

'Buy a choker from the Strangler'

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) October 8, 2020



Albert DeSalvo worked in the prison shop making jewelry.

The wave of terror swirled like a hurricane through Boston. Thirteen women brutally sexually assaulted and murdered from June 1962 to January 1964. Hundreds of sexual perverts were rounded up and questioned. Any one of them was possibly the person dubbed "the Boston Strangler."

And then, as quickly as the murders started, they stopped. And a man on no one's suspect list, Albert DeSalvo, a psychopath with a warm smile and a gift of gab, confessed to the crimes.

Sitting in the mental health facility in Bridgewater on charges of breaking and entering, robbery and sexually assaulting, but not killing, four women in 1964, DeSalvo, at the behest of his attorney, F. Lee Bailey, freely admitted his role in the slayings. In exchange for his cooperation, his confessions could not be used against him. As no physical or eyewitness evidence existed, the police were left with corroborating the admissions.

With a memory many thought photographic, DeSalvo told of many minor details only the murderer would know: the color of the paint in one apartment; a painting of a deer above a sofa in another; a door, against code, opening outward, not inward; squeaky steps in an apartment building.

DeSalvo stood trial for the crimes against the four women, his defense being insanity and marshalling his role as the Strangler in support thereof. The jury didn't buy it and DeSalvo was handed a hefty sentence: life.

The state prison in Walpole at that time found itself in violent turmoil, with easy access to drugs, liquor and even sex for the prisoners as they clashed with their jailers. With the upheaval worsening, the governor called for investigations and volunteers to man and monitor the institution.

One young volunteer, soon-to-be attorney Peter G. DeGelleke, witnessed numerous things that should not go on in a prison. He also established a relationship with a few of the inmates, including DeSalvo and George Nassar, who was serving a life sentence for the brutal murder of a gas station attendant.

DeSalvo worked in the prison shop making jewelry and handcrafted wooden items and often gave them out to those he liked. In speaking with DeGelleke, DeSalvo suggested a business partnership in which DeGelleke would sell, on the outside, items DeSalvo made.

DeSalvo even recommended a slogan: "Buy a choker from the Strangler." DeGelleke politely declined.

Despite the confessions and verifications, some came to strongly believe that DeSalvo, a self-ingratiating braggart who sought fame, was not the Strangler. They pointed, in part, to the gross disparity of the victims. Serial killers typically prey on a select group, whether it be Ted Bundy's young and attractive females; John Wayne Gacy's young gay men and boys; Wayne Williams' young black men; or far too many murderers to mention who target and mutilate prostitutes.



The Strangler's 13 victims

The ages of the Strangler's victims were, in order, 55, 85, 68, 65, 75, 67, 20, 23, 69, 26, 58, 23 and 19. They were Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, white and black. In many cases, the victims were choreographed in revolting and shocking positions. In contrast, another, Patricia Bissette, was gently laid to rest in bed, seemingly asleep. And DeSalvo's confessions weren't always on point. In one, he told of the murder of Beverly Samans, a woman in her early 20s living in Cambridge. He admitted stabbing her with a switchblade he had stolen from a home in Belmont, and later tossing the weapon into a swamp in Malden. It appears, however, that the killer, after stabbing Samans with one of her own kitchen knives, unsuccessfully tried to clean it and placed it by the sink.



Patricia Bissette

Perhaps DeSalvo's recollection was simply off, despite his reputation for a strong memory. After all, he was known to have raped and sexually assaulted hundreds of women.

Many people who murder do it for a particular reason: a businessman killing a colleague/rival to gain a financial windfall, a spousal killing to be with a lover or to avoid a messy divorce, or killing to keep a sensitive secret hidden. Killing during the Strangler frenzy provided cover. Strangle a lover and have the police attribute it to the Strangler. Twenty-three-year-old Bissette, for instance, the eighth Strangler victim, had been having an affair with her 53-year-old boss, who was married with two grown sons. Pregnant, she knew of certain business machinations that might prove embarrassing as well as legally damaging to him. Her boss

gave conflicting stories of his encounters with the victim. His lie detector test results were troublesome, not clearing him.



Peter G. DeGelleke (left), now a Bedford lawyer, with Albert DeSalvo

And then there was the aforementioned George Nassar, who had been locked up with DeSalvo in Bridgewater. He was described by a prison psychologist as a misogynistic, psychopathic, and highly intelligent and manipulative killer. Some opine that he was the true Strangler, feeding intimate and unique details of the murders to DeSalvo, who in the words of the same psychologist "so badly wanted to be the Strangler." DeSalvo then confessed, with the plan being that Nassar would receive the hefty reward money that would be split between the two.

And then there were the sexual crimes for which DeSalvo was convicted, coming after the last Strangler murder, that of 19-year-old Mary Sullivan on Jan. 4, 1964. Did the Strangler decide to keep sexually abusing, but stop strangling, when he victimized those four women in May, June, September and October 1964?

Epilogue

Neither DeSalvo nor anyone else was ever indicted for any of the 13 slayings. Shortly after his convictions in 1967, DeSalvo, along with two others, escaped from Bridgewater where he was being held prior to his transfer to Walpole. With Boston again thrown into a tizzy, he was quickly caught.

Back in prison, he reveled in his status as the Strangler, boasted of his worldwide fame, and decorated his cell with what he claimed was the 'special knot' used to bind his victims.

He also served home brew, an alcoholic beverage derived from fermented fruit juice mixed with bread or rice. And he dabbled in drugs.

DeSalvo was murdered inside Walpole on Nov. 25, 1973. No one was ever convicted of his killing.

In 2013, DNA tests were conducted on Mary Sullivan. They were a match for DeSalvo.

As for the other killings, some continue to believe that while the Boston Strangler committed some or even many of the murders, he did not commit them all.

Perhaps DeSalvo summed it up best in a poem he wrote and autographed for DeGelleke and others:

"The Boston Strangler"

Here is the story of the Strangler, yet untold.
The man who claims he strangled thirteen women
young and old.
The elusive Strangler there he goes.
Where his wander-lust sends him, no one knows.
He struck within the light of day
Leaving not one clue astray.
Young and old, their lips were sealed,
Their secret of death, yet not revealed.
Even though he is sick in mind.
He is much too clever for the police to find.
To reveal his secret, would bring him fame.
But burden his family with unwanted shame.
He hopes to become an object of study, to help psychiatry.
To better society.
Today he sits in a prison cell,
Inside only a secret he can tell.
People everywhere, are still in doubt.
The Strangler, in prison, or roaming about?

The above column is based on "The Boston Stranglers" by Susan Kelly, "The Family Business" by John DiNatale, "The Boston Strangler" by Gerold Frank, various

internet sources, and an interview with Peter G. DeGelleke. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a retired Appeals Court judge, can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.