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The mad, mad,  
mad, mad, mad  
world of

# Tony Schiena

How did a world karate champion end up fighting ISIS on the front line and speaking on panels with the Pope? *FS* meets a real life superhero

Words Thomas Theodore Illustrations Ben Willsher

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## ACTION MAN

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Tony Schiena arrived at University in 1993. Politically, South Africa was in a violent turmoil, apartheid was entering its final stages, and extremists on both the right and left were planting bombs. Targeted killings were common.

University was the only way for Schiena to avoid military service, which had been compulsory for white, male South Africans since 1974. Aged 18, he began a law degree, intending to ultimately specialise in maritime law. In his early student weeks, he struck up a friendship with an American law professor who, after five months of studying, gave Schiena the fabled 'tap-on-the-shoulder', plunging him into the dangerous land of espionage.

"Everything was really fucked up. There was a civil war brewing, and false flag operations and targeted killings. It was mayhem. I was placed into work with a right wing group, to spy on them. I didn't really know what I was doing. I was stuck into this intelligence world where they used me as an asset, and I ended up working with our own national intelligence group in this weird situation. The only reason I think I survived it was that I was oblivious to the inherent dangers, so being so young really helped. If I had been more aware of the gravity of it, I don't think I would have survived."

Overnight, both Schiena and the professor (who was working covertly for the CIA) disappeared off the grid; students showed up for their lectures, and their lecturer was nowhere to be seen.

Schiene learned that the group he'd infiltrated planned to detonate a military vehicle filled with explosives at World Peace talks. He told his brother-in-law, who worked in South African Special Forces, five days before. His brother-in-law passed off Schiena's intel as paranoid conspiracy, but when the explosion occurred, his family inferred that Schiena was involved in something heavy.

"I was a young kid," reflects Schiena. "I was exposed to this world and had to learn very quickly, and adapt very quickly. A lot of my initial training was from these terrorist groups themselves. It was an ►



interesting and unconventional start."

Apartheid ended the following year, and Nelson Mandela was elected the first black President of South Africa. The presence of international intelligence in the country dropped, meaning Schiena had to begin looking elsewhere for business, but a taste for intelligence work in such a complex environment set the tone for the following two decades.

His work has taken Schiena every place imaginable. During our one-hour conversation, he mentions that he retired in 2003 as undefeated world heavyweight karate champion; he's a deputy sheriff in Virginia; he's worked as a mercenary and an intelligence operative; he has trained armies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, South America, Central America, Russia, North Africa, Thailand, Cambodia and Eastern Europe; he refers to a Sheikh in Bahrain as "a good friend"; he appeared on CNN after exposing the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds; and the week after our chat, he was heading to the Vatican to speak about Child Trafficking on a panel with the Pope. He took fifty international flights last year, and every story he tells involves a high profile world leader or a close call with death.

After leaving South Africa and spending a few months laying low in Eastern Europe, Schiena worked from London for the remainder of the '90s. Most work involved "following the money", doing private jobs and sinister-sounding asset recovery; "assisting individuals who have lost millions and tried the normal, legal routes," he explains, "or found that people who have stolen from them are too powerful. We'd find a way to remedy that situation. It ranged from that to counter-kidnapping situations."

Though lucrative, Schiena was constantly looking for an escape route from a high-risk career. Most work came through former CIA, MI6 and people from other intelligence agencies, but several people mentioned in his stories were killed, and a successful mercenary makes money, then gets out alive.

In London, Schiena had a colleague and mentor, who he refers to as 'John', who wasn't so lucky. They'd worked together closely for six years before Schiena moved

to the USA. He received a call during the night - it was his dear friend, a Sheikh in Bahrain. "I've got bad news brother, John was killed in Budapest. They are saying it was a gas leak."

"A 'gas leak'? There were investigations, but results were inconclusive, that's what happened with him. He was trying to get me out too. 'You have other things going for you, don't get burnt like the rest of us.' This is the consensus among the old dogs."

Over time, Schiena's work has diversified. He's able to use the skills he's picked up - both on the job and through his martial arts history - to train militaries in close combat, counter terrorism and kidnapping.

