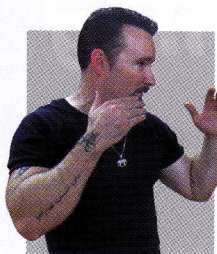


5 MINUTES WITH KARL THORNTON



Big-Hearted Warrior

As a recently appointed board member of Big Heart Project and the defensive tactics trainer to operatives of The Grey Man, Karl Thornton from Modern Defensive Tactics Australia puts his Black-belt skills to good — albeit dangerous — use, travelling in and out of Asia working to free children enslaved by paedophilia and prostitution. Thornton plays a pivotal part in these non-government organisations which, unsupported by the government, operate as 'rogue' crusaders throughout Thailand and Cambodia. With only a few days notice before each 'rescue', Thornton is always ready to go.

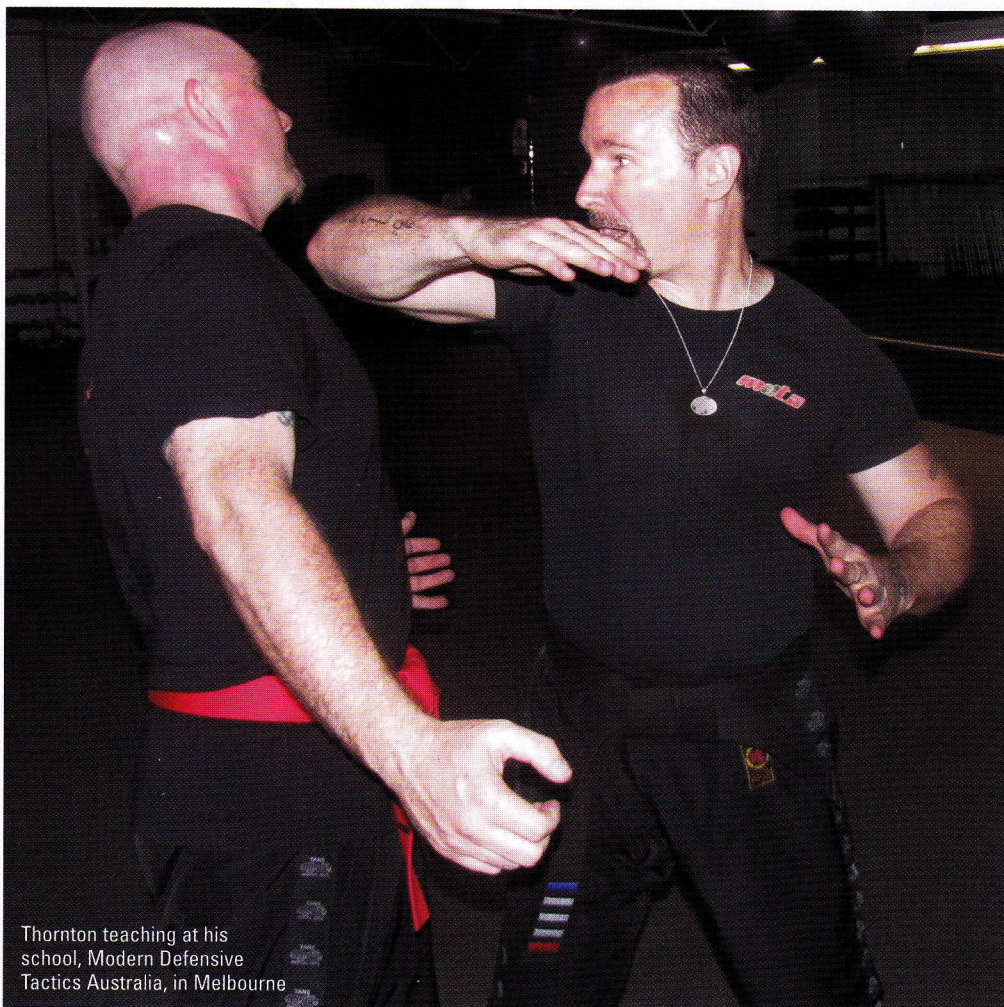
INTERVIEW BY LUKE DODEMAIDE

Firstly, what is the role of The Grey Man?

They do deal with infrastructure and projects overseas as kids are rescued, but their main functional role is in the rescue and intelligence and covert operations to try and find where kids are being trafficked from and to in Asia. They're dealing, on the side, with a bit of a smear campaign. Like anything, we knew it was going to happen eventually — if they can't get you in one way, they'll try to get you in another way.

Who are 'they'?

