

GOLDEN JUNK: 40 YEARS OF SARCO

By David M. Fortier
Photography By Emily K. Fortier

Charlie Steen has made his fortune on the principle that one man's trash is another's treasure.

I was standing in a narrow aisle holding a small metal object in my hand while trying to catch my breath. I had glanced down, seen a heap of these small objects, and picked one up. Turning it over, I noticed some writing on its side. It said "THOMPSON SUB-MACHINE GUN" and then things got hazy as the room began to spin. I was holding the rear portion of a Thompson receiver, just one of many in a huge stack. Glancing around I noted Thompson barrels, buttstocks, vertical forends, lower receivers, and other various parts in disorganized heaps. This simply couldn't be real I thought as the line between my fantasyland and reality suddenly became blurred.

"Whatcha find?" A voice suddenly brought me back. It was one of my hosts, Butch Steen. "Thompson parts huh," he said lifting a piece from the pile. "Yeah we got a few of them...."

His voice trailed off, or perhaps I simply lost track of what he was saying. My eyes were locked on the part he held in his hand. I watched as he turned and casually tossed it back into the pile. Only it was in slow motion, the part taking forever before it landed and bounced along. No this was not fantasy, but nor was it reality. No this was a special place, this was SARCO. I had found my Elvis, and his name was Charlie Steen.

Long before I ever penned my first article for SHOTGUN NEWS, I was a customer of SARCO's. My introduction to this old established company came as an 11-year-old kid while sitting in my local gun shop leafing through old issues of SHOTGUN NEWS. A purveyor of military surplus equipment, firearms, and gun parts, its ads immediately caught my attention.

As a youngster I would pour over SARCO's massive multi-page advertisements while saving my pennies to mail order some treasure from them. Over the years I've bought quite a variety of items that I just "had to have." These ranged from old leather three-pocket Mauser ammunition pouches as a kid to a more recently acquired M1891/30 Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle in superb condition.



Any SHOTGUN News reader will recognize SARCO, Inc., which this year celebrates 40 years in business. It's a family business, run by Butch, Marie and Charles Steen.

So when I got the chance to visit the company for its 40th anniversary, it was already an old friend.

While today SARCO (an acronym for Steen Armament Research Company) is perhaps the largest dealer in surplus war materiel in the country, 40 years ago things were quite different. The company was founded by Charles "Cholly" Steen with the help of his wife Marie. Their story is really that of the American dream, a young couple who through hard work, grit, and determination made it big.

A lover of militaria and firearms, Charlie began collecting army belts and other military items as a young boy. As he grew older, he competed on his school's rifle team. After finishing school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. There he shot on the Marine pistol team, earning a Distinguished Pistol Shot badge.

At the same time, he was also wheeling and dealing guns as he built his own collection.

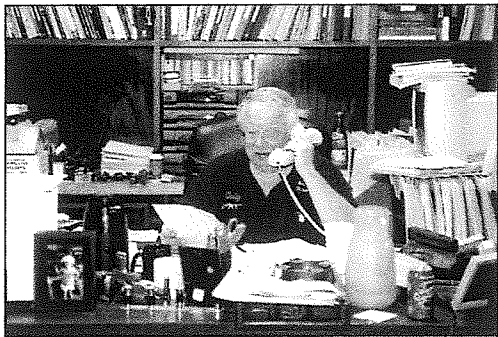
After finishing his tour of duty, Charlie married Marie and enrolled in engineering school. Fascinated with automatic weapons, he dreamed of someday being able to design his own. So while Marie worked as a schoolteacher, Charlie hit the books and went to college. Along the way, however, he got bit by the gun show bug. After attending a show, he made the comment to Marie that they had a lot of odd stuff kicking around and that they should try selling some.

So they rented a table and gave it a try. Their first attempt netted them a whopping \$200 when he was only earning \$70 a week. This spurred him on to trade an old broken Radom pistol for a peach basket of miscellaneous parts.

After a few months, he'd gotten \$175 out of the basket and it had only gone down 15%. So he decided that the parts business was the place to be.

