

People

File

Double Click here to return to the Story Profile - 

Story Name SMITH, AL
Topic Eric Szatkowski: Take One
Date 10/15/98 07:20:30 AM
Reference # P-Pert-8241256

To	Chief of Correspondents	From the Bureau	
		Chief in	CHI
For	Friedman, Jack	For	Lisa Greissingner
		CC	

Enter Text Here:

[Pam: I've got calls out to the Attorney General of Wisconsin, Luell, Szatkowski's boss, and one of his former television co-workers for tert. I will file take two with terts as they come in. cheers, lisa]

Late one bitter February night in 1997, Eric Szatkowski found himself on a lonely stretch of country road in rural Wisconsin looking for a needle in a haystack, or so it seemed. It was pitch black out and not a person or house in sight. The reason that Szatkowski was out that cold night was to pick up a bundle of cash at a pre-arranged drop site in a farmer's frozen field. He was told that the spot would be near an electrical box and marked by a gum wrapper. "All of a sudden there were headlights," recounts the soft spoken mid-westerner. "It made me really nervous. The other driver pulls in behind me and mirrors all of my moves. In the back of my mind I'm thinking, 'Maybe he found out that I'm a cop and as soon as I get out of this car and get the money, he's gonna take a shot at me.'" Okay — who wouldn't be nervous if you're posing as a hit man and driving around the middle of nowhere to pick up a \$1500 in a paper bag as a deposit on a \$10,000 contract to kill someone. But in the end, the other car was just that, another car, and by the end of the story the bad guy winds up in jail.

A career fighting crime might seem improbable for a former on-air television news reporter but "going into this was easy," explains Szatkowski citing job security and excitement as draws to his current line of work. "With television you had to worry whether you had a job one day to the next." Now, as a special agent with Wisconsin's Department of Justice, Szatkowski works in the Special Assignments Bureau. The Department of Justice is the law enforcement branch of the state's Attorney General's office. As an agent for the Criminal Division unit Szatkowski has seen it all—from drug dealers and husbands looking to do in their wives to child murderers, bomb makers and wives looking for ways to knock off their spouses and he handles homicides, murder-for-hire and militia groups.

The youngest of three children, Szatkowski (DOB 10/31/61) was raised on Milwaukee's south side in a predominately Polish neighbor. His parents Waclaw and Lucy emigrated from

Europe in the 1940s—his father, a carpenter and cabinet maker came over from Poland, his mother, a homemaker, from France. As new Americans they valued education—all of the children attended Catholic schools through high school. The Szatkowskis wanted their children to have the American dream, complete with college education and white collar work. Szatkowski says that his parents, now deceased, subtly let him know that police and investigative work were too blue collar. They passed away, (“It was tough, brutal even, losing both parents so close,” he says.) before he began his career in law enforcement and his siblings, brother Dennis, 48 and sister Claudine, 43, have nothing to say about their younger brother's work: the three are not close.

After graduating from Thomas Moore Catholic High School in 1979, Szatkowski attended the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. There he received his BA in mass communications in 1983, concentrating on television. During his junior year at UW he began an internship with TV6 in Milwaukee as an associate producer. (That same year he also met a business major who became his wife. Joyce and he married on December 25, 1983.) After graduation Szatkowski went to Oklahoma City to work at a local television station as an on-air reporter trainee. In short order new management came in and Szatkowski found himself once again back behind the cameras.

With his foray into on-air work stalled Szatkowski headed back to Wisconsin. There he got a job as a reporter at WKOW in Madison, WI. “I was assigned the courts and crime beat. I covered all of the sensational cases that occurred in Madison and Central Wisconsin,” he recalls. “Murders, arsons, sexual assault. If it bleeds, it leads, that was me. I really enjoy covering those stories and doing some investigative work. I just really enjoyed it.” It was as a reporter at 27 Eyewitness News that Szatkowski helped to solve his first crime. While he was covering a series of arsons in the Madison area he noticed the same guy was always on the street observing the activity. Szatkowski interviewed the guy, Fred Long, for one of his pieces and then notified the authorities. When police picked Long up for questioning and he admitted to setting the fires and was convicted on multiple counts of arson. Until being notified by Szatkowski the police hadn't realized that Long was at all the scenes. With that “investigative work just got into my blood,” says Szatkowski. And it was the investigative part of news reporting that he loved the most.

