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Escape From Reality

How the urban kidnap survival course became popular

By Steve Trader

On a cold, gray morning in early November, seated at a corner booth in Miss Laura's Diner, private investigator Brian O'Shea is attempting to demonstrate how to acquire personal information from a stranger by socially manipulating our 60-year-old waitress, Thelma, into sharing an intimate detail from her life.

It's not going well.

As a former military contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency, O'Shea used to apply this technique on villagers in war-torn countries to establish enemy locations. But on this Monday morning in Theresa, a one-church rural town situated 20 miles east of the Canadian border in upstate New York, our Thelma is not having it.

By the time our plates of French toast and Denver omelets arrive, the most we've gathered is that she enjoys living here, a crucial bit of information if there ever was one.

"You know, it's really just about making conversation," O'Shea offers, a little deflated as Thelma's one-word responses continue to mount. "I mean, it's a small town, what do we really expect to find out from her anyways?"

O'Shea has the face for this sort of work. Well built but not imposing, a crew cut the only trace of former military, he puts people at ease with his smile and direct eye contact. He's also done his homework; among his favorite reads is Neil Strauss's 2010 guidebook, ["The Game."](#)

A final round of coffee presents one last opportunity and O'Shea won't be denied. His cell phone is armed and ready as Thelma approaches.

"Hey Thelma, you said had grandkids right? These are my little ones right here," he says, turning to face her, offering the screenshot of his two children. She opens like a flower.

"Oh my goodness, yes. Mine are Alex and Ethan, 7 and 11."

"How funny, mine's name is Alex," he lies.

"I take them cookies, you know, day old ones from the diner here. They say, 'you know grandma, these would be better if they were fresh,'" she giggles.

Last Christmas was a tough one for Thelma; she had just survived a bout with breast cancer. She's much more optimistic about this holiday season.

Ok, so it may not be the most pertinent of material, but this reporter must also admit being slightly impressed by his persistence. As we stand to leave, she approaches with one last random thought.

“You know, enjoy them while they’re young, they just grow up so fast.”

O’Shea is clearly pleased with his effort as we pull on our jackets and exit Miss Laura’s.

“Nobody puts Baby in a corner,” he quips with a smile as we cross the parking lot and climb back into the rental car.

He has a point though. There really isn’t much more to the manipulation technique besides good old-fashioned conversation skills. Face someone when you speak to them, look them in the eye, read their body language, find a way to connect with them, play on their emotions, and you can pretty much get anyone to tell you anything.

Of course, for most of us, grasping the concept of social engineering is easier than putting it into practice. Naturally, a market for this sort of training might exist, and O’Shea discovered it when he met Eric Michaud, the founder of a company called Rift Recon in San Francisco.

Not long before the two men connected, Michaud had identified another craft worth coaching: how to pick locks, break zip ties and cut through ropes in case you’ve been abducted. Now, for \$1000, the pair will teach you both, and then capture you, as part of a three-day urban kidnap survival-training course called The Art of Escape.

Rift Recon began as a physical and cyber security company in late 2013. Before then, its founder and self-proclaimed hacker Michaud, 32, floated around a while, working as a government contractor, doing private security testing for places like Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago, and founding hacker spaces – cooperative-style offices where hackers hang out – both in Chicago and Washington D.C.

Michaud started picking locks in college because he thought it was fun. He cofounded The Open Organization of Lockpickers, or TOOOL, in 2004. By 2007, he was cracking high-security tumblers faster than nearly anyone in the world, placing fifth at LockCon, a global conference in Holland that’s sponsored by his own organization.

Shortly after he began Rift Recon, Michaud started exploring ways to enlighten the public with his unique skillset. When a friend suggested a survival-style training course, Art of Escape was born. [Six of the training courses have been run since](#) last January

Michaud chose The Armory in San Francisco as a location for the class. Built in 1912 as a World War II army training center, The Armory was purchased by the pornographic bondage website kink.com in 2007, and is used as the main shooting location for the company’s famous BDSM scenes.

Within two months, Michaud was forced to fire his associate instructor for falsifying a resume – [an](#) oversight one might assume wouldn't slip past this crowd. O'Shea was brought on board in March.

Of the two, Michaud has the less menacing presence. [Online photos from around the time Rift Recon began show him in](#) glasses, slicked [back hair](#) and blazer [jackets](#) with tennis shoes. [In a few, he's](#) cocking his head slightly and squinting seductively at the camera while holding a padlock. [In more recent photos, Michaud upgraded](#) to a full suit and tie.