Unfortunately, he was still in college at the time. Soon he found himself spending more time selling guns and parts than studying. Having found something that he loved to do, it was time to make a decision. Give up the hobby and concentrate on his engineering degree, or go against the flow and turn his hobby

into a full-time business. So he broached it to Marie. Her answer was simple. If he could make \$60 a week by the end of the year, he had her blessing. If he couldn't then he'd have to get a "real job". And so SARCO was born.



SARCO was founded by Charles "Cholly" Steen, who's seen here working on another "good deal." With four decades of trading under his belt, he's known as a canny negotiator.

At that time, Charlie and Marie were living in a second-floor apartment and SARCO was run out of their attic. The two of them went around selling their wares at gun shows and started to do pretty well. Charlie related how after they made \$700 at a show they went back to their hotel, sat on the bed, and repeatedly threw their earnings in the air, watching the money float back to the bed.

Through hard work and perseverance, Charlie was doing much better than \$60 a week. In 1961 he placed his first tiny ad in SHOTGUN NEWS and began selling mail order. The next step was when they bought the house next door to where they were living. This had a barn out back, and so became the new home of the ever-expanding SARCO.

Around this same time, the SARCO workforce began to increase when they had a daughter they named Valerie and then a son, Charles IV (Butch to his friends). Both of their children also worked in the family business. Valerie started in high school and things were so busy at the company that she actually had her Sweet 16 party there.

She continued and worked in the office at SARCO all through college. Butch can remember sorting screws for his dad at 8. He, too, worked at the family business through high school, then branched off for a while, working for a law firm and then in the music industry. In the end, he was drawn back to the family business and has been back for 2½ years now.

While the company has grown enormously, he can still remember how they started out in that small house with the barn out back.



Whether it's Bren guns or bazookas, it can usually be found somewhere in the multiple SARCO warehouses. Sometimes the Steens themselves are surprised what's there.

SARCO didn't stay in that small house very long though. After three or four years, the neighbors began to complain as Charlie had pallets and crates of parts stacked all the way down the driveway! So he moved into a 2,000 square foot warehouse, where the little company thrived and Charlie began to travel to South America buying all the surplus he could. Guns, ammunition, parts, whatever, if it was a good deal Charlie was interested!

It was after his first trip to Honduras that the Gun Control Act of 1968 took effect. After this anti-gun legislation, many people in the industry declared the sky was falling, and indeed many companies did fold. Charlie, however, simply took it in stride. While some things were different after 1968, it was still business as usual to him.

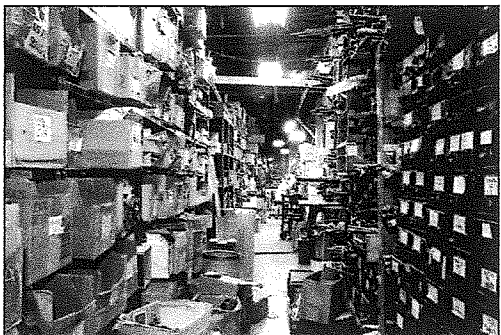
Around 1984, SARCO had grown to the point that it was again time to expand and the company moved to its present home in Stirling, New Jersey.

This location had a whopping 20,000 square feet and at first, the building seemed so cavernous that Charlie intended to rent out space. But within a year, he had managed to run out of room. So over the years he's had to utilize up to three satellite warehouses. These were finally condensed down into one extra warehouse located in Plainfield in the last five years.

The next question is, just what does he fill these warehouses with? That's what Em and I intended on finding out! I knew we were in a real gun business when Butch ushered us into his office, decorated with a water-cooled Browning .50!

Having spent 10 years in the music industry, Butch is hard at work bringing SARCO into the 21st century. He developed a five-year plan to improve customer service and satisfaction. This started with creating a management team. Next they began the long road of switching over to computers.

Yes, previously they did things the old fashioned way! Next, they are working on installing a thoroughly modern phone system with total automation. E-commerce is also something coming in the future via their excellent web site. So the company is indeed on the move.



The company grew from the attic of Charlie and Marie Steen's newlywed apartment, so here there is none of the antiseptic air of so much modern retailing.

