

DEVELOPING THE SKILLS NECESSARY FOR A NIGHT OPPEP

By: Moddy

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Compiler's note:

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Introduction:

There are several key skills which are necessary for one to succeed at Urban Exploration in the night; In this (short) document I aim to provide a form introduction to these skills and how the complete novice can develop them.

It is stupid to believe that one can immediately adopt the correct mindset. The key is to make small, but fast progressing, steps.

This isn't meant to be a manual for operations, far from it. Its meant to be a few ideas for developing the basic skills, and getting used to the environment. I don't go really touch on how to gain entry to buildings, or what to do when you're in - thats for a completely different topic. The closest I get to that is a brief section on carrying out a recce.

Phase 1 - "Getting your Night Eyes"

Believe it or not, the night is simply the day but without light. Nowadays, there are less differences than ever. With 24 hour shops, and "cities that never sleep". The night isn't even clearly defined; midnight is 12, but 11pm is still the evening for most, and most people refer to 1am as "One in the morning". Where is the night? Night is merely a concept we are brought up to believe in; an invention of society.

However, the first time you find yourself out - alone, perhaps in fields, at night can be pretty bewildering. So here's how I recommend you take your first footsteps.

I started in the winter, so for me I could get my "night eyes" by simply walking the dog at 9pm or so and enjoying the utter darkness. I would sit in a field with the dog and watch it, with almost an envy. The way the dog would stop and look out into the distance - seeing things with a clarity I could only dream of. You can pick up a lot from a dogs body language, and I learnt a lot from my dog.

If you haven't got a dog it doesn't matter, the principle is the same - go for a walk in the evening when its dark. Get used to the sounds of loneliness, the feeling of the dark, and the sights of darkness. Within a few nights you'll probably begin to relax around it, once you feel comfortable try going for the same walk at perhaps 2am.

Once you get used to walking around at night, and you feel "confident" (and trust me, you'll know when you truly feel confident) - then you can take it up a level.

Notes

* Despite all the importance which we place on flashlights and kit on this forum, try and go out without it. Relying on a flashlight when you have perfectly good moonlight is a VERY bad habit to get into.

* This stage depends on your surroundings, I live(d) in an area where there was enough fields and woodlands to experience a variety of different "darknesses"; whilst having a town nearby to experience what residential streets and shopping centers can be like.

* Remember; Its just like day - but dark.

Phase 2 - "Building your physical skills up"

This is one important factor; and one that I probably won't have to explain - you need to be reasonably fit to do this stuff. So perhaps it's time to start getting fit.

The chances are, if you're reading this you're already interested and already in pretty good shape. Never get complacent about your fitness though - ALWAYS IMPROVE.

Begin looking for training routines - focus on your upper body strength as well as your speed and endurance when running. I downloaded the Army "Get Fit" plan, and followed this - it combined exercises such as push-ups and sit-ups along with endurance runs and interval training. I also did a pull-up training plan to help me get the required strength for climbing and parkour.

Parkour is a good skill to have, fun to train in and very rewarding. I began by going to kids park and practicing basic vaults, then I started doing precision jumps.. moving on to different vaults, cat leaps, tic tacs.. There are many parkour videos on youtube, and many websites with training techniques. Pick a few simple moves and drill them until you're confident, then go out with the purpose of training in different locations.

Try and go to new places and just train without any planning - combine your endurance runs with parkour. Pick a place, get a stop watch and time yourself getting there - using any methods you can, on any route you can think of. We don't do Parkour for the aesthetic reasons - we do it for the sheer speed and power which we can harness; we don't have time to plan which techniques we're going to use - you need to be able to decide which technique to use whilst approaching an obstacle.. it needs to be second nature.

Soon you'll find your "Parkour Eyes" coming to you. Your training plan and your parkour training should be complimenting each other very nicely within a couple of weeks.

Next comes the other skill - climbing. Go out and be a kid again - climb trees! Pick fences that you think are easy to climb then climb them! Then try and climb them from the other side and take note of how hard fences can be from different sides - and practice beating them from both angles. Aim for variety - spice up your training with new locations, try to train in unfamiliar places - where you can further develop your ability to "see" opportunities to climb and to practice parkour.

Notes

* You can start this phase whilst doing phase one. The sooner you start, the sooner you see gains!

* Listen to your body, if you get pains when play it safe - but don't confuse the muscle ache that you get after a training session for anything more! This is probably a good time to stock up on "Deep Heat"!

* This is one of the fun stages, and it also has the advantage of providing you with many fitness gains.

* This phase never ends - ALWAYS improve your fitness, and ALWAYS practice your climbing skills.

Phase 3 - Combining what you've learnt so far

You should know be getting confident in the dark, and you should also be getting more confident with the more physical aspects; but are you ready to combine them?

Parkour and Climbing at night can be different, so its best to start simple again. Even if you feel confident doing more in the day time - its often a good idea to get used to the basics again, just to demonstrate the difference in perception during different light settings.