In 1988, while following a murder case, Szatkowski met an FBI agent who suggested that he check out a career in law enforcement. “I wasn't all that thrilled with where my television career was at that point and time,” he explains. “I had tried to get into bigger markets and it was tough. I just didn't have the patience.” He went down to Quantico for a three month training program and decided to get an investigative job in Wisconsin. “We were getting to a point where we wanted to have kids and raise our family and stability was more important to us,” he says of the switch. His wife Joyce points out that while there is more personal safety in terms of a media job, there is more job security in what her husband now does. She supported the job change whole heartedly. “Joyce is fantastic,” raves her husband. “I could have said that I want to sell cars or pick up garbage and she would be with me. I am very lucky to have her. I'm sure that a lot of other wives wouldn't be as flexible as she is. I had this bug in me that I like the investigative reporting, and then I thought hey, instead of reporting about these cases, maybe I could try and make some of them. It seemed like a natural extension.”

So, in 1989, he left television to become a fraud investigator for Wisconsin's Department of Transportation. Three years later he joined the Department of Justice as a investigator in narcotics. “It took a lot for people not to look at me as that ex-news reporter,” Szatkowski says. “I had to earn their respect and it's only in the past three or four years that I've really been confident in what I'm doing. Now people look at me 100 percent as an agent, and not a television news reporter.”

Despite the seeming inherent dangers of undercover work, no one in the history of the

Wisconsin Department of Justice has ever been killed while undercover. [NOTE: hard CK coming from Justice.] Szatkowski had a six week course on undercover techniques when he joined narcotics. "Experienced agents would set up role-playing," he explains. "They would play a person selling drugs or different scenarios such as going into a hotel room or an apartment to make a score. The agents play the bad guys and you hone your skills in a training setting. Once you're done with the program it's basically you're thrown out on the street." Szatkowski feels that the most dangerous undercover work isn't the murder-for-hire case but rather narcotics or militia. When he first began working undercover the Department of Justice kept him in Madison even though he had been an on-air reporter there. "I was surprised that they kept me in the same market," he shrugs, adding that he was never recognized while working narcotics in Madison. "I guess that drug dealers just don't watch the news."

Szatkowski's first undercover gig came when he was fresh out of the academy. While working out at a local gym he noticed some unusual activity. "There were the usual big guys," he remembers. "One of them, he was huge, six feet four inches, 275 pounds with a super tan. I have my Division of Narcotics Enforcement T-shirt on. Meantime, this guy is walking around the gym and saying to people, 'Hey, I've got some stuff and it's going fast. Do you want any?' He's only talking to weight lifters so I assume it's steroids." Using an informant, Szatkowski learned that the guy, a professional wrestler, was trafficking steroids. He arranged an introduction and purchased steroids, eventually busting the dealer and his supplier.

Unlike narcotics, there is no undercover training specifically for hit men—it's learn as you go. "I didn't have any formal training for my undercover work as a hit man," admits Szatkowski. "My training came on the job. The best training I got for undercover was when I worked narcotics." And Wisconsin's Department of Justice has no stats on the number of agents who have posed as hit man while investigating a murder for hire case. [Note: I'm having a hard time tracking down any of those numbers. I'm waiting to hear from the FBI about murder-for-hire stats.]

Szatkowski is called in on the old cases, the difficult cases, or the cases in which there is more than one jurisdiction. His assignments come from the director of the Criminal Division, Robbie Lawry. [NOTE: I've calls in to Lawry for a tert which I will file as it comes in—Lawry was off on Monday and out of the office yesterday.] As a special agent, Szatkowski works with local police, sheriffs' offices and federal agents. Although his offices are in Milwaukee, he spends at least 80 percent of his time on the road, tracking leads and making contacts with potential witnesses and suspects on cases all over the state of Wisconsin. Three quarters of his cases are homicides and when not undercover, Szatkowski uses a Justice Department Grand Prix equipped with cell phone, police radio, siren and lights.

His day begins at 8:00 a.m. when he checks into the office he shares with a state gaming agent before pursuing leads. His half of the room is neat, almost obsessively so. All of his cases, past and present, are stored in two grey filing cabinets. On top of his computer rests a baseball cap with "Dangerous Hit Man" embroidered on one side and "Cop" on the other. It was given to him by Bob Toussaint, one of the intended victims of a murder-for-hire plot. His half of the walls is decorated with movie posters from Golden Eye and the Enforcer as well as art work from his two children. On his bookcase is a copy of Hit Man, A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors, a how-to manual for wannabe hit men. The book has such informative chapters as "The Disposable Silencer," and "More Than One Way to Kill a Rabbit."

For work Szatkowski usually dresses casually unless he has to appear in court or meet someone. Today he looks like an anchorman: black slacks, a blue shirt, yellow power tie and a checked black and white jacket. He is clean cut, with blonde hair, very regular features and blue eyes. There is a gold band on his left hand, his wedding ring of almost 15 years. When he has to go undercover, Eric wears longer hair, to his collar, lets his beard grow in and lets himself get a

bit dirty. ("I don't like his undercover look," says wife Joyce of the long hair and scruffy face.)

