.

In Mexico, a long-standing kidnapping problem has metastasized in recent years. Beginning with the rise of the Zeta cartel, kidnap for ransom is now a significant part of Mexican criminal organizations' business models. In 2012, 1,317 kidnappings were reported to police, but Ricardo Ainslie, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who has extensively documented Mexico's kidnapping crisis, says the actual number is probably 10 times that. (One heavily quoted study by Mexico's agency responsible for national statistics estimated there were [105,682 kidnappings in 2012](#), although experts doubt the veracity of that figure.) "Mexican citizens exist in a state of tremendous vulnerability," Ainslie says. "There's a widespread sense that the authorities will not work this out for you."

Americans are being unlawfully held in Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. According to one [recent poll](#), more Americans are aware of James Foley's murder by ISIS than any other news story of the past five years. In 2013, an American named [Robert Levinson](#), who was kidnapped eight years ago on the island of Kish, Iran, while working with the CIA, became the longest-held hostage in U.S. history. Many fear him dead.

Our collective fascination with kidnapping long ago seeped into pop culture. A quick Amazon search reveals dozens of books recounting ordeals in captivity, from David Rohde's [A Rope and a Prayer](#) to Canadian journalist Amanda Lindhout's [A House in the Sky](#). In film, [Argo](#) won Best Picture in 2013 and [Captain Phillips](#) competed for the same the next year. On television, there's been Showtime's [Homeland](#) and CBS's [Hostages](#). There's even a company, called [Extreme Kidnapping](#), that for a few hundred dollars will take you hostage for kicks. Torture is optional.

*Tommy previously attended one of Wilson's firearms classes and enrolled in the kidnap course in order*

*to learn how to better protect his family—he considers it a Mother’s Day gift to his wife. Illustration by Richard Manders.*

“I’m very security aware,” Tommy says as we drive to a mall for our first exercise. “You can call me paranoid. You can call me crazy. Well, I’d rather be paranoid and crazy than in a coffin.”

Tommy’s car is a mess, garbage strewn everywhere—supposedly a deterrent for thieves. He tells me, “They’ll look at this and think, ‘This guy’s got nothing.’ It’s a dangerous world, man.”

Tommy is 33, born in Eastern Europe but raised in the northeastern U.S. before moving to South Florida. When I ask him why he thinks he’s a target for kidnapping, he says that because he works in real estate in a wealthy neighborhood, he often has to pick up rent money. “If I pick up cash from five, six, 10 people—I’m a target.”

We arrive at Aventura Mall, where Tommy and I are supposed to conduct surveillance on Wilson—getting in the mind of the criminals. Wilson tells us

to find him in the J.C. Penney and trail him.

I'm not sure what to do as we follow Wilson through the department store into the mall. How close should we be? Can he see us? Do the mall cops know what we're up to? It's exhilarating pretending to be a kidnapper, but Tommy's behavior makes me nervous. At one point, Wilson doubles back and Tommy pulls me into a shoe store, where he picks up a pair of New Balance sneakers and loudly asks if he should buy them. Later, he ducks out to buy cheesecake for his wife.

After about an hour of surveillance, and after losing Wilson several times, Tommy and I spot him entering a Sears store. We follow him down an escalator and Tommy decides he's had enough—he has to meet his wife for dinner in Coral Gables. In the men's section, he grabs Wilson from behind and yells, “Gotcha!”

In his car driving back to my hotel, Wilson, after breaking down our many surveillance failures, asks how I felt trailing him in the mall. I say I was

anxious, unsure of what to do, stressed that Tommy was giving us away. “Now, imagine someone is *really* following you,” he says. “*That’s* what you have to pay attention for”—people acting strange or agitated.

---

“

**I’M NOT TRYING TO MAKE YOU  
PARANOID. I’M TRYING TO MAKE  
YOU AWARE.**

”

---

I ask Wilson about his experiences in Haiti, a country I had visited the week before on a reporting trip. Wilson has traveled to Haiti several times, working security for a famous musician and for international journalists. In the aftermath of the earthquake, kidnapping was rampant in Haiti, and although numbers have dropped in recent years, it remains a concern.

I bring up Haiti because on my last day in Port-au-Prince, the capital, a photographer and I visited Cité Soleil, the poorest and roughest neighborhood in the city. Cité Soleil was once considered one of the most dangerous places on the planet, defined by poverty and gang violence. Things have improved in recent years, but locals had told us any trip to Cité Soleil needed to be planned in advance and approved by the local gang leaders who still largely govern it. But because of a lack of time, we instead hired a local man we didn't know to guide us through the neighborhood, paying him \$40. We had our driver park in front of a police station and guard our belongings, which included my passport, wallet, and computer. We spent a tense 30 minutes in the neighborhood and, other than a few hostile stares, walked out without incident.

