

# Vehicles for well-to-do take safety to an extreme

By Bill Griffith, Globe Staff, 2/29/2004

**M**ost of us, when we go car shopping, have rather mundane wish lists. If we're prepared, we've examined our needs, scrutinized the monthly budget, then made a determination of what we want and what we can afford. Then we start looking around. Usually, there are many options. We might be seeking a pickup, a sport utility vehicle, a commuter car, a "first car," something used, a convertible, a hybrid. All-in-all, "the usual."

Our more fortunate neighbors can look at the luxury market and hit the upscale dealerships. Others can go the sports-car route.

But there's a segment of the car-buying population that seeks something most of us are only peripherally aware of: armored cars. Not the Brink's trucks that haul cash to banks and ATMs. Rather, armor-plated people-movers: Chevrolet Suburbans, Lexuses, Jeep Grand Cherokees, Toyota Land Cruisers, and GM Hummers that have been reskinned with armor plating and sport ballistic glass, run-flat tires, and beefed-up mechanicals -- engines, suspensions, brakes -- to accommodate the extra weight.

If you drive the highways around Boston on a daily basis, chances are you've passed or have been passed by some of these vehicles and never suspected a thing. And that's the point.

"Blend into the environment. That's the number one rule for protection," said Darren Flynn, North American sales manager for Fairfield, Ohio-based O'Gara-Hess & Eisenhardt, which built its first armored limousine in 1948 for President Harry S. Truman.

"We always recommend a make and model that's indigenous to the area," Flynn said. "In most countries, the last thing you want is a vehicle that says, 'I'm rich.'"

While the company doesn't release customer names or locations, Flynn says it's not hard to guess where such cars would be required.

"Any place in the world where there are wealthy people who could be kidnapped for ransom that can be used to finance terrorist activities," Flynn said. "Look at the hot spots:

the Philippines, South and Latin America, Nigeria, South Africa, the Middle East, Russia, and Eastern Europe."

He said that in the United States the military is the company's largest customer. But O'Gara-Hess does have a roster of private-sector clients that Flynn would not discuss.

On Feb. 10, there was an unremarkable Chevy Suburban parked in front of the Globe offices. It was built by O'Gara-Hess and belongs to Harry Coyne of Coyne Consulting Group of Woburn, a specialist in personal protection.

Few, if any, of the people entering or exiting the building would have given the Suburban a second glance. If they'd opened a door, they'd certainly have noted it is extremely heavy, and attached to the body with bolted-on hinges. Lower a window and you'd gasp. It is several inches thick but distortion-free.

That's part of rule two.

"Never let anyone know what level of protection you have," said Flynn.

Potential owners are: heads of state, CEOs, wealthy families, law enforcement, and protective services, such as Coyne's.

O'Gara-Hess has been in the protection business since 1876, starting as a custom builder of horse-drawn coaches and ambulances, and later building motorized hearses and ambulances. Today, the company manufactures and sells cars in the United States, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, France, and Germany, with an additional international sales office in Geneva.

Flynn notes that 90 percent of security dollars are spent safeguarding the home and workplace; however, 80 percent of violent incidents happen between those two places.

In the late 1980s, an armored vehicle would have cost \$180,000. It would have been large and unwieldy and hard to drive, with thick, distorted glass. Today, armored vehicles offer good performance, and the glass has true optical quality, plus safeguards to protect against shards flying into the vehicle. Prices range from \$49,000 for handgun-level protection to \$126,000 for assault-rifle protection.

The company also produces "up-armored" versions of the HMMWV (Humvee) for the military.

A byproduct of O'Gara-Hess's testing is one of the largest ballistic databases in the world.

"You have to be able to assure a client exactly what our systems will defeat, what will happen in worst-case scenarios, and realistic standards," said Flynn.

Coyne preaches preparation for anyone he's hired to protect, making sure his "employer" knows how to react under any situation that might arise. Other keys to his business: driver training, first aid, and nonlethal weapons training.

Both Coyne and the manufacturer agree that both the armored vehicle and driver have a single goal: "Get your passenger out of the danger zone." That's what all of the expense of the armored vehicle buys you -- a couple of seconds to get away.

That's a far cry from the normal workaday commute and, for most of us, it's one vehicle we're glad isn't on the shopping list.

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COYNE'S LEFT FRONT BY TOM LARSEN



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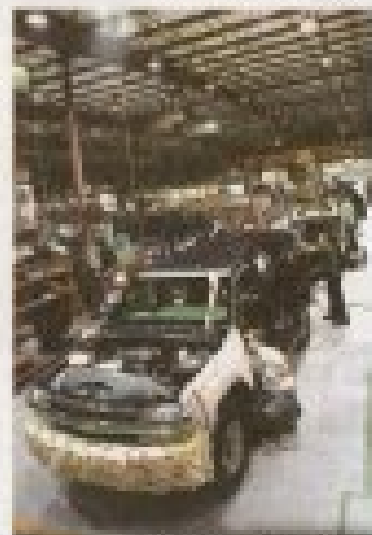
Harry Coyne (top right) of Coyne Consulting Group of Wilbur, a specialist in personal protection, with his company's armored Chevrolet Suburban. The SUV's bulletproof glass (top left) is thick — Coyne's cellphone is used for range tests — and the doors are so heavy that the hinges (bottom left) are bolted on. The SUV was retrofitted by O'Gara-Hess & Eisenhardt at its Ohio plant (bottom right). Below: A gunman fires at an armored vehicle in an O'Gara-Hess performance test.



COYNE'S LEFT FRONT BY TOM LARSEN



O'GARAH-HESS MANUFACT



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