

Cop in the Closet

by ex-Sgt. Jack Fossum

This is the second of five installments of Cop in the Closet, a book chronicling ex-Sgt. Fossum's twenty-one years in the Force. Should anyone wish to buy the book and find it unavailable, it can be purchased directly from the publisher, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., #10 Orwell Street, North Vancouver, B.C. V7J 3K1 Price: \$16.95 in hardcover, check or money order, postage paid by the publisher. Ed.

5. HAVE GUN — WILL SHOOT

When I was a policeman, convicted murderers were either hanged or had their death sentences commuted to life imprisonment. In 1967, following a U.S. Supreme Court decision labelling the death penalty as "cruel and unusual punishment," the Canadian government began commuting all death sentences to life imprisonment. Capital punishment was abolished by Parliament in 1975.

However, the issue did not die. Opinion polls showed that a majority of Canadians favored the death penalty for premeditated murder, and whenever a particularly grisly killing came to light there was renewed clamor for a return of the noose, or preferably some more "civilized" method of putting the convicted slayer to death.

The arguments pro and con are well known. The crux of the question is whether or not the death penalty is a deterrent. Those opposed argue that it is not and produce statistics to prove it. Those in favor hold that, statistics aside, if fear of the noose stays the hand of even one potential killer, saves the life of even one potential victim, the death

penalty has proved its worth as a deterrent. They stress that, in or out of jail, a murderer continues to be a threat to society, pointing to hostage takings and slayings inside penal institutions. He has nothing to lose by killing again and again.

Hitmen, psychopaths, and people who kill in moments of passion, under the influence of drugs, or in a bid to escape capture by the police obviously do not stop to think of the possible consequences to themselves. But would fear of the noose stay the hand of anyone contemplating murder?

Statistics indicate that the most commonly used murder weapon is the handgun, a tool made solely for the purpose of killing people. For this very reason its sale and possession is restricted by law in Canada. Would banning the handgun make a difference? Does capital punishment make a difference? The following stories from my own police experience may shed some light on these questions.

During the 1930's much police time was spent investigating safe-blowings. Favorite targets were prairie grain elevators. In small towns where there were no banking facilities, elevator agents had to keep sizable amounts of money on hand for day-to-day business. The money was generally kept in a small safe on the premises.

The location of grain elevators along the railway tracks some distance from the town gave the safe-blower a chance to ply his trade without undue fear of being caught in the act. The sound of the explosion was less likely to be heard. At worst it might come across to some light sleeper as a dull thud.