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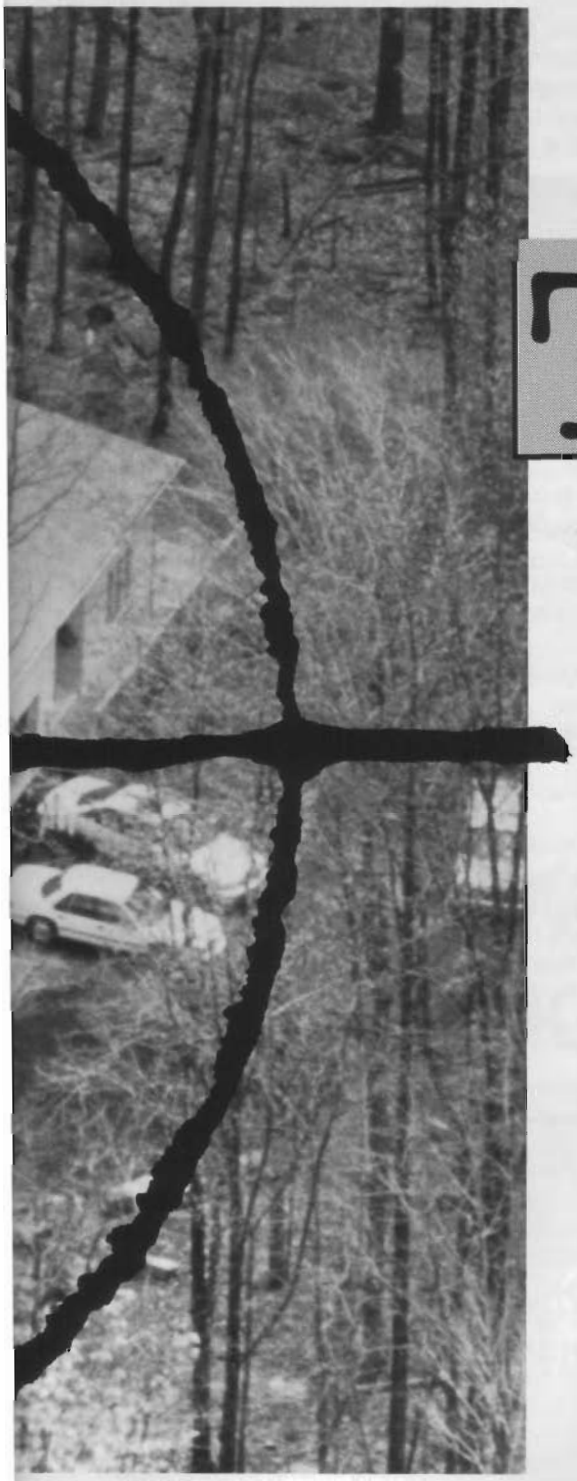
Caught in the cross hairs: Sidney Reso's Morris Township home.



Open Target

Could you be the next Sidney Reso?

By Maureen Nevin Duffy

ARE NEW JERSEY'S CHIEF EXECUTIVES reasonably safe from terrorists, thieves or disgruntled former employees? Was the kidnap and murder of Exxon executive Sidney Reso a tragic aberration, or a glaring example of the vulnerability of the state's corporate elite?

When Reso, 57, stopped his car to pick up the morning newspaper from the driveway of his Morris Township home on April 29th, he was already in a high-risk situation.

According to Secret Service-trained professionals, routine travel poses the greatest security risk for potential targets of assassins or kidnappers. In Reso's case, his daily routine proved fatal.

Security professionals are understandably hesitant to discuss the Exxon executive's abduction with reporters. They don't want to interfere with any ongoing investigations, make statements that could be manipulated during a trial, or make judgments without access to the facts which are certain to surface in testimony. But security personnel, who agreed to speak off the record, expressed frustration. The bare facts of the case, they say, imply that Exxon's program lacked key elements of a first-class executive-protection program.

How could a top official of Exxon Corp. have fallen victim to kidnappers? Certainly, if Reso wasn't safe, most executives must be similarly exposed. What can we learn by comparing what the security industry considers prudent procedures with what is known about the Reso case and corporate security in general — not to single anyone out for blame, but to remove security from the realm of theory and examine how it works in actual '90s practice.

Reso, despite his own low-profile demeanor, was a textbook example of a terrorist mark. He headed up Exxon Company International, the oil giant's largest division and a popular target of extremists. According to experts, this alone should have guaranteed Reso the tightest security protection — whether he wanted it or not.

