

Big Paul's Christmas Gift

by George Gabriel (1979-2006)

Thirtieth anniversary of the murder of Paul Castellano. George Gabriel was the John Gotti Case Agent.

The Cardinal Rule

La Cosa Nostra (LCN) has rules governing the conduct of its made members; probably the most important of which was the Cardinal Rule — Don't kill the Boss of a Family without permission from the Commission. In the 1980s, the Commission consisted of the bosses of the five NY LCN families: the Bonnano, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese and Luchese Families. Unless the Commission had cause to take out another Boss, it was highly unlikely that a disgruntled family member would seek and get permission from the Commission to wack a Boss, let alone survive making the request. Fundamentally the Cardinal Rule preserved the status quo, and was enforced as a matter of self-preservation. No Boss would ever endorse taking out another one and expose himself to the same fate. In December of 1985, "Big Paul" Castellano was the Boss of NY's most powerful family — the Gambino crime family.

Prelude to a murder

In 1985, the Gambino family stood at approximately 250 members strong, with an estimated 400 plus "associates" hitting the pavement earning money to kick-up to the Boss. Life as the Boss of the Gambino family was very lucrative, and for a greedy Boss like Castellano, the riches were vast. The LCN made their money through the control of powerful labor unions in NY, through which they controlled whole industries such as the construction, carting (garbage), trucking and concrete companies to name but a few. Big Paul, a very successful business man in his own right, padded his earnings by muscling in on Gambino-controlled industries, while short-changing his own family members.

Factions within the family

The Gambino Family administration was comprised of Boss Big Paul Castellano, Underboss Aniello "Neil" Dellacroce and Consiglieri Tommy Bilotti (Castellano's body guard and right-hand man). Under the administration, there were 32 Captains or "Capos" and their respective crews, all of whom were required to "kick up" to the Boss. While most complied, they didn't necessarily do so willingly. But, the Boss had all the authority, the most important of which was the authority to order a hit even on someone in his own family.

A smart Boss never rests on his laurels, and Big Paul was no fool. He was aware of a Capo from a Queens' neighborhood, who was getting a lot of attention from around the LCN community. Capo John Gotti was getting the kind of attention that makes a smart Boss nervous. At the time, Gotti's powerful crew was facing indictments from the Eastern District of NY on drug distribution charges. Castellano wanted to snip Gotti's wings, and used the drug case as his excuse to reign in Gotti and his crew. Running a large drug operation without the approval of the Boss was breaking another LCN rule. At one point, Castellano openly threatened Gotti; that if in fact Gotti's crew were dealing drugs, Castellano was going to order Gotti to kill his closest crew members — his brother Gene and life-long friend Angelo "quack quack" Ruggiero. In reality, the only thing keeping

Gotti and his crew alive was the backing of their very loyal Underboss, Neil Dellacroce.

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to him, to include a few somewhat secretive crews of Sicilians or "Zips" as they were known. Castellano's "American" killer crews were well-known to the rest of the Gambino Family; however, the Zips were a closer knit community and somewhat secretive, to the point that many of the "American"

crews in the Gambino Family didn't know who these guys were. So if a war broke out, crews like Gotti's could be easily targeted, whereas retaliation against the unknown Zips would be challenging.

The Forming of a Fist

While John Gotti and his crew had personal reasons to see Paul Castellano "taken out," taking such action on their own would at the least start a war between the factions within the Gambino family, or worse get Gotti killed. But Gotti soon learned that he was not alone in his loathing of Big Paul and his greedy reign over the Family. Gambino Capo Robert "DeBe" Dibernardo would approach Gotti acting as an intermediary on behalf of certain factions that were also fed up with Big Paul's greed — a powerful Brooklyn

crew headed by Capo Frankie Decicco, considered by Castellano as one of his most loyal, and another powerful Brooklyn Capo, Sammy “the Bull” Gravano and his crew of shooters. Finally, one additional Castellano *confidant* would surprisingly turn and join the Fist — Joe Watts. With the collusion of these seemingly disparate crews, the Fist had the making of a formidable force, capable of plotting and ultimately pulling off the assassination of a Family Boss.

The Trigger

As long as Neil Dellacroce was alive, Big Paul would have a difficult time getting his Administration to agree to take out the Gotti crew. And John Gotti would never make a move on Big Paul, without Neil’s approval, which he would never provide. On December 2, 1985, Neil Dellacroce succumbed to his ailing health issues and passed away. At Dellacroce’s funeral, a brazen Castellano would order the shuttering of Dellacroce’s social club, the Ravenite Social Club, located on Mulberry Street in the Little Italy section of Manhattan, and the dismantling of some of the crews supervised by Dellacroce — a clear signal that Castellano was intent on weakening those he perceived as a threat. Gotti interpreted Castellano’s actions as his death sentence.