In the dark many obstacles can look different, and many dangers can appear worse.. or they might not appear at all! The whole point of this phase is to understand these dangers and gain a greater feeling about how the adrenaline of parkour and climbing can feel at night - how you can hear more, you can see more and you feel more.. "switched on".

Notes

* This can be quite a dangerous one - but you know this isn't exactly a cotton-wool interest is it?

* Now is the time to get used to avoiding people and acting quietly - you may have got funny looks doing parkour in daylight, you could get more than that at night!

Phase 4 - Stealth

This is where it gets interesting! But first, lets talk about clothing. There are many debates as to what you should wear - casual vs ninja, black vs navy blue, camouflage vs solid... Its all preference and down to where you're opping. Some people even mix them up. My personal preference is black combats, boots and a hoodie. Although, I've also warn DPM combats before, and a black gore-tex jacket. As long as you aren't dressed stupidly, I wouldn't worry too much. I like to think that skill and talent can make most things blend into the darkness.

Generally, you want to be wearing clothes which are durable.. if disposable. They WILL get messy, and WILL get small rips and tears, but they WILL help you a lot. The qualities I look for are:

- thickness, I go for light clothes - if I need to wrap up warm, I'll use a layered approach.
- material, I like material that looks quite strong - and preferably resistant to waterproof.
- fit, Its nice to have clothing which isn't too baggy - so its not constantly getting caught on bushes, windows etc
- Dark, without anything that which catch light - as long as its not reflective I'm ok.

Now, the topic of clothing is far to wide for me to cover in this document; and that wasn't the point of this document anyway! So lets get on with the stealth...

Go back to the beginning and go for a walk dressed like this - how does it feel? Then lets try that again, listen to yourself as you walk - can you hear those twigs you're stepping on? those dry leaves were loud too weren't they? how about any gravel you had to walk over? or that gate you had to open? Thats just the sound! Lets think back to the shadow you were casting, or the silhouette as you walked over the hill..

Lets look at the basics of Camouflage and Concealment -

- Shape - Some things become obvious by their shape; i.e a human figure
 - * Try to break up the shape of your body, this is what camouflage does, and why soldiers use twigs and bits of bush to decorate their helmets.
- Shine - Light can catch objects, even moonlight, and present an obvious target to the eye.
 - * Try to "dull" any shiny objects of your kit - boots, key tags, buttons..
- Shadow - When moving around in moonlight, your shadow can go on for great distances!
 - * Try to keep in the shadows, then you wont cast one.
- Silhouette - When moving on higher ground you can cast an obvious silhouette for all to see
 - * Avoid moving on higher ground, instead try and take lower ground. if not, keep low and go slow.
- Spacing - Things that are evenly places are obviously not natural - i.e trees.
 - * If in a group, space out from each other, but in IRREGULAR distances.
- Movement - The eyes are naturally drawn to movement, so avoid making excessive fast movements
 - * Make slow and cautious movements where possible

Now we have our camouflage sorted, lets think about the noise. Put your clothes on and jump up and down - hear that rattle? Find out what it is and fix it! Only go out once you can no longer hear any rattles.. (If you think this is fun now, wait until we introduce a rucksack and kit for you to take out.. :D)

Now go for another walk, pay attention to the following:

- Your shadows
- Where you stand; avoid twigs and leaves - if necessary roll your feet
- Look into the distance and try and picture how you would look at that distance, do you think you'd blend in?

Once you get used to walking stealthily, try and do some parkour in your opping clothes - comfortable? If not, make minor adjustments until you are - and then practice, practice and practice! You are now getting the essentials done - you should now be noticing real progress with your fitness, with your confidence - and now with your stealth. You just need to combine them, and practice combining them.

Notes

- * This is one of the most important phases - so pay it a lot of attention!
- * It can take a lot of practice to get this phase done correctly - so keep at it and keep practicing
- * Try and set yourself goals - get a map and pick a point; you now have to get to that point without being seen!

Phase 5 - Selecting kit

This is another interest topic, and one which you will find many many hours spent pondering over! Now before you can select your kit we need to question exactly what you want to do.

In general though you may want to look at multitools, different types of flashlight, lockpicks.. etc. I personally op with the following kit:

- 3 D Cell Maglite
- 2 AA Minimag (Red filtered)
- 1 AAA LED Flashlight, with headlamp attachment
- Multitool
- First Aid Kit
- Leather Weight Lifting Gloves (For climbing)
- Spare/Emergency Batteries

- Tripod
- Digital Camera
- Film SLR

As you can see, I've split these into 2 sections - the first isn't op-specific, its kit that is common to everywhere I go. The second section is specific to my objectives; which are usually photography related. So only you can decide which bits of kit you'll place in the second section.

