

## Towson security firm seen at work in Mexico

Team protects author researching drug trade, kidnappings



Robert Oatman, seated in an armored car, is a former chief of detectives for the Baltimore County Police Department who is celebrating the 20th year of his Towson-based executive protection service. Some of his team's work is to be shown on a cable program. (Baltimore Sun photo by Algerina Perna / November 19, 2009)

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December 1, 2009

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Robert L. Oatman does executive protection - and no, he isn't a beefy, brainless bodyguard.

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He is a fit, trim and congenial figure who likes to wear crisp suits and who works with his team to draw up complex plans for shielding people they're paid to protect. It's a point of professional pride that none of his clients have ever been attacked on his watch over the past 20 years.

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"If you've got to touch your gun, it means you've made a mistake," said Oatman, 62, whose R.L. Oatman & Associates Inc. is based in Towson. "It's not about the gun. It's all about planning."

Much of the work that Oatman and his associates do is low profile and behind the scenes, since most clients don't want attention drawn to them and they want to avoid dangerous situations. Because of the confidential nature of his work, Oatman avoids publicity and ordinarily would've scoffed at the idea of allowing a film crew to shoot him and his team in action - until the right opportunity called.

A New York-based television production company called him up a few months ago, wanting to send a crew to shadow him and his team on one of their missions for a new show called "Dangerous Drives," on Fox's Speed Channel cable network.

It turned out to be a new kind of adventure for Oatman, who has been on many in his 40 years of law enforcement and executive protection experience. In September, Oatman and his team protected thriller writer Brad Thor on a trip to some of the griciest parts of **Mexico City** while the author did research for a book on drug trafficking and kidnapping - and a film crew taped their efforts.

"This was a unique challenge," Oatman said. "He really wanted to see the other side" of **Mexico City**.

Oatman spent 20 years in the Baltimore County Police Department, rising to the rank of major and chief of detectives and receiving highly specialized training in criminal intelligence, surveillance and personal protection.

He retired from the department in 1989 and immediately launched an executive protection service, bringing aboard another retired county policeman, Rick Heaps.

For years, Oatman, a published author and noted expert in his field, steadily built a reputation in executive protection, largely through satisfied clients and word of mouth.

Today, Oatman and his employees conduct threat assessments for corporate clients and families and provide executive protection services upon request. He also runs packed training seminars for dozens of people every year in the Baltimore area, attracting former law enforcement officers, corporate security officials, and others who

seek professional training in executive protection. One weeklong session costs \$3,375 per person.

Oatman and other executive protection firms saw an uptick in interest in their field after the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States. The threat against executives can be varied, with protection firms such as Oatman's doing threat assessment, providing security for relatives, and dealing with concerns over disgruntled, fired employees.

Since 1989, he's grown his firm from just himself and close friend Heaps to 14 full-time employees and 38 part-time contractors.

"We've doubled in size since 2003," said Oatman, who grew up in **Dundalk**.

Oatman declined to detail his firm's specific protection rates, but he said the industry standard ranges from \$900 to \$1,500 per day for one security professional from a reputable firm.

Brian McAllister, a field producer with Pangolin Pictures, said when they started researching executive protection firms for the show they discovered Oatman through his quotes in a **New York Times** article in 2002 in an article about executive protection firms. So they called him.

For the fast-paced **documentary** to be authentic, Pangolin needed a real client that Oatman would protect on a real mission. Thor had hired Oatman over the summer for protection while he was on a U.S. tour promoting his latest book, "The Apostle." He had mentioned to Oatman that he wanted to do research in Mexico City for a book about its culture of drug violence and kidnappings.

Thor jumped at the chance to go to Mexico City with Oatman and Pangolin. He saw it as another way he could connect with his own fans and promote his future book.

"It was absolute synchronicity," Thor said. "Bob allowed me to get done what I need to do safely. I could not have done that Mexico trip without Bob. It just would've been foolish. I would've ended up dead or a kidnap victim myself."

Unlike other clients that usually want to stay far away from danger, Thor posed a challenge for Oatman. For his book, Thor needed to get into some of the most crime-infested neighborhoods of Mexico City, where kidnappings of foreigners were common. So Oatman and a team of local security contractors, who had all been students of Oatman's, had to craft multiple routes and plans to spirit Thor in and out of the neighborhoods without incident. They used two armored sport utility vehicles to drive around the city - and the film crew recorded a lot of footage of Thor's protective detail in and around the vehicles as they used them.

"They were just incredibly professional. That's the first word that came to mind: professional," McAllister said.

"All we had to do was point our cameras at them," McAllister said. "They just knew exactly what they were doing. They had everything set up. They had preplanned the entire trip, from the pickup to the drop-off [at the airport]. It was really impressive."

The show that features R.L. Oatman & Associates is expected to air sometime in February on Fox's Speed Channel.

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