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The Atlantic Monthly | May 2004

THE AGENDA

SECURITY

How Do I Look?*Body armor is a must in some lines of work, and it gives "fashion plate" a whole new meaning*

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

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For years I had been borrowing this particular piece of sartorial equipment. Now I felt that I had reached the stage in life where I needed something that fit right, set the appropriate tone, and was hanging in my own closet ready for use. I am not talking about a tuxedo. I am talking about body armor: a vest that holds steel, ceramic, or polyethylene plates for protection against 9 mm, 5.56 mm, and 7.62 mm rounds, and also against various fragmentation devices.

I thought that buying a bulletproof vest and helmet would be simple, but it quickly became complicated—so many choices, so many Web sites, so much conflicting advice from friends. In the early twenty-first century there is a big demand for this type of thing. There are waiting lists for certain vests, and not all sizes are in stock. Just as there are people who attend soirees, company dinners, awards nights, and charity balls, there are people who find themselves in war zones, and they need to be protected but also to look right.

I was attracted to one Web site, BotachTactical.com, which advertised "Clearance: Great Products at Blowout Prices." It offered machine-washable Point Blank Concealable Armor with removable panels. Another Web site, BulletProofME.com, offered similar vests to "put the odds back in YOUR favor."

But I didn't want concealable armor that fit under a shirt—I am not a Secret Service agent, a police detective, a convenience-store clerk in a high-crime area, a drug lord, or a Mafioso. I wanted tactical body armor that fits over a shirt or a jacket. And the array of tactical body armor offered on the Internet seemed endless.

Friends in the Marines and the Army Special Forces recommended that I buy a vest and plates that gave Level III or IV protection. With that in mind I found a Military Outer Tactical Vest (OTV) I liked for \$790 at [Bullet ProofME.com](http://BulletProofME.com), and an even nicer Paraclete Modular Armor Vest—a "hybrid composite [of] Goldflex and Spectra-flex"—sold by Lightfighter.com for \$1,990, with soft-armor panels and Velcro pockets for hard-armor trauma plates.

When it comes to armor plates, you pay for lightness. As one Web site put it, an iron stove will stop a bullet, but who wants to wear an iron stove strapped to his body? Thus nine-pound steel plates cost \$110 apiece on [Bullet ProofME.com](http://BulletProofME.com), whereas ceramic plates that weigh only five and a half pounds cost \$245 apiece, and "maximum coverage" ceramic plates that weigh 7.9 pounds cost \$280. The lightest plates—three pounds—are made of polyethylene, and cost \$395 each.

All right, I thought. I'll buy polyethylene. Trouble is, polyethylene can deteriorate when exposed to excessive heat—so don't leave your IBA (Individual Body Armor) in a vehicle cooking in the sun, one seller advised. Well, I had just spent a summer in the southern Philippines and part of an autumn in Afghanistan cooking in the sun. Moreover, the polyethylene plates did not fit inside some of the vests I

liked.

There were other decisions, too. Did I need side plates? I remembered hearing a colonel berate a sergeant in Afghanistan for not having side plates. "Do you want to die, son?" the colonel asked. "Well, sir," the sergeant replied, "my first wife is getting one half of my retirement pension and my second wife the other half, so it's a good question."

Then I discovered an entire new range of plates, some offering point-blank Level IV protection: if 7.62 mm armor-piercing ammunition hits you twice in the same plate, you are still protected. A single Multi Hit III++ Hard Armor Plate costs \$1,678.95 at [Paraclete armor.com](http://Paraclete.armor.com). The top of the line from this Web site was a Level IIIA releasable vest filled with multi-hit plates for \$7,300.05, complete with pockets for ammunition, magazines, and explosive devices such as flash bangs.

I also had to choose a color. The vests that interested me came in black, plain tan, smoke green, woodland camouflage, and desert or tricolor camouflage. Black was out of place everywhere I had been. Plain tan attracted me, because it would set me apart as a journalist without being too conspicuous among the desert cammies worn by American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Woodland camouflage is the forest-green pattern used by the U.S. Army in every theater except the Middle East; I had seen woodland vests used occasionally in the Middle East, though I had never seen desert cammies used in South America or the Pacific. I liked woodland, but smoke green might be an alternative, I thought.

My decision was further complicated by the Marines. They wear digital cammies in a pattern different from the woodland and tricolor designs of the other services. Would they be offended if I wore woodland?

As with a lot of clothing these days, there were accessory items to consider. Did I want groin protection? Well, why not? The problem was that, as I had learned in the southern Philippines from observing an exercise featuring low-level explosives, groin protectors are cumbersome, albeit useful if something explodes at your feet.

There were other possibilities too. Members of an Army Special Forces team I had encountered in southern Afghanistan didn't like any of the vests on the market, so they ordered ceramic plates from the United States and had an Afghan tailor design vests for them. After all, why not employ and consult the locals, in order to win hearts and minds? I tried on one of the Afghan vests. No, I thought, it wasn't *me*.

In London, if you have money and you want an expert to make decisions about your dinner jacket, you might go to Savile Row. In the United States for this kind of thing you might go to Fayetteville, North Carolina, outside Fort Bragg, home of the Army Special Forces, or to Jacksonville, North Carolina, home of the Marine base Camp Lejeune.

In Fayetteville, I learned from a friend who has had a lifetime of experience in plainclothes intelligence work overseas that "there are vests and there are vests, and there are plates and there are plates." He warned, "Don't just go buy something over the Internet." He also advised me against buying any plates not made of boron carbide or silicon carbide or not in "tiled array" (if a plate cracks when one bullet hits you, you want the damage isolated to a tile, keeping the rest of the plate intact). Another friend told me that stopping rounds from an AK-47 isn't enough; a plate has to be able to stop armor-piercing bullets, too.

In Afghanistan I had noticed that if body armor is too heavy, you wind up taking it off at every opportunity. And bad things happen when you least expect it. In the end I traded some protection for lightness, figuring that if my body armor was comfortable, I'd wear it more often and be better protected. I bought a ProMAX Tactical Vest for \$750, with front and back polyethylene plates. I had been advised that the plates, snug inside the vest, would be protected from the sun for at least a few years. I had asked for tan, but it was sold out in my size, so I settled for desert camouflage. The total package cost \$1,540 at BulletProofME.com, an Austin, Texas, firm with great customer service. A helmet and ballistic eyewear

(from another Web site) added another \$340 to the bill. The helmet was covered in a desert pattern, and the salesman sent along a woodland cover for use outside the Middle East.

Everywhere in my odyssey through the world of body armor, salesmen mentioned satisfied customers. It was the unsatisfied customers I worried about.

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