

Louis Eppolito, Police Officer Turned Mob Hit Man, Dies at 71

Mr. Eppolito and his partner, Stephen Caracappa, were convicted of taking part in eight gangland murders in New York's "Mafia Cop" scandal.

By Ed Shanahan

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Louis Eppolito was practically born into the Mafia.

His father was a Gambino family soldier known as Fat the Gangster. An uncle known as Jimmy the Clam, a grandfather and a cousin were made men, too. By age 10, Louis was joining his father on his bookmaking rounds.

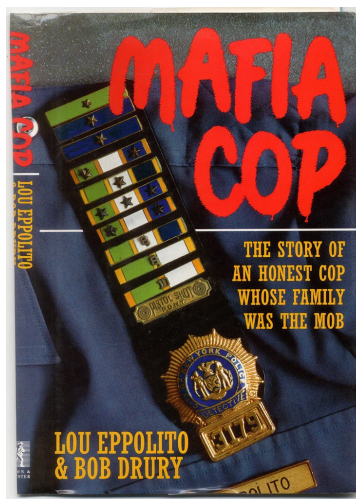
A life in organized crime seemed preordained, but Louis's interest faded after several relatives were killed by rival gangsters. So after graduating from high school, Louis went in a different direction: he joined the New York Police Department.

It was an unlikely career that earned him many medals and headlines. But Mr. Eppolito would end up at the center of one of the biggest scandals in department history.

He and a fellow detective, Stephen Caracappa, were convicted in 2006 of moonlighting as mob assassins, involved in eight gangland slayings while on the payroll of Anthony Casso, a Luchese crime family underboss known as Gaspire.

Mr. Eppolito, 71, died on Nov. 3 at a hospital in Tucson, Ariz., his wife, Frances Ann Eppolito, confirmed this week, without providing a cause. He had been serving a life sentence at the high-security United States penitentiary nearby.

After their arrest, Mr. Eppolito and Mr. Caracappa, who died at a medical detention facility in 2017 at 75, became widely known as the "Mafia Cops." The nickname came easily: Mr. Eppolito had already written a memoir, "Mafia Cop: The Story of an Honest Cop Whose Family Was the Mob" (1992), in which he recounted his mob pedigree.



Louis John Eppolito was born on July 22, 1948, in Brooklyn and grew up in East Flatbush, according to the memoir. His father, Ralph, was a professional criminal. His mother, Theresa, was a registered nurse.

Mr. Eppolito knew by the time he was 12 that his father killed people for pay, he acknowledged on Sally Jessy Raphael's talk show in 1992 while promoting his book. But he did not know details. The following exchange, he said, was typical.

"If I said to him, 'What happened to this guy?' He'd say 'He had to go.'"

“Go where, Dad? Where did he go? To St. Louis?”

“No. He’s gone.”

According to “Mafia Cop,” Ralph Eppolito beat his son often, but also instilled in him a lifelong respect for “honor and loyalty.”

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Louis Eppolito attended Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn, where he played several sports and graduated in 1966. He got into bodybuilding, and was crowned Mr. New York City in 1967.

Mr. Eppolito’s father died before his son entered the Police Academy. It was good timing.

“He hated cops with a passion,” Mr. Eppolito told Ms. Raphael.

But Louis Eppolito saw similarities between police officers and gangsters: Both lived by a strict code. And both, he believed, could deliver justice as they saw fit.

Mr. Eppolito joined the police force in 1969, the same year as Mr. Caracappa. They rose through the ranks and first worked together a decade later.

Mr. Eppolito came under suspicion in April 1984 when the authorities raided the New Jersey home of Rosario Gambino, a mobster and heroin trafficker.

There, investigators found copies of dozens of confidential intelligence reports on organized crime figures, according to court records. The copies had been made at the precinct where Mr. Eppolito was assigned at the time, and his fingerprints were on them, court filings showed.

Mr. Eppolito was suspended and hit with internal charges, but he was cleared after a departmental trial. He claimed in his book that he had been totally vindicated, saying the case was an effort by his enemies to set him up.

A federal judge later took the opposite view, criticizing police officials in a harsh ruling for what he called their “inexplicable failure to discipline” Mr. Eppolito in 1985 “after he was caught red-handed passing confidential police documents” to Mr. Gambino.

Mr. Eppolito stayed on the job for nearly five more years, receiving a promotion and, as a jury would find, cementing his ties to organized crime.

Nineteen eighty-five was also the year Mr. Eppolito and Mr. Caracappa began their relationship with Mr. Casso’s circle. A career criminal with ties to Mr. Casso hired them that year to kill a Long Island jeweler to keep him from testifying in an F.B.I. inquiry.

The detectives used a confidential police database to find the jeweler’s home address, the type of car he drove and his license plate number. They pulled him over and asked him to come to the precinct station house.

Instead, they took him to a building in Brooklyn, where Mr. Caracappa and another man killed him. Mr. Eppolito acted as a lookout.

It was the first of the eight killings they would participate in over the next several years on Mr. Casso’s orders. They received \$4,000 a month and up to \$65,000 for individual murders, prosecutors said.

The other victims included a Brooklyn man gunned down mistakenly because he had the same name as a rival of Mr. Casso’s; a Luchese gangster; two Gambino soldiers; and two F.B.I. informers.

The City of New York ultimately paid \$18.4 million to settle wrongful death lawsuits filed by the relatives of seven of the eight men killed by Mr. Eppolito and Mr. Caracappa.

Another \$9.9 million — a record payout at the time for the city — went to a man who spent 19 years of a 20-year sentence in prison before his murder conviction was overturned, after evidence emerged that Mr. Eppolito had framed him.

Along with his wife, Mr. Eppolito's survivors include three children, Andrea, Deanna and Anthony; four grandchildren; and a sister. A son from his first marriage, Louis Jr., had long been estranged from his father but was a regular presence at his trial.

Mr. Eppolito and Mr. Caracappa also fed Mr. Casso the names of people who were cooperating with the government, as well as information about active investigations and pending indictments.

Mr. Casso, hoping to enter the witness protection program, first identified Mr. Eppolito and Mr. Caracappa as working for him after he was arrested in 1993. But he was deemed an unreliable witness, and no charges were filed against the detectives.

By then, though, there was a cloud over them. Mr. Eppolito retired to a gated community in Las Vegas on a police pension, published his book and started a movie career that included bit parts in "Goodfellas," "Predator 2" and "Lost Highway."

It all came to a halt when he and Mr. Caracappa, who had moved in across the street from Mr. Eppolito, were arrested in Las Vegas in 2005.

The two men maintained their innocence until their deaths. Ms. Eppolito did the same on her husband's behalf on Wednesday, although she acknowledged, "There is nothing I'm going to say that is going to change public opinion."