

a history of Sportco

Part 2

by Gary Fleetwood

A rare Sportco Model 66D chambered in .22WRM calibre. Jack Warne has kept many 'oddities' that came from the factory floor.



With a profound expertise in straightening barrels, Gordon Myles ensured that Sportco rifles equalled the competition in intrinsic accuracy.

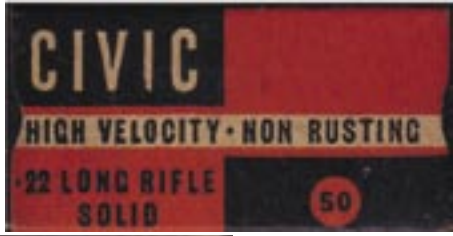
Sporting Arms Company founder Jack Warne freely admits that controlling the finances during the early years of Sporting Arms was not his strong point. The advice he quickly received was to find someone who could keep accurate books and pilot the new company to a secure financial position. In 1949, Jack was introduced to Bill Langman, the then chief financial officer at Adelaide-based Tubular Steel Industries, which manufactured chromium-plated tubular furniture. Langman was persuaded to join the new company, bringing with him the necessary skills in financial management, but equally important, bringing knowledge of 'old money' investors in Adelaide who were capable of supporting Sporting Arms.

"Whilst Bill did not know a lathe from a mill he was sharp identifying financial opportunities and bad creditors," said Jack Warne during our interview. "We could not have done it without him."

Fred Gray was Jack Warne's foreman when the two worked at Arrow Motors. Fred was a hard worker who expected a similar quality from those under him on the shop floor. Having a keen interest in firearms Fred was soon employed by Sporting Arms and became their chief engineer for his ability to think out complex mechanisms. With three draughtsmen in the engineering shop, Fred Gray and Jack Warne would make final decisions on design features of Sportco products.

Another brilliant machinist, Ted Handshin, would make tools, jigs and fixtures for the factory. Handshin was highly regarded by Jack Warne for his technical skills while Sid Miller and Gordon Myles were two other well regarded employees. Gordon had a skill in the straightening of barrels and Sid was paramount in the manufacture of prototypes and stock development. Don Stuart was Sporting Arms' leading salesman, who, according to Jack Warne, did a brilliant job of maintaining the networks used to promote and publicise the products within the industry.

Jack Warne approached Ron Holmes from Adelaide-based Riverbrand ammunition to manufacture soft point sporting ammunition under the Sportco brand. Utilising the well-established Sportco dis-



Two types of packaging for the Koch & Warne (K&W) air rifle pellets and a Civic .22 LR.

tribution network, the company sold millions of rounds of sporting and military surplus ammunition in the postwar years. Sportco also became the agent for Parker-Hale and as such had the ability to supply a vast array of full-bore range apparel and accessories to the then large number of fullbore rifle shooters. The 1966 Parker-Hale gun catalogue advertises Sportco products and states in that quaint British way that “Sporting Arms Limited of Adelaide, Australia, makers of the rifles shown below, are Parker-Hale Agents for the entire Australian territory.”

When US company Omark Industries indicated an interest to have their products manufactured in Australia, Jack Warne travelled to the US in September 1957 and spent time with the owner John >



SSAA Benchrest champion Syd Miller used a Sportco M33 Varmint rifle to win many competitive events. Involved in design and production of prototypes, Syd is a well-known and respected member of Australia’s shooting community.

Gray investigating the processes for manufacturing fastening guns and pins for the building industry. This decision came at a time when rumours of tougher Australian gun legislation were rife. Jack Warne's capacity in the area of metallurgy was obvious and a deal was struck between the two men that saw Omark receive a 5 per cent royalty on the net invoiced value of their products made in Australia. At that time Omark also manufactured 75 per cent of the world's market for saw chain and Sporting Arms began the distribution of Oregon saw chain to the timber industry in Australia.

In 1960 Jack travelled again to Portland and discussed with John Gray the capacity of Sportco to manufacture the complete 'Drive-it' power-actuated fastening guns. After initial indicators showed that Sportco could make them for half the price they were made for in the US, Jack Warne returned to Australia with an order to manufacture 38,000 units annually for their USA partner. The future of the manufacture of firearms at Sporting Arms Company seemed secure, with Omark Industries buying out the Sporting Arms Company in 1966. The same year the company went public and Omark's John Gray bought 26 per cent of the company stock. This decision to go public on the stock market generated the capacity to purchase new machinery, including an imported German four-spindled 'Kruger' copying lathe for manufacturing the wooden stocks.