Big Paul’s Final Lesson

Paul Castellano would learn that there is no honor amongst thieves. On December 16, 1985 Big Paul had an appointment to see his lawyer, Jimmy Larossa who was representing Castellano in a RICO case of his own. Larossa’s law office was in midtown Manhattan, just around the corner from Castellano’s favorite eatery, Spark’s Steak House on 46th St. off 3rd Avenue. A few Castellano “faithful” arranged to meet Big Paul for dinner following his meeting with Larossa, to include Capos Frank Decicco and Jimmy Brown Failla. At around 4 pm, Bilotti pulled up in front of the restaurant and exited the Lincoln Town Car to assist his Boss out of the car. Bilotti would never make it around the car, and Big Paul would never make it into Sparks. In the middle of this crowded midtown street, packed with holiday shoppers, four gunmen in trench coats and Russian fur hats, approached the Town Car guns blazing, and began shooting both Castellano and Bilotti. When the smoke cleared, the Boss of the Gambino Family lay in a pool of blood in the middle of this bustling midtown street, shot dead in broad daylight.



The Ravenite Social Club



The murder scene in front of Spark’s Steak House

The shooters vanished into the crowd leaving a stunned NYC not knowing what to expect next. A bold hit on one of NY’s powerful Mob Bosses suddenly thrust the Gambino Family into certain turmoil.

One would think that when an explosive shooting takes place in the middle of broad daylight, in the middle of Manhattan, a few weeks before Christmas, in front of one of NY’s busiest and most popular steak houses, with streets full of holiday shoppers, tourists and partiers — SOMEONE was bound to notice. Then put yourself in the shoes of would-be witnesses who quickly learn from a frenzied media that this was no ordinary shooting, but a notorious mob rub-out of one of NY’s most dangerous mob Bosses. The media immediately began broadcasting stories of impending mob wars and more bloodshed on the streets of NY, which understandably discouraged potential witnesses from coming forward. And to make matters worse, the media seized on the rumors that a certain mob captain from Queens, NY, a relatively unknown character named John Gotti was somehow responsible for the hit in his attempt to take over NY’s biggest mob family. And so began the five-year media fascination with John Gotti and the LCN.

C-16, The FBI’s answer to countering the Gambino Family

In December 1985, the NY Division of the FBI had no less than 10 criminal squads dedicated to investigating the various criminal conduct of the LCN. There was an FBI squad assigned to investigate each of the five NY families — Squad C-16 had the distinction of being the Gambino organized crime squad. Led by Supervisory Special Agent J Bruce Mouw (aka, “*don’t tell them now Mouw*,” a nicknamed earned for being tight lipped) the Squad had a mix of about 13 Agents, ranging from relatively new Agents to very seasoned investigators. Under Mouw’s tutelage, Squad C-16 enjoyed a robust human intelligence program, with sources well-placed in key areas of the Gambino Family. Fortunately, while the focus of source development typically centered on the sitting Boss (Castellano), his Administration, and inner circle, Squad C-16 also had well-placed sources on certain Queens and Brooklyn crews as well. While no one had predicted the hit on Paul, the squad’s excellent source coverage provided Mouw and his investigators with the identities of 10 of the 11 conspirators and shooters involved in the hit within 24 hours.

As all good investigators understand, there is a big difference between knowing who committed the crime, and proving they committed it. But it sure is nice to know who the focus of your investigation should be from the outset.

Challenges Abound

Squad C-16 was joined by the very capable homicide detectives from NYPD's 17th Precinct, in a 24-month effort to find "willing" witnesses with information pertinent to the hits. Despite the throngs of people in the vicinity of the shooting that evening, the combined efforts of these investigators did not contribute one witness during any subsequent trials. While we knew John Gotti, Frank DeCicco, Sammy Gravano, Dominick Pizzonia, Anthony Rampino, Vincent Artuso, Fat Sally Scala, Eddie Lino, Angelo Ruggiero and John Carneglia were on-scene participants in the hit, the only witness that came close to identifying any of them was a young lady who recalled a man looking like a skeleton running into her on the street, right after the shooting stopped. Anthony Rampino, a shooter in Gotti's crew, fit the description of the man who looked like the skeleton man. He is doing 35 years on a drug conviction.

