

# FIREARMS NEWS®

GUN SALES, REVIEWS, & INFORMATION

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## THE TM22

ROCK ISLAND ARMORY'S  
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RIMFIRE RIFLE!

Aimpoint Micro H-2

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### THE BEAR HAMMER!

SMITH & WESSON'S  
PERFORMANCE CENTER  
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Two SEALs in 1986 at “obsolescent weapons training” in Marana. Trainer Jim is third from the front. The line included a 1919 Browning, MG42, 1917 water-cooled Browning, Maxim, Bren, Hotchkiss Mle 1914, and many others.

# SHOOTING ARIZONA:

## MACHINE GUN SHOOTING LIKE NOWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD

### Part 2 – War Stories: Memorable Events and Characters

By Richard Maclean

**[EDITOR’S NOTE: The views and opinions are the author’s and not necessarily those of the staff or management of Outdoor Sportsman Group or Firearms News. They are presented for educational, informational, and entertainment purposes only.]**

**P**art one covered the evolution of machine gun shooting in Arizona. Shooters love “war stories,” so many may consider this part, part two, the most interesting . . . and much more controversial. Consider the following warning at the start of the May 2021 movie *Georgetown*: “This story does not in any way claim to be the truth. Nonetheless, it is inspired by actual events.”

■ **Police Encounters – The Good Ones**

Urban sprawl and the Arizona population were increasing. As a result, the chance of the public or police hearing explosions or seeing tracers grew exponentially. Most of these encounters between the police and the shooters were very friendly.

I recall one episode where two police cars rolled into a small Saddleback Mountain shoot. The lead officer strolled out with a big smile and laughed, “Well, I guess you have us outgunned.” Yes, indeed. We would offer the police to shoot the guns. Sometimes



1994. Smiling, cigar-chomping, Randy shows off his unregistered undestructive device (potato) cannon to the sheriffs who visited a Saddleback shoot. Randy would later become one of Arizona’s largest Class 3 dealers and one of four founding members of Dry Creek LLC.



they would, but they more often declined, probably considering it a conflict of interest.

At one such encounter, an officer decided to go macho at a small shoot in a gravel pit near Carefree, Arizona. He popped the trunk and took out a surplus M-16 that police departments bought from government arsenals for about \$50 after the 1997 North Hollywood shootout. He rammed the magazine into the gun and cycled the bolt, or so he thought. A dozen eager observers then heard a click. The magazine was jammed in backward, sparking uncontrollable laughter: humiliation to the max.

■ **Police Encounters — The Bad Ones**

Two other encounters were less than amicable, one of which could have been a disaster.

■ **The Kokalis New River Raid**

Around 1974, Peter Kokalis ran a shoot with about 30 attendees, including his friend Mike Dillon and a few from outside Arizona. A police sergeant observed tracers he thought were being shot near Route 17 and Table Mesa Road in New River, a town north of Phoenix. Believing that this must be a revolutionary training activity, the state police quickly formed a SWAT-type raid, complete with helicopter support.

Everyone was questioned, and identities were recorded. By then, some had been drinking, causing further concern and talk about confiscating guns. The primary worry for attendees was that an incident report existed that might be discoverable in a background search. In addition, the wording was such that one might surmise that these shooters were training for some revolutionary purpose. Bogus, but potentially damaging.

Peter assured everyone that he would take care of it, but he did not have the necessary channels and influence. Finally, Ralph Wong intervened and straightened out the mess. An “apology letter” was issued by the controlling agency, the Department of Public Safety. Mike Dillion was forever grateful. Because of



1974. Before the police raid that night, a smiling group of shooters at Peter Kokalis' Table Mesa. In the first row, 2nd and 3rd from left are Mike Dillon and Peter, respectively, and 8th is Ralph Wong. Bob Faris is standing in the 2nd row, 7th from left. The barrel of a 1919 Browning on the line is visible lower right. (Ed Hope)

this incident, large machine gun shoots were never done again at New River.