At its peak, Omark Australia Ltd produced 1500 rifles a month, with a lucrative deal signed with Winchester USA to produce 25,000 actions for the American arms giant.

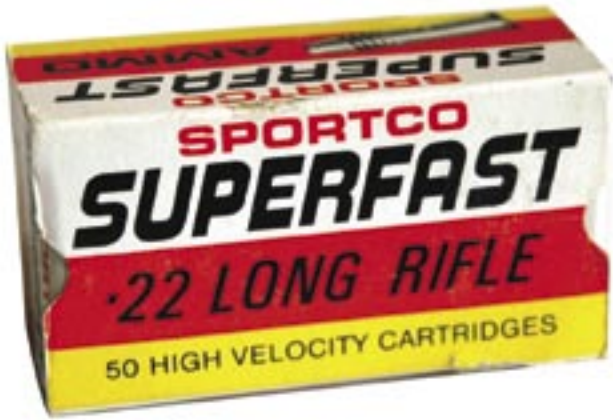
The vice president of marketing for Winchester was in Australia and visited Omark to look at the plant and to discuss the possibility of manufacturing a rifle action in .22 rimfire calibre. After two visits to the US by Jack Warne, and a subsequent visit by two technicians from Winchester to the Adelaide plant, the deal was signed. Australian shooters will recognise the Winchester Model 320 10-shot bolt-action, and the Winchester Model 310 single-shot as built upon the Sportco 66D action. The actions were shipped to the US where they were fitted with US-made barrels and stocks and sold worldwide. An ominous sign for the Australian industry was that the imported 'US made' Winchester 320 sold for less in Adelaide gunshops than the locally made Sportco Model 66D rifle.

Bill Langman managed Sporting Arms until it closed in the early 1980s, leaving a legacy of Australian expertise in the design, manufacture and promotion of sporting firearms.

Jack Warne eventually settled in Portland, Oregon, after being asked to manage Omark's troubled Construction Tool Division. Having worked for Omark for many years, Jack established Kimber firearms in the US before retiring some years ago. At 84 years of age, Jack is a very fit and active living memorial to what Australians could do with hard work, imagination and ambition. Still very much the 'Australian bloke', Jack proudly manoeuvres through the Portland traffic in his Australian-made V8 Monaro, and with equal pride, often oils his remaining collection of Sportco rifles. ●

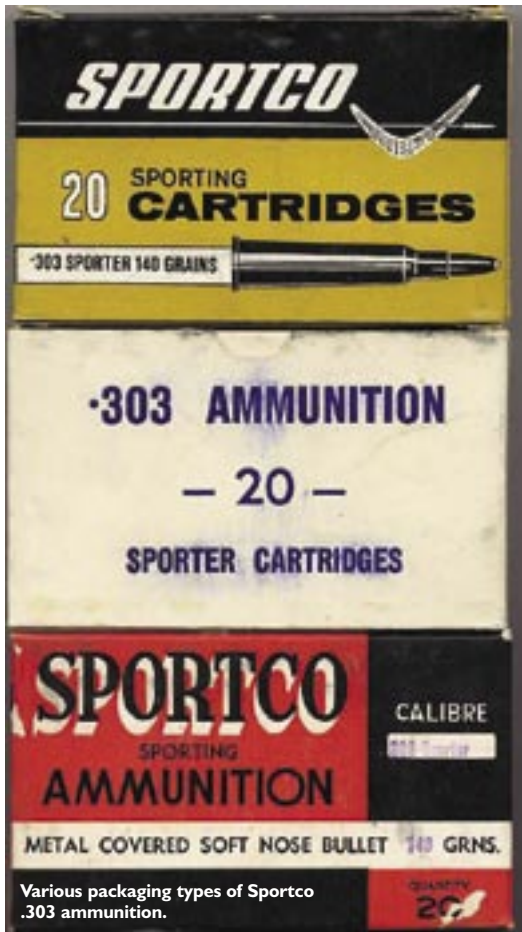


Jack Warne aims the new Sportco Model 55 single-barrel shotgun while design engineer Fred Gray finds something to grin about.



Many Australian hunters will remember the Winchester Australia-manufactured 'Sportco' ammunition and some will also identify this set of packaged Sportco ring mounts.

(Thanks to Terry Warnock of the Australian Cartridge Collectors Association for supplying some pictures.)



Various packaging types of Sportco .303 ammunition.