



Joseph Dominick Pistone, SMA '59

Imagine a lone, one-man army who works undercover, infiltrates a Mafia mob family, and lives to tell about it. Joseph Dominick Pistone is such a man. Joe successfully infiltrated the New York Bonanno family and was so credible in his role that he became one of the most successful FBI mole infiltrators in the history of undercover fieldwork. Yet he almost lost everything he valued when he became too close with Lefty Ruggiero, a Mafia soldier he was to bring to justice.

Joe Pistone was born in Erie, Pennsylvania and he grew up in Paterson, New Jersey. After completing a post graduate year at Staunton Military Academy in 1959, he attended Paterson State College (now William Paterson University) earning a B.A. in elementary education social studies in 1965. Pistone then worked as a teacher for one year before taking a position at the Office of Naval Intelligence. Pistone joined the FBI in 1969, and, after serving in a variety of roles, he was transferred to New York in 1974 and assigned to the truck hijacking squad.

His ability to drive 18-wheel trucks, learned and practiced during his college days, led to his being chosen for what would become his first undercover operation, infiltrating a gang stealing heavy vehicles and equipment. His penetration of the group led to the arrest of over 30 people along the Eastern Seaboard in February 1976 — described at the time as one of the largest and most profitable theft rings ever broken in America.

Operation Sun-Apple (1976–1981)

Pistone was selected to be the undercover agent for another assignment because he was of Sicilian heritage, fluent in Italian and acquainted with the mob from growing up in New Jersey. He also said that he did not perspire under pressure and was aware of the Mafia's codes of conduct and system. The operation was given the code name "Sun-Apple" after the locations of its two simultaneous operations: Miami ("Sunny Miami") and New York ("The Big Apple"). After extensive preparation including FBI gemology classes and using his alias, Donnie Brasco, he went undercover as an expert jewel thief.

In September 1976, Pistone walked out of the FBI office and did not return for the next six years. The FBI erased Pistone's history. Officially, he never existed; and anyone who called asking for him would be told that no one by that name was employed there. His co-workers, friends, and informants had no idea what had happened to him. Pistone stated that it was not the original aim to penetrate the Mafia; rather, the focus was to be on a group of people fencing stolen property from the large number of truck hijackings taking place each day in New York (five to six a day). It was intended that the undercover operation last for around six months.

At the same time that Pistone was investigating the Bonanno crime family, Bob Delaney of the New Jersey State Police, under the ruse of "Bobby Covert" and also known as "Bobby Smash," began investigating the New Jersey organized crime scene. During the investigation, he maintained an open association with the crime families who would alleviate their business pressures from the unions for a price. The two met through Colombo crime family caporegime Nicholas Forlano, although at the time neither man knew that the other was working undercover.

Pistone became an associate in Jilly Greca's crew from the Colombo family. Greca's crew was involved mostly in truck hijacking and selling stolen merchandise. Since only a few people knew of Pistone's real identity, FBI and NYPD investigations had Pistone down as an actual Mafia associate called Don Brasco. He later moved to the Bonanno family and subsequently developed a close relationship with Anthony Mirra, Dominick "Sonny Black" Napolitano and was tutored in the ways of the wise guy by Bonanno soldier Benjamin "Lefty Guns" Ruggiero. It was by doing this that Ruggiero inadvertently provided much evidence to Pistone, as Mafia members will not normally talk to non-members about the inner workings of the Mafia. Ruggiero became very close friends with Pistone and told him that he would "die with him."

Pistone was responsible for a lucrative business venture in Holiday, Florida, when he opened and operated the *King's Court Bottle Club*. In Florida, Pistone worked with another FBI agent working undercover as Tony Rossi. Pistone stated that he would have become a made member of the Bonanno family if he had murdered capo Philip Giaccone in December 1981. The hit was called off, but Pistone was later contracted to murder Alphonse "Sonny Red" Indelicato's son, Anthony "Bruno" Indelicato, who previously evaded a meeting which left Indelicato, Giaccone and Dominick Trincherà dead.

Pistone's operation was ordered ended after six years undercover. He wanted to continue at least until he became a made man; he believed Napolitano would lie about him "making his bones," participating in a mafia-ordered hit to prove his loyalty, and felt the FBI would never again have the opportunity to humiliate the Mafia by revealing that an agent had been inducted into the ranks. However, Pistone's superiors decided that the operation was becoming too dangerous and set an end date of July 26, 1981. Only after Pistone departed did FBI agents Doug Fencl, Jim Kinne and Jerry Loar inform Napolitano and Ruggiero that their longtime associate was an FBI agent.