Dolf Goldsmith reflects today on the raid, “While examining the firing line, one of the officers spotted a Thompson saying, ‘Here is finally one that I know what it is.’ We thought that comment was one of the funniest things said that evening. I later looked at the ‘lay of the land’ and realized that because of a sharp bend in the road, it would look like we were shooting tracers across it.”

After that, Peter Kokalis bought remote land near Bagdad, Arizona, off Route 93, and ran small, private shoots there. The large shoots moved to SP Crater.

For the next two years, a state police agent chaperoned these shoots to verify that they met the conditions of the agreement that nullified the original incident report.

■ **The Yuma Shoot**

The next incident occurred on the Barry Goldwater Bombing Range. Most of the range is off-limits, but a few places are open to campers and shooters who have obtained permits. At the time of the Yuma shoot, the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) managed these permits, not the military. In April 1998, invited shooters had their permits, guns, and bullets.



Tracer fire such as this attracted the attention of the police on Highway 17. Thinking it was from a militia group, a raid of the shoot followed that night. Green tracer is Com Block ammunition.



Mike Brick (center in front of the author at right) organized the Yuma shoots after Bob Faris retired from the Yuma Proving Ground and moved to Wickenburg. Discussing the cost of tracers, the essential ingredient for spectacular night shoots. SP Crater 2009. (Ed Hope)



**We had the guns, bullets, and permits. The Marines had blanks, that is until the raid by the Special Reaction Team. Yuma shoot firing line 1998. (F to B) Bren, MG-42, Maxim, two Vickers; 1919 Browning.**



**Typical truckload of ammunition at a Dateland shoot around 1990. Tarps were put down next, then tripods and cased guns covered by a top canvas. The photo provides insight into the volume of ammunition that was expended even during the early shoots. (Kenton Tucker)**

About 1,000 US Marines on a WTI (Weapons Training Institute) exercise had only guns and blanks. Seeing what amounted to a Marine "Tent City" on the drive to the shoot, I thought, "*This is not good.*" However, we soon discovered the benefits: we watched in fascination as jets overhead kicked out pyrotechnic decoy flares.

That evening, a very late participant, Robert, got lost and fired off some tracers to attract attention to his plight. (More about Robert next.) Unbeknownst to him was a nearby Patriot Missile Battery costing about a billion dollars. Thinking that it was under attack, the Marines called the commanding officer, who told them to abandon their position since no mock attack was authorized. In addition, a Black Hawk helicopter was rumored to be running training exercises in blackout mode and saw the tracer fire.

Unfortunately, the BLM never notified the military of our presence, and the military never told the BLM of the exercise. A major SNAFU. With everyone ignorant of last night's activities the following day, two Humvees drove in behind the shooting line. I started to walk towards the vehicle to do my usual "meet and greet." But I did an immediate about-face when a Marine Special Reaction Team (SRT) exited, established a perimeter, and leveled their machine guns. The faces of these young Marines looked grim and scared, probably believing we were armed terrorists on a similar training exercise.

If the flag had been raised at that moment to start our shoot, creating an eruption of machine gun fire, it could have been a disaster. Fortunately, the BLM contact was with the SRT and recognized the permit filer, Mike Brick, who told BLM, "*We do not want this to be a problem; we filed the permits, we're 100% legal, but we will get out.*"

BLM and Range Management turned the function into a civilian office. It made new requirements that the Marines, not the BLM, controlled. A "risk assessment survey and environmental impact" was done, and several public hearings were held. The new requirements prohibited all the activities of greatest interest to shooters (e.g., airplanes, tracers, night shoots, reactive targets, etc.).

They effectively shut down the range for this group of shooters. Since Bob Faris had worked nearby at the Yuma Proving Ground, he was familiar with other area shooting spots. Dateland and Red Top Wash were used as alternatives.

#### ■ Robert, the Loose Cannon on Deck

Robert was a locksmith from Orange County, California, with an aberrant interest in large-caliber weapons, pyrotechnics, and amateur experimental rocketry. Even his business card had an exploding rocket image rather than anything relevant to locksmithing.



