

CLOSE PROTECTION IN UK -  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
MIKE O'NEILL

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## David Rubens Associates

David Rubens Associates is a specialist corporate security consultancy offering strategic security services to individuals and organisations across the world.

DRA has worked with government agencies, NGO's, international conglomerates and major global events, and brings a mixture of strategic vision, operational experience and academic research to all of its projects, however large or small.

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**David Rubens**, DRA's founding director, holds an MSc in Security and Risk Management from Scarman Centre, Leicester University, and is a Visiting Lecturer on their Global Security and Policing MSc programme. He was a Visiting Fellow (2009-'10) at the Security and Resilience Department, Cranfield University at the UK Defence Academy, specialising in Terrorism & Public Policy and Strategic Management & Leadership, and is currently studying for a Professional Doctorate at Portsmouth University, researching issues surrounding the development of large-scale trans-boundary and trans-jurisdictional disaster management operations.

David is widely experienced at developing, delivering and managing large-scale strategic security development programmes, and has worked with government agencies and academic institutions in Asia, Africa, Middle East, Caribbean and Eastern Europe.

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## Close Protection in the UK - An Interview with Mike O'Neill

With only six months to go to the Olympics, and with confusing –and often contradictory – messages about the future of security licensing in the UK, it is a pleasure to turn this month's column over to Mike O'Neill, one of the leading figures in the UK SME security sector, a long-time leader of the industry through his activities in the Security Institute and BSIA (where he chairs the Close Protection Section), and one of the first recipients of the title Chartered Security Professional, which has been flagged up as the latest stage in the development of a truly professional status for the UK security management sector. Mike spent many years in the Parachute Regiment, where he commanded the Pathfinder Platoon, and has been involved for equally many years in running Greyman's, a well-known security consultancy specialising in corporate consultancy and high-value CP projects. He has recently merged his consultancy with Perpetuity Consulting to form Optimal Risk.

### CPO licensing for the Olympics

I started off by asking Mike what the situation was with the issues surrounding the licensing of CPO's for the London 2012 Olympics. He told me that the single most important issue that had been resolved was the matter of overseas guests bring their own CP teams. 'The SIA and Home Office briefly looked at the possibility of allowing overseas CP teams into the UK for the duration of the Olympics, given the unique nature of the event and the additional pressures on security providers in general. However, they came back to the basic principle that if licensing and registration are necessary on grounds on national security and public safety, then that argument would be completely demolished if we allowed hundreds of unlicensed, unregistered security personnel into the UK at exactly the time when the national security threat levels were perceived to be at their highest. This has meant that the decision has been definitively taken that anyone acting in the role of a personal security officer in the UK, even during the time of the Olympics, will need to be licensed by the SIA unless they are a bona fide in-house employed contractor'.

I asked Mike whether there were any plans in place to monitor and enforce such a ruling. 'I don't want to give anything away, but I think that it is clear that experienced CP operators would quickly recognise another person or team working in a CP capacity, and I think that it is fair to say that if CP teams are operating in the areas where we would expect them to be – around the major hotels, at the sports venues or in high-profile social events during the Olympics – then there is a fairly high likelihood that at some stage they could be approached by someone and told that given that they are operating as a personal protection officer, could they please show proof of right to work in that capacity. It is still early days, but I think that people who are working legitimately can be confident that we will have measures in place to deal with something that is, at the extreme end, a very real possible threat to national security and public safety'.

Just before this column went to print, the government announced that the military would be involved in the Olympics security programme, with up to 7,500 personnel being seconded to various support and front-line roles. I asked Mike for his opinion on this move. 'I think that it is a natural step to take, given the nature of the Olympics and the fact that in the military we have a pre-formed set of trained, disciplined men and women who are used to being deployed on a moment's notice. The government has made it clear that the security around the Olympics will be a 'blue operation' ie based on normal policing activities, but I think that it is only right and reasonable that military personnel are used as a stand-by reserve force, just as they were in other major national incidents, such as foot-and-mouth disease or in times of major flooding'.