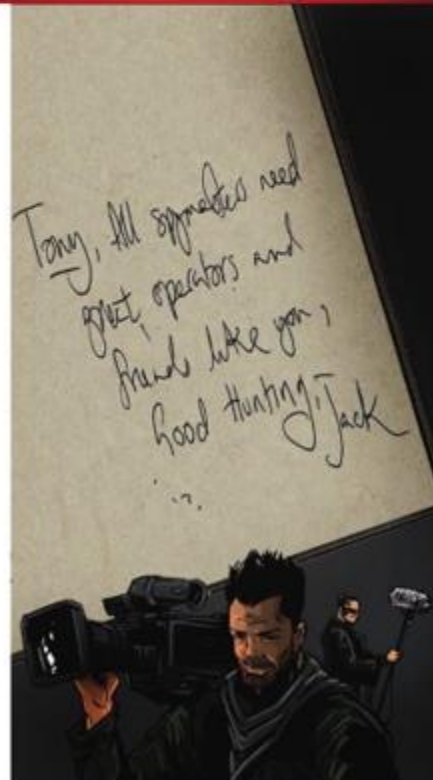
"We teach escape, and evasion; we throw a bag over their heads and we hog-tie them; in the Middle East, we'll be blasting Arabic music and shouting at them and waterboarding them to a point, tasing them, so they know what torture feels like, then teaching them how to get out of it. How


to get out of restraints and disarm weapons or befriend a kidnapper."

Sounds completely mental.

Now the questions I really want to ask - what's the closest he's come to death?

"If you're on the front line, one mile





from ISIS and you're taking a photo of their infamous black and white flag," he begins, "and within half an hour, there are air strikes and there's sniper fire from ISIS, you're in a place where anything can go wrong, that's what you'd expect because you're on the front line. But when you're in the intelligence world, shit can come at you from anywhere, and when you're meeting with associations or individuals who are high risk and targeted for assassination, that's most dangerous because it can come at you at any time."

"I dealt with Boris Berezovsky and I did an interview recently on Fox about Litvinenko [the Russian agent who was poisoned with plutonium in London]. I was having dinner with Boris and he went to see Litvinenko at his death bed. Boris was killed a couple of years ago, and I can't remember what they listed his death as, but people in the business know what really happened. When you're around that kind of thing, it could happen any time."

Another, slightly different near-miss came in Caracas, Venezuela. Schiena got a call from his friend Simon Mann, the British mercenary who made the headlines when sentenced to prison in

Equatorial Guinea after attempting to lead a coup against the government.

Mann was involved with a documentary made by *Vice*, and asked Schiena if he'd be up for being in the film. Schiena said the film crew could come out to Caracas, where he was due to protect a millionaire. They landed at the city's airport under the guise of "a normal bit of filming."

"Caracas is a dangerous environment. The drug lords are constantly fighting the government and every day, people disappear on the street. Anyway, we flew into Venezuela in a private jet. The authorities started asking a lot of questions, someone had tipped them off that we weren't there simply to film. There had been civil unrest in Caracas and westerners were being blamed for stirring the riots, and there we were with our backgrounds and cameras.

"If they'd Googled us, we'd have been arrested immediately. I'd been stupid and because I'd not had to time to stop off at home, was carrying the book I'd been reading during my travels. It was a proof copy of *Good Hunting* by Jack Devine, a former CIA head of operation, in which he had personally written: 'Tony, all spymasters need great operators and friends like you, *Good Hunting*, Jack'. If they'd searched more thoroughly, that book would've been the nail in my coffin. He was former head of the CIA station in Venezuela before he became CIA director of operations."

Often when asked questions, Schiena, struggles to give an immediate answer, saying things like: "If you gave me ten minutes, I would write down everywhere I've been for you." But when asked about the most dangerous place he's ever been, the answer is immediate.

"ISIS front line," he says without a moment's hesitation.

"There are so many players there and you have the two superpowers, one for Assad and one against Assad. Then the Turks are bombing the Kurds and ISIS, and Iran are there, and Hezbollah. The Kurds were the only ones fighting ISIS at one point. Everybody was there, but the Kurds were the only ones engaging them. We were about a mile from them, but the danger doesn't stop there, because you can drive back three hours away from the front and you could get had by an intelligence agency, or a group that's not aligned with the Kurds. I was OK because I was wearing a Kurdish uniform.

