

Private Eye

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both Vail, Colo., and San Diego.

"Just to show you how a low-tech ruse can work, in that case we got most of the information out of his wife," says Peterson. "We knew where he was living, and we got hold of his plane reservations to San Diego by calling his travel agent. We used a secretary ruse — pretending to be his secretary and asking, 'Did we have this booked correctly? Is this itinerary right?' Then I called his wife, pretending to be 'Alex, from out of town,' a business partner who was just passing through Colorado. She ended up telling us all about the development in Vail. To get her going, I mentioned the term 'Hong Kong investors,' because I knew her husband was already in the air, and I knew she didn't want to blow anything for him, so she ended up telling us everything about this development company he had up in Boulder. When the government brought him in, he honestly thought he'd been tracked on satellite for the past two years. That's why I always tell my wife: 'If anyone calls and starts asking questions, hang up.'

"If we can bring them in, the paranoia factor sets in," Peterson observes. "We had one guy who claimed to be bankrupt who then went out and took his whole family, and his partner's family and even some potential investors, on a ski trip to Austria. There must have been 13 of them, all told. We had the airline reservations, and we could document that he had two Swiss bank accounts because we followed him when he went across the street to Switzerland. We always figured he was definitely not broke, that he had to have a couple of million salted away, but we had no way to prove it. But when the feds brought him in, he was so rattled by what they knew about him that he thought he was being monitored on a satellite. Then the guy thinks: 'If they know this much; uh-oh, perjury time.' So he caved."

Peterson started out in the mid-'Sixties as a cop in suburban Chicago, but got out because he had to make too many marijuana busts and didn't want to be in a situation where he had to arrest his friends. "You have to remember what it was like back then," he sighs.

He drifted west to Colorado, doing a bit of this and a bit of that, before enrolling in the Community College of Denver, where he studied criminal justice. After two years, he left school and became a full-time Sam Spade. His resume includes stints as a bodyguard for a Saudi oilman and for an offensive pop star who had received inexplicable death threats during her trips to Vail and Aspen back in the 'Seventies. Later, he would do undercover work for an oil company in Wyoming, and for

Marvin Davis, who suspected that an employee had embezzled millions of dollars from him. That case is still in litigation.

Peterson, who has concealed-weapons licenses in several states, owns a 14-round, .40-caliber Glock, a .38-caliber Colt and an Uzi submachine gun — all of which are serious Miami Vice-type equipment. But the guns 'n' ammo are more useful as props in magazine stories such as this than as everyday tools of the trade.

"The Uzi was collateral from a loan; it's in the file cabinet across the room," chuckles Peterson. "Those things are too expensive to use, anyway; they fire too much ammunition." He says the other guns are also gathering dust most of the time. Thus, even though his press kit is filled with local newspaper and magazine articles depicting a younger Peterson, with *de rigueur* shades, posing next to a flashy new Corvette, Peterson says that he has never had to use a weapon in his entire career, and



R.W. Peterson

has only been fired on once. Now that he is in his mid-40s, and has this nice thing going with the FDIC, he likes to play down the tough-guy side of the business anyway.

In the early days, when reporters would come in, we'd tell them what they wanted to hear," he recalls. "But you don't get many serious clients that way. You just get oddballs who want to come work for you."

Still, there are occasions when firearms are necessary. In February 1991, while serving as a private financial investigator for a Denver S&L investigating one of its creditors in an alleged Ponzi scheme, Peterson and his crew entered the warehouse of a company called M&L Business Machine, which was supposed to be filled with computer products. "For some reason, they couldn't get the bankruptcy marshals that day," Peterson recalls, "and they didn't want to take a chance that this guy they were tracking would start moving things around. So we went in."

Prying open a group of boxes, the investigators found only bricks and dirt, not electronic equipment. (This tried-and-true technique for foiling auditors was also used with great success by Miniscribe, another classic 'Eighties scam.) The scheme is believed to have cost 250 private holders of unsecured notes as much as \$250 million. The S&L that hired Peterson to investigate M&L Business Machine is now in the hands of the Resolution Trust Corp.

In addition to his corporate work, Peterson earns a nice piece of change conducting background checks. Sometimes, his clients are employers anxious to verify the resumes of prospective employees. Sometimes, his clients are wealthy middle-aged women anxious to determine whether the "doctor" they met on vacation is really a physician and, if so, why he wears so many gold chains. And sometimes, in this age of sexual anxiety when the night can write a check the day would prefer not to cash, his clients are men and women who want to know whether their prospective partners have ever participated in activities that could lead to the transmission of fatal diseases. Peterson has also worked for brokerage houses.

Recently, Peterson was hired by a Fort Collins, Colo., woman to investigate a man claiming to be a doctor from Mexico. The woman was already down \$18,000 (a gift to *el doctor*) and one used Rolex watch (valued at \$8,500), and would have been out a \$40,000 Porsche when the private eye stepped in and found that the man had been thrown out of medical school, had been married five times and was on the lam for failure to pay child support. An unforeseen consequence of the S&L catastrophe: Men who would previously have spent their time defrauding the government now are forced to defraud single women.

Surprise is one of the best weapons a good private investigator has. Targets of federal probes, having already gone through the normal judicial procedures, think the case is settled. Not in their wildest dreams would they expect the government to hire private eyes to trail them. Not in their wildest dreams would they ever suspect that the innocuous person sitting at the next table might be eavesdropping.

"We've done electronic surveillance on ski slopes, we've had people sit at the next table in the ski lodge, and in one case we used a Japanese guy to sit next to four Japanese businessmen in a sushi bar and listen in on their conversations," reports Peterson. This last incident, for the record, didn't involve a failed S&L. Instead, Peterson had been hired by an American firm to find out how much a Japanese outfit was willing to pay for a local golf course. Peterson says it's quite amazing how much confidential information can be

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gleaned from listening to ordinary conversations in bars and restaurants.

"They were talking about the deal pretty openly," he recalls, and he says the same thing is true of S&L scamsters. "They never expect anything like that. They're sure that it's safe."

An astonishing amount of information also can be obtained from office personnel, if an investigator pretends to be a friend of the boss or a secretary of one of the boss's business

"I called up one guy's secretary, pretending to be 'Joe from San Diego,' and we were joking about how much money he had hidden," he says. "His secretary was going, 'Yeah, he's supposed to be broke, yuk, yuk, yuk.' It just goes to show you: pay your secretary thirty thou and train her well."

With all this talk about gaining access to phone records, or looking over medical records, or masquerading as an old buddy from out of town, or pretending to be somebody's secretary, the question arises: Does the government ever request details about the kinds of tactics Peterson uses to obtain his informa-

"Not really," he chortles. "They know we use some fairly devious techniques." ■