Having got the technical stuff cleared up, I asked Mike what he thought the opportunities would be for private security operators in the UK during the Olympics, and whether it would be the once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity that some people seemed to think it might be. 'I certainly don't think that it will be something that will allow you to radically change your retirement plans!', he told me. 'At the end of the day, it is about six weeks work, if you look at the Paralympics as well, and actually it is quite possible that there will not be as much extra activity as some people are predicting. After all, we do not have a serious personal security problem in London as might have been the case, for example, in South Africa during the World Cup. It is unlikely that small family groups would be looking for 'security services', and larger corporate groups may well look into having one or two security people attached to their group during their stay in London, but the idea of hundreds of security teams operating across the city is not something that I am particularly confident will happen.

However, where I think that there is an opportunity in the market is for those companies that can offer their services more as 'logistical support' or 'facilitators', arranging itineraries, writing security reports and risk assessments, becoming the concierge rather than the simple security provider'.

### **SIA licensing in the future**

Having touched upon the issue of licensing during the Olympics, I asked Mike what the state of play was concerning the future licensing of Close Protection Officers, especially given that the SIA had announced that there would be a major review of how the sector was licensed and accredited once the Olympics were over. 'The major change which will occur is the licensing of companies. Although there are going to be other changes made, they are more in the way that the programme is going to be administered rather than in a major shake-up of the individual licensing concept. Anyone wishing to work in the sector will have to undertake a training programme and complete the licensing process much as they do now', Mike explained. 'The main difference is that rather than individual CPO's applying to the SIA for their license, a number of major players in the security industry will be accredited to handle the administration of the licensing programmes, and therefore anyone wishing to work will have to go through one of those bodies in order to get the necessary accreditation'. Mike went on to give me his own vision of how the licensing of the CP sector could change over the next few years. 'Although there is no question that the basic framework that is in place is fit-for-purpose, I believe that the new licensing procedure could give us the opportunity to build even more professionalism, and the recognition of professional excellence, into the picture. We have a situation at the moment where the right to work in the security sector is a simple binary choice – either you have a license or you don't. So what we have is that the entry-level requirement, which is by its nature the very minimum that we could expect from entry-level operators, has become the over-all industry standard. There is no place in the present system for recognised on-going professional development. For example, I think that there is certainly a place for additional value to be given to skills such as Advanced Driving or Team Leader skills, which would then hopefully become recognised by service-buyers as being value-adding to the overall package of skills that the individual and company brings to the client, though I am aware that there are also extreme cost pressures within the industry, which means that unprofessional and relatively unskilled operators are still being preferred over professional CPO's with the full range of skills and capabilities, purely on the basis of price. And this includes major clients who should certainly know better'.

## The CP sector during a recession

To sum up, I asked Mike what he thought the CP sector in general needed to do in order to maintain its viability during the coming recession. 'I think that there are two potential scenario's. The first is that as pay rates are pushed downwards by increased pressure from clients, we will see a general drop in professional standards as those operators with the personal and professional attributes that would have allowed them to offer a strong professional service decide that there is no point working in what will become a low-pay, low-skill sector. On the other hand, and this is something that I am hoping will happen, it is equally possible that increased financial tension will see professional people from other sectors considering the security sector as one that is appropriate for them to work in, and they will then bring all of their previous skills, experience and general professionalism into the sector, which will have the effect of up-skilling the UK security and CP sectors in general'.

I asked Mike if he had any words of wisdom to finish off with, especially with the prospect of a tough 2012 ahead. 'There is no question that we are in tough times, and moving into what might well be tougher times. However, I am a strong believer that there is always a place for the agile operator, someone who develops a genuine understanding of the clients' requirements, who is flexible and adaptable, and who above all can provide the highest level of professionalism and customer service, across the board and on a sustainable basis. If you are able to provide that level of service, then you have at least given yourself the chance to develop the relationships with clients that will get you through the tough times'.

My thanks to Mike for taking the time out to chat, and I wish all readers of C&S a safe, peaceful and happy New Year, and a healthy and prosperous 2012.



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