**Even Robert's business card (redacted) had an exploding rocket. Unfortunately, his interest in large-caliber weapons, pyrotechnics, and experimental rocketry would eventually cost him his life.**

He was very likable, but he was also wholly unpredictable. The near disaster at the Yuma shoot was just described. I also witnessed two additional near-fatal events, both at SP Crater.

Why include these stories of Robert in *Shooting Arizona*? First, they emphasize the importance of qualified range safety officers and "adults in charge" controlling all shoot aspects. As stated before, there has never been a death related to Arizona machine gun shoots organized by the individuals mentioned in this article. After these potentially fatal incidents, he was "banned" from coming to Arizona shoots. However, that did not stop Robert from doing what he loved, and as described in *Part 3's Epilog*, it cost him his life.

#### ■ The World's Biggest Lawn Dart

Robert constructed a rocket with what he claimed to be a sophisticated altitude-triggered release system to provide a soft parachute landing. He brought it to SP Crater to demonstrate how it worked. Then, it went up several thousand feet in a massive woosh as everyone waited for the parachute to release. It did not happen. Instead, the six-foot rocket came down at over 200 MPH.

Pandemonium broke loose since everyone was not too sure where it would impact. The two-foot solid hardwood nosecone could easily go through a person or destroy an expensive gun or vehicle. Fortunately, it landed in front of the line and embedded itself into rock-hard dirt. Extracted after a half-hour dig, it resides on a beam in Ed Hope's machine shop like a trophy.

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1995. Robert shoots his 20mm M42 Carl Gustaf 20mm recoilless rifle. Bob Faris and Ed Hope in the background at SP Crater, nearly killing him and another shooter.

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#### ■ The Exploding 20mm "Gustav" Rifle

Robert owned an M42 Carl Gustaf 20mm recoilless rifle. He made the cover of *Machine Gun News* in January 1995, the only issue ever printed horizontally to capture the double-ended blast from the recoilless rifle.

Ammunition was both extremely rare and expensive. His solution was to hand-load using custom dies and powders that might mimic the original load. To put this in perspective, a 9mm round has about seven grains of powder. This 20mm has over 1,500 grains, roughly half the powder weight in a fragmentation grenade. This is not a pineapple-to-pineapple comparison, but you get the point: there is a lot of explosive energy, even though the recoil is similar to a .22 rifle. I know first hand: I've shot it.

When handling such dangerous powder charges, if thinking rationally, one would set up a test stand, remove oneself and work up a safe load. Robert's approach was to use his shoulder as the test stand.



Marana 1988. The SEALs brought to the training shoot an array of weapons they might need if called away in an emergency. Pictured is a cut-down M60 with a 500-round backpack they called the "Embassy Rescue System." (Kenton Tucker)



Robert graced the cover of the January 1995 issue of *Machine Gun News*, firing his M42 Gustaf 20mm recoilless rifle. This was the only issue to be oriented horizontally to accommodate the blast image.

This worked for years until, late one evening, Robert told us he was testing a new load. Chuck Olsen and I decided to move away and position ourselves behind a truck. Call it a gut-level premonition.

We heard what we thought was a standard report. Later we realized that the observed flash was not the two-ended signature burst but the breach exploding. Another shooter, Randy, saw the explosion far behind

the line and heard the breach whizzing a few feet away. Like warfare, luck and a few feet of space saved him from death or catastrophic injury.

I heard the call, "Robert's down," and rushed over, only to see his eyes roll back in his head. At that point, the medics arrived and called for a medevac helicopter. It came in surprisingly short order but would not land until an officer arrived by car to confirm that this was not an active shooter scene. Flares were also interfering with the night vision equipment. That was the protocol at these early shoots. The Big Sandy Range is integrated with all such emergency services, and such precautions are unnecessary.

Amazingly, Robert suffered only a broken cheekbone and other relatively minor injuries. Credit goes to Carl Gustaf: his design blew the breach away from and not towards Robert's head.

#### ■ The SEALs Bring the Ammunition

Ralph Wong's shoots attracted attention, including the notice of the CIA and Special Operations groups such as the Navy SEALs. Richard Marcinko, the commander of SEAL Team Six and later "Red Cell," recognized that his team might be sent anywhere in the world and "live off the land." Third-world governments and revolutionaries do not necessarily have modern weapons. Marcinko had access to ammo but not obsolescent machine guns and the shooters who knew how to run and maintain them properly.