Aftermath

Shortly thereafter, Napolitano was murdered for having allowed an FBI agent to infiltrate the family; he was shot dead and his hands were cut off. Anthony Mirra, who initially brought Donnie Brasco to the family, was also killed. Ruggiero was to be killed as well, but was arrested by the FBI while on his way to a meeting, in order to prevent his death. Napolitano's girlfriend Judy later contacted Pistone and told him, "Donnie, I always knew that you weren't cut out for that world because you carried yourself different, you had an air of intelligence, you know? I knew that you were much more than just a thief. You were a good friend to Sonny and me. Sonny didn't have any ill feelings toward you." Even after finding out that Pistone was an undercover agent, Napolitano expressed no ill will, even saying, "I really loved that kid."

The Mafia put out a \$500,000 open contract on Pistone and kicked the Bonanno family off the Commission. FBI agents visited Mafia bosses in New York and told them not to even bother with the contract. The evidence collected by Pistone led to over 200 *indictments* and over 100 *convictions* of Mafia members. Although the infiltration of Donnie Brasco nearly destroyed the Bonanno family, it later became a blessing in disguise for the family. When the Mafia Commission Trial saw the top leadership of the Five Families sent to prison, the Bonanno family was the only major family whose leadership was not decimated because the family had been kicked off the Commission. By dodging this bullet, the family kept its leadership intact and was able to consolidate its power once again. The boss who led that resurgence, Joseph Massino, was convicted in 2004 of ordering Napolitano to be killed for allowing Pistone into the family.

Pistone still travels disguised, under assumed names and with a license to carry a firearm. He will not set foot in any location with high Mafia presence. However, in the book *Unfinished Business*, he said that he went to New York while working as a consultant on the movie *Donnie Brasco* and mentions that some people recognized him. Pistone continues to be active as an author and consultant to worldwide law

enforcement agencies, including Scotland Yard, and has been called to testify before the United States Senate as an expert on organized crime.

In September 2012, Pistone testified in Quebec's corruption commission, as an expert witness.

Media

Pistone detailed his undercover experience in his 1988 book *Donnie Brasco: My Undercover Life in the Mafia*. The book was the basis for the critically acclaimed 1997 film *Donnie Brasco*, starring Johnny Depp as Pistone and Al Pacino as "Lefty" Ruggiero, and for the short-lived 2000 TV series *Falcone*, starring Jason Gedrick as Pistone (whose mob alias was changed from "Donnie Brasco" to "Joe Falcone" for copyright reasons). Pistone was a consultant on *Donnie Brasco* and made sure that all the portrayals and settings were accurate. His life was used in an episode of *FBI: The Untold Stories*.

Pistone revisited his experiences as Donnie Brasco in his books *The Way of the Wiseguy* (2004) and *Donnie Brasco: Unfinished Business* (2007). Pistone wrote a novel titled, *The Good Guys*, with Joseph Bonanno's son, Salvatore "Bill" Bonanno. He has also written several works of fiction such as *Deep Cover*, *Mobbed Up* and *Snake Eyes*. He has served as an executive producer on movies relating to the Mafia, including the 2006 film *10th & Wolf*. In 2008, Italian artist Rossella Biscotti interviewed Pistone in her video *The Undercover Man*. A play based on Donnie Brasco opened at the Pennsylvania Playhouse.

Pistone is featured in the eighth episode of UK history TV channel Yesterday's documentary series *Mafia's Greatest Hits*. A *Secrets of the Dead* episode, "Gangland Graveyard," features Pistone and his infiltration of the Mafia as part of the long-running investigation into the murder of three Mafia captains by Massino.

For the six years during which he was undercover, Joe and his wife and three daughters all had to live through his absences of five to six months at a time with only a day or two together, and still remained a family. He stated later in an interview that "My status as the head of the family diminished after being away for months. They were handling everything without me. Even though I came home and thought I'm still the head of the family, I wasn't. I had to accept it because I had no control over it. I was leaving the next day (but) I was convinced to do something for a better society, for a better country, so I knew that my kids would eventually benefit by what I was doing. It was the only way to look at it. If you do it because you want to be a big star, then everything's going to fall apart." To protect them since the trials, Joe and his family have moved several times, and changed their names. Joe continues to keep them out of any public appearances.

From Peter Hossli, Wikipedia, and Jayne Margetts of Imazine.
Edits by Kelly McGavock, SMA '59