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

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ast 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.


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 $56.95.

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

The 13-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 $10.95 and used it to kill the President of the United States.

How do they? 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 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 1965. After the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, firearms-control bills were introduced in both houses of Congress but died in committees.

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 businesses worried about their profits—this in the face of official figures that show more than 9,000 fatal firearms accidents every year in the United States. FBI reports on almost 3,000 gun murders a year (90 per cent committed with concealable handguns) and evidence that half our suicides and 50 per cent of our murders are committed with firearms.

One answer: At this time Senator Dodd is ready to the problem. In 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 unequipped customers. The importation of military surplus and the sale of bazookas, anti-tank guns, grenades, bomb and other weapons not suitable for sporting purposes would be curbed. Effective state laws and local enforcement would 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 a 15-year-old boy who was found to have a false name that he used to order a foreign version of a U.S. gun—by telling the seller he was 16, a4 15 years old. The boy gave a false name to get a foreign version of this 168 U.S. gun—and killed three people with it.

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(COMEBACK) 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 sport's store for $315 for the gun and 25 rounds of ammunition.

Police had to let him keep it—so they could find nothing in federal, state or local statutes forbidding the possession of semi-automatic and assault rifles.

It was this type of gun that destroyed the British war in Syria. 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 five men became suspicious and notified the F.B.I., the weapon was shipped to Plainfield, N. J., and from there the express office there. The semi-automatic rifle in Alexandria had ended his role in the transaction by pointing out, correctly, that selling “in large-bore rifles” is no different in the case of the law than selling a deer gun.

Tracking 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 inside Washington, which are stocked with more than 200,000 rifles and pistols.

Mr. Cummings told the F.B.I. committee that he has other warehouses and offices in England, Finland and Switzerland, and that during the last two years he has imported 1,000,000 anti-tank guns annually into the United States and sold them to 5,000 dealers in 35 states. He admitted 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 “this army surplus is not controlled by law.” He added that his lawbreaking language cheers his own private recreation industry.

High-powered Some of the catalogs and advertisements believe that on street corners for $5.80 each, then bored out the barrels and enlarged the cylinder chambers to take 80,000 rounds of ammunition for an anti-tank cannon.

Another group that finds it easy to stockpile arms and ammunition in the U.S. Kilo Klone. The Dill committee discovered that last year one federalized licensed dealer who was involved with the Klan in Minnesota bought 18 Russian Tokarev rifles and 15,000 rounds of ammunition by mail from a retail outlet in Alexandria, Va.

On January 18, 1966, a former Klan member from North Carolina, N. C., believed to be a House Un-American Activities subcommittee member of the FBI was known to own firearms for defense and pick up guns wherever they could be bought without a permit. On one occasion, he said, four eps was collected to order surplus anti-tank rifles from a dealer in Norfolk, Va.

It should not be forgotten that the Dill subcommittee was created for the purpose of investigating juvenile delinquency. The main similarity between lethal weapons plays an important role in the rising youth crime rate, and the weapons of delinquents have become increasingly sophisticated. A Los Angeles police lieutenant describes brass knuckles, pocket knives and dubs as passe. “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 shot over a 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 1965 and 1966, 172,000 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 1966 New York City detected around a man, handy with tools, who bought the starter pistol 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 sentences peddled them to street corners for $3, and he had disposed of about 200 when apprehended.

“The sight . . . Opponents of stricter firearms laws to home area” 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.” Opponents often forget the first clause referring to “a well-organized 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 clause referring to “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.”

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