

Murder in the Mail

Anyone (even a kid, if he tells enough lies) can buy a deer rifle or an anti-tank gun right out of a catalogue

BY JEROME WILSON

Last October a Brinks armored car company's vault in Syracuse, N. Y., was blasted open with an anti-tank cannon by thieves who stole \$400,000.

In December, 1964, a high-powered bazooka shell exploded in the East River in New York City just short of the United Nations building, at which it had, fortunately, been carelessly aimed.

On January 30, 1964, a mentally disturbed mother in Wheaton, Md., killed her three teen-age children and herself with a .38 revolver, and on January 29, 1965, a 15-year-old boy in Baltimore used a .38 caliber foreign revolver to murder his mother, father and younger sister.

These shocking, bizarre and dissimilar acts of violence had one thing in common: the deadly weapons involved were purchased from dealers in surplus military goods, who peddle their merchandise as cheerfully as used-car salesmen, and at lower prices. The bazooka cost \$35, the anti-tank gun \$99.50, the foreign revolver only \$16.95.

No one asked the buyers what use they intended to make of their purchases, and no one found the sellers guilty of any wrong-doing.

The 15-year-old boy was not told that he was too young to buy a gun, because he ordered it by mail and gave a false name and a post-office box number — just as Lee Harvey Oswald did when he bought an old Italian army carbine for \$19.95 and used it to kill the President of the United States.

How do they get weapons? How does it happen that children, criminals and psychotic assassins are able so easily to acquire the weapons they use to build up our annual toll of murders, suicides and accidents? It happens, first, because there are no effective laws in the United States to control the traffic in arms and, second, because the sale of firearms has become a well organized, money-making business.

Much of the evidence that the interstate trade in arms is a serious national problem was gathered by a U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, headed by Senator Thomas J. Dodd of Connecticut. The committee began hearings in Washington in early 1963. After the assassination of


President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, firearms-control bills were introduced in both houses of Congress but died in committee.

There was strong support for the legislation from influential senators and representatives, but there was also vocal and successful opposition from organized sporting interests, gun collectors and business-

men worried about their profits — this in the face of official figures that show more than 2,000 fatal firearms accidents every year in the United States . . . FBI reports on almost 5,000 gun murders a year (70 per cent committed with concealable handguns) . . . and evidence that half our suicides and 56 per cent of our murders are committed with firearms.

One answer to the problem At this time Senator Dodd is readying a new bill. It would limit the interstate mail-order sale of firearms to licensed dealers, prohibit the sale of handguns to anyone under 21 and forbid a dealer to sell handguns to out-of-state customers. The importation of military surplus and the sale of bazookas, anti-tank guns, grenades, bombs and other weapons not suitable for sporting purposes would be curbed. Effective state laws and local enforcement will still be necessary even if the bill is passed. But law officers will no longer face some of the odd and dangerous situations they do today in keeping the peace.


Last October, for example, a man in Tucson, Ariz., called the police to report that he had seen two young men carrying what appeared to be a large machine gun into a rooming house near the University of Arizona campus. Armed with a search warrant, the police entered the room of an (TURN PAGE)



\$19⁹⁵
 Lee Harvey Oswald
 bought this Italian army gun,
 with which he shot President
 Kennedy, from a Chicago
 mail-order house — he didn't even
 have to prove he had a license



\$99⁵⁰ This Finnish anti-tank gun
 "starred" in the Brinks vault
 robbery — after being purchased legally



\$16⁹⁵
 A boy gave
 a false name to get a
 foreign version of this
 \$68 U.S. gun — and killed
 three people with it

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(CONTINUED) engineering student and found a heavy Finnish anti-tank gun of the type used in the Finnish-Russian war. The student produced a receipt from a local store for \$156 for the gun and 25 rounds of 20-millimeter ammunition.

Police had to let him keep it — they could find nothing in federal, state or local statutes forbidding the possession of a semi-automatic tank-killer and armor-piercing ammunition.

It was this same type of gun that destroyed the Brinks vault in Syracuse. In this case, the weapon was bought by two criminals who walked in and paid cash at a gun store in Alexandria, Va. Although the store owner became suspicious and notified the FBI, the weapon was shipped to Plattsburg, N. Y., and stolen from the express office there. The arms dealer in Alexandria defended his role in the transaction by pointing out, correctly, that selling "a large-bore rifle" is no different in the eyes of the law than selling a deer gun.

Tracing the source of the Finnish weapon and other foreign arms led investigators to a businessman named Samuel Cummings, president of International Armaments Corporation. A United States citizen and a resident of Monte Carlo, Mr. Cummings has nine warehouses on the Potomac, a mile from Washington, which are stocked with some 400,000 rifles and pistols.

Mr. Cummings told the Dodd committee that he has other warehouses and offices in England, Finland and Switzerland, and that during the last ten years he has imported 125,000 weapons annually into the United States and sold them to 6,000 dealers in 50 states. He testified that this military surplus included 4,500 mortars, bazookas, anti-tank rifles and artillery pieces.

When asked about the Finnish tank destroyers, Mr. Cummings said that he had imported 1,000 and that "those are, generally, used by collectors and long-range shooters for their own private recreation and experimental purposes."