Ralph Wong knew the people with the requisite guns and expertise and put the pieces together for training shoots in the 1980s. He describes the scene,

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"A C-130 landed at nearby Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and out rolled a van with Langley, Virginia license plates and cases of ammunition. Free ammo shipment!"

Kenton Tucker, one of the founders of the Big Sandy Range, picks up the story from here, "Bob Faris, Ralph Wong, and others, including myself, were working with SEAL Team Six. At one of these events, they arrived with huge amounts of ammo and weapons: 50 cal, 7.62 NATO, 45, 9mm, 7.62x39, and so on. The 5.56 was, of course, linked on Stoner belts. Most of the ammo was sterile. Finally, after shooting most of the day, the SEALs said, 'We can't shoot all this ammo, and it is not worth the process to return it to inventory. Do you want to shoot it up?'"

"I thought Bob had won the lottery. He had the biggest grin I have ever seen. We shot almost all night using their ammo. There were so many empty wooden crates that we kept warm by burning them. The SEALs were notorious for their pranks, and I got mine in the form of the morning wake-up call. They rolled a flash-bang grenade under the truck while I was sound asleep. They thought it was hilarious: I thought I had levitated off the ground."

#### ■ Ammunition Cognitive Dissonance

They were shooting the good stuff and loving it. Machine gunners back in early times had a strange, conflicted attitude towards the ammunition they would run through their guns: buy it cheap and get lots of it. As a result, many shooters bought large quantities of corrosive and questionable war surplus ammo, such as 1930s vintage Turkish 8X57mm Mauser ammunition packed in wooden cases with a black wave.

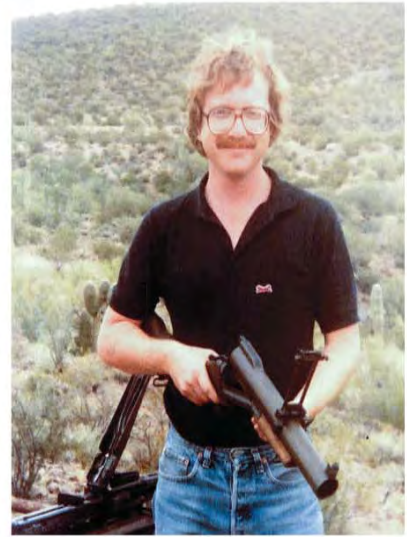
Turkish ammo seemed to work fine in the Mausers for which it was intended, but in a belt-fed, not so much. Technically, it was relatively hot ammo with a thin base. Since the base is unsupported in



Jim (not a SEAL) fired the cut-down M60 with a 500-round backpack brought to Marana by the SEALs.

a Browning 1919 bolt, it could blow and bulge a side plate, a top cover, or worse. Yet, all manner of similar stuff was fed through machine guns back when most guns did not cost the price of a new RAM truck.

Shooters may want cheap ammo, but they love rare and classic weapons much, much more. Sometimes, lousy ammo and a superb gun come together with undesirable results. For example, at an SP Crater shoot, an individual was shooting a Stoner 63, coveted as the Holy Grail of squad automatic weapons



April 1986. Kenton Tucker with the SEAL's M79 grenade launcher at the Marana "obsolescent weapon training shoot." They brought their weapons should they need to be deployed in an emergency. (Kenton Tucker)

(SAW). A bit like a WWII German MG-42, only far rarer. The top plate blew up, cutting the face of the shooter.

There was an immediate concern for the shooter lasting only a few seconds to assess the injury. It then promptly shifted to profound concern, "OMG!! Is the Stoner okay?!" Fortunately, the large shoots invariably had an EMT or MD available and several experienced gunsmiths. Both injured patients survived to the relief of everyone.

