

Top-notch work by federal agents keeps three people alive

Luck is a religion in Las Vegas. The roll of the dice or flop of the cards turns some gamblers into heretics and others into true-believers.

After years of observation, I think I have found the most fortunate men in Las Vegas. They are not gamblers in the traditional sense, but they are immensely lucky all the same.

Lucky to be alive, that is.

The men are local outcall escort service operators Frank Bartello, Richard Soranno and Harry Jacobs. Thanks to the swift movement of a handful of FBI agents on Friday, the outcall service operators are still breathing.

A number of others — potentially including a local cop and a member of the district attorney's office — could be faced with a different fortune entirely. But I'll get to that.

According to a criminal complaint released Tuesday in U.S. District Court, life was about to get ugly for the three escort operators. Six men with ties to New York's Gambino crime family and John Gotti Jr. wanted to eliminate Bartello, Soranno and Jacobs in order to take over the outcall escort service racket.

Those indicted on charges ranging from extortion to interstate travel in aid of racketeering, include Chris DeCarlo, Mario Pugliese, Vincent Congiusti, Anton Nelson, Kenneth Byrnes and Josh Snellings. DeCarlo, owner of



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the DeCarlo Group outcall escort and casino junket business, is accused of using mafia contacts in a plot to eliminate the competition.

Of particular note in the government's complaint is the presence of suspected Tampa, Fla., hitmen "Vinnie Aspirins" Congiusti and former military mercenary Nelson. Congiusti is, according to the government's complaint, known to torture his victims by boring holes in their heads with a cordless power drill. When Vinnie Aspirins pays you a visit, it is said, your headaches disappear permanently.

A search warrant recovered not only the drill, but homemade silencers, weapons, ammunition and explosive materials.

Told you Bartello, Soranno and Jacobs were lucky.

Of course, it's always possible Congiusti was merely in town to perform a

little free-lance brain surgery.

The current case is indirectly related to a long-term FBI investigation of local mob activity in Las Vegas. The bureau's organized crime squad, which gathered evidence that led to the indictment of key members of mob families in Los Angeles and Buffalo, N.Y., opened a whole new chapter with the DeCarlo Group investigation.

With suspected assassins arriving in Las Vegas last week from Florida and California, the FBI agents scrambled to handle the surveillance and rushed to have emergency wiretaps approved by the court. Thanks to their efforts, Special Agent in Charge Bobby Siller says, three men are still breathing.

"After we got into it, we learned there was going to be a violent attempt on their part to take over the business," Siller says. "Last Friday was just a hectic day ... I do believe we were responsible for saving the lives of people here who were potential targets. If we had not had a proactive approach, I believe we would have had a loss of lives."

The latest chapter in the FBI's push to stem the mob's presence in Las Vegas appears to include evidence of corruption within the police department and district attorney's office. Outside U.S. District Court Tuesday afternoon, the FBI's Assistant Special Agent in Charge Walt Stowe had little to say

about what has been uncovered.

A court document unsealed in the current case alleges a confidential government witness, posing as a connected guy with ties to the local sex industry, was kicked several times by police and was warned that he "needed to learn how we do business in Las Vegas." The confidential witness was later approached by DeCarlo, who claimed to be connected to reputed local mafia soldiers Vincent Faraci and John Conti.

The confidential witness later allowed FBI undercover agents access to his outcall business, and they were quickly approached by DeCarlo and were told by him that he was capable of "fixing" a case inside the district attorney's office.

The FBI's Siller explains that Sheriff Jerry Keller and District Attorney Stewart Bell are cooperating fully with the bureau inquiry.

Meanwhile, Bartello, Soranno and Jacobs are probably out playing Megabucks and buying fistfuls of lottery tickets.

The way their luck is running, how can they lose?

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