Next we got to meet Charlie's wife Marie. I was immediately impressed by this woman who helped her husband forge this company while raising two children. A schoolteacher by trade, she was just as at home talking about the arts or religion as she was the surplus that her family's company was founded upon.

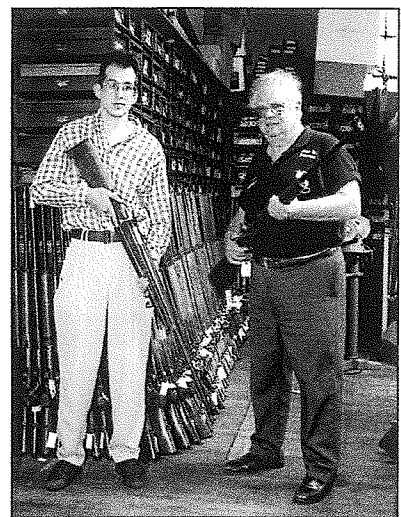
Then the door to Butch's office swung open and we had a chance to meet the man himself, Charlie Steen. Charlie is a down-to-earth guy who has lived the American dream. He often proudly says "I just sell junk," and he still is like a kid in a candy store when he finds some treasure in a pile of rusty surplus.

A visit to SARCO starts in the showroom. This is open to visitors and is well worth the trip. Here, in an atmosphere that will remind you of the old-time gun shop, you can see firearms, ammunition, militaria, optics, edged weapons and books for sale.

Walking down the aisles, I quickly noted a variety of original Mauser sniper rifles, Trapdoor Springfields, Remington Rolling Blocks, an original World War I Springfield sniper rifle, Jungle Carbines, MAS 36, 49, and 49/56s, Mosins, Colt M1909 revolvers, Triple Lock Smiths, muskets, Lugers, Broomhandles, P-17s, and far too much more to list.

As a collector of French small arms, I found myself staring at not just a semi-auto Mle 1917 but also the even rarer Mle 1918 as well! Believe me when I say they have some uncommon pieces!

From the showroom we went to the gun room. Here they have a huge variety of surplus firearms. The first thing I noticed was a long line of 6.5 Swedish Mauser Target Rifles. They seemed to have all sorts of handguns, rifles, and shotguns from the common to the unheard-of. Something on the order of 20,000 are kept in stock.



A look inside SARCO's Gun Room. The first thing Fortier noticed was a line of 6.5 Swedish Mauser target rifles. At any given time SARCO has some 20,000 guns on hand.

The guys here are kept busy working on various projects Charlie comes up with. The only problem is that Charlie has far more projects than time. I'll share a couple of examples with you. Since the 1960s, Charlie has been buying up Springfield M1903 rifle parts. In addition, he bought up the original tooling to manufacture Springfield receivers, trigger guards, and other parts.

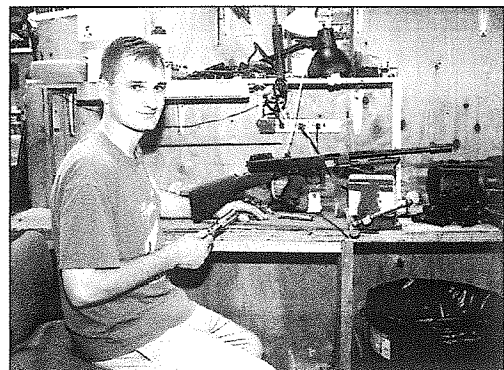
He actually has everything he needs to begin production of Springfield rifles, except the time to do it! Likewise, three or four years ago, he bought 3,300 BM-59 part kits. These just need receivers and to be reassembled. Perhaps someday, if he can find the time.

From there, we headed out into the warehouse area where orders are picked. SARCO is the sort of business that just grew, so I quickly discovered that you never know what may await you around the next corner. Walking along, I quickly hit sensory overload at the sheer magnitude of what they had in inventory. Bren gun parts were literally strewn everywhere.

There were heaps of Browning Hi-Power holster/stocks here, and a MAS 36/39CR bayonet there, and M-3 grease gun parts, and it just went on and on and on. I stopped and stared at a metal cabinet. One drawer in it was labeled "Kentucky Rifle Butt-plates" while its neighbor was marked "AK-47 Night Sights."