The hours a special agent keeps can be even more grueling and unpredictable than those of a journalist. If Szatkowski is brought in on a murder-for-hire he has to drop everything else. He works through the night, with 24-36 hour stints at exhausting regularity. When he's not at work, or out of town for work, everything revolves around his family. "I'm out of town so much that when I do get to spend time with the kids is really important," he says of family time.

At least one night a week he doesn't make it home, then there are the weeks when he is gone for six or seven days. His schedule is no schedule. "My daily routine all depends on the case I'm working," says Szatkowski. "It could mean getting up and interviewing witnesses and suspects, or trying to find a suspect or a witness." Each case is different; sometimes he'll go to the department of Transportation for driver's license information ___that's easy. On other cases he goes to neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and employers. "I'll make calls or go door to door," he says.

When Szatkowski gets a murder-for-hire case the first matter of business is to contact the local officials, then technical agents to help set up the wire and video. "That way the meeting I have with the bad guys or gals is seen on tape and we have a recording," he explains. When he goes in for the meeting, he goes in with a team comprised of Justice agents and local people. "We work together," he says. "It will be the agency that requested assistance, myself, and then the technical services agents. It really is a team effort." No matter what the situation is when Szatkowski works undercover he usually wears a microcassette on his body. Not all of the hit man cases turn out to be undercover, sometimes the suspects are skittish and don't want to meet someone new, or the case starts out as a murder-for-hire and develops into something else. "In a lot of the murder for hire cases I don't actually meet the people," explains Eric. "I use informants."

Szatkowski has agreed to discuss his undercover work as a hit man in the hopes that "talking about murder for hire will stop one person from doing it." All of the half dozen or so murder-for-hire cases that he has worked are divorces or unhappy marriages. As Szatkowski put it: "keeping all the marital assets isn't worth the five or ten or forty years [of prison]. Murder for hire just rips the family apart. The children and extended family are devastated: everything comes out in the courtroom." One of the recurrent themes with these cases is that no matter how much the person looking to hire the hit man hates the spouse, they always consider the kids. "The scheduling always has to be done the children are with the other spouse," he says.

According to Szatkowski the key to successful undercover work is the ability to put yourself in the skin of the person you are pretending to be. "You have to project an image that you are who you are pretending to be," he explains. "If I'm posing as a hit man I won't look the way I do now. [Clean cut, shirt, tie and jacket, black trousers and shoes] The way it usually works is I get between several days or even a week or two before I am actually going to meet the person who wants the hit done." Before meeting the person setting up the hit, Szatkowski meets with the local police or sheriff's department. He might also meet any informants or sometimes even the intended victims. "Logistically since I work all over the state so it takes at least a few days," he says. "During the time before the meeting, I won't shave so I have a scruffy beard going or maybe a goatee. I'll dress down; cowboy boots, jeans, bandanna or baseball cap, leather jacket. I'll try and get dirty. Literally picking up dirt and getting it on my hands and under my nails and on my coat. Just so I can look like a hit man for lack of a better term. Appearance does matter to a certain extent."

Szatkowski says that you really have to believe that you're going in the meeting to do a contract. "You have to pretend in your mind that you are actually going to go through with the hit," he says. "You need to think about what you would do to get away with it. Focus on how to

go about it without getting caught. In your mind you want to do whatever you can to get away with it. And if you convey that attitude to the person you are investigating then they are more comfortable with you, they really think you know what you're doing." Part of the reason to be so convincing is that in order to convict someone of solicitation for murder you need to show intent. "I'm not trying to entrap somebody," he explains. " I'm not trying to set somebody up. My job is to determine that person's intent. Do they really intend to hire me to kill someone or are they just thinking or fantasizing about it. You need to convince the jury that this is what the person wants to do. The suspect can walk out the door and find someone else to do it so you need to make the deal.""

MURDER FOR HIRE CASES

In February 1997 the La Crosse sheriff's department learned from an informant that James Schuman (DOB 12/19/50), a Galesville businessman and owner of Schuman and Sons Seed & Irrigation, was looking for someone to make his estranged wife Susan "disappear from his life." The case sheriff's department called the Wisconsin Department of Justice for help in a case and Szatkowski was assigned to the case. Schuman had asked the informant, an employee and ex-biker, if he knew someone willing to do the job. He was offering \$10,000 for the hit, plus another ten if they killed his wife's father or boyfriend. The informant, on directions from the police, told Schuman that he had found someone willing to do the job and that the hit man would call Schuman directly. That guy was Szatkowski.

