

Law Enforcement Body Armor: Heavy or Light?

I get numerous questions reference heavy or light body armor, or should I say “Heavy Vest” or “Plate Carrier.” Here are a few thoughts.

History:

I started wearing body armor in special ops in 1986. We had soft body armor with insertable plates. The plates were heavy. Most of the time, body armor was required unless we were going to the Jungle. Jungle operations made it too hot to wear, killing mobility and increasing water intake to unsustainable levels. So, we did what they did in Vietnam and did not wear it.

With more and more urban and “tube” targets (planes/buses) coming into the battlefield, body armor was worn. We were supposed to go anywhere, anytime and do anything. That requires a bit of thought and flexibility as well. Body armor in one environment might help mission success and save lives, in others it might cause mission failure as it degrades the human component.

In Panama, I watched another group try and do raids in full body armor. I also watched them come back and one or two would crumble to the ground requiring an IV to get their fluids back to normal levels. Going from one part of the world to another and not being acclimated can do this to the human component. Our group decided not to wear body armor and preferred to be fast and mobile. We did over 40 hits in a week without and no one to my knowledge became a heat casualty. We were lucky and no one pressed us in close in fighting. We got into a couple of small shootings outside of targets, but not much to talk about. As a side note, plate carriers were not out there yet.



A doctor would like to cover you from head to toe in body armor. The problem is, you cannot fight in it. Also, they don't have to wear it nor do they understand the ramifications of its long-term wear.



Full body armor can be a heat containment issue and drain you of needed water. Stay hydrated at all times as you never know when the next mission will come. Keep a bottle or two of water with your body armor and throw it down when the armor goes on. You can always pee. You cannot always drink. Most of the time we forget to when things start happening

Below is from a Law Enforcement friend who I have the utmost respect for.

Paul,

We mandate a full vest plus shoulder pads and a level IV front plate - but not the neck ring, throat triangle, nor groin protection - those are optional.

We allow plate Carriers for extreme hot weather (almost never), WMD ops and some specialty missions like tunnel rat ops - crawl spaces and attics if its a hole in the ceiling that needs to be crawled up through.

This choice is driven by our threat matrix in our operational area and the shooting statistics in our area. Gunshot wound analysis from our multiple level one trauma centers show 10-15% of the gunshot wounds are from rifles - but 85-90% of the wounds are from handguns. With the majority of offenders armed with pistols why would we not mandate protection from the threat.....

I do not want to be the team leader that has to tell one of my guys wife that her husband was murdered by some piece of shit because we let him go Hollywood with body armor.

With 4 armored vehicles - 2 large rolling rifle bunkers and multiple rifle rated hand held shields - we are aggressive in their use as we have had team members protected by them all from gunfire.

My observations & opinion: Plate carrier use sky rocketed post 9-11. This was fueled by the special ops community and their combat experiences.

An analysis of their ops found plate carriers appropriate as 95+% of the threat they faced was 7.62 rifles in urban combat environments and extreme heat. When the spec op veterans started to get out and join swat teams, they pushed for what they know and are comfortable with - plate carriers - natural progression. When FBI HRT went that way - then the other fed teams went that way and so on.....

While heat is of course a factor for SWAT - I bet these same departments mandate full wrap around level II or III ballistic protection to be worn while on patrol by the patrol officers, but not the SWAT team? I have never been shot at while serving decades on patrol - but I have been shot at on five SWAT ops, both inside and outside - a number of those occasions multiple rounds from multiple weapon systems (rifles, shotguns & pistols) on multiple occasions during the call-out. We have had gun fire hit our big rolling shields - two of our armored vehicles and our hand-held shields.

Armor saves lives.....

Lastly - we can't overlook the "cool guy factor" when having this discussion - but no one wants to go there.....

Just my 2 cents.....

Best as always – Ed

As a historical note, a friend and officer who spent five years overseas with chest plates and was never shot. He came back to Chicago as a police officer and was saved by soft body armor and what would have been an under the chest plate hit. Had he been wearing just plates, he might not be alive today.



Plate Carriers vs. Heavy Body Armor-General

Northern States have severe cold where I would want the total package to keep body warmth in during cold weather operations. The problem you run into in the southern states is the heat. You cannot put enough water into your body during long term or multiple ops to keep a human being going. If you are physically or mentally degraded when it is time to press the threat, problems can arise.



Physical Fitness

A good physical training program is needed to support the wear of body armor. Not only are you moving your body weight, you are moving another package. I weighed 230 pounds in the day and with light body armor and my rifle/equipment, I was 310 pounds for urban combat operations. I had to move that weight and also be able to drag people/team mates/prisoners, etc. My PT program consisted of a balanced cardio and weight routine. I did not want to blow out knees because I did too much weight training and not enough leg cardio.

Training

Your physical training program should sustain your ability to wear body armor for 8 hours. Maybe not all at one time, but for three-hour blocks. If you cannot train for those periods, get in shape. Otherwise during training and live operations, you will physically and mentally degrade to the level of your physical readiness.

Shooting

I hear complaints about not being able to shooting heavy body armor. I use a slightly bladed stance and I can lock my arms with shoulder pads and hit all my reference points. It can be done.

LE vs. Mil

The wearing of plate carriers is taking a calculated risk. Military guys may be doing many, many hits a day and working around water. They may need to tailor the gear for the multiple mission requirements they have. Many times, they are engaged on the outside and need the ability to fire and maneuver. Sometimes in the mountains and in the jungle. I get it.

Law Enforcement generally handles one shooter at a time. Air-conditioned vehicles are available, water is available, food, etc. Rotations can be set up. They are generally moving 100 yards or so to a target and the fight is a close in one at CQB distances and the mission is done.

In addition, Law Enforcement officers are generally pushing a hit on a target that will not provide them protection from gunfire. Dry wall is the only thing stopping a bullet from reaching them in another room. Overseas, they make walls of brick and mortar which keeps bad guys from shooting through them. In America, most houses are made of sticks and chalkboard. The wall is not your protection. You are wearing your protection.

Conclusion

- Were I Special Ops today, I would wear a plate carrier as I know the mobility required for single and multiple urban combat ops.

- If I was a Law Enforcement or SWAT Type, I would layer up heavier as I know the shot would be up close a majority of the time.
- Look at your missions and pick the best armor that will apply to them all. Go modular if you can during the heat.
- If you are not in shape to carry the weight, up your physical training program.

My preference is for everyone to come home at the end of the day. The need to balance armor and surface area protection will always be changing with advances in technology. Adapt new gear as it proves itself worthy. In the end, your physical shape is the variable where you can have the most impact.

About the Author:

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