

Real Crimes, Unreal Weapons

Author: Joe Wojtas

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IN January, a 13-year-old wielding what looked like a .38-caliber revolver tried to rob a Chinese restaurant in Mount Vernon, N.Y., until workers wrested the gun from him.

In February, a 16-year-old boy in Clifton, N.J., accompanied by a friend, stuck what appeared to be a .45-caliber handgun in a man's chest and stole his cocker spaniel.

And in the fall, a teenager in a pickup truck with other youths pulled up to a man walking with his nephew in Stonington, Conn., and pointed what looked like a Walther PPK pistol at the man's head.

In each case the weapon used was not real. They were toy, airsoft or BB guns that the police say look so authentic that veteran law enforcement officers are unable to tell the difference, even from a few feet away.

"Until one of my officers picked up the gun, no one thought it was an imitation," Mount Vernon's police commissioner, David E. Chong, said about the fake used in the attempted robbery.

Mr. Chong and officers across the region said they were worried that it is only a matter of time before someone holding one of those handguns or rifles is mistakenly shot by the police, as happened in Longwood, Fla., in January 2006, when a SWAT officer killed a 15-year-old boy who was brandishing an airsoft pistol at school.

"Police officers don't have the luxury of saying, 'Is that a real gun or not a real gun?'" said Harry W. Rilling, the police chief in Norwalk, Conn., and president of the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. "They have to make a split-second decision, and it could result in a tragedy."

Chief Rilling said that a teenager was arrested in Norwalk in the fall for threatening someone with an airsoft gun, which fires plastic pellets or BBs and is spring-, gas- or battery-powered. "The gun looked real," he said. "It even said Beretta on the grip."

That's the attraction for some buyers. The guns, which can be bought on the Web or at gun shops and sporting goods stores for as little as \$25, have the same color, design and markings of popular handgun models made by Smith & Wesson, Sig Sauer and Glock, among others. "The attention to detail on these guns is amazing," said Detective Lt. Richard Berdnik of the Clifton Police Department, which recovered the dog and made two arrests.

Joe Castronovo, the Clifton man whose dog was stolen, said the gun looked real to him.

"It didn't even enter my mind it was a toy," he said. "These guys meant business, and I wasn't going to take a chance."

The widespread use of airsoft guns began in the 1980s in Japan. The majority of the guns are manufactured by Asian companies licensed by handgun manufacturers to use their designs.

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The guns' popularity started growing in the United States about six years ago, and today there are an estimated 1.5 million people nationwide who participate in airsoft games, according to Claudio DiBucci, who said he sells about 1,000 airsoft guns a year at his store, Hot Spot Airsoft, in Oceanside on Long Island.

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While airsoft is similar to paintball, several things set it apart. Paintball is often played on fields with little cover; airsoft competitions take place in wooded areas with players wearing military-style clothing and engaging in simulated combat missions, like rescuing a captured soldier.

"I get to go out and be a Delta Force guy on weekends," said Charles Roth, 25, of Stamford, Conn., a creative director for a marketing firm and the administrator of the Northeastern Airsoft Group, with some 3,000 members from Maine to New York. "It's a hobby like anything else."

Mr. Roth said his group arranged games for members and offered safety programs to players 12 and older. He said that the guns were slightly more popular with teenagers than adults, and that he expected them to become even more popular with teenagers because of their accessibility and low cost. He said that the number of incidents involving the police increased once big chain stores began selling the guns, but that buyers had to assume some responsibility.

"This is an education thing that's up to parents and the big retailers," he said. "You can't give a kid an airsoft for Christmas and tell him to go out and play with it. It's not a toy. We try hard to give kids a chance to come out and play safe."

Federal law requires airsoft manufacturers to place an orange tip on the barrel, but the police said that some owners remove the tip, paint over it or cover it with black tape. In the death of the Florida teenager, the pistol's tip had been painted black.

"It's hard to tell a toy Glock from a real Glock without the orange on the end," said Anthony Salvatore, the police chief in Cromwell, Conn. "Our officers have a tough enough job out there without worrying about issues like this."

Another concern, Commissioner Chong of Mount Vernon said, is that some criminals paint the tips of real guns red or orange to make them look fake.

Across the country, some states and communities have begun to consider banning airsoft guns or strengthening the laws that regulate them. In Connecticut, State Representative Leonard C. Greene, Republican of Beacons Falls, introduced a bill in January that would allow authorities to confiscate altered airsoft guns and fine owners \$100.

In New York and New Jersey, the guns are legal to own, but committing a crime with one carries the same penalty as using a real firearm. Some counties have gone a step further. Last year, Nassau County banned the sale of BB, pellet and airsoft guns to anyone under 18, and in Westchester County it is illegal to make or sell an imitation firearm in realistic colors like black, blue or gray and with a barrel that is not plugged.

The day after the attempted robbery at the Chinese restaurant, Commissioner Chong said, the Mount Vernon police seized illegal fake guns from three stores that sell toy weapons and arrested two store owners and a manager, charging them with selling unlawful replicas. "I sent the message very clearly that this won't be tolerated in this community," he said.

Mr. Roth, of the airsoft group, and Mr. DiBucci, the shop owner, said that while they shared the concerns of the police and supported the proposed Connecticut law, they were adamantly opposed to banning airsoft guns or requiring owners to get permits.

"You can't ban everything in life because it could be dangerous," Mr. DiBucci said. "If someone is stupid, you don't blame the gun."

CAPTION(S):

Photos: PRETENDERS -- Police Lt. Roy Hastings of Mount Vernon, N.Y., left, with real firearms, and Officer Paul Roland with replicas. Below, airsoft pistols, which fire plastic BBs, above, are for sale at a store on Long Island. (Photographs by Phil Marino for The New York Times); (Photo by Susan Farley for The New York Times)

By JOE WOJTAS

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