High-powered Some of the catalogues and advertisements of army-navy stores and mail-order sporting goods houses make stimulating — though not necessarily authoritative — reading. A dealer in New Jersey offers "the original bazooka used by German troops to smash American-British forces all over Europe" . . . an automatic rifle "used by fanatic SS snipers during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944" . . . a pistol of the type used by Russian secret police "to terrify and kill enemies of the State" . . . an "almost-new" German cannon, for \$400, which will "stop any vehicle or light tank within a mile" and is "ideal for use as a home protection weapon."

A single issue of "Shotgun News," national trade paper of the weapons business, advertises purse-size tear-gas guns, Nazi and Luftwaffe automatic rifles, throwing knives and bayonets, police-type billy clubs, riot guns, derringers, daggers, blowguns and pellet guns. A blueprint and parts list for building your own .45 target pistol is \$2.

Unless his state or local laws require a permit, a mail-order purchaser simply signs a statement that he is over 21, of sound mind, and not a convicted felon. In 1962 Dodd subcommittee investigators checked the names of District residents who filled out such forms and ordered pistols by mail. Twenty-five

per cent had criminal records, and two had been committed as mental cases.

Millions of Americans live with the comforting misapprehension that they are protected by state and federal laws governing the purchase and possession of weapons. New Yorkers think so, for example, because theirs is the only state where an annual license is required to own a pistol. But every day last year the police investigated four or five complaints of assault with a gun.

Many of the owners of these weapons acquired them on shopping trips to other states or by filling out a mail-order coupon. The records of one large gunshop in Chillum, Maryland, revealed that in 1964 and part of 1965, 58 per cent of its handgun sales were to residents of the District. Of these, a further check showed that 40 per cent of the purchasers had criminal records.

Gun laws go Today's federal weapons laws date back to '30s back to the 1930s and were drawn mainly to discourage the sale of submachine guns to gangsters. One piece of almost 28-year-old legislation allows anyone other than a felon to acquire a federal dealer's license in firearms — for \$1. It is held by thousands of individuals who have never sold a gun but who like to order them at wholesale prices without filling out bothersome forms. The Dodd bill would raise the dealer licensing fee and restrict licenses to those who have a legitimate place of business.

According to Thomas C. Lynch, Attorney General of California, federal dealers' licenses are particularly popular in his state with members of such groups as the Minutemen and the Christian Defense League, which claim to be preparing to defend this nation from Communism. How they collect their arsenals — automatic rifles, machine guns, mortars, land mines, booby traps, powder and ammunition by the case — was illustrated last year when police and federal officers arrested a pair of men who had arrived in Los Angeles from Delaware in two five-ton trucks loaded with arms and more than 950,000 rounds of ammunition for an anti-tank cannon.

Another group that finds it easy to stockpile arms and ammunition is the Ku Klux Klan. The Dodd committee discovered that last year one federally licensed dealer who was involved with the Klan in Mississippi bought 18 Russian Tokarev rifles and 10,000 rounds of ammunition by mail from a retail outlet in Alexandria, Va.

On January 28, 1966, a former Klan member from Greenville, N. C., testified before a House Un-American Activities subcommittee that members of his Klavern were instructed to arm themselves for

defense and pick up guns wherever they could be bought without a permit. On one occasion, he said, about \$300 was collected to order surplus army rifles from a dealer in Norfolk, Va.

It should not be forgotten that the Dodd subcommittee was created for the purpose of investigating juvenile delinquency. The ready availability of lethal weapons plays an important part in the rising youth crime rate, and the weapons of delinquency have become increasingly sophisticated. A Los Angeles police lieutenant describes brass knuckles, knives and clubs as passé. "It is guns they are after," he told the committee. A New York City official reports that the home-made zip gun has declined sharply in popularity among youth gang members because it is easier to buy a cheap six-shot starter pistol.

The most popular juvenile weapon today is a "starter pistol" designed to fire harmless blank cartridges but easily convertible to shoot .22 bullets. In 1963 and 1964, 127,000 of these pistols were imported from abroad; one Los Angeles importer brought in more than 80,000 of them, ordering at the same time the steel barrels which would convert them to serviceable handguns.

In 1962 New York City detectives arrested a man, handy with tools, who bought the starter pistols from an out-of-state sporting goods store for \$5.80 each, then bored out the barrels and enlarged the cylinder chambers to take .22 cartridges. His salesmen peddled them on street corners for \$20, and he had disposed of about 100 when apprehended.

"The right . . . to bear arms" Opponents of stricter firearms laws often quote the second amendment to the United States Constitution, which says: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." Usually they forget the first clause referring to "a well-regulated militia" and remember only the second part of the sentence. Prohibition of the sale of pistols to minors, or the control of firearms in interstate trade, or the requirement that a licensed dealer know to whom he is selling a weapon, will scarcely weaken the security of the state.

Other critics claim that no matter how many laws are passed, criminals will still find ways to get guns and only the law-abiding citizen will be disarmed. They say "it is not guns that kill people; people kill people."

True enough. But licensing automobile drivers has not eliminated highway accidents, and no one proposes that children and incompetents should be encouraged to drive.

(THE END)

\$34⁹⁵

*Nobody asked the buyers
of this bazooka what they
intended to use it for —
and all they did
was shell the United Nations!*



Wide World