Kenton Tucker relays a story of another gun blow-up, this time embedding a shard of metal into the shooter's lip, "I'm an EMT and was the first on the scene, quickly followed by a dentist, a nurse, and a surgeon. The protocol is that the most senior medical person takes over, so it went up the line to the surgeon. While he was stitching, another individual came forward and said, 'Can I help?' So, we asked, who are you? 'A lawyer.' Everyone laughed."

The cheap ammo attitude is changing for two reasons. First, the value of guns has also gone through the stratosphere. Second, there is a dwindling supply of cheap ammo. Surplus military ammo has dried up, and the importation of inexpensive commercial ammo from countries such as China and Russia (e.g., Norinco and Wolf from Russia, respectively) has been banned.

#### ■ Kumbaya Times Evolve Into Personality Clashes — Some Personal Reflections

I have been very fortunate to meet and interact with hundreds of practitioners (i.e., shooters), manufacturers, police, and military personnel at various venues, including the Las Vegas SHOT Show. The vast majority are "regular guys and gals" who do not concern themselves with their correct pronouns. I have found that the key personality traits that determine how an



2002. Arizona shoots have attracted many internationally known collectors, writers, and forensic experts. Here Robert Segel, editor, author, and collector of machine guns and their memorabilia, stands behind Kenton Tucker. Dry Creek Shoot SP Crater. (Ed Hope)

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A long-standing tradition at Arizona shoots. Shooters with similar firearms for a "mad minute." At right: seven Thompsons open fire at SP Crater. At left: five BARs (Brown-ing Automatic Rifles) and a FAL, empty their magazines. SP Crater. (Kenton Tucker)



1990. There were always EMT-trained medics at the large shoots. Sometimes physicians were also present, such as John "Doc" Hanigsberg MD with his 1919 Browning on a aluminum M74 mount, and 1917 Browning. (Kenton Tucker)

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individual gets along within this shooting community are their ego size and their ability to handle criticism.

In the beginning (i.e., the 50s through the 70s), the principal actors (i.e., Generations 1, 2, and 3 leadership) went to each other's shoots, sold and transferred guns, shot together, and got along. Chuck Olsen (3rd generation) provides a perspective of these relationships by telling the story of his Breda Model 37

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The largest caliber ammo: 216mm "mortar ammo" (a.k.a. bowling balls) stacked like a Civil War memorial. A four ounce black powder charge fired with cannon fuse, friction fuse or shotgun primers.



The bowling ball is gripped with three fingers and lowered on top of a four-ounce black powder charge. Considered by ATF as antique replicas, these are legal to own and fire if your local and state regulations allow them.



Gas cylinder bowling ball mortars are real crowd-pleasers. The ball goes up a quarter mile and "pulse whistles" on the way down as air blows past the rotating finger holes.



**Chuck Olsen, an Arizona collector, looks over his most recent purchase, a rare Breda 8mm, Model 37 with a fascinating WWII history and a Who's Who ownership pedigree. Big Sandy 2022. (Chuck Olsen)**



**1987. Very early GE M134 Minigun at SP Crater. (Kenton Tucker)**



**Old vs. New. Dolf Goldsmith examining an original Gatling gun at Big Sandy Shoot (Rob Lippert) and a Dillon Mini gun at SP Crater. (Kenton Tucker)**

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Heavy Machine Gun, "A ship off Italy was harassed by a heavy machine gun onshore. The ship fired a few salvos from their big guns, promptly eliminating the problem, but not the weapon. Sailors went ashore and retrieved the weapon, taking it out of future action. One later brought it back home, registered it, and sold it to a collector.

"Dolf Goldsmith [more about Dolf next] bought it from the collector and sold it to Ralph Wong. Bob Faris pleaded with Wong for years to sell it to him. Finally, Ralph gave in. Jon Blaylock bought it from the Faris

estate and sold it to Robert Segel [The editor for *Small Arms Review* would often attend Arizona shoots]. I would witness these negotiations at all the shoots. There were lots of friendly camaraderie and opportunities to look over each other's guns and test fire them. I suppose that helped in the bargaining."

■ **The Major Players**

Some observations and personal reflections on five significant players in Arizona's shooting community follow. Without question, these individuals

established reputations as being highly talented and successful.