Before meeting with Schuman, Szatkowski met with the La Crosse Sheriff's department and got all of the facts of the case. "I never had to meet the informant," he says. "It was already set up that all I had to do was call Schuman." Schuman was expecting the call. Szatkowski called and said, "I understand that you have a job for me." He told Schuman that he would be up in La Crosse and they arranged a meeting. Szatkowski went up with two technical agents and they set up in a second floor hotel room at the Roadstar Inn in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

"I met with him in the motel room," says Szatkowski, who was wearing a black baseball cap backwards and a leather coat, jeans, boots. There was an open can of beer and cigarettes in the motel room, even though he doesn't smoke. "And we're going over what we're gonna do and I ask him about his changing his mind and he tells me that he hates cops more than I can believe. He tells me that cops think they're God with a gun and a star and he hates them. Meanwhile I'm thinking, 'here I am one of those guys with a star and a gun' and I'm thinking that if Schuman finds out that I'm an agent it will be bad but at least Schuman's my size and I've got backup."

Schuman tells Szatkowski that he wants his wife Susan disappear: They are in a bitter two-year divorce and custody battle and he doesn't see any other way of handling the situation. "He had a hard time using the word 'kill,' remembers Szatkowski. "He would talk about the corpse, and say that he wanted her gone." Schuman and his wife had been married for some twenty years. "The issues were who gets what money, and custody of the children," explains Szatkowski. "These are typical things that thousands of people experience in this country every year. A lot of people going through a bitter divorce may wish that their partner was dead, but Schuman wanted to go to the next level." Schuman also told Szatkowski that if he happened to take care of his wife's boyfriend Kurt Knappen or her father, Bob Toussaint, he will be paid for those as well. What concerned Szatkowski the most was that Schuman wanted a week after to think about whether he wanted to go through with the killings.

After the meeting Szatkowski went back to Milwaukee to write up his report and wait for Schuman's call. "He finally contacted me and gave me the go-a-head. He wanted to give me a good faith deposit. He gave me directions to a drop site near Galesville in the middle of now where in the northwestern part of Wisconsin. We talked the night before and he gave me directions to where the money would be and he gave me directions to the boyfriend's house as

well as a description of the car he drove,” recalls Szatkowski. Schuman didn’t have a key to the house, but he described the layout as well as the car his soon-to-be-ex-wife would be driving. “At that point I understood that the hits were a go,” says Szatkowski.

Szatkowski and Rick Luell, another agent his partner from Justice head to the drop site. “Rick put the passenger seat down and hid in the back,” explains Szatkowski, who had assured the nervous Schuman he would be alone. The night-time pick up made Szatkowski uneasy—Luell was his only backup. “I’m thinking, ‘Schuman hates cops and this is his opportunity.’ A week had gone by and the longer these investigations go on, the more chances are that your cover will be blown because people talk or word gets leaked out. I drive out to the drop site, it’s pitch black, there are no street lights. We’re driving down this deserted country road and all of a sudden I see these head lights.” He was wearing a bullet proof vest.

At seven o’clock the money wasn’t there. “We went out a few more times and it still wasn’t there,” recalls Szatkowski, who finally reached Schuman around eleven that evening to find out what was going on. “He told me that he had tried to page me earlier, but I hadn’t gotten the page. He just wanted to let me know that if his wife was at her boyfriend’s house, there might be a child there that belonged to the boyfriend. And he didn’t want me to kill the two-year-old. I told him not to worry because I didn’t do kids. We talked about the money, he still had it and he told me he couldn’t get the two thousand we had agreed upon, he only had fifteen hundred, because he buried his money in the ground and it was frozen. He told me that it might take a month or two before the ground thawed and he could get all the money. We had agreed upon \$10,000 per person I killed: his wife, her boyfriend, and her father. And if I did a good job, he had four or five other people who has screwed him over in business. He told me that I could make a lucrative living doing this.”

After the last phone call Schuman put the money out; at around 1:00 a.m. Szatkowski, with Luell still hidden in the back of the car, picked the money up. “We regrouped and decided to arrest him that morning because we had been up for more than 24 hours. There was a lot of tension when we were out looking for the money, is this guy on to us, is something gonna happen to us.” Luell and the officers from La Crosse went to Schuman’s and arrested him. Szatkowski was not there for the bust.

“Once he was arrested he was told that I was an undercover agent,” he says. Schuman, who was charged with attempted first degree murder of his wife Susan and solicitation of first degree murder of the boyfriend and father, was sentenced in July 1997 to 35 years in prison. After the trial Bob Toussaint wrote Szatkowski saying that without his work they would have never gotten rid of the son-in-law from hell.