Walking a little further, I noticed some shelving made from old wooden crates. Looking closer, I picked out a red stripe on the wood and the words "1200 Caliber .30 Ball Cartridges Model 1906 For Model 1903 Rifle".

Slowly, we worked our way over towards the machine gun department. As we got closer, the number of Bren gun parts you had to step over seemed to multiply. A broken crate spilled PPSH-41 drums on the floor here and over there was a literal heap of Vickers tripods.



SARCO does some work on certain guns in-house. At any given time they have a number of projects in the works. Dummy and movie guns are a more recent addition.

I tried not to trip over a slew of DP drums and dummy 3.5-inch rockets as I was introduced to machine gun guru David Michels. If you call SARCO looking for machine gun parts, then Dave is probably the man you'll talk to.



The firm has been modernizing its computer and phone systems to make ordering faster and more accurate, while retaining the familiar personal touch customers enjoy.

Machine gun parts are a large part of SARCO's business. For example, they have sold more than 20,000 Sten kits and have the largest stock in private hands of Browning .30 and .50 cal. machine gun parts.

In addition to a variety of non-firing dummy guns, such as Thompson and Bren guns, they also offer a variety of machine gun parts kits. SARCO has so many parts that they publish a separate Machine Gun Catalog with parts, tools, and accessories. SARCO is a Class 3 dealer and sells live machine guns as well as working with movie companies providing guns for use in films.

From here we checked out the rest of the facility. This included shipping, receiving and the customer service department that takes incoming orders over the phone.

One ongoing project with their customer service representatives is to educate them on the parts they're selling. To do this, Butch has been bringing parts kit up to show the girls so they can better understand the needs of their customers. In addition, a new phone system will make ordering easier for customers in the future.

After the tour, we broke for lunch. While driving to a local restaurant I prodded Charlie for some stories from the early days of high adventure. These he had in abundance. Over the next couple of hours he shared tales of some of his good buys, and some of his not so good buys. Treasures found, treasures missed, and deals that never came to fruition.

He shared the time he bought 1,000 Kropatschek rifles and to sell them, he bought an ad in the *American Rifleman*. The ad was quite expensive and he didn't sell enough rifles to even cover the cost of it and so lost money.

Another time he had the chance to buy 90,000 M-2 Carbine bolts for \$5,400. He passed on that deal and now in hindsight realizes he could have made a mint.



A peek at part of SARCO's showroom. Here a wide variety of guns, ammunition, militaria, edged weapons, and books are for sale. No fancy décor; just lots of guns!

Then there was the time he bought one lot of junk Mausers from Brazil for \$3 apiece. When they arrived and he started picking through them, he found that they included the original pressure test guns from Germany! So without even trying he had ended up with some real collectable treasures.

In 1989, he went to Nepal to work on a deal. They wanted to sell 50,000 antique guns that ranged from Brown Bess flintlocks to Martinis, Sniders, and more. They said he could have them for all for \$285,000. But alas, the deal never went through. The guns sat until just a couple of years ago, when they finally sold for \$3.5 million!

This is a good example of how difficult it can be to do business overseas. While SARCO buys directly from foreign governments, Charlie has found that brokers who know the local customs and power structure greatly simplify things. Dealing with governments can take years.

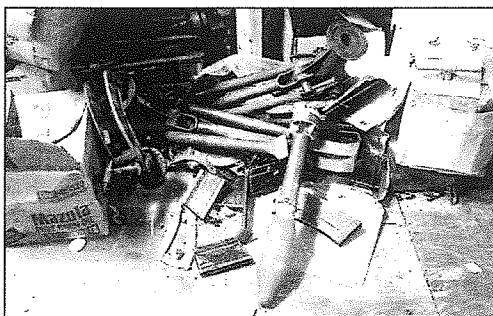
I think the greatest Charlie Steen tale of all, though, is a missed deal in Honduras. He spent six weeks down there buying surplus in the 1960s from the Honduran government. They had worked out a deal to buy all the old and obsolete arms and ammunition that the military had stored around the country.