[He can be vague when describing how he made the leap from hacking to picking locks to instructing a kidnap escape class, but it seems to have something to do with how essential these skills are to one another, particularly, "when the big one hits."](#)

"I'll put it this way: in the woods learning to make fire is a critical skill," said Michaud. "In a city, you're probably not building fires much, but lockpicking will help you get through those doors to get to the supplies that you need that are already there."

On how kidnapping becomes involved, it's simply, "just one of the skills you need," said Michaud.

When students arrive on the first day, they're introduced first to the lockpickers' tool kit before they begin practicing on the simple, single-tumbler lock and keys, gradually working their way up to more advanced systems.

Later in the day, O'Shea and Michaud teach students to escape from bound situations using simple tools that may be accessible in a room, like the friction of a shoelace to cut through a zip tie, or a hairpin as a handcuff key. The pair discusses strategic places on and around the body where one might hide a small metal shim or knife blade.

Day two [starts](#) with social engineering. Students break into pairs, and try to gather as much information from each other as they can, using body language as a cue for when someone is lying. [Later](#) in the day, the group [discusses](#) how to cache supplies in public, become a harder target and use costumes to maneuver through a city.

On the final day, all hell breaks loose, sort of. Students come to class knowing full well they're about to be kidnapped. They've strategically planned for it by hiding supplies both in the city and on their bodies. Then, sometime that morning, they are taken hostage by Michaud and company. Black bags are pulled over their heads, pairs of people are tied together, bodies are searched for instruments, and the partners must work together to get out of a room and into the city.

Outside, the instructors and a team of additional volunteers stalk the neighborhood, using their own methods of disguise to catch escaped students as they work to complete objectives.

O'Shea once paid off an entire block of Chinese restaurant shop owners to watch a locked gate and threaten to call the cops on any [one](#) who attempted to pick a lock across the street.

Each student carries a card that describes the training scenario in case the cops actually do show up. So far, no one has been arrested.

Michaud's executive assistant, Arianna Travaglini, will [often](#) dress in all black and drive around in a black suburban, roll right up onto the curb in front of unsuspecting students and throw [them](#) into the backseat. Get caught three times and you're out of the game.

"We've brought in psychologists, set designers, to make this as authentic as possible," said Michaud. "We've had students who have frozen up before, which is expected because we do our best to make it as authentic as possible."

About 70 people have taken the Art of Escape training program; two were women who had [previously been assaulted](#). Neither would speak publicly for this article, but Rift Recon confirmed that neither chose to take part in the final day of training; it was too realistic.

One might hypothesize that the majority of people who take this class are "doomsday preppers," but Michaud says very few of those types find the class hard-core enough.

Instead, the clientele [has been](#) roughly 60 percent males, 30-40 years old, some who hail from the world of physical security, a few couples, laborers from San Francisco's technology industry, and the author of a series of spy novels. A bachelor party once hired the company to let them take part in only the final day of training.

Nobody who has taken the class has ever had to put the skills to use in an actual kidnapping scenario, and everyone can collectively agree that that's a good statistic.

The question begs though, if nobody is getting kidnapped, then what are students using their \$1000 training for anyway?

The Smith & Wesson model .500 Magnum revolver, a five-pound, five-chamber, stainless steel, single-action behemoth of a handgun, is considered to be the most powerful of its kind on earth. A single shot can take down a grizzly bear.

The Internet is littered with videos showing amateur marksmen on the shooting range, firing off a Magnum round with one lackadaisical hand, and the gun recoiling back into their faces, nearly knocking them unconscious. O'Shea, who served in the Army Special Forces for [10](#) years, is no stranger to handling weapons, and even he's a little anxious about it. He doesn't get the chance very often anymore.

Occasionally though, the field of private security rewards O'Shea, and he meets a client who owns a two-story log cabin on 50 acres of land outside of Theresa, New York, and an assortment of more than 20 legally registered handguns and rifles ranging from a Ruger .22-caliber pistol to the .500 Magnum, to a Barrett .50-caliber bolt-action sniper rifle.

And then occasionally O'Shea gets an Art of Escape student like Staten Island resident Mike Simanovsky, who happens to be looking for a place where he and his seven buddies can get away from the city hustle for a weekend and fire off some guns.

Two months later, on a cold Sunday morning in November, in the clearing of a wooded grove about a half-mile behind the log cabin, we stand huddled in a half-circle around O'Shea to watch him demonstrate the proper technique for how to aim a hand-cannon like the Smith & Wesson.

Kurt Callahan, a local Theresa resident who looks after the cabin and the artillery while the owner is away, casually jokes that there will be no hospital visits today; if there's a shooting accident, there are a couple of shovels inside the shed and plenty of places to bury a body.