Schuman was a revelation for Szatkowski. “I was shocked that he was as clean cut and well to do as he appeared to be,” he remembers. “I deal with the worst of society. When you deal with drug dealers and murders and people looking to hire someone to kill, well, they usually don’t come across as nice. This guy was well-to-do, articulate, nice guy. I was expecting a stereotypical bad guy and it was just a shock that here was this articulate, well-to-do guy that wanted to hire a hit man.”

Another of Szatkowski’s murder-for-hire cases was Mary J. DeAngelis (DOB 8/31/53). She wanted someone to kill her husband, who was a barber in Glendale, Wisconsin. The case began when a couple of handymen were called to do work at the DeAngelis house. She began talking about the divorce she was going through and how much she hated her husband. “She basically told total strangers how much she hated her husband and wanted to get rid of him and did they know anyone who could do the job,” says Szatkowski. The handymen went to the police and the police called for help.

Szatkowski met with the informants, and the technical agents wired them. He had the

informants go back to DeAngelis and talk more about the job. The informants told DeAngelis that they knew a guy named Mike who would take care of her husband. So Szatkowski met with DeAngelis on November 11, 1995 at the informants' apartment. The technical agents had wired the place for sound and video before the meeting. "He's really not a good father, but he's the only father they have," she told him, giving him a list of the days when she would have the children. DeAngelis also gave Szatkowski photos and the home and work addresses for her soon-to-be-ex. "She told me that she was strapped for cash, but once he was dead she would sell the house and give me 10 percent of the sale," he recalls.

As earnest money DeAngelis gave Szatkowski \$50 for the hit, promising the ten percent later. She wanted him to kill her husband in his barber shop, making it look like a robbery. She also told Szatkowski that her husband kept a stash of cash hidden in the shop and if he found it it was his, a bonus. A couple of days after their meeting DeAngelis was arrested by the Glendale police four years for conspiracy to commit first degree murder. On March 21, 1996 DeAngelis was sentenced to 4 years of prison after pleading guilty to solicitation to commit second degree murder.

Timothy Mark Schuette (DOB 3/4/55), the owner of a big trucking firm in Manitowoc, north of Milwaukee, also wanted his estranged spouse dead. He approached one of his former employees, Michael Hunter, about doing a hit. "He assumed that because the guy was from Chicago and an African American that he was either a gang member or that he would know someone in a gang," explains Szatkowski. Hunter first believed that Schuette was letting off steam but Schuette kept coming back. Hunter decided he couldn't go to the local police because the family was so prominent so he went down to Milwaukee and the police there sent him over to the Department of Justice. "This is the first case that I've worked where the informant just walked in," says Szatkowski, who interviewed Hunter and then drove up to Manitowoc with him.

Justice wanted to send Szatkowski in undercover but Schuette got spooked and refused to meet anyone new. "We don't want to put citizens in a position," says Szatkowski. "But the guy was so paranoid that he wouldn't take an introduction to a stranger. Our hands were tied." The plan was to set up in Hunter's apartment and have Schuette come in to finalize the deal. The apartment was wired for sound and video. so while Schuette completed the deal in the living room, Szatkowski hid in the bedroom behind the bed so that he would be close by in case something went wrong. "We were able to hear most of what went on, but not all of it," he remembers. "Schuette drives up in an SUV, comes in and runs through the whole plot to kill his wife but it has to look like an accident. I'm listening to this and there is no doubt in my mind that he was one of the most cold and calculating people. I could hear 80-90 percent of what was being said."

Schuette leaves and Szatkowski doesn't hear any more conversation. Schuette had just gone out to his car to get a picture of his wife and the money. "We start to walk out and radio the surveillance and all of a sudden Schuette walks back in," he says. "He sees me in a mirror, and I see him. I was uneasy, he didn't know that we were the police, but what if he thought we were going to rip him off. Hunter just stood there while Schuette kept asking, 'Who's he?'" Getting no answer, Schuette made a break and took off in his car. Hunter had thought that they were going to arrest Schuette then and there so he said nothing: "We radioed for back up and they picked him up a few blocks away," says Szatkowski. When the police search Schuette they find that he has several thousand dollars in his pocket and his wife's pictures. He is charged with conspiracy to commit first degree murder and he was sentenced to 12 years in prison in September 1998.

