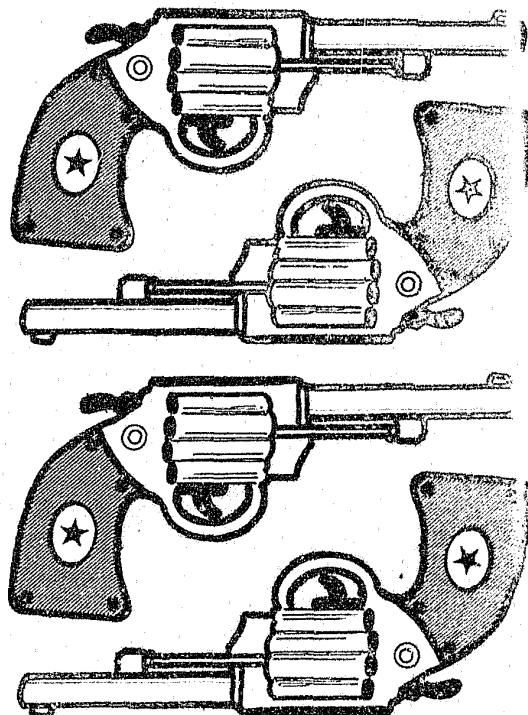


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An Investigative Aid: FIREARMS TRACING

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Firearms are frequently abandoned at the scene of a crime, or found on persons or in the vehicles of persons taken into custody, or recovered in military police raids. Owners of these firearms are reluctant to claim the weapons for fear of tying themselves to a crime being investigated, or to an unrelated crime, or even for illegal possession of firearms.

During the investigation of a crime in which a firearm has been found, investigators may have to prove that the suspect owned or had had in his possession the recovered weapon. To do this, the firearm often must be traced.

The Gun Control Act of 1968 requires that individuals or companies engaged in the sale of firearms have a federal license.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), an investigative US Treasury Department Agency, enforces the Gun Control Act of 1968 and other federal firearms laws. The ATF Bureau is the only federal agency that has statutory authority for access to the records kept by firearms dealers; thus, the ATF is the agency through which all guns are traced. In October 1972, an

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms National Tracing Center became operational and, since that date, tracing requests have increased from 753 to over 3,000 a month. The ATF tracing service is free to *all* law enforcement agencies, and can be obtained by contacting the nearest ATF office. There is usually an ATF Special Agent who maintains liaison with the Criminal Investigation Division and the Provost Marshal's office.

To give maximum assistance with a reasonable number of employees, the ATF National Tracing Center has established three priorities for tracing firearms (fig. 1). The time required to trace a gun varies but it usually takes from a few hours for a Priority I trace up to five or more working days for a Priority III trace.

To expedite tracing a firearm, military police or other law enforcing officers should give the ATF Tracing Center a complete description of the weapon (fig. 2). The ATF Special Agent transmits this information to the National Tracing Center in Washington, D.C., where the firearm will be traced from the manufacturer through the wholesaler or

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| I. Urgent. | The firearm has been used in a crime of violence or a felony and information is essential to apprehend or hold a suspect. |
| II. Expedite. | Time factor is essential to investigation. |
| III. Routine. | Time factor is not essential to the investigation. |

Figure 1

Information Needed to Trace Firearms	
• Manufacturer	• Serial number
• Type of firearm	• Magoror cylinder capacity
• Model	• Any other identifying marks
• Caliber gauge	• Reason for trace request
• Country of origin	
• Barrel length	
• Finish	

Figure 2

importer to the retail purchaser.

Retail gun dealers must maintain a written record on each person who buys a gun. This information is kept on a *Firearms Transaction Record* and must include the purchaser's name, address, birth date, physical description, and the purchaser's driver's license or military identification-card number.

After the trace has been completed, the ATF Special Agent will give the military police officer information on the retail purchaser. It is then up to the investigating officer to continue the investigation to determine if the purchaser, or some subsequent possessor of the gun, was involved in the crime being investigated.

The ATF National Tracing Center is usually successful in tracing firearms to the first retail purchaser. However, a successful trace could be prevented if the firearm has been stolen during shipment or from the dealer, if

the dealer's records have been destroyed, or if other similar incidents have occurred that would cause a break in the "chain-of-transfer." Before 1968, some manufacturers did not put a serial number on shotguns and rifles. Of course, these weapons cannot be traced. However, federal law now requires that a serial number be placed on all firearms. If the serial number is obliterated, the gun should be sent to the crime laboratory with a request that the number be restored. If this can be done, the weapon is then traced in the normal manner.

If the first retail purchaser is not involved in the investigation, he can at least tell the investigator how he disposed of the weapon. This information may give the investigator some idea of how successful he can expect to be in further tracing the weapon. Cheaper handguns, or so called "*Saturday Night Specials*," may change hands a dozen times in a relatively short time. Of course, the longer a firearm has been in circulation, the more difficult it is to connect the weapon with a particular person.

Recovered firearms also may be checked through the *National Crime Information Center* and the Provost Marshal's gun registration records. Don't forget to canvass local pawn shops, discount stores, and other high-volume gun dealers. They may provide the missing link in the chain-of-transfer of a weapon in question. Although retail gun dealers are under no obligation to give a military police investigator access to his firearms records, most dealers voluntarily cooperate with all law enforcement agencies.

All weapons recovered during criminal investigations should be traced to determine the owner or possessor of the weapon. Tracing firearms may result in recovering stolen property, discovering other crimes or firearms violations, or yield new suspects for investigation.

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