You never know what you'll discover pawing around SARCO. Fortier stumbled across rare French Mle 1918 and Mle 1917 self-loading rifles just sitting on a rack.

So for six weeks, Charlie and his associate traveled around to various military outposts and depots, collecting old guns and shipping them to one main collection point where they were packed and shipped to the United States. While they were at one outpost, they were told that there was an old fort overlooking the harbor that had some old cannon in it they could have.

Charlie thought about it and decided it would be more work than it was worth, so he never bothered. Years went by and then he read an article in *Soldier of Fortune* about how some paramedics had gone down to Honduras to help the people after a hurricane.



SARCO at its best: Turkish Vickers tripods, Belgian BAR mags, a .30-'06 Madsen mag, Browning bipod, and a 3.5" rocket lay stacked in a heap. Fun's everywhere you look!

Two of them ended up in the same place where Charlie had been, and they talked about the fort up on the hill and the cannon they saw in the fort. These cannon were found to be ones Columbus had taken off his ship and put up in the fort when he landed in Honduras! "Kinda sorry I missed that one," Charlie said with a laugh after telling me the story.

After lunch we had a chance to tour SARCO's satellite warehouse in Plainfield. This place was simply incredible. It contained everything from heavy iron chests used to carry gold in the days of Wells Fargo to MiG-21 cockpits! Uhlán lances from the days of horse cavalry were stacked in a pile.

Not far from them were some Navy Model KDB-1 remote controlled drones. These radio-controlled aircraft feature 126-hp supercharged engines and were literally brand new.



Dave Michels (center) is the answer man in SARCO's machine gun department. The company stocks surplus machine gun parts by the ton and a good stock of MGs.

As in the other warehouse, you never knew what you might find and had to watch your step so you didn't trip over a Bren gun lower. While we were there Charlie let out a whoop after finding a box of M-3 grease gun trigger guards he didn't know he had. Simply incredible!

In addition to their bread-and-butter surplus parts, SARCO has recently added reproductions, and currently has more than 500 items in production. These range from leather holsters and shooting slings to rare sniper rifle scope mounts.

The big news here is a line of M1911 .45 autos under the Rock Island Armory banner. These are quality Government Model .45s built in the Philippines on CNC equipment.

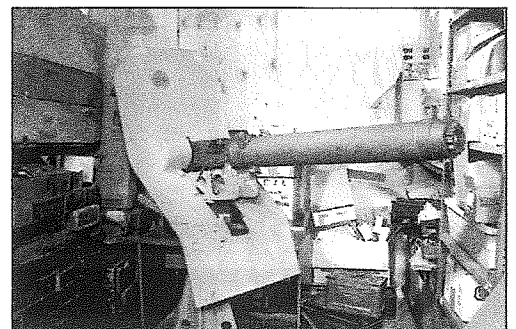
While I had seen pictures of their handguns in SARCO ads, they never caught my attention. So when Butch handed me one, I was a bit surprised, given the very low price, to see it was a nicely machined, fitted, and finished piece. Currently SARCO and California partner Dealer Warehouse offer four models: a standard 5-inch Government Model, a 4-inch Mid-size model, a 3½-inch Compact and a 5-inch Wide Body that accepts a 14-round high capacity magazine.

When I got back from my visit, I had SARCO send me one of the 5-inch Government Models for testing. I wanted to check its fit and finish and have a chance to spend some time with it on the range. I'm pretty skeptical about cheap .45s, so I was curious about how it would look and perform.