Within days of the hit, Gotti's new-found fame made him the focus of every law enforcement agency with relevant authority over criminal matters in NY. This new-found fame also contributed to the revocation of his bail in mid-1986 and he was remanded to custody, pending a federal trial on a 1982 indictment for gambling and loan sharking. Gotti would remain in custody until mid-1987, when a jury would deliver an unexpected blow to the government, handing Gotti the gift of acquittal on all charges. This surprise verdict reignited the media fascination and frenzy surrounding Gotti; now dubbed "Teflon Don." Nobody played up to the media better than John Gotti. Adding insult to injury, following the jury verdict, our well-placed sources let us know that a Gotti loyalist had in fact bribed one of the jurors, whose not guilty vote would deliver the acquittal. Recognizing that Big Paul's hit was not going to be solved by eye witnesses, Squad C-16 settled in for a traditional, slow and methodical approach to investigating the LCN. In this case, satisfying the RICO requirement of establishing the criminal enterprise was going to be a little easier as the Gambino Family was starting from a clean slate at the top, with a new Boss building his regime in front of our eyes.

Hearing of the verdict while driving the streets in Queens, NY, squad mate Mark Roberts and I headed for the Bergin Hunt and Fish Club, Gotti's Queens Headquarters. Our instincts were right. We knew that an acquitted wise guy would go "home" immediately afterward to celebrate with his family. John Gotti's home was the Bergen Hunt and Fish Club, his family was his crew. We spotted Gotti walking in conversation with his brother Genie a block away from the club. Mark pulled the car up right next to the Gotti's, when I quickly exited the vehicle and approached the two brothers. A somewhat stunned John Gotti turned to me with eyes wide open, barely noticing my extended hand. As I approached, I reminded him of an earlier encounter during which I told him I would be on hand to congratulate him, should he beat

the government at trial. After shaking hands, I left a confused Gotti, with the message that we (the FBI) will be seeing him around. In retrospect, I should have thought this one out a little more! Word got back to the squad following this brief encounter, that John thought he was about to be "hit" as our car pulled up to him that day in retaliation for killing Big Paul. Lucky for us, Genie wasn't packing that day.

Time is on our side

One of the luxuries FBI investigators enjoy over our law enforcement counterparts is time. FBI Agents are not burdened with an unmanageable case load, and get the support needed when it's needed. Our success lies in our patience and determination to gather compelling evidence that ensures a conviction. More so with Gotti, we were determined not to have a repeat of the government's 1987 performance; no acquittals no matter what. From 1987 through 1990, the Gambino Squad C-16 applied for and monitored electronic surveillance at any and all locations where Gotti was conducting business. We spent over 18 months surveilling (physically and electronically) the activities at the Bergin Hunt and Fish Club in Queens, and the Ravenite Social Club in Little Italy. The bugs in the Bergin Club were discovered, and for several months our surveillance was hampered by white noise devices brought into all of the clubs to mask conversations.

Beginning around September 1989 through May 1990, the focus of our electronic and physical surveillance was centered around the Ravenite Social Club, including an internal hallway behind the club and an apartment two stories above the club. During that period, we intercepted five one-hour conversations from inside the apartment, a location we knew from our sources to be the spot where Gotti held his most sensitive conversations. In December of 1990, these five conversations between Gotti and members of his administration, Sammy Gravano and Frank Locascio, led to a plethora of RICO charges to include the murders of Paul Castellano and Tommy Billoti, which was the topic of a one-hour Gotti diatribe one November night in the apartment. In December of 1990, John Gotti was arrested, together with Underboss Sammy Gravano, Consiglieri Frank Locascio and Capo Tommy Gambino. Not only did the tapes deliver the government's case against Gotti and his crew, but they ultimately resulted in Sammy "the Bull" Gravano's decision to "flip" and turn on John Gotti and the rest of the NY Organized Crime world. In the end, we finally did develop an eyewitness to the Castellano/Billoti homicides — one of the participants, Sammy the Bull provided riveting testimony at the trial disclosing how this infamous hit was planned and executed. Gotti and Gravano had a ring side seat to the hit, seated in a vehicle parked across the street, positioned to provide back-up should Tommy or Paul run away, or if anyone tried to interfere.

Big Paul died a violent death on the streets in NYC, and John Gotti died in jail, for killing Big Paul Castellano. In the end, breaking the Cardinal Rule didn't really pay off for John Gotti.