



Three generations of Steens. From left, Butch, Kip, Marie and Cholly.

SARCO'S NEXT GENERATION

How the most famous gun parts retailer is moving into the 21st century while maintaining a family-run approach.

By David Hunter Jones, Editor

Cholly sat in his plush leather chair at his giant L-shaped desk that was covered with folders in metal dividers, magazines, newspaper clippings and most importantly, a pot of coffee—his second of the day. He

sat with a pleasant smile and his eyes sparkled as he reminisced about deals of old that helped build Sarco into the gun parts mega retailer it is today. Behind him, in a wall-to-ceiling bookcase sat hundreds of manuals,

books, records and photos from deals and days gone by. His son, Butch, sat next to me and Cholly's wife, Marie, and grandson Kip were also in the room intermittently as they came and went tending to current business.



Anyone who works with their family each day can consider themselves blessed.



Sarco's warehouses are quite literally a treasure trove for history buffs and gun geeks alike.



Here's a wall of Garand stocks.

Cholly spoke about traveling the world many times over from India to Russia to South America, all in the name of finding the next great deal. Many times his efforts at securing a good deal were bogged down in quagmires that ranged from being undercut, corruption in country, or shipping woes. Tracking down old military hardware—from radios to ammo, to jet fuselages to guns—with so many people and moving parts is an exercise in patience and takes a heaping dose of luck as well. Cholly Steen, through 50-plus years running Sarco, has learned the finer points of executing a deal and getting

his goods stateside. He's so adept at it and has so many contacts all over the globe that he can't bring himself to quit. During my interview he secured 1,500 Bren kits via phone. I was amazed, but Cholly shook it off.

"That's a small deal," he said, swigging coffee and staring into his computer. Nothing distracts this guy from a deal; he's a coonhound on a hot trail.

Naturally, I then asked what a large deal was. He was pulled away on business before I got an answer, but Butch later put that question into focus.

"The warehouses were always so full, but dad kept on buying stuff. It got to the point when he bought truckloads of assorted ammo—I don't recall how much—but

there was so much and we didn't have any place to put it, so we used the boxes as flooring."

Yes, for a time Sarco employees walked throughout the 18,000 square foot warehouse on cases of ammo as if they were tile. That has been the pace of Sarco's growth, thanks to Cholly's deals. Currently within Sarco's warehouses and showroom lie more than 67,000 guns (many frames and receivers), countless rounds of ammunition, thousands of magazines and just as many accessories.

"Ever since we moved warehouses to Pennsylvania, we've got 2,000 guns for sale in the showroom and are bringing in more each day," Butch says.

Sarco shows no signs of slowing down, thanks to Cholly's bird-dogging deals, and Butch's business savvy.

Today the pair complements each other very well. Cholly is still bringing containers of stuff to fill the company's four warehouses, and Butch tackles the logistics of getting things sorted and categorized.

"Dad said that when I came on board, I brought us into the 20th century," Butch laughs. "I'm now doing my best to bring us into the 21st."

Beginnings

The nutshell version of Sarco is that when Cholly (Charlie, really, but it's pronounced "Cholly" because of his thick New England accent) was in the Marine Corps stationed in San Diego, he bought gun parts and built guns to sell to Marines. He did this to make a few bucks on the side and continued it when he got out and went to college to become an engineer. He began Sarco (Steen Armament Research Corporation) with the goal of designing machine guns. While juggling a budding business and college education, his wife, Marie was supporting the pair through her salary as a teacher. Marie and Cholly got started in the parts business when Cholly traded an incomplete Radom pistol (worth \$10 at the time) for a peach basket of miscellaneous parts. After six months he sold \$175 in parts and the pile had only gone down a few



The original warehouse in Stirling, N.J., is full of floor-to-ceiling drawers that contain a hodgepodge of parts.



Need anti-aircraft sights for your Chauchat? Sarco's got you covered.



Any given drawer is crammed full of interesting items, such as these 1911 mags.



Butch Steen takes stock of another row of drawers.



A wall of barrels is one of the more interesting parts of the Stirling warehouse.



Butch takes aim with a repro rocket launcher.



Sarco has pouches of canvas and leather of about every design.

Sarco has recently gotten big into reproduction items, such as these WWII German "potato masher" grenades.



Butch has several offices, this one's in Easton, Penn.

inches. All that has changed is that the "basket" is quite a bit larger now. Later, Marie said that he could quit college (after completing 3½ years), but if at the end of the year he wasn't making \$60 a week, he had to move on (a going salary at the time was \$75 per week).

