

# Gambling-Trial Tapes Obscure Footnote

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## *Gambling-Trial Tapes Obscure Footnote*

By ANDREW KREIG

The taped conversations of a colorful, tough-talking gambling underworld, played for a Hartford federal jury during the last two weeks, have obscured a curious footnote in the history of law enforcement in Connecticut.

The first court-approved secret entry to install a "bugging" microphone may have been a flop.

In the trial, three men are accused of big-scale gambling and using threats to collect debts. Defense attorneys include a key figure in the biggest corporate merger in world history and a former federal prosecutor.

A major witness for the government is an admitted bookmaker now under federal protection, who appeared in court wearing dark sunglasses and who answers to the name, "The Mope."

The Mope, 29-year-old Ronald Del Mastro, described a gambling network that

moved its headquarters daily and used nicknames to confuse authorities.

Some of the 25 persons indicted in the case last year had been investigated for seven years by grand juries without being charged.

The trial jury has heard several score of wiretapped telephone conversations of men with names like "Basket," "Pear," and "The Hammer."

Occasionally a small smile will creep over the face of one of the jurors when he hears exotic criminal jargon. But most of the all-white, generally middle-aged, jury panel of 13 men and three women kept set expressions while they heard a steady stream of profane tape-recordings.

Presiding over the trial is a man known as "The Bishop" to many lawyers because of his upright, serene and almost fatherly manner — T. Emmet Clarie.

Clarie, who is the chief federal district court judge in Connecticut, approved the in-

stallation of telephone wiretaps and a microphone two years ago to monitor activities at a New Britain Avenue storefront in Hartford.

Clarie ruled that the microphone had to be installed because telephoned wiretaps alone probably would be inadequate.

Suspects in the case used special equipment that automatically switched telephone calls to prearranged numbers around Hartford, hindering law enforcers, testimony indicated.

Yet the prosecution has presented to the jury only one "bugged" conversation because of their poor audibility. Even this one had to be electronically processed at the FBI laboratory in Washington, D.C., to decipher it.

In that tape, codefendant Anthony D. Volpe of West Hartford was identified as talking with Del Mastro, who said, "What do

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# Bugging Device May Have Flopped

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you want me to take off Steve . . . C-Note?" (A C-note is \$100.)

The government claims that Volpe later said, ". . . slap him in the face," although the words are difficult to understand.

In the transcript of separate wiretapped telephone conversation, codefendant Michael T. O'Brien is quoted as threatening to split open the heads of two debtors, explaining that "our mob" runs things "a little different than the other bookmakers in town."

Defense attorneys have admitted that O'Brien and codefendant Lawrence DiBenedetto of Newington were gamblers and small-time bookmakers. But the lawyers said their clients were innocent of the federal indictments.

Volpe's attorney, F. Mac Buckley, has denied an FBI agent's claim that Volpe was a financial backer of O'Brien's gambling business.

Volpe and O'Brien are the two main codefendants, each facing maximum prison terms of 70 years or more if they are convicted on all counts. O'Brien faces six counts, Volpe five.

Buckley is a former federal prosecutor and unsuccessful Republican congressional candidate for the First District.

Atty. Joseph E. Fazzano, defending Volpe, represents more than 60 police unions in Connecticut including Hartford's. Fazzano helped negotiate International Telephone and Telegraph Co.'s \$1.5 billion acquisition of the Hartford Fire Insurance Co.

DiBenedetto, accused of gambling, extortion and conspiracy, is represented by Atty. Joseph F. Keefe, who has handled several recent murder defenses in Litchfield County.

Defense lawyers have suggested during court that many of their clients' tape-recorded comments were made in jest.

The prosecution is headed by Paul E. Coffey and Peter R. Casey, both of a special federal strike force against organized crime that has worked closely with Hartford police.

Coffey's aggressive courtroom manner contrasts with the measured, deadpanned tones of one of his leading witnesses, veteran FBI agent Dewey L. Santacroce. The agent has spent more than two years transcribing a mountain of sometimes inaudible tape-re-

cordings.

O'Brien, 35, of 180 Bond St., drove around the city before his indictment in a Lincoln Continental with a vanity license plate that read, "MOB-1." The defense has pointed out that the car was registered to his mother, Mary O'Brien, who has the same initials.

O'Brien is a rugged-looking man above medium height, with long eyelashes. He was once arrested while in his jogging outfit, which also has the embroidered letters "m, o, b.," authorities said. Authorities said about \$1,000 was tucked in the outfit's pocket.

O'Brien has said he has a real estate broker's license and was a successful beer salesman.

Volpe, 44, is revealed in the tapes to have a quieter manner than O'Brien, whom he resembles in build.

Volpe was described in court as a former employe of his brother, Americo Volpe, at the Place Cafe — which was across an alley from the wiretapped storefront.

The cafe was decorated with posterized scenes from the movie, "The Godfather."

It was destroyed last year in what Coffey, his voice tinged with sarcasm, told the judge was "an unfortunate fire."