"It's the mixture of front line danger and the thought that three hours away, you could still get kidnapped and tortured. Then, if you're like me, the private military guy, you're a target of





course. Who the hell is this guy? That kind of deal."

Schiena's work often requires interacting with (or protecting) high-profile leaders. Because he rarely becomes entangled in the red tape of traditional diplomacy, and can be on the ground before normal agency employees, he often has to act in a diplomatic capacity, relaying information between leaders or security staff in one country to another.

"Through my early intelligence work, I had to learn to deal with all kinds of people, which really helped because a lot of work involves being able to cajole people in a certain direction. Or convince them to work for you. I have always been very diplomatic, and had a lot of diplomatic associations. I've spent so much time with so many presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers of Interior and so on that I developed a strong diplomatic

sense, and learned how to work those channels to get the result you want."

Tony Schiena has seen a lot of shit, could beat the shit out of anyone and has made a shitload of cash, but at what cost? Is this a man who's lost his soul? Will he fight anywhere? For anyone? That's what I want to find out. I try to broach the topic by asking about the relative benefits of working in the private military sector over a traditional army. I've read that typically, private militaries are staffed by former heads of state organisations and highly skilled soldiers, who've grown dissatisfied by the traditional armies and have been lured into the more financially rewarding world of mercenary work. This gets Schiena talking on morality.

"At the end of the day, it's my choice whether to engage in conflict or not. If my moral compass doesn't agree with something, then I am under no obligation



**"Unlike the military, I get to decide who I work for"**



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# ACTION MAN

## INTERNATIONAL HARD MAN

Some of Schiena's top snaps



With the President of Colombia, Ernesto Samper, a decade ago



Training Merced County, California SWAT team in counter terrorism



Tony trains the Cambodian special forces

to do it, because it's my choice. You have a choice that militaries don't. Within a conflict, you get to decide who you work for, and who you help."

Sometimes that involves working for the underdog. Schiena appeared on CNN after exposing ISIS' use of chemical weapons, specifically mustard gas, against the Kurds. Prior to the discovery, he'd been in Iraq liaising between high-profile Iraqis and the Canadian government, and on the side, he'd been training Kurds in Iraq in counter-terrorism in preparation for their fight against ISIS. While working with the Kurds, Schiena received intel of the use of chemical weapons, and travelled up into the mountains to meet the victims, who were left severely injured as a consequence of the attacks.

"The thing with mustard gas? That wasn't right. I was very vocal and outspoken and ended up on the news, which obviously made me lose any possible prospect of business with the Iraqis. The Iraqis and the Kurds are at odds. For me it was wrong, and I'm going to do something about it. The military couldn't achieve what I was doing there, they'd have to go through the traditional democratic routes. Bureaucracy can take a lot of time and sometimes there's no time to be wasted. People die."

I probe further - are there any fields of work that really push his buttons?

"I have a good tactical sense, and I've trained US SWAT teams in full counter terrorism to fight cartels, but when you're on the ground, helping soldiers on the front line, that's the most gratifying. I trained a group of Afghan national Army, and a week earlier, a group of them had been captured and tortured by Taliban. This group have just lost 20 of their unit, so that's gratifying because you can really give them stuff that helps them - that's almost not work. Sometimes I don't even charge for it. Of course it's a business, I'm no saint. But that's the work I enjoy."

His main topic of interest, though, is human trafficking. "I've been involved in fighting that for ten years. Next week, I'm going to the Vatican for a conference on trafficking." That's where he'll be jamming out with the Pope. Obviously.

Our conversation ends there. Schiena tells me that I can email or call him with any follow up questions, but to be honest, I'm too bewildered by the frequency and extremity of the anecdotal bombardment. I've just spent an hour speaking to a real-life Chuck Norris meme generator. He tells me he's heading to Dubai for a meeting now, then another in London, before he gets to Rome three days later.

Good luck saving the world, mate. 🍷