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Arms Caches Found on Coast; Some Linked to Private Armies

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LOS ANGELES, July 2 — Policemen in nearby Riverside last week went to the home of a steel company laborer named Jack B. Tomlin to investigate reports that he owned an unregistered machine gun.

The police say they found not just a gun but a private arsenal consisting of dynamite, booby traps, machine guns and some solid-fuel rocket propellant.

Incredibly, discoveries of caches of weapons and explosives are recurring with increasing frequency in southern California. Six arsenals have been detected in the last month and more than a dozen in the last year.

Thomas C. Lynch, attorney general of California, said that some of the discoveries clearly involved weapons that belonged to or were destined for what he described as extremist private armies operating in the state—the Minute Men and the California Rangers among them.

“The situation represents a continuing threat to the peace of the community,” he said.

The detection of these illegal private weapons hoards has helped to dramatize a much broader problem that is worrying authorities in Southern California—the tremendous increase in the quantity of legal hand guns in the possession of ordinary citizens.

Watts Began the Problem

The Watts riots of last summer first set off a buying wave and this pace has not slackened in the year since the riots. According to official estimates, more than 31,000 hand guns will be sold in Los Angeles this year, enough to arm two infantry divisions.

“The potential for danger is awesome,” The Los Angeles Times said in an editorial this week.

While ordinary citizens acquire most of their guns through regular commercial outlets, three Southern California Representatives demanded this week a full-scale investigation into the possibility that the extremist groups might have found yet another secret channel for acquiring weapons en masse.

The Representatives demanding an investigation were Charles H. Wilson, John Tunney and Thomas Rees, all Democrats from Southern California.

Their concern was touched off by the assertions of David De Mulle, one of the men arrested for having a private weapon hoard. He said that a

substantial amount of the arms and explosives had been abandoned by the Army after military maneuvers.

De Mulle, who was charged with possession of TNT, tear gas, smoke grenades and other weapons in his small apartment, said that extremist groups and “gun nuts” simply cruised the desert after Army maneuvers and picked up vast quantities of discarded weapons.

Army Supposed to Clean Up

Although military clean-up crews are supposed to clear weapons from the areas, De Mulle said that there were always plenty of weapons around after they leave. Some men are still finding weapons left over from Operation Desert Strike, a maneuver in 1964 that involved 100,000 troops, he said. He also said that he had once seen a truck painted with swastikas cruising the desert looking for weapons.

The Army promptly replied that its clean-up crews carefully picked up all material after each maneuver.

De Mulle made his charges after police had found TNT, tear gas, smoke grenades and other materials in his apartment. De Mulle allegedly was a friend of Tomlin, the steel company laborer.

Investigators said they did not believe that either Tomlin or De Mulle were members of extremist groups. However, one official said that police were investigating the connections of another unidentified man, the son of a wealthy local businessman, who had concealed scores of hand grenades and other weapons in his backyard. This man is believed to be affiliated with the militant National States' Rights party, whose members affect military ranks and uniforms.

Among other paramilitary organizations that maintain “private armies” in the state, the official said, are the Minute Men, the American Nazi party, the California Rangers and the Christian Defense League.

The activities of private armies in California have been inhibited by the passage of a law that went into effect last September. It bans formal training exercises by paramilitary groups. Since that time the training maneuvers reportedly have been shifted to Arizona and Nevada and the once-garrulous leaders of the armies have gone underground.

Of all the groups the Minute Men probably attract the most attention. Law enforcement officials estimate its state membership at between 500 and 1,000.