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New Growth Business — Arming Cars

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HOLLYWOOD, Fla., — Richard C. Medlin is a man with a light-hearted approach to a grim business.

The calling card of his Custom Armor Manufacturing Company carries three miniature holes above a diagram of spent cartridges, and his favorite parting shot for a client leav-

ing his shop with one of his custom-made bulletproof vests is, "If you have any trouble with that thing, you give me a call."

It isn't that he's ghoulish. It's just that the growing need that edgy people abroad feel to protect themselves from terrorist attacks is making him rich.

He recently moved here to be near his Latin American customers, who make up half of his business. Almost all the rest of his clients come from Europe and the Middle East.

Mr. Medlin has fashioned armored cars for Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany, King Juan Carlos of Spain and for the Presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, Panama, Iraq and Mexico. Though the Shah was forced to leave Iran before receiving his own car, he rode in others during exile stays.

Mr. Medlin constructed a bombproof case for the \$2.5 million Guten-

berg Bible at the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Tex., and a special bullet-resistant wagon for the favorite horse of a Salvadoran millionaire. The armored van he designed for the Saudi royal family has seats that elevate through two sun roofs to permit hunting with falcons in tranquility.

It is a business that virtually did not exist until five years ago, Mr. medlin said. When he and a partner opened his original company in San Antonio in 1976 they planned to armor 14 cars a year but were soon making 10 a month to meet immediate demand. They did \$1.7 million of business in 1977, \$3.2 million in 1978 and \$8.4 million in 1979.

He left the San Antonio company last year and opened his own concern here. In his first year in Florida he says he has done \$700,000 worth of business.

Industry analysts expect there to be 3,500 armored cars worldwide by the end of this year. Mr. Medlin's companies have made 400 so far.

In troubled capitals like Guatemala City and San Salvador, it is now common to see a high-riding bulletproof Cherokee Chief, Jeep Wagoneer, Chevrolet Suburban or International Scout side by side with the traditional Mercedes-Benz in the circular driveways leading to the homes of the rich. Even Central Americans under no direct threat have been known to order armored cars for their status value.

The Scout, often used as an escort vehicle, can be armored for \$19,375 at Mr. Medlin's rates. For \$50,990 he will operate on a standard-size Cadillac, Lincoln, Ford, Chevrolet, Dodge, Cherokee, Wagoneer or Suburban. BMW's, Mercedes and Cadillac limousines cost \$58,975. These prices are in addition to the purchase price of the auto.

Gun Ports and Tear Gas

What the consumer gets is a vehicle with the entire passenger compartment armored, including curved windshield and side glass, floor armor, protected batteries and fuel tanks and gun ports for returning fire. For an extra \$2,100, Mr. Medlin will install tear-gas outlets hidden behind fender reflectors that at the turn of a dashboard switch produce a 50-foot toxic cloud.

Other specialties include a remote-control ignition system for starting the

car from a distance sufficient to let one be an observer of an engine bomb and not its victim (\$975); ramming bumpers for offensive driving (\$388) and bulletproof wheels made by bolting a doughnut-shaped portion of polycarbonate to the inside of the rim that enables the car to keep rolling even after the tire has been deflated (\$2,000).

As expensive as the vehicles are, they can save money for the person paying high-priced kidnapping and ransom insurance. Mr. Medlin said that Lloyd's of London had waived premiums and otherwise reduced the cost of such policies for his customers.

Behind this decision are statistics that show that 90 percent of assassination attempts take place while the intended victim is riding in a car. Mr.

Medlin says his finished product will resist rifle and rocket fire, bombs and dynamite during the estimated seven to 15 seconds that most attacks last.

Three Attacks Noted

To his knowledge he has yet to "lose" a customer, although he says that three of his cars have been attacked.

A Salvadoran colonel survived an assault in downtown San Salvador in which his automobile took 35 rounds; a van belonging to a member of Anastasio Somoza Debayle's Government in Nicaragua was struck three times by rockets but remained intact, and a dynamite attack on a Medlin van in downtown Guatemala City did not injure the four military officials inside.

Security-conscious himself. Mr. Medlin did not want any pictures taken in which he was clearly identifiable. He is also deliberately vague about years he spent as a government police agent in such countries as Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Panama and Costa Rica. Asked if he was working for the Central Intelligence Agency, he said, "I was working for the United States Government."

Born in Hereford, Tex., 38 years ago, Mr. Medlin has specialized in electronic surveillance, psychological stress testing and polygraph reading. By 1975, he was doing private consulting work in Mexico and decided he could improve upon the kind of armored car that executives and government officials used there.

Using a method of fitting soft body armor like that used in lightweight vests to rigid materials, he was able to construct a much lighter car.

"Generally, bulletproof cars still leave a lot to be desired," said Carmine Pellosi, vice president of CCS Communication Control, a New York manufacturer and distributor of security products that purchases Medlin cars. "Their standards are so low that they do not pass threat-level tests," he added. "But when you ask for Medlin to build one to a certain standard, the company does it."

Mr. Pellosi added that all Medlin cars were rated at the highest "threat level," meaning they are designed to withstand long rifles.