I tell Wilson the story and ask what he thinks we did wrong. “Everything,” he says, with a look of consternation. Among our miscalculations: We left our belongings with a driver we barely knew; we allowed a stranger to act as our guide, paying him a small sum even as we carried several thousand

dollars worth of cameras and phones; we lacked even a basic understanding of our surroundings, not to mention a plan for escape; we hadn't informed our contacts of our whereabouts in advance; and we had ignored local knowledge about visiting the neighborhood.

I jot down the single word Wilson uses to describe our trip to Cité Soleil: *stupid*. But I tell him I disagree. We had taken some precautions, we weren't alone, and we were just a few blocks from a massive police station. Besides, journalists take these kinds of risks all the time. It's part of the job.

Wilson shakes his head. "Let's say your friend gets stabbed in the gut for his camera. Where's the nearest hospital? Who are you calling? He's got 20 minutes before he bleeds out," he says. "I'm not trying to make you paranoid. I'm trying to make you aware. Here, it was, like, you were lucky, no problems." He looks at me in the passenger seat. "How many times are you going to be lucky?"

**O**n the floor of a gym in Fort Lauderdale the following morning, Wilson has laid out several dozen knives and other weapons for the self-defense portion of the course. He's loading videos on his computer when Tommy shows up, entering through an open garage door. He's sweaty with dark circles under his eyes, looking agitated.

Tommy tells us the he'd spent the night before drinking a bottle of vodka and surfing the Internet. He hasn't slept. The reason, he says, was to create a mental state of distress in preparation for today's lesson, to better recreate the circumstances of a kidnapping. Tommy takes a seat, breathing heavily. He picks up a kettle bell off the floor and hoists it over his shoulder. As his shirt lifts, I notice a handgun in the waistband of his shorts.

Wilson begins by showing us a number of security camera videos. In one, a robber in Puerto Rico shoots and kills two cops who failed to properly check for a gun; in another, a man slits the throat of a store worker before being shot by a clerk who had a hidden gun. With each one, Wilson tells us what

we should glean from it—who did what wrong.

We move over to the mat where Wilson has placed the knives. “Anything can be used as a weapon,” he says—an umbrella, a fork, a carabiner on a keychain. He walks us through the many knives he has brought with him, including one sharp enough to shave a man’s leg hair, which he demonstrates on himself. “You put that in somebody’s neck and it’s ‘Good night, Vienna.’”

Next, he takes us on a very unpleasant head-to-toe tour of the body’s pressure points, tapping and pinching Tommy and me with a pair of needle-nose pliers. From there, it’s on to punch and kick combinations, which Tommy and I lob at Wilson, who wears pads on his hands. “When people come to my class, I want to figure out what works for them,” Wilson says. “If your punches are no good but your bitch slaps are, use your bitch slaps. If your front kick sucks but your push kick is good, use your push kick.”

The exercises drag on, and I eventually ask what this lesson has to do with

kidnapping. “When you have the chance to escape,” he says, “you take it.”

**O**n the morning of the third day, while we’re driving to Pembroke Pines, I prod Wilson about how to deal with the fear one would experience as a hostage. Is there a way to prepare for it, even somewhat? Other courses I’d seen offered some form of interrogation training; students were bound, pepper-sprayed, roughed up. Wilson says it’s entirely up to me—“I can tie you up and pour water over your head, no problem”—but he also warns that whatever we do will ultimately be pointless. “You can’t simulate that,” he says. “Nothing can mentally or physically prepare you for that.”

Back at the office, Wilson moves on to the course’s next component: guidelines for what happens after a person has been kidnapped.

– The most dangerous period of a kidnapping is the first 10 to 15 minutes. Stress is high, adrenaline flowing. You will be terrified and your captors will

be energized and nervous. This is when violence is most likely to occur; kidnappers will strike or injure you to establish authority and instill fear.

– Once you've been kidnapped, and escape is impossible, the only option is to comply. You might be blindfolded and bound, locked in a room.

Panicking and resisting will only make the situation worse. Stay calm.

– The first rule of establishing a relationship with your captors is to humanize yourself. Say your name. Say you love your family and want for them to know you're OK. Mention their names. If your captives are pious, appeal to their religion and express your own faith. There is a fine line here, though: Excessive begging and pleading will have little effect. Most kidnappers will either know what you're trying to achieve, or won't care.

– The goal is to establish a relationship over the long term. Ask for small things first: a glass of water, to have your bindings loosened. Over time, you want your captors to feel sorry for you.

– If the kidnapping is about money, don't make promises you can't keep. Don't promise a million dollars if your family can't raise it.

