

**SPORTCO****SPORTCO-MARTINI .22 RF SINGLE SHOT RIFLE****a history of
Sportco
Part I****by Gary Fleetwood**

Born in the western suburbs of Adelaide in 1923, Jack Warne decided at the age of 14 to manage his own business. What type of business Jack had not decided but there was little doubt

by those who knew this energetic and ambitious young man that something special was going to happen.

Jack and Marjorie

Warne now live in Portland, Oregon, and recently gave the SSAA an opportunity to share the history of Australia's greatest sporting firearm manufacturer, Sporting Arms Company.

Jack Warne's father took his young family to the small rural town of Kimba on South Australia's vast Eyre Peninsula and established his barber shop. Young Jack spent many days hunting kangaroos with his father's French single-shot .22 rifle and although an understanding of firearms was entrenched at an early age, Jack had no idea that his life would eventually see him design and manufacture firearms on a scale hitherto not seen in the Australian sporting market.

Spending time as a builder's assistant, then, at the age of 17, driving trucks between Adelaide, Kimba and the rural properties in the state's far north, Jack eventually took a job with British Tube Mills (BTM) in Adelaide. He was placed in the metallurgy laboratories as an assistant and soon developed an excellent knowledge of the processes involved with tube steel manufacture and the characteristics of metals involved in industry. His time at BTM reinforced Jack's desire to set up his own manufacturing plant and encouraged him to complete his high school studies at the School of Mines in Adelaide.

Jack Warne with his beloved 'Huntsman' single-shot .22LR rifle.

Early in the war, Jack left BTM and started work in Adelaide at the Pirie Street premises of Arrow Motor Company. He used his welding skills to fit charcoal gas converters on vehicles. Being in a protected industry, Jack was not eligible for the draft and it was during this time that he met fellow Arrow Motors employee Kevin Koch, a very capable mechanic and welder. Both young men decided to leave Arrow Motors and they established Koch and Warne (KW), manufacturing tricycles and other tube products in the old Angas Street premises of Simpson and Co.

KW made the bicycle seats, springs and frames for their tricycles and soon progressed to manufacture their own wheels for this very popular item on a self-manufactured rim-rolling machine. Tens of thousands of KW tricycles were sold Australia-wide to a market that was void of consumable items at the end of World War II. KW soon also manufactured an air rifle, copied from an original Daisy they had acquired. It became obvious that sales of these cheap rifles were limited by the availability of pellets, so the company began to manufacture their own from reclaimed lead sourced from a secondhand dealer on Port Road at Alberton.

Jack designed a rolling mill to flatten out sheets of lead to the correct thickness and the pellets were stamped out in their millions. This capacity to overcome the logistical shortcomings of the postwar years developed the company into quite a successful enterprise. This Angas Street property is also the location where Sporting Arms Com-



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A HISTORY OF SPORTCO

ppany was also eventually established before KW purchased their Pirie Street property from Freeman Motors for the princely sum of £30,000. This Pirie Street building has since been demolished and is the location of the Australian Red Cross Blood Centre today.

The manufacture of the tricycles required the procurement of a rubber product manufactured by South Australian Rubber Mills (SARM) called 'pram cord', which was used on the steel rims of the wheels. It was through this liaison with SARM that Jack Warne met an extroverted Irish man named Jack O'Flaherty, SARM's sales manager, and an avid hunter, firearm collector and competitive shooter. Jack Warne's earlier experiences with hunting were rekindled by this association and he, O'Flaherty, and Koch spent time on hunting expeditions together.

O'Flaherty was one of the many sporting shooters who converted .303 SMLE rifles to .303/22 calibre in the postwar era for use in the field on soft-skinned game. At this time, South Australian Ray Cully was reloading cases for the new .303/22 calibre, which he sold under the name of 'Sprinter', and the market for this calibre and the conversion grew enormously. Sid Churches, one of Australia's earliest manufacturers of modern ammunition projectiles, was developing, also at this time, his Cudmore Park company under the name of Taipan Pro-



Left to right: Sportco chief designer, Fred Gray, sales representative Don Stuart, Jack Warne and Don Fleetwood share a beer at a Christmas function at Sporting Arms.

jectiles and was a key player in the development and supply of quality projectiles for this and other new cartridges. It did not take KW long to identify that the only missing commodity in the postwar resurgence of use of sporting firearms was quality barrels suitable for the high-velocity cartridges used in SMLE conversions.

Jack was aware that the Small Arms Factory (SAF) at Lithgow was still manufacturing quality barrels and they were perhaps an excellent source of information he required for the techniques of barrel production. The problem was how to get that information. Fortune smiled upon KW when contacts within Sydney-based Steel Improvement Company, which supplied

bluing salts for the KW air rifles, advised that they also supplied SAF Lithgow. A hurried trip to Sydney resulted in being driven in a 'fancy' Buick through the Blue Mountains to SAF Lithgow where the 25-year-old entrepreneurs were introduced to the barrel shop manager. They arrived back in Adelaide with the information required to commence the manufacture of quality barrels for the Australian sporting market.

