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CIA-01-Cummings, Sam
Interarms (Ante-arms)

Interarms—and the Man

In the antiquated splendor of Monte Carlo, a British journalist tracks down the elusive Sam Cummings, armament broker to the world. Interarms, his huge private weapons business with a complex of warehouses located on the Potomac at old town Alexandria, has an inventory ranging from carbines to jet fighters. Anthony Haden-Guest reports on the man who could outfit 40 army divisions.

Originator
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THE TEMPTATION to romanticize this business," Sam Cummings says, "it's irresistible. He chuckles. Cummings chuckles frequently, a full, gleeful chuckle, with a fetching sardonic timbre. We walk out of the sunlight, sloppy over that whole cobalt and orange Vistavision Monaco. "Do you like your tea strong? Of course, all the English like their tea strong."

Sam Cummings is American, 43, with a manner of controlled buoyancy. What with a closish crop of hair and a bland face running to plumpness, he has a somewhat collegiate style, nondescript/casual, but expensively so, in an ordinary blue blazer (but tailored) and a plain broadcloth shirt (but monogrammed). One might take him for a successful businessman, which he is, or — that controlled buoyancy — for a successful salesman, which he is also. Sam Cummings is founder/owner of Interarms, unobtrusively a multimillionaire, and the biggest private arms dealer in the world.

And we are meeting in Monte Carlo, that antiquated Las Vegas, which also provided a convenient domicile for that earlier armaments king, Sir Basil Zaharoff, for whom was polished the phrase, "Merchants of Death." Cummings again gives that sophisticated guffaw—"We are perfect whipping boys. For the press, for politicians." He pours the tea (strong). His apartment, at least, lacks the Zaharoff touch, being in a block of bourgeois modernism, a bit too

plush for an office block and a bit too glassily anonymous for apartments.

"Both everyone in the arms business, and everyone who writes about the arms business" — the lightest of glances — "tends to exaggerate our own importance. For instance, we have this internal company humor, which people misunderstand." Cummings indicates his telephone, which is marked CAUTION. *Speech on this instrument is NOT SECURE*, and tosses over a keychain. This consists mainly of a gold-plated Sten gun bullet, with "Interarms" written on it, in English on one side, Russian on the other. "You see, with us you'll be all right . . . with every side."

Sam Cummings founded Interarms 17 years ago, and it gained its present dominant status in the private arms trade with astounding speed. That status must, however, be defined. "We are used as psychological whipping boys," Cummings says of the private dealers. "The greatest traders in the business are governments." Which is, of course, true. Of the world's traffic, a huge proportion is direct government to government transaction. The USSR, for instance, as Sam points out genially, sells to South Africa. And one of Europe's most hard-headed salesmen is neutral Sweden—"Very effective. And they make very good material. The Bofors is a classic. To our regret they don't stay" — gurgle of merriment — "neutral in the international armaments sales field at all." The

post-war arms boom—there is now one gun for every man on the planet—has several causes. Fundamentally, the East-West arms race has not only kept up a torrential flow of arms, but has meant that much of the flood is instantly obsolescent and given or sold to friendly but smaller powers. Also there has been the Third World, with its proliferation of arms-hungry nations.

The importance of the private arms dealer—Cummings, overwhelmingly—cannot be revealed through statistics. Nations, as arms dealers, are huge but unwieldy. They are hamstrung by politics, and its attendant hypocrisies. (Consider the South African imbroglio, and that Sir Basil Zaharoff sold in his day to both sides of the Boer War without any fuss at all.) Private arms dealers feast, perfectly legally, on surplus, and move perfectly legally through the loopholes and chinks of political and economic relations.

Interarms' precise volume of business is difficult to estimate. It includes trafficking in military "materiel" — "materiel," pronounced by Cummings with a faint Gallic inflection, is to arms dealers what "product" is to movie producers: morally neutral merchandise. It includes a trade in refurbishing obsolete hardware for the sporting market. It includes, in turnover, predominantly, deals in which Cummings acted as broker or middleman. As to his turnover, guesses within arms circles have put it