Unfortunately, J. Curtis Earl and Peter Kokalis are known in some circles for their outsized negative traits. I recognize that many, if not thousands of individuals, thought the world of these two. That said, I'm conveying the facts received from reliable sources, records, and personal encounters. The reader can decide on the merits of this information and balance it with their own experiences or sources.

■ **Bob Faris**

Bob was so highly regarded in the Arizona shooting community that he was known as "Uncle Bob." He was influential in supporting the creation of the SP Crater and the Big Sandy shoots. Indeed, the main road going into the Big Sandy range is named after him. Several other sources on the internet describe his background. These are not synopsized in this article, other than the following remarks by Kenton Tucker.

"One of the most amazing times I watched Bob fix a machine gun was when he repaired a Stoner 63A Commando. It would fire two or three rounds and then malfunction. I checked the extractor and ejector and ensured that the links were the correct Stoner links. But unfortunately, it still would not work.

"Bob was standing over me, grabbed the gun, walked to the back of my van, and used the bumper to bend the top cover. The owner turned white as he watched Bob manhandle his \$65,000 gun [Note: Probably over \$100,000 today]. I think he was in shock. Well, it worked great after that. He explained that the timing was off, and that was how you adjusted the timing. I then asked him where in the heck he learned that, and he said, 'From Eugene Stoner.'"

Bob impressed me because he treated everyone patiently and respectfully. On several occasions, when I was clueless about how to fix a problem, he would diagnose it in minutes and explain the solution





Without Bob Faris' permission, J. Curtis Earl put this picture on the back cover of his 1970 catalog. Bob was livid, fearing this may lead to problems since he was still working under a top-secret clearance at the Yuma Proving Grounds.



SP Crater 2003. Twin AN-M2 30 cal. Brownings. These were owned by Mike Dillon and came from the rear of a Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber. Combined, the pair have a rate of fire like a Minigun. (Kenton Tucker)

without condescension or scathing criticism. His expertise and reputation, however, infuriated J. Curtis Earl and Peter Kokalis.

For example, without naming him directly, Peter would mock him in articles about Bob's views about a particular gun, a shooting stance, or anything. As for Curtis, in a 2010 interview, Bob was surprisingly blunt, "He was a crook. He did not do anything but make money and trouble." Bob had reason to be upset with Curtis.

When Bob was still working at the Yuma Proving Ground, Curtis put Bob's picture on the back of one of his catalogs without permission. Understandably, he was concerned about possible repercussions. This was not paranoia. As described later in a similar incident, a federal special agent pictured in Curtis' catalog came under pressure from FBI management.

Nevertheless, Bob took both Curtis and Peter in stride. He just stopped going to their shoots. Bob was world-class without ego issues.



2010. Dolf Goldsmith (L) and Bob Faris (R) at Big Sandy shoot. 1919 Browning, Maxim, and Vickers on the line. (Ed Hope)

■ **Dolf Goldsmith**

Dolf is well known to the Arizona shooting community for his participation in events. However, his reputation grew far beyond Arizona because of his books, eight at last count. He is incredibly knowledgeable yet does not have the all-too-common inflated ego. For example, in his 2005 book *Browning Machine Gun, Vol. I: Rifle Caliber Brownings in U.S. Service*, I noticed that he did not include the M35 1928 Colt commercial tripod made for Argentina.

I mentioned this oversight, and Dolf instantly acknowledged that he should have added it. However, instead of rationalizing or getting defensive, he thanked me. A similar incident occurred sometime later, and the response was the same; he was appreciative, not defensive.

Two other stories illustrate his high degree of integrity and perception:

Although Dolf Goldsmith was a friend of J. Curtis Earl and an early attendee of his shoots as far back as 1971, the relationship grew tense after becoming a Class 3 dealer in 1974. Curtis viewed him as a potential competitor. I wrote in an article draft: "Curtis came up with what he thought was a creative solution: he encouraged buyers such as Dolf Goldsmith to become Class 3 dealers to avoid the transfer tax cost." (Emphasis added)

As I often do, I sent a copy of the draft out for comment and shortly after that, received Dolf's handwritten note stating, "I had no problem paying transfer costs. However, I lived in a state where state law required you to be a federally licensed dealer before you could legally own an MG." He offered a correction based on the facts and not my assumptions.