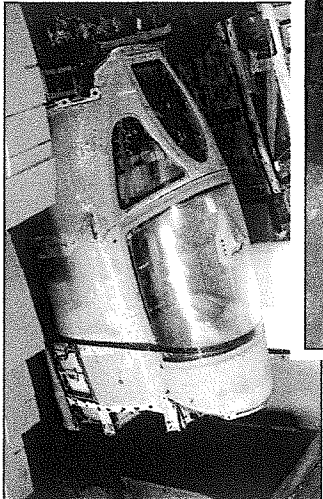
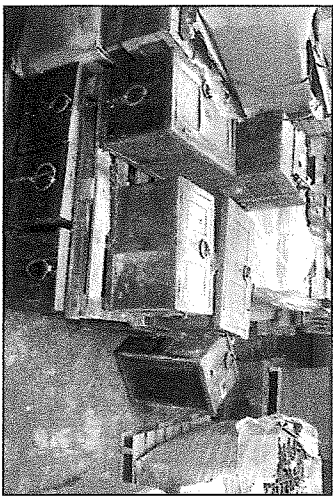
Taking the Rock Island Armory 1911 out of its hard case, I was impressed by how it looked. It sported smooth wood grips, an attractive G.I. type parkerized finish, long steel trigger, flat mainspring housing, A1 style sights, and an eight-round magazine. All the controls operated smoothly, the trigger broke at 5.5 pounds with no creep, and the magazine ejected cleanly with a press of the button.

Taking it out back to my range, I ran a quick 100 rounds through it to break it in. During the first few magazines I had three or four times where she failed to go fully into battery, but she quickly broke in and then proceeded to run like a champ.

To check accuracy, I used Aguila's 230-grain FMJ and 117-grain IQ, Black Hills Ammunition's 185-grain JHP and 230-grain FMJ, and Wolf Performance Ammunition's 230-grain FMJ. Four 5-shot groups were fired from a sandbag rest at 25 yards with each load.



Not something you see every day, a water-cooled .50 caliber Browning Machine Gun. No dummy, this baby's live and ready to rock and roll if you can afford it!



The stock at SARCO ranges from strong boxes from the days of Wells Fargo to Soviet-built Mig-21 jet cockpits. The Steen motto is, if it's priced right, buy it!

While the military sights are small and hard to see, Rock Island Armory gun posted some fine groups. Average group size with the different loads ran as follows: Agula 230-FMJ, 3.4 inches; IQ, 2.75 inches; Black Hills 185 JHP, 2.875 inches; 230 FMJ, 3.1 inches; Wolf 230 FMJ, 3.5 inches. The best five-shot group was posted with Black Hills 185 JHP, which pounded five rounds into just 2 inches. Agula was hard on its heels though, with its lightning-fast IQ, which scorched five rounds into 2.5 inches.

Average group size with all loads was 3.125 inches. There were zero malfunctions or problems after the initial break-in. The last thing I did was to casually fire 10 rounds offhand at a

steel silhouette placed at 100 yards. I rang it loudly 7 times. All in all it's an accurate and reliable 1911 that looks good and is well worth the money.

In addition to running SARCO, Charlie is also the President of FAIR (Firearms Importers Roundtable) Trade Group. This organization was founded in 1994 and protects the interests of firearms importers by monitoring legislation.

The group's goal is to keep American firearms and ammunition markets open to the global community of suppliers. This is to provide a "level playing field" so that American consumers have the broadest market choices. It's good to know that while the anti-gunners do their best to restrict what we may own organizations like FAIR are out there.



The Philippine-made Rock Island Armory 1911 proved to be not only good-looking but accurate and reliable as well. It appeals to those who want a G1-style .45 auto.

Emily and I came away quite impressed by SARCO, its employees, and the family that founded the company. Charlie is ever vigilant for a "good deal" and he filled me in on a couple he has recently made. With the inside scoop I'm already saving my pennies for when the goods arrive

However, I couldn't travel all the way to SARCO and come back empty handed! While I couldn't afford their exceedingly rare Mile 1918, I did get a MAS Mile 1936 for my collection. After 40 years SARCO continues to grow and expand. I just keep wondering what Charlie might find next!

STEEN

SOURCES

SARCO, Inc. • 908-647-3800 • www.sarcoinc.com

FAIR Trade Group • 202-296-4114

Centurion Ordnance • 210-695-4602
(Agula Ammunition)

Black Hills Ammunition • 605-348-5150
(Quality Rifle and Handgun Ammunition)

Sporting Supplies Int'l, Inc. • 714-635-4246
(Wolf Performance Ammunition)

The employees of SARCO, Inc. would like to dedicate this article to Glenn DeRuiter who died in a tragic accident June 29, 2002. Well known to people in the industry, Glenn had worked at SARCO for 28 years. He will be missed by all of us.