What of the dangers of his work? Szatkowski says that here have only been a handful of times when he felt in danger. Once was the money drop for the Schuman case, the other his first drug case. "On the steroids case the guy who unwittingly introduced me to the wrestler was a bad

actor. One year, on Good Friday, one of the few times I didn't have my weapon with me off-duty, I was with my family at a Menards (a hardware store) in Madison. My daughter was four and my son was two. We were just shopping and we walked by this one guy, and he was a big weight lifter, and I was pushing the cart with my son in it and I got a feeling that someone was watching me. I turned and looked and Rocky Piel was staring me down. It was the eeriest feeling and I didn't have my weapon with me. I instinctively let go of the cart and went to the opposite end of the store. I just ditched my family. He kept staring. Eventually I lost him in some of the aisles and then I got into a position where I could watch him unseen. I kept an eye on him until he left the store. I made sure that he got in his car and left before I hooked back up with my family. My wife didn't have any idea what had happened until I told her, and my daughter kept asking where I had gone."

Later that same year, around Christmas, Szatkowski and his family were at a mall in Madison. "I had a feeling that someone was watching," he recalls. "There was this big individual just standing on the side looking at me with his arms folded across his chest." It was Rocky Piel "It was another situation where I just left my family and then watched to see where he was going," says Szatkowski. "When I was sure I wasn't being followed I hooked up with my family again and we headed home. That was the second run in with Rocky but this time I had my weapon. But I did not want to be in a situation where I had to use it. After those run ins, I always carried my weapon, even off duty. When I worked undercover narcotics in Madison, a lot of times the guys would get out of prison in a relatively short amount of time and when you live in a small town you just run in to these people. I didn't like being in Madison, it was just too small. You never knew who you were going to run into." Szatkowski who testified in court about these stalkings. Piel was sentenced to a year and eventually died of an overdose related to cocaine. "I don't like to see anybody die," Szatkowski says. "I respect human life. But I don't have to look over my shoulder any more with this guy."

His wife, Joyce, is sanguine about the dangers. "I don't let it bother me," she says. "I know he's a great investigator—he would never put himself into danger. If I thought about it every time he went out the door for work I'd go crazy." But she does have those moments when her stomach clenches. "When Eric told me about the field and the bag of money it made really nervous," she says. "But he loves to do it and that makes it all right. If it bothered me I'd ask him to get a desk job as a supervisor but he wouldn't be happy. I consider him to be the best agent they've ever had. He's a perfectionist, and it keeps him safe."

After the run-ins with Piel, Szatkowski decided that his wife needed to have protection. "We have weapons at home and my wife knows how to use them," he says. "When I'm gone, if she needs it, it's there though it certainly isn't accessible to the children." Although he doesn't dwell on the danger his work might pose to his family, he does acknowledge that it is a possibility. "Way way in the back of my mind I think there is a remote possibility that someone would try to get at me through my family," he admits. "But I never dwell on it. I know from working militia cases that police officers addresses are found out and they have been targets. Yea, it's possible, but it's also possible that when she's driving the kids to school she's in a collision and hurt or killed to. Just taking the step and having her be able to protect herself makes all the difference. But my number one concern would be the militia groups."

Szatkowski and his family live in the Milwaukee area. Joyce (DOB 8/11/60) is self-employed. [NOTE: She cares for children in the home but this is OFF THE RECORD.] They have a beautiful four-bedroom home, with a country kitchen, study, living room, and formal dining room. There are tons of photos everywhere of the children and Halloween decorations festoon every corner. Joseph (DOB 10/22/91), their son, is seven, Marie (8/14/89), their daughter is nine. The kids have an all-American life, a house in the suburb and pets that include two gold fish and a parakeet. Joseph plays pee-wee tag football, both kids play piano, and Marie has tons of Beanie Babies, Polly Pockets, and Sky Dancers. Joyce says that when her

husband decided to change careers she didn't have any problems with the dangers of his new job. She is amazingly positive and supportive of his work. "I knew it was really exciting for Eric to start on this career," she says. "It's not bad when he's gone one night a week: it's when he's gone more than a few days a week that it gets more difficult."

And Szatkowski keeps pointing out that although the murder-for-hire cases seem dangerous, they aren't as deadly as narcotics cases. "The people that I've seen in the murder for hire cases are very cold and cunning," says Szatkowski. "They don't have the guts to do it themselves." The people they target are spouses or ex-spouses, not law enforcement. "All of these persons know that if their ex is killed they will be the main suspect," explains Szatkowski. "They want an alibi, they want to be out of town. They know that if they did it themselves they would be the main suspect, so that's another reason they look for someone else to do it."

