

SOCIAL ISSUES: Police can't tell the difference between replica and authentic guns.

Fake weapons, real dilemma

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
STAFF REPORTER

Retailers selling replica weapons say they are responsible, don't sell to anyone under 18, and remind buyers of the dangers whenever they make a sale.

But they admit what happens once the gun leaves their shop is out of their control.

"We sell soft-air guns for fun, for sport and for collecting," said one retailer who didn't want to be identified. "We ask for ID, we keep records of everyone we sell to. Look—the rules are posted right on the counter."

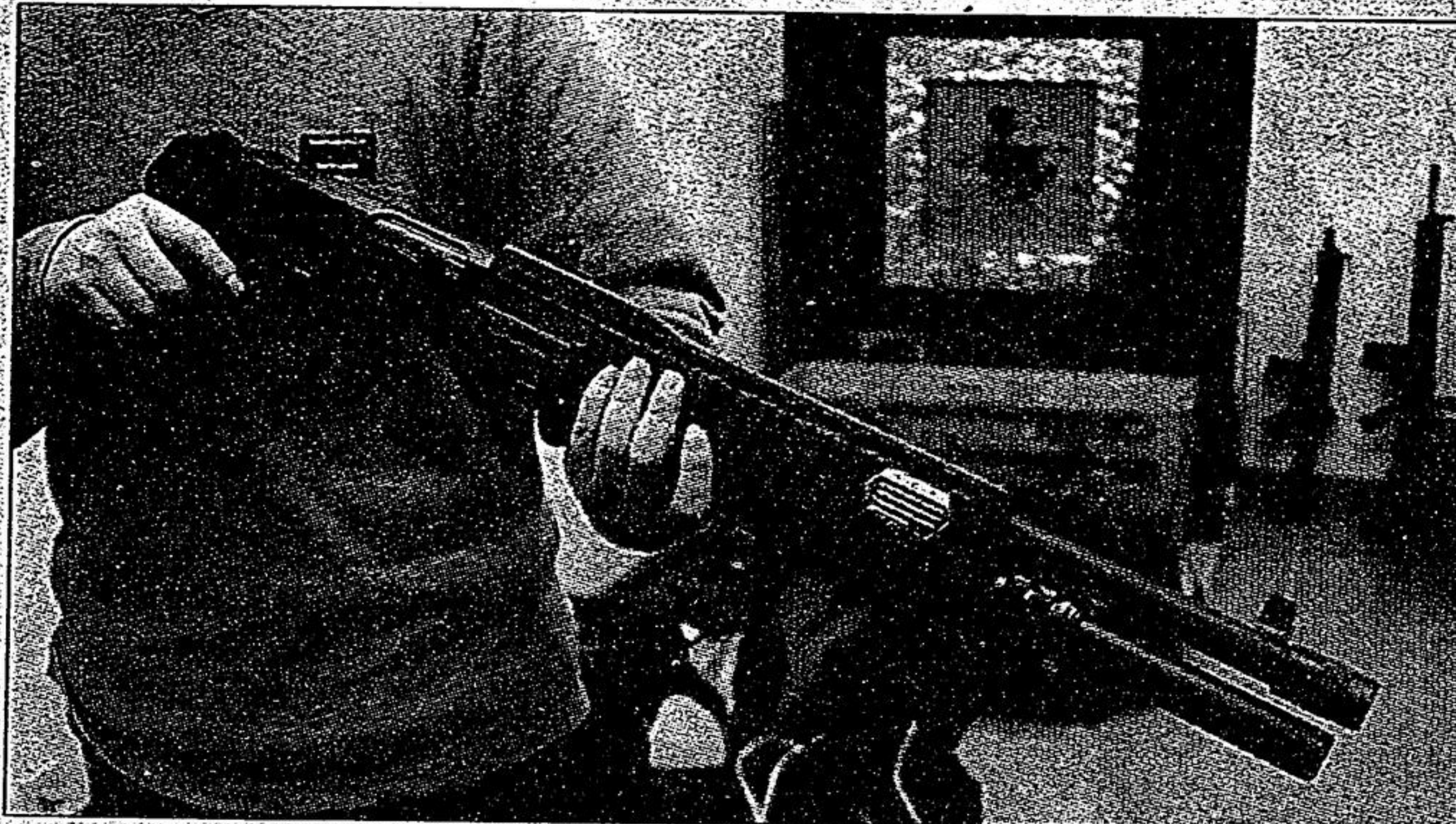
And so they are. Copies of the federal regulations surrounding the sale and use of replica weapons are taped to the front counter.

But the employee said if a parent buys for a teenager, for example, and that teenager takes the gun out in public, there's not much he can do to stop that.

Vincent Wong, of the Hot Shot store on Ferrier Street, said while he asks all his customers for identification, he doesn't keep permanent records, and admits: "If people use the guns to do bad things, that we can't avoid. But they should remember the most danger is to the person carrying it."

That's because today's replicas look so real, it's difficult for even police officers to distinguish them from the real thing. And they can't help but worry that, eventually, something terrible will happen.

"If we can't tell if a weapon is real and someone points it at us, or we respond to a gun call and find someone armed, what are we going to do? Hope it's fake and hope for the best? Or shoot and maybe cause a real tragedy?" York Regional Police Const. Keith Freemantle asked.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

A shopkeeper poses with a single shot pump action rifle available for sale in his store. This replica weapon sells for about \$400.

