

A 'nice guy' who finished accused

EVEN BEFORE the feds signed John Gotti's former right-hand man to a megasinging contract, the man who topped prosecutors' hit list was not a gangster, but a cop.

So it's no surprise that once Gotti underboss Salvatore (Sammy Bull) Gravano came on board, it was former Detective William Peist who felt the most heat — right away.

Nothing riles a good cop or a good agent more than a bad one, which Peist allegedly was, according to the indictment filed against him last week.

"The turncoat son of a bitch betrayed everyone in this town who carries a badge," said one law enforcement official, summing up how prosecutors and FBI agents felt when they learned on an FBI bug that Peist was allegedly selling big secrets to Gotti and other reputed mobsters.

According to the racketeering indictment against Peist, the former detective single-handedly derailed at least 17 major federal and state probes into alleged murderers and drug dealers.

"It's not like he was passing on trivial stuff about bookie joints or surveillance photos of wakes and weddings; this was major-league information he was selling," said one law enforcement official. "He warned off major drug dealers and killers in the Gambino, Bonanno and Genovese crime families."

"It's worse than criminal," said another official. "All the manpower that was wasted, and the cases that died.

He screwed up a lot of cases."

"It's staggering how much damage one guy could do, and did — and the cases are not in one borough, they're all over the city, in New Jersey," said the first official. "Peist proves the old saying that it only takes one; one bad guy in the know can be devastating."



GANG LAND
JERRY CAPECI

Peist worked in the NYPD's intelligence division, but sources said most of the information Peist allegedly passed on to Gotti — through Peist's wife's cousin — he got from cops and investigators.

"And he did it just by being a nice guy," explained one source, "always saying, 'Sure, I can get that picture for you,' or, 'Sure, I'll get you that print-out,' whenever he was asked for a favor."

The feds learned Gotti had a major law enforcement source on his payroll on Jan. 17, 1990, when reputed Gotti capo Joseph (Joe Butch) Corrao and another associate were overheard telling Gotti that the Brooklyn district attorney's office had "bugged" then-reputed underboss Gravano.

Sources said Peist had learned that the district attorney's probe, which focused on a construction-site trailer and the office of Gravano's Benson-

hurst, Brooklyn, construction company, was given to the state's Organized Crime Task Force.

When Gotti learned of the bug against Gravano, he told Corrao's associate, George (George Russo) Helbig, to pump his source for more information.

"Even if he's gotta get a few dollars, we give him a few," said Gotti, according to court papers.

It's not clear how much Peist earned in the three years he allegedly was on Gotti's payroll, but Assistant U.S. Attorney Jo Ann Navickas wants Peist to forfeit that, as well as his police salary for the period, about \$130,000.

Peist's attorney, Jack Chrisomalis, told Gang Land his client "wasn't passing on any stuff to anyone. The indictment is very vague, has no basis in fact, and he denies each and every allegation in it."

Corrao's attorney, Alan Futerfas, declined to comment.

Albert Aronne, who represents Helbig, said his client was "charged with passing along gossip, which is not against the law according to the federal statutes I've read."

Michael Franzese's book, "Quitting the Mob," won't be out until next year, but mob buffs can get a taste of the crimes and lack of punishment for the former Colombo family capo in a new book by Atlanta sportswriter Chris Mortensen.

In "Playing for Keeps," Mortensen recounts Franzese's testimony — and the sweet deal he got — at the Chicago federal racketeering prosecution of

talent and sports agent Norby Walters, who was convicted at trial but who won on appeal.

★ ★ ★

Gang Land's vote for best Mafia book of the year is "Blood and Honor," by George Anastasia, a chilling but often amusing story about the violent world of imprisoned Philadelphia mob boss Nicodemo (Little Nicky) Scarfo.

ANASTASIA, a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter, uses interviews with former mobster Nicholas (Nicky Crow) Caramandi, solid reporting and great pictures to document Scarfo's bloody 10-year reign as Philadelphia mob boss.

Anastasia uses two similar baseball photos that hung in Scarfo's Atlantic City office — in which one batter gets credit for a home run while another who failed to touch first base is called out — to illustrate this cardinal rule:

"It was paramount for every soldier to 'touch base' with his capo. Those that didn't were 'out.'"

Fotog is positive burning negatives

SAN FRANCISCO — For 20 years, renowned photographer Brett Weston vowed to destroy all his negatives when he turned 80. When the day came yesterday, he didn't flinch, consigning a lifetime of work to flames.

"Nobody can print it the way I do, it wouldn't be my work," he explained.

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