Szatkowski says that law enforcement can't help but change your perception of people. "It's not only the murder for hire cases but the homicide cases that I've worked as well," he explains. "I've seen child murders, vicious, senseless killings. Nothing surprises me any more. People are capable of doing anything you can imagine. None of it surprises me anymore. I wasn't like that ten years ago. There is always gonna be bad people. When you work in a job like this you realize that bad people come in all shapes and sizes and from all walks of life. People are capable of doing anything, absolutely anything. Most cops that have been on the job any amount of time are deadened or numbed to the horrific crimes in terms of being surprised by them. You never really say this isn't terrible or wrong or bad but it's not like you go, 'Oh, my gosh, I can't believe someone would do this.'"

Would he ever change careers? "I can't imagine getting burned out. This is the most exciting, rewarding job anybody could have," he says. "I'm doing a worthwhile service: putting people away that deserved to be put away and helping people who may have been murdered in the cases of murder for hire, or in the case of homicides, helping families get justice from the people who killed their loved ones. In a couple of the murder for hire cases in the when the intended victims met me there were tears of gratitude and I got the biggest hugs and thank yous." As a practicing Catholic Szatkowski feels that "human life is the most precious gift that we have. No amount of money in the world can give you that feeling that you really helped someone, and that you really made a difference. It's just a good feeling to know that you've done something good for these people." He has no plans of hanging up his badge just yet. "To me not only is this really intellectually challenging and a lot of fun but it meaningful as well." Score one for the good guys.

People

File

Double Click here to return to the Story Profile - 

Story Name SMITH, AL
Topic Take 2: TERTS
Date 10/19/98 06:50:52 PM
Reference # P-Pert-8241256

To	Chief of Correspondents	From the Bureau	
		Chief in	CHI
For	Friedman, Jack	For	Lisa Greissinger
		CC	

Enter Text Here:

[Pam — Here are the terts I have thus far. Will continue on others unless I hear otherwise from you. I have been trading calls with Tony Galli, a former colleague of Eric from his television days. I will file that on Galli as soon as I speak with him. Also the FBI is checking to see if they have any sort of statistics on murder-for-hire —they can't get the a number for agents who have posed as hit men —but they may be able to break it down by cases. I will file ASAP when I get national numbers. See below for Wisconsin.

cheers, lisa]

Robbie Lowery, the director of the Special Assignments Bureau for Wisconsin's department of Justice says that Eric is terrific undercover agent able to work the at times difficult murder for hire cases because of his intelligence and quick wit. Lowery, who has been Eric's supervisor for the past three and a half years, says that "what makes Eric good undercover in the murder-for-hire cases is that Eric thinks on his feet and he's hardworking." This is especially important in undercover work because it is so unpredictable. "You never know what will come up in the meeting," explains Lowery. "But when Eric has a meeting with the bad guy nothing stumps him: he can always come up with a good story." And Eric's media experience was a plus. "Eric's television background was a bonus," admits Lowery. " He had terrific interview skills from that. It gave him a leg up."

Not only is Eric is valued as someone who does good undercover work, but he also shows well. "He is outstanding at trail," says Lowery. "There are more than a few letters on file from district attorneys who have commented on his abilities in court. He is professional, and goes back to the traditional police role" According to Lowery the Department of Justice is called in for the undercover work because they have fresh faces or the unknown person in the smaller communities which also don't have the technical agents or the body wires. "The video and audio tapes are very important for the trail because it give the jury a chance to see and hear what went on," says Lowery. "Eric knows how far to take things during the meeting. We take to the DA in the area to find out how far they are comfortable doing. Eric will go in and lay it out, saying, "This is who I am, I was referred to you, I

understand that there is something you want me to do.' And then it goes from there."

Eric's partner at Justice for the past five years is Richard Luell (DOB 12/7/43). He's been a special agent for the Wisconsin Department of Justice for 26 years. According to Luell Eric's narcotic's work was great training for his current undercover stints. "I didn't have to give him a lot of guidance in undercover," says Luell. "He already had been working undercover for quite a while in drugs." When the two work a murder-for-hire case Eric does the undercover work and Luell provides backup. "All he has to worry about is the undercover work, what he has to say, whether the person really means to carry it out or is just blowing off steam," explains Luell. "My job is to provide security for Eric, the victim and the general public."

When the two worked the case in La Crosse Luell says he was there to "cover Eric's backside." They wanted to keep the information about the undercover job very quiet. "Word of mouth travels fast, especially in a small towns," says Luell. With Schuman we wanted to make sure he really wanted to kill his wife." After numerous phone conversations Eric and Schuman finally met. "Letting it go a little longer there is always danger," admits Luell. "Schuman could have decided to do it himself, or looked to find someone who is less expensive. The more time that elapses, the harder it is to contain. More people find out." Luell worried about Eric's safety because Schuman had ties to militia groups. "Those people are serious and have access to weapons," he says. "And they don't like police officers. When Eric went out to pick up the money there might be an ambush. Someone could have been in the woods along the ditch line and then they could have just shot him and walked away. I was with him in the car lying down, fully armed. As it turned out, nothing like that happened but I was just preparing for the worst."

