

## Paranoia

"In the park, in the dark, in the Bronx, every night," Special Agent Greg Kornloff would answer when asked by fellow agents what his group was up to. The members of New York's Group #22 were a paranoid bunch in 1974 and had been ordered by their supervisor to be "closed mouth" about the Italian heroin case they were working. "Loose lips sink ships," was the often quoted advise.

When released from the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary after serving a ten year sentence for narcotics trafficking, mobster Anthony Vazzino, AKA Tony Vazz, wasted little time before going back to his old ways. And one of Tony Vazz's first customers was Jimmy Culhane, a cop shooter, drug dealer and overall bad ass. However Jimmy did have one saving grace, he was a confidential informant (CI) for DEA Group Supervisor Ron Caffrey.

Since Tony Vazzino was somewhat of a celebrity among Italian heroin dealers, he had once turned down the golden opportunity to become a "made" member of the Mafia because he was making too much money selling "babania" and did not wish to share the profits, supervisor Caffrey wanted the investigation to be kept as low key as possible. However as the case progressed, so did the paranoia. Each night Group #22 agents would gather in the parking lot of the Bronx's Van Courtland Park before setting out for the night's work and the topic of conversation usually focused on the "fact" that Tony Vazz was a master at the fine art of detecting surveillance. How he would speed along major highways and suddenly almost come to a complete stop before continuing. How he would drive slowly along city streets and instantly speed up before making a turn on almost two wheels. And how he would go through red lights and stop signs without even touching the brakes.

But New York's Group #22 was not the only group smitten by the paranoia bug. A group in DEA's Newark office, working on another Italian celebrity narcotics trafficker, Mario Perna, who "coincidentally" was a close associate of Tony Vazz, was similarly afflicted. And on a blustery winter's night their paths ironically crossed on Johnson Avenue in the Bronx.

The New York gasoline shortage was at its peak and Group #22's surveillance officers shivered in their G-Cars as Tony Vazz, Mario Perna, and Jimmy Culhane sat comfortably inside a favorite Chinese restaurant. It was a matter of priorities, either freeze or save the gas and there was no question that the latter was the more important of the two.

At about nine PM, to the total astonishment of Group Supervisor Caffrey, G-Cars with New Jersey license plates pulled up in front of the restaurant and under the unbelieving eyes of their New York counterparts, the Newark agents marched into the restaurant and arrested Mario Perna as he sipped Wanton soup with Vazzino and Culhane. However the only person not effected by the now heightened paranoia was Tony Vazz. After much reflection, he considered the arrest of Perna as just one of those unfortunate things that happen in the world of illegal narcotics and continued to conduct business as usual while driving the New York agents "bonkers" with his erratic driving.

However months later after Anthony Vazzino was arrested in possession of almost twenty pounds of heroin, the truth came out to the total mortification of his pursuers. Tony Vazz's erratic driving was due to the fact that he was "blind as a bat" even with his glasses and couldn't have detected surveillance agents even if they were "in his trunk."

6/15/2/47