– The psychological aspects are the hardest. The best thing to do is to mentally prepare yourself for a long period of captivity. The longer you prolong the kidnapping, the more you can humanize yourself to your captors, the better your chances of survival.

Toward the end of the lecture, Tommy finally shows up. He sits at the conference table and looks as if he's about to have a breakdown. He says that he's not going to finish the course today, that he has to drive home. "Over the last two years, I've probably slept, like, an accumulative of 48 hours," he says. Then he rambles, telling bits of stories that don't seem to connect, and finishes by saying, "I love this country." He looks like he's about to cry. Finally, he shakes our hands and walks out of the conference room.

Wilson and I share an awkward moment of silence. “He’s a nice guy,” Wilson says. “You get a lot of that in Florida.”

**T**he final exercise is role-playing. Wilson has hired two young men he often works with, named Vic and Alex—or “Tweedledee and Tweedledum,” as Wilson affectionately calls them—to pretend to be kidnapers. I’m the person delivering a ransom payment. I follow a series of instructions that lead me across greater Miami—to the airport, to a dive bar in Little Haiti, to a busted-up payphone in Liberty City, one of Miami’s toughest neighborhoods.

After several hours of driving around with Wilson, who is acting as my driver, the “kidnappers” instruct me to leave the payment—an empty envelope—behind a toilet in a run-down mall in Liberty City. In the parking lot when I emerge, Wilson is ready with a certificate in plastic covering, noting that I have now completed Risks Inc.’s kidnap course.

Apparently the day’s exercise is meant to get students used to operating in

unfamiliar locations, slightly edgy neighborhoods where they feel uncomfortable or out of place. It's also a chance for students to put their surveillance skills to the test, to practice awareness and notice other people's behavior. Wilson tells me that one of his students, a former Marine, had refused to go into the mall where I'd left the payment.

On the way back to Dania Beach, Wilson asks if there's anything else I'd like to do during the course. I know exactly what he's referring to. Somewhat reluctantly, I tell him, yes, there is one more thing: I want to be waterboarded. I say I want to know what it feels like—even in some small, superficial way—to actually be a hostage.

Wilson calls Vic and Alex and tells them to meet at a paintball park in Hollywood where Vic works part time. When we pull up, the park is closed. Vic and Alex arrive shortly after, bringing with them a four-liter water jug. Wilson leads us to the back, and then he and the Tweedles walk off to plan. I'm getting increasingly nervous about what's coming. I try to tell myself it's going to be fine, that I'm in control, but those thoughts keep getting

overruled.

When they come back, Wilson ties a blindfold around my eyes. Almost immediately I start breathing heavily. Vic tries to reassure me; Wilson wants to move it along. As they walk me over to a plywood table, I experience something like a panic attack. My heart is racing and I can't catch my breath.

What does it feel like to be waterboarded? It's as terrible as you think. At first it's just water splashing over my face, but I'm still in a state of near panic—I need to breathe. I inhale—and there it is, the feeling of drowning. It's like a switch, and once flipped, without thinking, I slam my hand on the table and Wilson stops pouring.

The experience felt like it went on for minutes. Only later do I learn that I had lasted about 10 seconds.

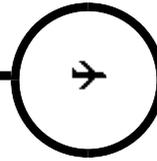
I barely sleep my last night at the Motel 6 in Dania Beach. I feel edgy in the humidity. The images Wilson had shown me repeat like a macabre slideshow in my mind. The panic of the waterboarding remains.

In the weeks and months that follow I often think about the course. Wilson had said he wanted to make me security-aware, not paranoid. He had succeeded and failed; I find myself increasingly both. Would I become like Tommy, a security obsessive dumping money into courses I clearly don't need?

Likely not. But the conversations I'd had with Wilson on the long car rides around Miami keep coming back to me. I think back to my visit to Port-au-Prince and realize that going into Cité Soleil the way we did—unprepared, without precaution, unprotected—was foolish. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, we make it out without incident. But this is the most important lesson I bring away from the course: All it takes is that one time. And there's

nothing that can truly prepare you for if that time comes.

Illustrations by [Richard Manders](mailto:mantroutink@gmail.com) ([mantroutink@gmail.com](mailto:mantroutink@gmail.com))



*Mitch Moxley has written for publications including GQ, The Atlantic, and Grantland, and he is the features editor at Roads & Kingdoms.*

*Follow him on [Twitter](#).*



**0 Comments**

Add a comment...

FOOD & DRINKS  
FEATURES  
BREAKFAST  
5 O'CLOCK SOMEWHERE

POLITICS & CULTURE  
FEATURES  
PHOTOGRAPHER Q&A  
PHOTOESSAYS

TRAVEL  
FEATURES  
KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

ABOUT  
ABOUT R&K