When Eric's in a tense situation he doesn't show that he's nervous. "He's relaxed under pressure, and that's hard," says Luell. "Maybe that comes from his media background, where he's used to being on camera and center stage. And Eric thinks on his feet." Luell says that hardest part of undercover work is keeping your cover straight. "You have to assume a role and then you are asked a serious of hard questions and you have to be able to continue that role playing," he explains. "It takes a lot of thought. Once you tell your story, the tough thing about lying is that you have to remember all the lies that you tell. Every time you have a conversation with this person you have to be able to repeat that entire scenario. You never know what one or two words they [the bad guy] might glum on to. If you don't repeat it the same way you're going to arouse their suspicion. It takes someone who is of above average intelligence, somewhat of an actor, who can recall his lines. Someone who can play act and who gives that appearance of being relaxed. Eric is very good at all that."

James Warren, the Administrator for the Division of Criminal Investigation for Wisconsin's Department of Justice, says that although it appears that murder-for-hire cases are on the rise, at least in his state, the only evidence he has is anecdotal. "There are no definitive stats but the murder for hire cases seem to be on the rise and they almost invariably involves an ex-wife or husband going through marital problems," he says. "But we haven't kept any statistics on these cases." Warren also notes that state numbers are unavailable because some of the bigger agencies handle their own undercover work. Unless the Department of Justice is called in, they have not way of knowing about any cases.

Susan Toussaint (10/26/52) formerly Schuman, was one of the people James Schuman targeted for death when he told Eric he wanted some people to "disappear." Toussaint, a registered nurse who is not practicing, says that Eric's credibility as a hit man saved not only her life, but that of her father and boyfriend as well. (Susan's father Robert Toussaint declined to speak about the experience, preferring to have Susan speak to us. But

he did send a letter to the Attorney General's office praising Eric's work.) "It wasn't until two months ago that I sat down and watched the video of Eric posing as a hit man," says Toussaint. "I just wasn't ready to see it before now. What makes Eric effective and believable is he made the transformation so amazingly real. He became the character he portrayed."

Like others, Toussaint describes Eric as "intelligent and cool under fire. He doesn't get rattled." Eric kept his cool even at the trial where he was on the witness stand for an entire day. "He was really badgered by Jim's attorney," says Toussaint. "Eric was up there for a whole day and he was unflappable. You felt confident that he was on the stand." And confident when he was undercover. Toussaint, who says that she didn't meet Eric until the trial, first learned about the plot to have her killed when she was at a barbecue convention in Mobil, AL. She and her former husband had been going through a bitter divorce (it was finalized in December 1997) when the call about the hit came from local authorities. "When Jim met Eric it was like he was out shopping and he was talking about having three people killed," she says. "He didn't want to share any of the marital assets."

Viewing the tape of Eric and Jim Schuman, Toussaint praised Eric's abilities to portray a cold-blooded killer. "He did a real professional job and the way he makes the transformation from solid citizen and family man to hit man is just a real talent," she explains. "You wouldn't recognize him." Toussaint says that pulling one over on Schuman was a challenge. "Eric had a pretty paranoid person he had to convince," she says. "And thank god he was able to convince him because if Eric hadn't been able to and if Jim Schuman had been spooked, I probably wouldn't be here today." Toussaint is convinced that Schuman would have gone elsewhere to get the job done. "I'd be dead and two other people very close to me would be dead as well," she ponders. "It's a god send that Eric was able to convince him that he was the guy for the job, that he was a hit man, a real hit man."

Schuman was sentenced to 35 years for the plot to kill his former wife. Toussaint says that while the entire experience was a nightmare, she has to credit Eric and the whole team for the work they did in bringing her former husband to justice. "One of the things that was a great comfort to me and my family was knowing that they had done such an excellent job," she says. "They knew what a bad apple Jim Schuman was and they really didn't want any loopholes. They really covered all of those bases. Eric and his team were phenomenally supportive of me and my family during the trial. They were protective of us, very accessible. I can't say enough good about them." And even though the trial is over and the bad boy has been put away, Eric still keeps in touch. "When he was in town last month he called me just to see how I was doing," smiles Toussaint, who admits that she will live in some degree of fear for the rest of her life. "I was so blown away. It just made me feel so good that he thought of how I was doing."