Adding to the incongruities is the figure who heads the division's security, James A. Brooke, a man considered by his peers to be "a consummate professional in the security business." Another said Brooke has "an excellent reputation" and holds a top rank in military intelligence. Further proof of that respect is Brooke's position on the prestigious 25-member Overseas Security Advisory Council of the U.S. Department of State. According to executive director Ralph F. Laurello, even though Brooke has been a member for less than two years, he has already assumed the chair of the Country Council. A type of oversight committee, the council acts as a steering body for businesses coordinating security activities overseas. Says Laurello: "Personally, I'd say he is one of the most prominent security directors in the country."

Like most corporations, Exxon refuses to discuss the subject of security — period. And the company remains shrouded in a self-imposed media blackout on the Reso case, pending the trial of the alleged killers, Arthur and Irene Seale. But security directors at other New Jersey corporations, agreeing to speak off the record, offer these insights.

Says one director: "Brooke really didn't have a hand in the security of Reso." Due to a reorganization of Exxon's security operations a few years ago, the efforts were decentralized. "Brooke was only in charge of securities overseas," says the source. "If Reso had been out of the country, he would have been protected by Brooke."

Sources close to Brooke say they are incensed over attacks against him by some unscrupulous security vendors who they say are slamming Brooke as part of a marketing bombardment. "Those of us in the business," says one security director, "have been noting who threw the stones."

They say Brooke can't defend himself because he is under a gag order. "He took a bad rap because his office happens to be in Florham Park," says another security director and a close colleague of Brooke's. Florham Park is the corporate headquarters of Exxon Company International. However, the security for the facility is under the domestic division, whose director sits in Houston. "The consensus in the community," says the source, "is that the Exxon domestic security program is not under professional standards." Exxon refused to comment on these statements.

Today, budget constraints are forcing companies to choose their area of emphasis. Most corporations and many investigators perceive the greatest threat to executives as being outside the country — traveling in countries politically opposed to the views of the corporation or the U.S., countries where kidnapping for cash has become an industry.

"Outside of the Reso case, New Jersey is pretty safe," says John F. Viggiano, president of Dignitary Protection and Investigative Services Inc. in New York City. Viggiano's group has worked for the Shah of Iran's family and *The Daily News*, during its labor strike.

"Security is so expensive," adds a director. (Less than $50 an hour for a personal guard is considered suspect.) "It's where the hardpressed manager makes his cost cuts. You need professional judgment on when to draw the line. Unfortunately, many security directors aren't good enough at that." Decentralization, he adds, has made the task harder still.

In general, "based on discussions with my peers, executive protection runs the gamut from abysmal to outstanding," says Robert C.G. Disney, vice chairman of the Arlington, Va.-based American Society for Industrial Security's (ASIS) standing committee on terrorist activity. "The vast majority of corporations in this country tend to fall into the marginal category — meaning a hit-or-miss operation," says Disney, who is also director of security for a major financial institution.

But Disney admits that security decisions shouldn't be made with a siege mentality. "The threat against corporate executives is probably very low — it increases if you go overseas to certain countries. And it's greater against a company or individual if he or the company is in a controversial situation. A company, say, targeted by a far-right environmental group, in a business that's got a record of heavy pollution. The person who runs the company tends to become the target of the group."

That description could apply to Reso. But Reso's kidnappers

On Guard

Security professionals recommend the following safeguards.

1. Risk changes. Continually review your status.
2. Deterrence is best. Focus on physical security: fences, alarms, passive barriers and securing your car.
3. Do thorough background checks on all security personnel. Recruit with the same credential check you would use on a key employee.
4. Plan ahead. Keep tapes of your voice, code words and personal dates and events that will help authorities assess your true situation should you be abducted.
5. Vary your work schedule and your route to and from the office. Park close to the building.
6. Avoid trips to countries on the state department's advisory list.
7. Don't travel with matched or expensive luggage, and dress casually.
8. You are most vulnerable in your car. Avoid vanity plates, which draw attention to who you are. Use a specially trained driver from a well-respected defensive-driving school. The driver should keep the tank filled and the cap locked. Install locks on the hood and a bolt through the exhaust pipe (to prevent insertion of dynamite sticks).
9. Remember to arrange protection for your family whenever you're traveling.

seem to have acted out of simple greed. That raises the question: How do you protect against one of the oldest sins known to man? One way companies try to get a sense of a person's character is through background checks. According to private investigators and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials, gaining Seale's police employment record would have been child's play for a security officer.