By the end of the day, Simanovsky and company have torn through dozens of clips and rounds, blown apart a life-size cardboard cutout of the red and yellow M&Ms characters with a Mossberg .12 gauge shotgun, exploded nine small jars of Tannerite powder with a collection of AR-4 and M6 semi-automatic assault rifles, and attempted to hit a target 300 yards away with a five-inch long, .50-caliber bullet fired from the same model of gun that is responsible for the world's longest sniper kill shot, two miles.

Between the ammunition and use of the cabin, which included venison stew for lunch, it cost each person about \$600 for the day. O'Shea tacked \$100 on for each person for his time, which everyone seemed to agree was fair. Everyone paid in cash.

Simanovsky describes himself is kind an extreme guy. A few years ago, he decided to take up hiking as a hobby, so he flew to Katmandu and backpacked to the base camp of Mount Everest. Afterwards, he started buying gear, and then signed up for a survivalist training course in Virginia.

He's the first to admit that it's not likely he'll be kidnapped. He's short, stocky, tough and scrappy-looking. For him, the escape training course and gun-shooting excursion were natural next steps in the process.

"It's personal development in a sense," said Simanovsky. "You do a thing, you really like it. So you pursue it, maybe do something else, that's all it is. I'm not planning to work for the CIA or whatever agency, but as a hobby it's like at least a little bit of a glimmer of insight into what it takes to be that person."

It's not like Simanovsky didn't learn anything for his \$1000. He always has a padlock or two lying around his house that he practices picking. In the afternoon, as we transferred a stack of assault rifles from the bed of the all-terrain vehicle back into the basement of the cabin, he sized up the cellar door handle.

"These locks from Home Depot, Lowe's, a minute, maybe thirty seconds even," he said.

Simanovsky performed very well during the kidnap escape course when Rift Recon taught it in New York City for the first time ever last September. He sewed a scalpel blade into the flap that covers the zipper of his pants, and taped a metal shim to the bottom of his boot. He

bought a one-day gym membership near Chinatown, where the simulation was held, and stored a bag full of gear and a change of clothes in a locker there. He disguised himself as a tourist. Although Michaud and O'Shea asked that participants stay within certain course boundaries, Simanovsky blew off that rule completely. He was the only student not to get caught by the instructors on the final training day.

"If you have a hobby, say you like motorcycles, or you like expensive prostitutes, or you like expensive suits, a suit could cost you a \$1000 bucks easy in New York City, a nice suit," said Simanovsky, voice trailing off. "My point is this. If you enjoy something, if you think you could benefit from something then you should do it. I do it for me, not anybody else."

Though it's been discussed briefly in the past, Michaud says that the \$1000 price tag for the Art of Escape course is a firm one. He couldn't lower the cost without lowering the quality. While similar urban survival classes, like onPoint Tactical [in New Jersey](#), cost \$200 less, Michaud says his price weeds out people who wouldn't take the class seriously, and that free or extremely discounted self-defense classes don't give a comparable experience.

"A lot of other places out there teach you to be a hardened person," said Michaud, referring to other classes that focus solely on teaching students how to look tough to mess with.

"We found that women were not being served in this particular type of training. In terms of being taken, we teach them to avoid it before it happens. It's doesn't sound as exciting but that's really our job at Rift, to save people."

In its early stages, few women took Art of Escape, though more have signed up recently.

Women now make up about 40 percent of their [clients](#).

Angelica Wu, 43, is a business systems analyst for a biotech firm in San Francisco and a self-described introvert. She took the class at the beginning of December. She grew up in Brazil, in an area she said was riddled with kidnapping crime, so the description of the class appealed to her.

Though she said she sees the class more geared toward corporate clients, she does a lot of solo traveling around the world and feels safer now.

"I think a lot of times people just walk on the streets just looking at their cell phones, not even realizing what's going on around them," said Wu. "Being able to look around, if you see somebody suspicious who is out of place or following you, I think that's already an accomplished feat."

Michaud explains how simple skills like scanning a room can help people avoid potential danger. He was recently involved in an altercation at a bar in The Castro district, near his home in San Francisco, while he and his fiancée were having dinner.

When a homeless man walked in the door, Michaud said it didn't register immediately, but something seemed off. All of a sudden the guy was at their table. Michaud thought it was the waiter at first.

"And then a jar of mayonnaise came down, not kidding," said Michaud. "And I'm like, I ordered mayonnaise but I didn't order the jar. And I look up and I'm like, ok, this guy is obviously not in our crowd."