He was also very cautious. When he was in Arizona for one of the early shoots at SP Crater, a friend told him that he saw J. Curtis Earl place something in his trunk while others were getting ready for the trip up from Phoenix. Becoming suspicious, he opened the trunk and found a 1917 Marlin, "Potato Digger,"

receiver he suspected was not properly papered and promptly disposed of it where it could not be retrieved. Later that day, the police arrived at the shooting site and demanded to see the paperwork on his guns after someone had tipped them off that he had illegal machine guns.

He believes Curtis set him up. Indeed, his 1979 Senate testimony established Curtis as an ATF informant: Senator DeConcini, "You had acted as an informant for the ATF?" Mr. Earl, "Many, many, many times."

Dolf had reason to be upset with Curtis, and similar to Bob Faris, he was blunt in a 2022 e-mail exchange for this article, "That guy was a snake in the grass; he would try to put you in prison by setting you up to violate the law."

■ **Mike Dillon**

There are numerous background stories on how Mike Dillon became interested in machine guns. The essential elements are that he received a Thompson and a Star reloader from the widow of the person that died in a plane borrowed from Mike. Affordable progressive reloading was in its infancy. Dillon saw numerous possibilities to improve a reloading press after talking to multiple machine and fabrication shops in the greater Phoenix area.

His direct marketing strategy to reloaders and the lifetime guarantee made him very successful. He changed the industry. For example, everyone has encountered the runaround you may get when issues develop and you try to decipher incomprehensible warranties. Dillon broke this convention. For instance, I had a minor problem best described as cosmetic with a Dillon powder measure. Assuming my complaint would be rejected, I took a chance and brought it to the Scottsdale store. The response was impressive: without even a word, the employee turned around, went into the back room, and handed over a new, in-the-box unit.



2005. The Minigun on Dillon's Bell UH-1 Iroquois "Huey" is prepped for a strafing run at Red Top Wash near Yuma.



A belt of solid tracers is fed into the 4,000-round ammo container.

Mike and some employees flew down to a shoot near Yuma at Red Top Wash. The crew loaded up a minigun and waited till dark after setting the dynamite and glow stick targets. In an incredible show of firepower, 100 observers witnessed tracer-enhanced strafing runs. Not a single target was hit. Years later, I ran into Mike at the SHOT Show and kidded him about that run. He smiled and, instead of getting defensive, said, "We have gotten better at it."

Like many others, Mike finally had a falling out with Peter Kokalis and J. Curtis Earl. With respect to Curtis, Gary Christopher, Curtis' close friend, provides some insight, "I had listened to so many of Curtis' stories of him bitching about customers, business associates, dealers, and others, that I quickly recognized that under no circumstances could I have anything remotely resembling a business relationship with him."

With respect to Peter, Gary Kieft of Dillion Precision and a shooter at Arizona events since the 1980s states, "As Peter's ego grew, he became more difficult to deal with." It was inevitable that they would clash as Dillon's expertise grew and his business success compounded. Humor and modesty, yes, but Dillon was still known as a tough, uncompromising businessman who would engineer a deal in his favor in seconds.

In one such instance, it led to a legal dispute with Eric Lutfy, owner of Thunderbird Cartridge Company. Thunderbird was located outside Scottsdale's restrictions on storing powder and primers, so Dillon subcontracted with Eric for these shipments to his customers. A disagreement grew over payment splits, and the dispute wound up as a legal conflict that dragged on for years. Eventually, Thunderbird won the lawsuit. Why mention this?

When relationships broke down with Peter Kokalis and J. Curtis Earl, that was it. Full stop. Associations were irreparable because of their egos and temperament. Today, however, Erick Lutfy is close with the Dillons. No hard feelings; all reasonable businesspeople.