Most retailers say they understand police concerns.

One store owner said he would even consider talking to his Japanese manufacturer about putting some kind of identifying mark of the replicas, like a coloured stripe or large lettering on the muzzle, a regulation enforced in many states south of the border, according to Scarborough West MPP Jim Brown.

Brown is one of Ontario's Crime Control commissioners and his proposed bill to regulate the sale and purchase of replicas is currently being reviewed by provincial staff.

Brown's bill may well be obsolete by the

time it comes to first reading—federal legislation expected next month would prohibit replicas outright.

But until then, as long as you have a few hundred bucks, you can buy a replica shotgun, handgun, AK-47, or M-16 in one of Markham's four retailers that regularly sell the weapons.

"We sell about six a week, ranging from \$250 for a pistol to \$2,000 for a big rifle," Wong said. "People collect the replicas because they can't get real AK-47s or M-16s. If they want those types of weapons, they can only get replicas."

Hot Shot sells dozens of plastic guns

bearing intriguing titles like Special Purpose Automatic Shotgun, The Electric Sniper Rifle and The Automatic Airgun. The store also features a test-fire target, used by prospective customers to sample the wares.

Customers are taught how to load and fire the guns, which can shoot plastic pellets up to 460 feet per second (FPS). That's very close to a real firearm, which shoots a minimum 500 FPS, Freemantle said.

Wong added people rarely buy the guns for their own protection.

"You can get a real gun for cheap, about \$100. The fake ones are more, starting at about \$200, so why not get a real one if you want to protect yourself?"

A check with two local high schools, Markham District High and Milliken Mills, shows that while staff are aware of the situation, replica weapons are not an issue being dealt with on a day-to-day basis.

The board's Safe Schools Policy prohibits all replica weapons, and Milliken principal Ken McAlpine said students know enough not to bring them to school.

McAlpine said he has run into a few incidents in other York Region schools, including one where a student brought in a replica gun and threatened someone in what had become an on-going dispute. That student, under the Safe Schools Policy, was expelled.

"It's a very serious issue," he said. "If a student is in possession of something that appears real, you have to treat it as real. And the pellet guns, depending on the velocity, could take out an eye or certainly puncture skin."

"We haven't seen anything like that here," MDHS principal David Freeman said. "Markham is a terrific school. We haven't had a problem at all, for which I'm thankful."

New airport redundant if Buttonville remains

Replacing Buttonville Airport could cost \$58 million: report

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

Buttonville has Ontario's third-busiest airport and it handles more private traffic than Pearson International, a report released this week states.

Buttonville's operators, Toronto Airways Ltd., paid for the study to show the airport's importance to both aviation and the area's economy.

Its lease, which includes a yearly \$1.5 million subsidy from the province, will expire at year's end. The report argues the lease should be extended, because "there simply are no practical alternatives to Buttonville."

It could cost \$58 million to replace the airport, which is getting crowded by urban development. But, the report argues, if

Buttonville Airport stays open, no one needs to start a new airport at Pickering.

"We said we can fill the void until Pickering comes onside, which means we can postpone a huge capital expenditure at Pickering," Derek Sifton, vice-president of Toronto Airways, said this week.

If Buttonville closed, the study by Malone Given Parsons of Markham concluded, much of its private traffic "could not be accommodated" at Pearson, which Sifton said already turns some general aviation flights away and schedules others into "slot times."

York Region and the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, operators of Pearson, are set to sign an accord next week which recognizes Buttonville as "an important component of the GTA airports system."

COMMUNITY: As the art gallery sets up at the Clock Tower Theatre, a satellite facility will be located in Vandorf

Latcham Gallery on the double

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
STAFF WRITER

Whitchurch-Stouffville is about to become a two-gallery town.

Officials of The Latcham Gallery Association are eyeing both the soon-to-open Clock Tower Theatre just off Main Street and a building near the museum in Vandorf to be used as an art gallery.

The 19-year-old Latcham Gallery used space in the Whitchurch-Stouffville Public Library, but the library board put an end to this agreement about a year ago.

The move caused an outcry in the community. Gallery membership snowballed. Today, the gallery boasts more than 500 members and 100 working volunteers.

Gallery association president John Wilson told Whitchurch-Stouffville council Tuesday that having the gallery in two spots will better serve both the east and the west sides of town. "We can reach across all of

Whitchurch-Stouffville," he said.

The main gallery, measuring 2,000 square feet, would be in the Clock Tower Theatre, while a satellite gallery would operate in Vandorf.

The move to bring art to Vandorf has thrilled residents of Vandorf and Preston Lake. The Vandorf Residential Association and Pride of Preston Lake have given the plan their official backing.

"We are willing to support the gallery by way of recruitment of new members, volunteerism and fund raising," Vandorf association spokesperson Carolyn Teare-Richardson said. Meanwhile, Chuck Candor of the Preston Lake group has offered to help Latcham Gallery in any way possible.

Moving to the Clock Tower Theatre became a viable idea after gallery officials learned that the Clock Tower group plans to renovate the former municipal building into a 400-seat multi-purpose facility.

Craig Riley's MARKVILLE LINCOLN MERCURY

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