

# The crisis manager

**He is committed to helping expatriates extricate themselves from crisis situations around the world.**

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**A**FTER 15 years in the French Army, Guillaume de Saint-Bon decided it was time to check out what civilian life had to offer.

"I wanted to experience other things and see more of the world," says the 38-year-old, whose family has a long tradition of serving in the French Armed Forces.

Armed with a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from INSEAD through part-time study, de Saint-Bon decided to capitalise on his experience as a helicopter pilot and commander's logistics unit to open up his own aero-services consultancy company in Singapore.

As luck would have it, when he approached International SOS — a global company that provides medical assistance, security services and travel support to expatriates around the world — with his ideas, the company was so impressed by his portfolio that they offered him a job.

Says de Saint-Bon: "I met them with the intention of offering my services, but I think they were looking for someone with my profile."

Although they initially considered him for two positions, the Saint Cyr Military Academy graduate convinced them to merge responsibilities from both jobs into his current position as Director of Assistance Operations for Asia.

## My job involves ...

... two main types of work.

Whenever a security or medical crisis situation arises, I am the main coordinator for all parties — from onsite ground personnel to third-party service providers like doctors and hospitals, to the local authorities.

For example, if someone falls ill in a remote area of China and needs to be evacuated to a major health centre like Singapore, I will arrange for the ambulance and air travel, get the documents required and coordinate the necessary arrangements in Singapore.

My job is to ensure that all parties work well together to provide the best service for our clients. It's like an orchestra, where everyone must play together to create a symphony. I am the orchestra master.

I also monitor the situation in countries we have clients in, and plan for emergencies that might arise.

At the moment, for instance, we are monitoring the security situation in Pakistan. We send regular updates to our clients there.

I have to prepare an emergency evacuation plan and have the necessary arrangements in place in case the situation turns bad.

On average, International SOS handles 800,000 cases a year and about 20,000 of these involve air evacuations.

## My morning starts with ...

... getting a report of what has happened the previous night.

Our alarm centres are open 24 hours, so I need to be updated on what happens during the night and make decisions on how we should react.

If there are complicated cases involving different alarm centres and clients, I will take on the role of lead coordinator.

I make phone calls to get reports, manage the plan of action and coordinate arrangements.

We use aeroplanes a great deal and have a wide network of third-party providers.

I spend time with various service providers every day to ensure that they work together



Guillaume de Saint-Bon getting an update on an emergency situation from a colleague at the Singapore Alarm Centre, where he is based.

**»I must be ready to drop everything in a second and fly to wherever a crisis occurs«**

GUILLAUME DE SAINT-BON

smoothly and quickly when necessary.

I also conduct audits to ensure that all our aeroplanes and service providers adhere to safety regulations.

I also make time to reflect on crises that have happened, and our responses to them, so that we can learn from past experiences and improve our services.

But most importantly, I must be ready to drop everything in a second and fly to wherever a crisis occurs.

To give you an idea of how hectic the schedule can be, in the past two months, I only got to spend four nights at home.

## To qualify, you need ...

... to be able to manage people and teams.

This job is extremely operations-based, so you need a lot of management skills. Having an MBA helps in terms of understanding how an organisation like International SOS operates.

A degree, or experience in the logistics and supplies field, helps in understanding the processes involved in the job.

Some background in leadership training or management is also useful.

## The best person for the job ...

... is someone who is client-focused. We strive to provide our clients with the best service possible.

You must be able to understand the big picture as well as have an eye for details



International SOS members are often involved in medical evacuations.

because a lack of planning in either can cause everything to fail.

Being open to the opinions of experienced colleagues, and able to merge their best ideas as well as communicate them to all parties are also essential skills.

You must also be flexible and adaptable as you will have to deal with people from different countries and backgrounds.

## Prospects for the future

This job is quite specific and unique, as the company merged the responsibilities from two positions into one for me.

I don't know of many companies doing the same thing, but from this job, you can branch into consulting or request for postings to different countries within the same organisation.

## I love my job because ...

... we are saving lives. In a crisis, you can see people willing to work through the night because they believe in what they are doing.

When the client thanks you, you know you have made a difference in their lives and you get a real sense of achievement.

Also, every day is different in this job.

Of course, there is a lot of pressure but it is an exciting job.

## What I dislike most ...

... is nothing much, to be honest. If I really have to pick on something, I'd say it's the lack of a normal social life. I have many friends but because I travel so frequently, they often do a lot of things without me.

## Will I be a millionaire by 30?

Maybe, if you open your own company!

It's hard to say, as each person receives a different remuneration package depending on his situation. It also depends on factors, like the country to which you are posted and your position.

For example, if you are sent to Nigeria or Angola, you will receive a hardship allowance that adds to your salary.