Michaud noticed the guy was tense. **The** man shoved his hand into Michaud's plate of onion rings, **and then, as he picked** up a ketchup bottle to hit over the waiter's head, Michaud lunged for the guy and stopped him.

"It's one of the main things we teach in class is whether to go, or not go," said Michaud, referring to his own reaction time. "Often the main problem is people figuring out when to go, because if you don't, and you stay, eventually you're going to die. One of the things we teach in the class is knowing your trigger, whatever that is, and how to react."

So far, Art of Escape has pulled in about \$70,000 and is profitable, says Michaud. Volunteers help with training; O'Shea and Travaglini are the only two employees on the payroll. The free city streets used for his kidnap scenarios keeps costs low. And there are plans for the course to go on a national tour of sorts, to four or five major cities next year.

But the Art of Escape training alone isn't keeping the lights on. The company also sells gear, does custom software development, provides cyber-security advice, and picks up an odd-job consulting gig every once in a while too.

For instance, Rift Recon recently advised a local San Francisco adult film studio shooting a pornographic video in the Redwood Forest just north of the city. It was a controversial situation, said Michaud, which involved law enforcement officers confiscating footage despite the studio having obtained the proper legal permits. He helped develop a plan for the studio to quickly back up the scenes on secure digital cards, and then safely move the SD cards out of the sensitive area before the local sheriff could seize it.

Still, what Michaud is most passionate about right now is Art of Escape, and the difference he sees that it makes in his clients.

"It turns out that a lot of the things people don't have in our class is, I don't want to say social skills, but what they don't understand is human interaction dynamics," he said. "Surprisingly, when people say it's common knowledge, it's not really that common."

He notices how much confidence his class instills in the students, and it shows physically. They talk in a stronger fashion, stand up straighter, and hold their shoulders back more.

"The thing about confidence is that it makes you less of a target, especially if you look like someone not to be fucked with," said Michaud.

One way to accomplish that training is to hire someone like O'Shea, who occasionally fucks with people for a living.

His company, Striker Pierce, based out of Alexandria, [Virginia](#), was recently hired to [advise](#) a business that was being hassled by a hedge fund manager out of Canada. The manager was publishing online reports claiming the business was a bad one, so O'Shea was brought in to apply counter-intelligence measures.

He also made news recently as the man who publicly served a subpoena to hedge fund manager and Russian human rights campaigner Bill Browder, after Browder refused to appear in court for cross-examination in a fraud case against a former client.

O'Shea said he found him easily despite his supposedly secret hideout in Aspen, Colorado. Now he's thinking about reaching out to Browder suggesting he hire Striker Pierce as a private security service.

O'Shea's confidence hardly ever waivers, but still, he'll admit that he occasionally gets nervous for his safety. He often works for some pretty heavy hitters in the corporate and government world. It has a way of always putting him a little on edge.

So it's no surprise then that at 5:30 a.m. on the morning we are scheduled to shoot guns in Theresa, when I knock on O'Shea's hotel room window with two cups of coffee and two cigarettes in hand, I watch through the partially opened curtains as he first dislodges a chair from under the door handle before letting me in.

"Guy approaching my hotel with a hood up, any other circumstance and I would have shot you" said O'Shea, replacing, "[good morning.](#)" He doesn't even have a gun with him.

We are the only two people staying at the hotel, which was actually closed for the season, but the owners were nice enough to give us a pair of rooms anyway, so I ask O'Shea to pick the hotel door lock. He says he left his tool kit in Virginia.

He does at the very least explain to me how to tail someone, and more importantly how to spot if I'm the one being tailed, on our five-hour drive back to the city. It's all about baselining, paying attention to what's not normal in a situation, he explains.

"How do you know when a shootout is about to happen in any of the old western movies?" asks O'Shea.

"The music?" I answer, half joking.

"All the women close their window shutters, that's not normal," he says. "When you get into an elevator, say hellos, maybe what floor are you going to? That's normal. But a 'what floor are you going to, hey what do you do here?' That's not normal baseline. I'll get out on the next floor that I can and circle back around."

I joke that he must get a lot of exercise. He says it happens all the time.

Michaud agrees, saying I'd be surprised to find that the statistics on kidnapping are not in anyone's favor, particularly the rich, international-traveling demographic of people who take his class, or journalists, one last pitch to get me on a plane headed for San Francisco when the class begins again next year. It's a hard argument to deny.

The money, the aura of it, it must be worth it. Otherwise Michaud wouldn't insist time and again that this is more than a James Bond fantasy adventure experience.

"What you're actually paying for is a first-class, safe experience to test your mettle against situations that you've only heard about in movies, that happen in real life," said Michaud. "We're trying to be more or less the Disney of the experience."

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