Now depending on what kit you bring - you may wish to consider how you're going to transport your kit. I personally have a well laid out rucksack - with my tripod strapped in the side, my Film SLR in a protective case inside and 2 digital cameras in a case inside. There is cloth securing all the items in there to prevent damage from knocks. In a side pouch on the rucksack I keep my spare batteries, wrapped up in cling film to stop them clinking together. I have a small black pouch attached to my rucksack with my 1AAA LED flashlight inside it, and I keep my mini maglite and multi-tool in another pouch on my belt. My big maglite also stays inside the rucksack until I reach the target, and it gets hooked on to my belt.

Solutions you may wish to think about when thinking about carrying kit are..

- Rucksacks - The obvious solution, is good for carrying equipment to an op; but not good if you need to get stuff out in a tactical environment with speed
- Belt kit - The small pouches that go on our belt; good for carrying torches, multitools or small items like that. Shouldn't be used to carry excessive weight though! Can get a bit uncomfortable..
- Load Carrying Webbing - Usually consisting of a form of belt kit with a "yoke" which bears the load across the shoulders. Types of this include "PLCE", which is used across several militaries. Very adaptable and versatile - with a bit of configuration this can be very useful. May not be suitable for climbing through tight spaces though.
- Assault Vests - Like a tactical hunting vest. Used by various militaries and very useful - like webbing except the pouches are all easily accessible and it is suitable for climbing through tight squeezes. Be careful what you place in the pouches though, as you may be hitting the ground if/when you get seen!

Obviously, depending on the items with which you decide to take - your set up will be different. Once you have your equipment packed you need to consider these factors:

- Weight - Will the kit weigh you down in anyway?
- Noise - Do the "jump test" and see if you're getting any excessive noise - if so; FIX IT!
- Camouflage - Look at your kit; will it ruin your stealth? Remember the above phase, and shape, shadow, shine...

Now, its time to take your kit out! Get ready for an op - get your clothes on and your kit ready.. and go for a walk! Go for a few walks to get used too carrying your kit, and make any adaption that you feel you need. Get used to having it with you, and learn how it feels.

Once you're used to it, its time to combine the phases again! Take your kit out on a run - get used to the feeling of running with it, adapt the kit again to make it more comfortable. Keep repeating this until you're confident your set-up is good. Then try to climb a tree, climb a few fences - do a spot of parkour training.. go back to basics and just get used to carrying everything, moving tactically/stealthily, as well as using escape and evasion techniques such as parkour/running/climbing. You're now ready!

Notes:

* By this stage we've covered topics ranging from getting used to the night, too clothing and now kit. We should hopefully have covered enough for you to be comfortable enough to go out on your first op!

* If you don't feel ready then don't progress, there is no time limit - take your time and go at your own pace. NEVER RUSH!

* Only progress when you're 110% confident that you're ready, and that you can combine all the skills you've learnt so far.

Phase 6 - Doing a starter op

Its beyond the scope of this document to explain how to carry out a whole op - however, I shall make brief notes and try and advise you regarding a good starter op.

Look for abandonments, its always best to start with an abandonment. Once you have found a suitable one, begin to do some recce work. Walk past in daylight and make a note of any security. When you're at home look for aerial photography online and memorize the layout of the perimeter. Make notes on aerial photos, colour code parts to help you remember!

Find out what the building was used for, who owned it, what they did there exactly.. any information you can get at all! It will all pay off in the end, think about what it was used for and what kind of requirements they would've had. A factory? They must've have had place to take goods inward, they must've had a shipping department to send goods out, a reception for visitors.. Then think about fire escapes, look on aerial photos for skylights.

Now is the time to begin thinking about how you're going to get to the target, look at maps and aerial photographs again and develop a route which is quiet and dark enough for you to navigate without being seen.

Rehearse this route in the daylight, checking for any hazards - making a note of anything you come across. Think of alternative routes should you need them, places to hide along the way... Think of every possibility.

This is the information gathering phase done. Now for the recce. Get ready for an op, but don't bring all of your kit - for you wont need a lot of it. This time we're just going to try and get as close to the building as we can. Using the stealth and skills we have already learnt, its time to go to the building.

When you're near the building, spend some time watching for activity, try and memorize any security patrols or patterns. This could be quite a boring time but its imperative that when you finally go in, you go in armed with as much knowledge as you can.

Once you feel you have enough information you can leave and come home.. WELL DONE! That was the closest you've got to an op so far, enjoy it? Well, I hope you did - as you should have enough information to pull it off now...

You should hopefully have:

- Details of Security - Numbers, patrols, patrol routes, timings,
- Notes on the perimeter defenses - Fences, cameras, alarms, bushes, overgrowth, security patrols
- Information on the building itself - Possible entrance/exit points

Now its time, once again, to pull together everything we've done so far and make a stealthy approach to the target, overcome any obstacles in our way, get to the building and exploit any weaknesses we spotted on the recce, and hopefully manage to come out unharmed! If it goes wrong? Well, I hope you practiced the fitness/parkour/climbing enough to get away quick enough ;)