Without going into it, *The Australian* ran a story and it was basically a smear campaign. One of the organisations, which is funded by American-based companies and was supposed to look after a certain region, was not doing what it was supposed to do. The Grey Man came in and effected an 'operation' or rescue and because we're non-funded — it's all volunteers going over and doing it — the organisation that is funding this organisation was not too happy. They said: 'Hang on, we're paying you \$250,000 a year to look after this area, how come you didn't know what was going on yet The Grey Man comes to the rescue?' So they've been discredited in a way by saying 'It never really happened, [abuse is] still happening in the village.' But we've got tip-offs from different locations that are secure. We're not going



Thornton teaching at his school, Modern Defensive Tactics Australia, in Melbourne

to blow them off just to try to fight against [those launching the smear campaign], so we just let it go and hopefully it will eventually wash its way over.

What do you do for The Grey Man?

I'm sort of an independent, and what I mean by that is

my organisation, MDTA, we attain the operatives for The Grey Man, but we also go over [to Asia] ourselves. We're not actually a part of The Grey Man — although I am The Grey Man's defensive specialist and train their personnel. MDTA try and stay a little independent

and separate from them, the reason being that I also work with other NGOs. I'm now the director of another rescue operation called the Big Heart Project, and they're mainly out of Cambodia. Again, they are set up where they have facilities in place to educate, and they

deal with food, shelter, water, all that sort of thing. They educate around 400 kids. And that's what everybody sees, they get involved in the 'after'. They don't see what comes beforehand.

Where does the funding come from for these projects?

It's all donations. So if you want peoples' help and support, you've got to come out and ask for it. But if you're a covert organisation, how do you come out and ask for it? The circumstances make it hard to get the dollars to do something — you say 'Look, this is what we're doing', and they say 'When and where are you going?' and you reply with 'I can't tell you that'.

So, all our guys are basically self-funded — you pay for your own airfare and you pay for your own accommodation over there, which is good in one way because you only get people who are committed to what they're doing and want to do it. But at the same time, we have a lot of good people who are ready to go but simply can't afford to.

Blitz has been great in supporting and helping us. We put together what we call the Armchair Warrior Program, which is not a charity but a fundraising effort. That helps to fund The Grey Man and the Big Heart Project.

With it being so covert, and so skilled, how do you find suitable applicants for these roles?

A lot of them will contact us. But it's not as easy as they think: people will contact us and say 'Okay, I have a lot of martial arts experience,' and that's great but it's not what it's all about. It's about understanding and training in very high-stress situations, that's why a lot of military or police personnel who have had exposure to that will be more suited to it — but it doesn't necessarily mean they're all going to be the type of people that can work in that environment, because covert

is covert. They'll be trained in the culture, the etiquette and the 'dos and don'ts' of where they're going. And you're trying to deal with these criminals that are making money; you're putting your hands in their pockets and they don't care what they have to do to stop you hurting their business. The operatives need to know how to de-escalate and deal with a person on a level before it gets to physical confrontation, because physical confrontation should always be the last resort. So, prior to that, you have to be able to read the environment, how to use your skills to deal with people. Worst-case scenario, if something happens, you've got to be able to deal with it quickly and effectively, and get out of there as quickly as possible.

How long is the typical rescue mission?

There is a lot that can be done from here, which is the beauty of the internet. We also have a lot of personnel over there, and when I say 'personnel' that doesn't mean people dedicated to a cause, they might just be people from

The Grey Man we're working with the Royal Thai Police Anti-trafficking Division, because at the end of the day they're the ones doing the raid, so we assist them. We'll get all the information together, hand it over to them and they'll decide when they're ready to raid. Then, for example, if I'm part of the physical response team, I may travel over two days before, confirm the targets and see where we're going.

What are the police units like to work with?

They deal with things totally different than here. You have to come to understand them and the relationship we build up with these people doesn't happen overnight. They take a long time to establish, and you have to make sure you are in with the right type of people. It's not a quick process, and the unfortunate part is whenever there is media coverage there's been 'Something happening overseas, kids have been rescued' and that's the end of the story. In Asia, it's hard to make a living anyway, so corruption and persuasion can be funded

How do your guys hold up mentally, seeing all the things you must encounter?

