

CASE REPORT

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The Meaning of an Accessory Projectile

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ABSTRACT: A previously expended pistol casing was removed from a gunshot wound after an apparent accidental shooting. Examination of this foreign body indicated it had ridden the bore ahead of the bullet. Further investigation disclosed this as a deliberate but ignorant means to load an already loaded weapon. The assailants then fired at a passerby and killed him. Disclosure of the foreign body by X-ray, recovery and examination at autopsy were used to corroborate the circumstances and allowed charges of criminally negligent homicide to be placed.

KEYWORDS: jurisprudence, firearms, ballistics

Foreign bodies associated with gunshot wounds are common curiosities, often of evidentiary value. These may represent an intermediate target set in motion after having been struck by the bullet in free flight or something expelled from the bore as a projectile in its own right. This case involved a foreign body, which could not only be linked back to the weapon, but reflected the criminal intent behind its presence.

Case Report

A 14-year-old boy, feeling threatened because of an argument, was given a sawed-off .44 magnum rifle for protection by a 13-year-old boy. The elder juvenile was deliberately aiming and pointing the weapon at a 12-year-old passerby when it discharged. The victim was struck in the face, producing a large wound of entrance from glabella to nares. He was pronounced dead at the scene and the body was remanded for autopsy.

The entrance wound as depicted in Fig. 1 was sutured for clarification, revealing two areas of abrasion separated by a ragged laceration with deep tissue bridging. Although the history related only one discharge, the wound indicated two projectiles. AP and lateral skull films showed two foreign bodies, one a large mutilated bullet lodging within the posterior fossa, the other a deformed rimless cartridge case in the right maxillary sinus (Fig. 2). Dissection of the wound track indicated entry of the bullet at the glabella,

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FIG. 1—Photograph of the entry wounds to the face. The bullet entered at the glabella and proceeded through the brain, the cartridge case entered at the inferior margin of the wound and was recovered in the right maxillary sinus. The wound has been sutured for clarity, but retains the atypical appearance of two entries marked by abrasions, connected through a large bridging laceration.

lacerating the frontal lobes, ricocheting off of the petrous bone and into the right parietal lobe. The cartridge case was recovered free in the sinus. Both projectiles are shown in Fig. 3.

The cartridge case is a previously expended .380 automatic (9 mm kurz) with a pin-indented primer. Both primer and cartridge base are coated with a thick deposit of lead consistent with the type of bullet recovered from the boy's head (Fig. 4). The obvious conclusion is that the empty casing had been base down in the bore ahead of the bullet when the weapon was fired.

The autopsy findings corroborated with further questioning of the two juveniles. Intent on having a functional firearm, but ignorant of the rifle's mechanism and the fact it was

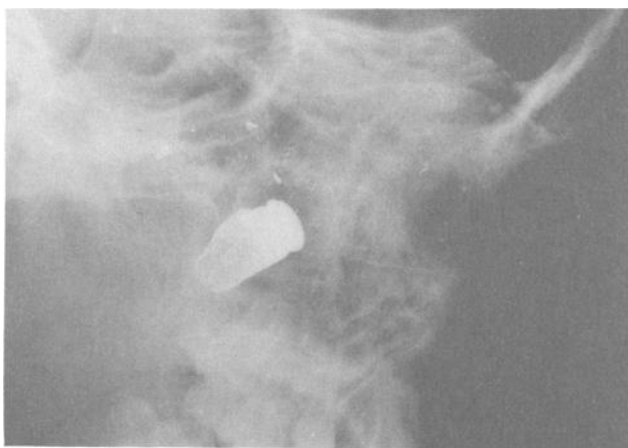


FIG. 2—Radiograph of the previously expended cartridge case lodged in the sinus. The path of the bullet is marked by minute lead fragments along its track.

loaded, they found the expended cartridge case and put it down the bore. Having no understanding of ammunition they now believed this action made the weapon functional. The deliberateness of the action and the desire to possess a loaded weapon allowed both youths to be charged with criminally negligent homicide.

Discussion

Many unusual items have come out of the bores of firearms, ranging from rust and metal fouling [1], to previously lodged bullets [2], and curiosities like inappropriate cartridges in the bore being fired and ejected by the bullet behind [3]. With any unexpected foreign body, the question arises whether the object was an intermediate target [4], or inside the weapon when set in motion [5].

The uniform deposition of lead over a minimally distorted base indicates an impact before the bullet has accelerated to high velocity [5]. The sawed-off rifle was discarded by the youths and never recovered, but even if available, duplicating the process of



FIG. 3—Photograph of both projectiles showing the .44 caliber bullet that accelerated the cartridge case down the bore, coating its base with lead.



FIG. 4—Photograph of the base of the cartridge as an accessory projectile. The primer contains a firing pin impression, indicating its previous expenditure, while the base is partially obscured by the heavy deposits of lead from the bullet, indicating it was pushed down the bore. It does not show the marked deformation a bullet would make had the casing been an intermediate target.

accelerating an empty case down a bore by firing a bullet was judged too dangerous to attempt [6]. As a test, empty cases shot in the base at the range of several feet all showed severe distortion, unlike the foreign body removed from the victim. Additionally, the scene investigation indicated no opportunity for the casing to have been an intermediate target, as the shooting occurred in the open. This case is unique in helping establish the intent of the persons handling the rifle to have a loaded firearm capable of causing bodily injury and to go about armed.

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