Arthur Seale, like most security personnel, was a policeman before going to work for Exxon. But Seale's work record with the Hillside Police Department was not exemplary. According to Hillside Mayor James C. Welsh, the minutes of the municipality's formal meetings show that Seale was suspended twice, once for excessive force. In a routine reference check, such information would probably be missed or denied as private. Even for someone familiar with Seale's employment problems, he says, it would have been a "painstaking process" going through the minutes of the municipal body's twice-monthly meetings to find the right dates.

Security professionals say that's why *they* should do these checks. However, a security director for a New Jersey Fortune 50 corporation told us his company's personnel office does them all. "I ordered an extensive investigation into a prospective security employee and they wouldn't even let me see the results," he says.

"Any good agency should conduct an investigation beyond" standard personnel records, says William Baum, vice president of investigations for D.B. Kelly Associates Inc. The Somerset-based firm supplies a range of security services, from imaging systems for combating insurance fraud, to former state troopers for guarding executives and celebrities. Founder Col. David B. Kelly, former superintendent of the New Jersey State Police, directed security at the 1965 Glassboro Summit Conference.

"There's a big difference between having a clerk in personnel and having a trained investigator do a check," says Baum. "They know how to act, ask a sensitive question, or recognize something subtle in a report. They talk to the local cops."

According to Mayor Welsh, Seale also resigned from duty and was given a state pension because of a bad knee. "He couldn't do police work," he says. Welsh speculated about how Seale would've passed a company physical. Asked if Seale should have been approved for a security job, Welsh proposes, "Maybe it was a desk-jockey job."

"Obviously a case like this brings to light the fact that more stringent security measures may need to be employed by executives," says William J. Tonkin, a spokesman for the FBI's Newark office, which handled the Reso investigation. "We won't address if the Reso case points out lapses, but it may be prudent to re-examine the role of security in corporations in light of Reso. They may wish to at least look at their current security policies to see if they warrant revamping, including background checks on security personnel."

Budget cuts, say some security vendors, have prompted corporations to slash expenditures across department lines and shift background checks to human resources staffs. "Security staff is one of the first groups to be trimmed during tough economic times," says ASIS's Disney. "So you have fewer people trying to do the same job when the threat is even greater." In the past year-and-a-half, he notes, employee hostility has risen with the economy's downturn.

The Reso case was more opportunist than terrorist, agrees John M. Mann, an executive-protection specialist for the Wackenhut Corp. in Coral Gables, Fla. Wackenhut, which has 90 offices in 46 countries, has seen an increased demand for services since the Reso case broke. "The escalating problem for

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execs is disgruntled employees," he says.

Viggiano, a former Secret Service agent trained to protect the president, agrees. "You've got a guy who's led an exemplary life, then loses it all when he hits hard times. And the numbers of disgruntled keep growing."

In the meanwhile, "perform a vulnerability survey," advises Mann. Surveys cover both risk factors of the company and the executive — at home, at work and traveling. Investigators then counsel the company on its risk factors and individuals on basic steps: securing the home, having a plan, being prepared.

Most executives will at least secure their home and car. "The vehicle is the only time a terrorist can fix an individual in time and place," says a security director for a large New Jersey pharmaceutical house. "Ninety percent of the time it happens there. So if you can protect the car, you can do a pretty good job of protecting the person. By having a specially trained chauffeur, not necessarily bearing arms, the car becomes a weapon."

Experts we spoke with recommend two defensive-driving schools very highly: Scotti School of Defensive Driving in Medford, Mass., and BSR Inc. in Summit Point, W.Va. The car service is a key element of an "excellent" protection program, says Disney, "not for the executive's convenience, but for protection to and from work and other business trips. It's mandated by the corporate chairman. You don't have a say in whether you want it or not."

Several sources say Reso was offered such protection and refused it. Robert E. Powis, chairman of INTERPASS Ltd., an Irvington, N.Y.-based security firm, echoes others in the industry when he says many executives turn protection down as an invasion of privacy.

What about mandatory coverage? "That generally comes from the chief executive," says Powis. "And often he's rejecting it for himself." What this proves, says Disney, is the need for a set of corporate security standards throughout the organization. An executive's safety, he says, is directly dependent upon the attitude at the top. "If we don't train our CEOs in the importance of security in the corporate system, these risks will be perpetuated."

For information on legislation resulting from the Reso case, see page 16.