Hiring the calorie cops

24-hour guards won't let dieters cheat

By John Corr
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The refrigerator door opens silently in the night kitchen and a sliver of light scores the linoleum floor.

Suddenly, the still dark is shattered:

"Freeze, turkey! Drop it. NOW!"

The Fat Squad strikes again.

"We're strict. In fact, we're mean. We're the Fat Squad commandos, and we're proud." That's Joe Bones speaking. A nice person, basically, but a bad hombre when it comes to dieters. See, the dieters pay him $300 a day, and he or one of his commandos moves right in for a little intense surveillance.

"We are on the job, breakfast, lunch and dinner," he said. "We are even there in the middle of the night. The Fat Squad commandos never sleep."

Joe Bones is the operator of a new business designed to make diets succeed for people who have tried everything else. When you hire the Fat Squad commandos, you don't cheat on your diet. They don't let you.

Also, when you hire the Fat Squad commandos, you can't fire them.

"We move in and we provide the discipline," Bones said. "If need be, we will tie you to the bed to keep you from breaking your diet."

Your $300 actually buys you three commandos, each on an eight-hour shift. They go to work with you, come home with you, accompany you on dates.

If you don't want them listening to your every word, they will wear headsets that block out the sound. But they will watch you, and they won't go away, and they can't be talked into anything. Once you hire these commandos, you are stuck with them for the term of the agreement, which is at least three days.

"That's the crucial period with dieting," Bones said, "just as it is with smoking."

(You can also rent commandos who won't let you smoke, but so far nobody has.)

After the $900 for three days, you can add extra days at the rate of $250 each. Or you can start out by signing up for a full week for $1,750.

"Who will pay that kind of money to stay on a diet?" Bones asked rhetorically. "People who are desperate, people who have tried everything else and can't take the time to admit themselves to a health spa or a fat farm.

"We do the same thing for you, and you can keep working and live at home."

When you sign up, the Fat Squad "shakes down the place," Bones said. That means a thorough search. The refrigerator and pantry are cleared of all foods that are not on your diet.

Other parts of the house, including the bathrooms, are searched for "caches." "You don't trick a Fat Squad commando," Bones said.

The Fat Squad has been operating in the New York City area for about three months. So far, it has had 40 customers and the number of inquiries has been going up sharply of late, Bones said. "We get good word of mouth," he explained.

It all started some months ago with a conversation among Bones, a friend who is an enlisted man in the Marine Corps and the friend's wife. The Marine was about 40 pounds overweight and had tried a long succession of fad diets, crash diets, exercise programs and other tactics.

"What he needs," the wife said, "is a drill sergeant."

Bones is an actor and, as is customary with actors, has a lot of free time between jobs. He volunteered to play drill sergeant.

"I was relentless," he said, "and the man lost 30 pounds. That got me thinking."

The first thing that Bones did was recruit some commandos.

"I have also worked in the construction industry, where there is also sporadic employment for a lot of people," he said. "So I know a lot of actors and construction workers who can be available to move in with somebody and watch them like a hawk for a few days."

But not all actors and construction workers make good commandos, he said.

"They gotta be big, to begin with. You want an imposing figure and, if necessary, they have to be able to take food away from people.

"Next, they gotta be tough. You look for a little mean streak, a person who has a little bit of genuine drill sergeant in him or her. We have both men and women, and the clients can specify which they prefer."

The commandos, he said, have to be willing to "stick to the clients like glue." They even check out bathrooms before clients enter, if there is any chance that food has been stashed there.

"You can't assume that, because somebody is spending all of that money for Fat Squad services, they will be playing fair," Bones said. "We assume that they will try to trick us. But the Fat Squad doesn't trick easily."

The commandos are instructed to provide "moral support," but not to get too friendly. "Our commandos are cordial, but *strict*," Bones said.

Clients sign a waiver absolving the Fat Squad from blame for "mental anguish" and other problems arising from surveillance, and the client signs a document giving the commandos the right to search for food and confiscate it, and to use "reasonable physical force" to prevent the dieter from eating "unauthorized food."

The first paying Fat Squad client was a television executive who had gone to a health spa to lose weight. But he had more to lose and he had to stay in New York — so he called on the Fat Squad.

"He was a great success," Bones said. "He lost a lot of weight in a few days and referred some of his friends to us."

The service has its headquarters at 107 Waverly Place in New York City. But the commandos will go anywhere.

"The cost is the same anywhere," Bones said. "We just add travel expenses." Those expenses, however, cover three people. The surveillance is so intense, Bones said, that the commandos can't work more than eight hours at a time.

And no, the night shift most definitely may not be dispensed with.

"One of our clients — a really tough case — was not only very much overweight but also very clever. She was getting away with candy bars at night, and we might not have nabbed her except that she was a snorer. Our commando checked the bedroom one night because the snoring had stopped — and caught her red-handed.

"She had concealed candy bars in the clothing in her closet, and we missed them when we made the original search of the premises. After that, we started checking out wardrobes as well as houses.

"It's tough to fool the Fat Squad," Bones said, "because the Fat Squad is tough."



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Members of the Fat Squad at their New York headquarters (from left): Verne G. Williams, Joe Bones, Kitty Barnes, Nadine Hartstein, Michael Brody and Tony Barsha.