To this day, Marie is still the majority owner of the company, and Sarco is poised to remain a dominant force in the gun parts game thanks to Butch's contributions that complement Cholly's wheeling and dealing.

Before becoming general manager of Sarco, Inc., Butch Steen owned a successful record label in New Jersey, and then worked in New York City for the most successful record label at the time. What brought him to Sarco from the music industry wasn't dollar signs, but rather a sense of duty and family.

"Sarco is something my dad built from an apartment, and it's remained a family-run business from the start, and I want to keep it that way," Butch said. "Plus, I was ready

to start my own family with my wife, and I was working long hours in the city and not getting home until 11 at night sometimes, so that made the decision a little easier."

Butch is a driven man by nature, and got Cholly's determination. He wanted to maintain a busy lifestyle with a challenging work environment, and he got both in spades. Plus, Butch is a history buff and war relics are high on his list of interests.

"I was basically doing my bosses' job for them in New York City, so I wanted a bigger challenge—and I got it!" Butch says.

One of the best parts of working at Sarco, according to Butch, is that he's always rediscovering gear from Cholly's past deals. For example, he recently uncovered 1,900 M60 bolts that Cholly bought in 1986, a bead blasting machine, a rocket fuselage and 15 pallets of M1917 tripods that have been organized into kits that are now

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The Easton site also has a full-service gunsmith.

Sarco sells full rifles and kits for the Italian BM 59, which is similar to the M1A.





The 7,000 square foot Easton storefront stocks more than 2,000 guns for sale and is part of a larger warehouse.



Believe it or not, the Easton warehouse is categorized.

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available for purchase. Oh, then there's the 147 pallets of Italian M1 Garand stocks among countless other items in the four warehouses totaling some 72,000 square feet. Eventually, most everything will be moved to Easton, Penn., due to the friendlier business climate.

Per Butch, everything that's moved from New Jersey to Pennsylvania is immediately categorized and inventoried and added to Sarco's website, www.e-sarcoinc.com. For example, there are now separate sections for Uzis,

machine guns, M16s, BARs, Mausers etc. There are 55 pallets of shotgun stocks, 17 pallets of Remington 40X stocks, and 40 pallets of tooling, and parts from when Cholly bought out Hi-Standard in its entirety. All of this comprises just one part of one warehouse. The scale of Sarco is hard to imagine until you peruse each one.

"The best example I've found to try and tell people what it's like is the warehouse at the end of the first *Indiana Jones* movie, where they put the ark away on



These guns will eventually be in the showroom.



"Machine Gun" Dave is Sarco's resident machine gun guru. Here he's got a real M60 while Butch Steen holds a Sten gun.



The Easton location's showroom and warehouse. The architecture of the building is where Sarco gets its castle-themed logo.

a forklift. The old warehouses are like that, but less organized," Butch says.

The Future

Butch describes his business relationship with Cholly as very synergistic and after seeing them in action, I have



Need an AR stock? Sarco's got 'em.



Workers assemble parts kits.



How'd you like to organize this mess? It's a tall order, but one that Butch Steen is adamant about so that he knows exactly what's in stock.



And you thought you had a lot of mags...



When you order through Sarco, your box will end up here, waiting for a shipping label.

to agree. Cholly buys, Butch categorizes, organizes and sells. Butch is also very hands-on in the business.

“Showing your people that you’re willing to do what they do is important,” he says. “I spent five hours on a forklift the other day working in the warehouse and I loved every minute of it. I like planning a corporate infrastructure and running numbers, but I also like to get my hands dirty and pull parts and organize things. This is the best of both worlds for me.”

Moving into the 21st century, Butch wants to get everything in Sarco’s possession “discovered” and onto the website. He’s also begun stocking Magpul

accessories, ammo, and other things in the showroom that might not have occurred to Cholly. There again is the synergy between the two. He’s also going to make sure that the most famous and longest-running ad in *Firearms News* is current with the latest finds and best deals. For example, Sarco currently has a bunch of very nice .40 S&W Smith & Wesson M&Ps with Trijicon night sights that were purchased from the Pennsylvania DCNR. One can be yours for \$349.

“Dad’s run this company for more than 50 years and has done an amazing job, but I’m thinking in terms of today’s generation and how they shop and find parts,”

Butch said. “I want to fill backstock bins and continue to fill the showroom with new items and populate the website, while still maintaining the family-run business appeal.

“My dad created a legacy of sorts with Sarco, and I want to continue that. Being here ties into the whole family thing, and how better to do that than to run a family business while spending more time with my own family?” he asks.

For more information on Sarco, or to search more parts than imaginable, see the ad in each issue of *Firearms News* or visit www.e-sarcoinc.com.

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