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# 'Tom Swift's Electric

By Tom Zito

Washington Post Staff Writer

When he was a boy of 10 in Chicago, Jack Cover read with fascination the adventures of "Tom Swift and his Electric Rifle."

"What an amazing thought, stunning people with blue balls of electricity," Cover, now 55, said with a sense of wonder, even though he's made the Swiftian fantasy almost come true.

Cover's Taser, a \$200 device that fires darts charged with 50,000 volts of electricity, has been bought by 3,000 persons around the country in the four months it's been on the market, according to the inventor. It's being promoted as a safe alternative to the gun for self protection.

The device—a one-pound, gray plastic, flashlight-shaped object that shoots two barbs with a range of 15 feet—is so much out of the world of Buck Rogers that authorities don't quite know how to approach it.

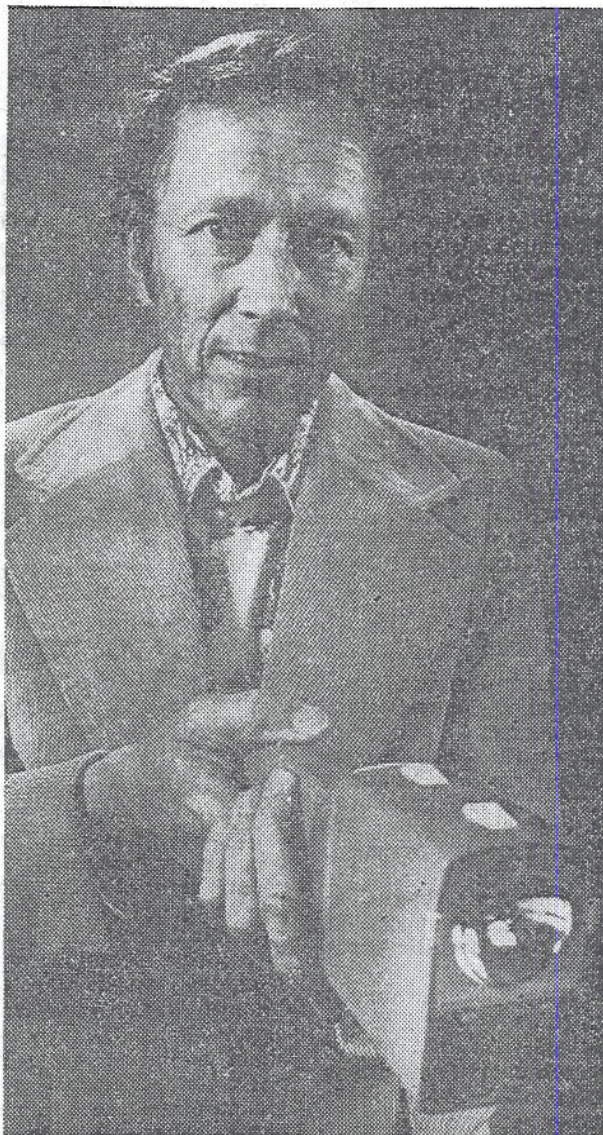
The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms examined the Taser, and determined that it wasn't covered by the Gun Control Act of 1968.

"It's like a piano falling off a five-story building," said Assistant Director A. Atley Peterson, who heads ATF's Office of Technical and Scientific Services. "It's dangerous, but it's not a firearm."

Peterson said that when the device was first marketed a few months ago, the bureau had numerous inquiries from state and local law enforcement agencies.

"They wanted to know whether the thing was legal, and we had to tell them that it was probably just a hazardous device," he said. Now Peterson says queries about the Taser "are almost non-existent."

The Consumer Product Safety Commission, at the request of California's Taser



By James A. Parcell—The Washington Post

Jack Cover and his 50,000-volt, \$200 flashlight-dart gun.

Systems, Inc., has scheduled a public informational meeting on the device at 9 a.m. today at 5401 West Bard Ave., Bethesda.

"We expect them to demonstrate the device and answer some questions on potential medical hazards," said William Kitzes of the commission's staff.

Vincent DiMaio, a Dallas

medical examiner, studied the Taser last year at the request of the Dallas police department after two local shops began selling them.

"We told them that essentially it was a non-lethal weapon," DiMaio said, "although there's really nothing that's a non-lethal weapon. A person who has a serious heart problem could

# Rifle' Is Here

conceivably be killed by it, but the chance is very remote. A more serious problem is that somebody who gets shocked might fall over and break an arm or a head."

The novelty of the unit has posed theoretical problems for local law enforcement officials: none of the police administrators and prosecuting attorneys contacted in Washington, Maryland and Virginia had ever heard of the Taser, and were consequently unwilling to speculate on its legal status.

"It would seem to be a question of intent," said one U.S. attorney in the District. "If the device were bought with the intention to hurt someone, it would be clearly illegal. The problem comes up when you get in the area of self-defense. The courts have frequently ruled that self-defense is a valid defense against a charge of possession of dangerous weapon. And that assumes that this thing is a dangerous weapon."

Cover, who said he has been shocked by the device "countless times," said he devised the Taser "strictly as a self protection device."

"I started thinking about it during the Watts riots," he said, "and then a few days later I read a story in the Los Angeles Times about a man who had harmlessly gotten stuck on an electric cattle fence for three hours. The current immobilized his muscles, and I thought, 'Why not convert that into a hand item?'"

"In 1969 my family was attacked by five men who started throwing stones through our windows. I got out my .32 and pointed it through one of the windows and they ran away. That's when I decided to go full speed ahead on the Taser. It's been six years of my life and a million dollars to develop," he said.

Cover was initially backed-

by Al Simon, the president of Advanced Chemical

Technology, a company that developed plastic 55-gallon drums and blister packages for cosmetics.

"We got tired of answering the phone 'TSER' for Tom Swift's Electric Rifle—and went through the list of vowels. 'Taser' sounded good to all of us," he said.

"Simon thought it would be a great item for airlines to use in subduing hijackers," Cover said. "We had thought about making the thing look like a ham sandwich, and then they came along with their screening devices and wiped us out. So we settled on a flashlight design. The flashlight works on a rechargeable, 8-volt battery. Some capacitors boost the charge, and when you press another button, the little darts fly out, still attached to the device with tiny wires. We limited the distance to 15 feet, so it would only seem attractive as a self-defense item, but we've developed a model that can shoot as far as 150 feet. All you have to do is hit someone's clothing. That's why the voltage is so high. It goes right through it."

A self-professed gun enthusiast, Cover admits that the Taser can be bought by persons with other than self-defense on their minds.

"All we can do," he said, "is keep the range down and make it an impractical thing for thugs to depend on."

In Florida recently, two people walked into a gas station and zapped the attendant. They got away with the till and he got left on the ground.

"It was like sticking your finger in a wall socket," the attendant said later. "I fell to the floor and I couldn't move."