KW purchased machinery at a postwar surplus sale from the Hendon ammunition plant and, using their engineering and welding skills, the men adapted bargain-priced machinery to produce barrels. Skilled tradesmen were employed to operate the tool-making equipment used to manufacture and maintain the drills, reamers and cutters. The first few months began the learning curve of experience, which involved among other problems, overcoming the fact that the drill sometimes came out of the side of the barrel blank. Several more trips to friends in SAF Lithgow saw these teething problems fixed and a smooth production facility established, with four barrels an hour being produced.

Not long after the barrel-making facility was established, KW was approached by clothes-line manufacturer Hills Hoist that wished to purchase tubing products at a cheaper price than from BTM. Unable to supply the quantity >

A HISTORY OF SPORTCO



that Hills Hoist required, both partners gave consideration to selling their tube mill facility to Hills Hoist. It was this business decision that saw the partnership of Kevin Koch and Jack Warne come to an amicable end, with Kevin continuing on in the tube manufacture business in his own Adelaide workshop, and Jack moving towards establishing the Sporting Arms Company.

Jack was soon involved in a business opportunity that saw Sportco well on its way in the firearms manufacturing industry in Australia. The Australian Government put up for tender some 40,000 BSA and Wesley Richards .310 Martini Cadet rifles, and Jack was aware of



The Sporting Arms Company factory had its share of visiting dignitaries - this visit in 1968 by the then Governor of South Australia, Lieutenant General Sir Edric Bastyan. From left to right: Sportco finance director Bill Langman, Lady Bastyan, Jack Warne, Sir Edric Bastyan, and barrel-maker Gordon Myles.



their potential for sale to Australian shooters converted to the popular .22 Hornet and .22LR calibres. Approaching 'old money' friends within Adelaide for financial assistance, Jack won the tender and soon had truck loads of crated .310 rifles being driven from the Sydney defence warehouse to Adelaide. This opportunity was compounded by an approach from failed bidder Golden State Arms in Los Angeles, which offered Jack a considerable amount for half of the rifles. These were shipped still in their Australian Government crates direct to the US after the agreed amount 'was wired through to the bank in Adelaide'.

It was at this time that Sporting Arms also

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A HISTORY OF SPORTCO



The original staff
of Sporting Arms
Company outside
the Pirie Street
factory in the
early 1950s.

produced their first .22LR rifle, the single-shot 'Huntsman', which had to compete with Slazenger's SAF Lithgow-manufactured 1A and 1B rifle. The Huntsman was unique in that it had a progressive twist rifling, a fact that Jack Warne some 57 years later openly admits was more an error in the original setting of the barrel rifling machine than by engineering design. The manufacture of these rifles required the production of stocks, an issue that caused considerable effort to get the process right. Sporting Arms were again back at the surplus auctions and purchased a machine that was soon re-engineered to simulate the functions of the Pratt and Whitney copy lathe. Routers and moulding

machines were purchased from local commercial outlets, while rose alder, myrtle and sycamore timber was eventually accessed from Queensland, after initial consideration was given to purchasing other types from the US.

The Model 87A was the first .22LR semi-automatic rifle manufactured by Sporting Arms Company. The receiver was constructed from BTM tubing, reamed out to an internal diameter to accept a piece of 5/8" bar stock from which the final bolt assembly was machined and finished. Copied from a tube feed Springfield model, the 87A was troubled by feeding problems initiated by the timing of the cartridge lifter and was not

terribly successful. The later Model 2 semi-automatic was redesigned to have a 10- or 5-round box magazine and, with other minor modifications, had a good reputation as a reliable, sturdy and accurate firearm.

During the mid-1950s, the opportunity came to purchase surplus machinery from SAF Lithgow when production of the new FN FAL (L1A1) rifle was being contemplated. Jack went to Lithgow and purchased 15 milling machines and other items to enhance the capacity of Sporting Arms, which had now moved to their 35,000 sq ft facility at 1185-1187 South Road, Clovelly Park. This new factory was made possible by a government loan instigated by State Premier Sir Thomas Playford, who is regarded to this day as being responsible for pushing South Australia into the industrial age. Sir Thomas visited the Sportco factory on several occasions and made a point of offering an open-door policy to Jack Warne on manufacturing issues and the state economy.

In a coming edition of *Australian Shooter* we look at some of the individuals who worked at Sportco, the move by Sportco into the fastening system industry and the takeover by Omark Industries. We will also look at the sale of Omark-manufactured actions to Winchester and the eventual closure of Sportco. ●