It can be tough on some. There's what I call an 'A', a 'B' and a 'C' version. The 'A' version is just getting the information out there — like saying, 'What we do is send people over to Asia and rescue them from child trafficking and child prostitution.' Then there's the 'B' version, which is along the lines of the book that [The Grey Man founder] John Curtis brought out for The Grey Man, it goes more into detail so people get a better understanding. But then you get people who want the 'C' version, which is the outright truth — exactly what goes on: the reality of how much abuse, torture and degradation these kids go through. Those going overseas who are doing this have to be given the 'C' version. If they aren't, you're putting them in a high-risk situation because if they're seeing the things that we're seeing, that's going to test them psychologically and maybe put the whole team in danger. You see children in these types of environments, like in what we

"The operatives need to know how to de-escalate and deal with a person on a level before it gets to physical confrontation, because physical confrontation should always be the last resort."

the region who are also against what is happening in their own country, so they will supply information. When it comes time for us to start looking at a raid, a raid could be 12 months off or 18 months off. Things get put in place; teams go over just to do some intelligence gathering and confirm where targets may be. That information is all then put together and slowly sifted through to make sure we have it right. And then it is a process of dealing with the people involved; if it was Thailand, for instance, with

pretty quickly. But I think there's a misconception that all police and all government are corrupt, and everybody's corrupt — that's not the case. What we try to do is get involved with people who, as far as we know through our research, are not corrupt. We're not there to tell them how they should do things. But by having organisations like the Big Heart Project or The Grey Man or other NGOs who do this type of work, with the time, technology and infrastructure to assist, it helps.



Thornton in bodyguard mode

SO, HOW GOOD ARE THEY?



"most comfortable mouthpiece that I've ever used" – Preacher



"Your mouth guards are the best on the market. I have worn plenty and I give yours a double thumbs up. Thanks heaps man."

– John Wayne Parr

NUFF SAID!

To get your custom-fit
KING BROWN mouthguard
Call: 0419 297 165
Email: kingbrownmouthguards@dodo.com.au



FIND US ON FACEBOOK

KING BROWN

MOUTHGUARDS®

5 MINUTES WITH KARL THORNTON

call the 'lock-ups' and that is where kids are basically kept in settings no bigger than a dog box — broken down and raped and tortured, trained to be sold off and for the purposes they're there for.

In the media you see the 'A' or 'B' versions. You don't hear that they lace these kids' water with amphetamines to get them working harder and faster, and when they're not good anymore they're either tossed out or buried in a shallow grave. These are the kind of things that happen over there. You know, it's hard. I'll give you a slight 'C' version.

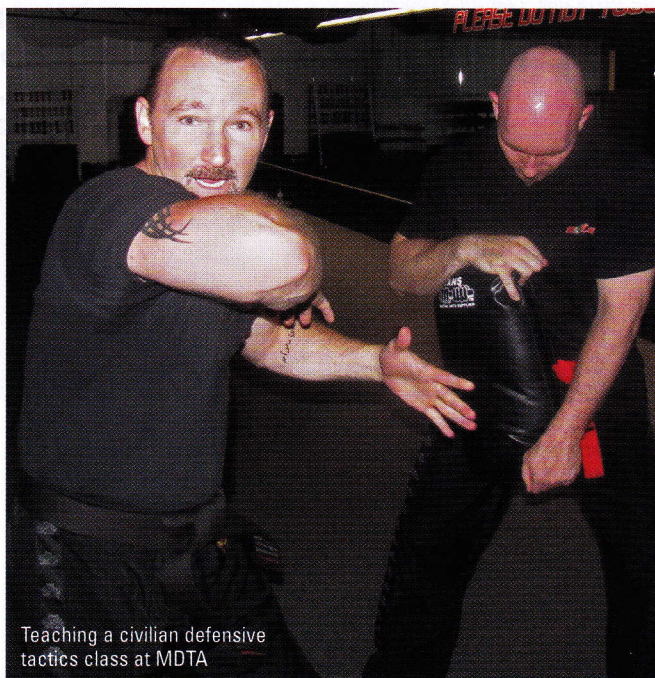
For example, a virgin is always worth a lot more, not just when they're sold, because 90 per cent of the time they are sold as virgins. Obviously over time, the buyers — or the clients — who are paedophiles, they're not stupid. So the pimps/traffickers have a process where they will try to stitch these kids back up, to be like a virgin. And these people say, 'If the child heals and everything's all right, great, we'll make some money off them' but if infection sets in, then that's the end of them.

Do you ever contact the children after they have been rescued?

We all have different ways of dealing with it. I have kids myself, and I like to keep some sort of distance from the children we save. I look at what I do at this end of it, and I don't want to see what happens at the other end of it. If I see too much of that, they may intrude on what I do on this side of it. Eventually one day though, yes, I will be involved in the end product. At the last raid, we got the girls to the police station, then that's it — we get out of the country.

When we grab these children and I see the looks on their faces, that's why I do it. And that's not to say it's always a smile. These children are all scared of adults — they don't trust them. But I know, from there, things will be better for them. ■

For information on MDTA training and the Armchair Warrior program, visit www.mdt.com.au. For more information on helping combat child slavery in Asia, visit www.thegreyman.org and www.bigheartproject.org



Teaching a civilian defensive tactics class at MDTA