

The .22 Caliber Killings

By Mark Schorr

"...The last four years have seen a slew of professionally performed .22 killings; most of the victims were FBI informants..."

EXCERPT:

"The .22 caliber bullet is the best one made," says Detective George Simmons, who has spent 27 of his 30 years as a New York cop assigned to the Ballistics Unit, which analyzes 20,000 guns a year. "The .22 utilizes all its power. It goes in and doesn't fly through. It bounces around inside the body like a rubber ball."

"In a sense, a .22 can do more damage," explains Dr. Michael Baden, New York City's chief medical examiner. "A .22 striking the chest and going partly in and stopping expends all its energy in the body, whereas a .38 might go in and out of the body."

The .22's most appealing feature is its silenceability. Although possession of a silencer carries stiff penalties (ten years and a \$10,000 fine), underworld gunsmiths are kept busy machining the vented, noise-suppressing tubes. A recent innovation, the "hit kit," a carrying case containing a .22 automatic modified to take a silencer, plus the silencer, goes for a minimum of \$500, sources say.

Traditionally, this small handgun has been known as a "plinker," for target shooting or killing small animals, or a "lady's gun," because it is lightweight, has almost no recoil, and fits in the most delicate female palm. It could hardly be more different from the "lupara," the short shotgun that Sicilian mafiosi have always favored.

In the United States, hit men have used shotguns and, for greater concealability, medium- and high-powered handguns like .38 revolvers, .357 Magnum revolvers, or .45 automatics. Why then the switch? Investigators found clues in the first .22 murder.

Sam "Momo" Giancana had not reached 67 years of age by being Mr. Nice Guy. He had over 60 arrests on his rap sheet, including 3 for murder before he reached age twenty. He had crossed the border in the mid-1960s but was returned by Mexico in 1974. Back in Chicago, he wanted to be boss again.

Momo, however, was under a lot of pressure. He had appeared before Congress and testified about the CIA; the cops were parked outside his house jotting down license-plate numbers; there were reams of transcripts of his private conversations, courtesy of an FBI bug; and he had a blood clot in his gut, a reminder of his recent gallbladder operation. Momo was frustrated, kept at arm's distance from his old position of power.

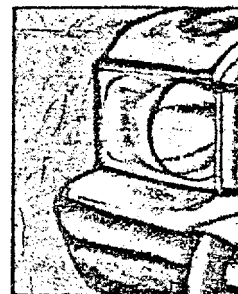
But on the night of June 19, 1975, when he was joined by a close friend for an evening of socializing, he tried to relax. He didn't think of the government's immunity offer he had accepted, or that he had confided to trusted friends that he would "do anything to keep from rotting in jail." Momo didn't want to die in prison.

At about 10:30 P.M., he suggested a late-night snack to his friend. The two men went down to the basement kitchen, and Momo began cooking. Concentrating on the sausage sizzling in the skillet, he didn't hear the tiny metallic click as a silencer was screwed onto the long-barreled .22 Hi-Standard automatic. He didn't hear his guest come up behind him and level the gun inches from the back of his head.

The police surveillance team outside

heard two very faint pops. The sound they ignored signaled the first use of the .22 as the mob elite's favored gun.

While the mob previously had been ignorant of the .22's virtues, the CIA hadn't been. In fact, the Office of Strategic Services, the agency the CIA sprang from, had helped the Connecticut-based Hi-Standard Company develop the model that killed Giancana.



A Chicago hit man turned informant states he has "hard evidence" that the CIA ordered Momo's murder, using a mob hit man to carry out the job. The CIA, of course, denies

this. But the CIA certainly had good reason to believe Momo a threat to national security. Not only had he had the same mistress as President John Kennedy, but he also had been chosen by the CIA to arrange the murder of Fidel Castro. Momo was neck-deep in the intrigue that might have led to Kennedy's death, and he was scheduled to testify about it before Congress.

The Hi-Standard pistol that killed Giancana was traced to Florida, the state whose large Cuban-refugee population makes it a favorite for CIA maneuvering. Florida also leads in underworld gun purchases. The gun laws are lax for pistols—all you need is a Florida driver's license, about \$25 on the black market. For .22 ammunition, you don't even need that.