#### ■ J. Curtis Earl

J. Curtis Earl was one of the country's most influential early Class 3 dealers. I wrote the details of his business and family dealings in a three-part series in *Small Arms Review* in May, July, and August 2010, "Who was J. Curtis Earl?" This information is available on *Small Arms Review* and my websites and not repeated here other than a few bits of information that follow to put his influence in context.

Many, possibly thousands of machine gun owners started by noticing his small ads appearing in gun magazines and ordering a catalog. Well-illustrated and breathtaking in its variety of in-stock NFA firearms, readers found out how they could legally buy, own, and shoot a machine gun. Between 1968 and 1983, Curtis Earl distributed over 65,000 catalogs; copies can still be found on the internet from sources such as eBay.

From 1965 through 1999, J. Curtis Earl bought and sold nearly 3,000 Title II firearms. In 1983 Curtis had in stock approximately 800 NFA firearms. Some were movie guns from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Studios or television guns such as those used in the TV series, *The Untouchables*. Many were from police departments around the country or notorious prisons such as Attica, Sing Sing, Folsom, and San Quentin.

The inventory was also impressive because of the sheer volume of particular models. Aside from the Thompsons, he had sixty-six MAC M-10s and M-11s and forty-four Reisingers. He also had a mind-boggling collection of German MG-34s and 42s.

He was influential in the NFA world, but this should not imply that he was highly regarded and respected. On the contrary, most people who contradicted him considered him difficult, dishonest, petty, and cantankerous. Be they friends, relatives, or business associates; he cut no one any slack when delivering his wrath. Unfortunately, I was on the receiving end of this anger several times.

For example, in 2000, Curtis was planning to ship a portion of his weapons collection to the Idaho

State Historical Society for the J. Curtis Earl Memorial Exhibit. He had an inventory of ammunition for a 37mm Bofors and 25mm Peteau and needed to dispose of this first. He chose the best way possible: shoot it on private property near Wickenburg with a small group of friends.

Before the cannon shoot, reactive targets were set up at a distance that was not very challenging for target shooting but was optimum to hear the sound of the

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Gun owners noticed J. Curtis Earl's gun magazine ads and ordered a catalog such as this one from 1988. Readers found out how they could legally own a machine gun. Between 1968 and 1983, J. Curtis Earl distributed over 65,000 catalogs. (Chuck Olsen)



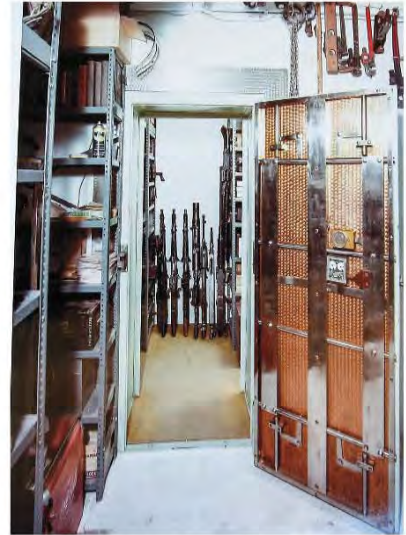
Entering J. Curtis Earl's vault room was an eye-popping experience. The vault was lined with guns worth millions at today's prices. A lineup of Thompsons is at the left, and too many to list are at the right. (Chuck Olsen)

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hits. I proceeded to pick them off on semi-auto with optics. Curtis went ballistic and shouted, "No optics!" The offending optics were removed, but I picked off with open sights on the first shot. Curtis again went ballistic, "Full-auto only!" Using aimed fire, targets were again taken out on the first round, albeit with a

burst of noise. Yet again, Curtis went ballistic. At that point, I had enough, "What do you want me to do? Point down range and just spray?"

The cannons were then positioned, and he gave the "honors" to a friend to fire the first round from these antique weapons not shot in decades. The ammunition



A time lock door from a closed Florence, Arizona bank protected J. Curtis Earl's valuable collection. MG42s and a Lewis gun on the back wall, among others. (Chuck Olsen)

was half a century old and possibly unstable. Curtis removed himself from the proximity of the cannons and hid behind a truck. So did I. Fortunately, the first round jammed one cannon, and the other rounds were duds, probably because of corroded primers.

Curtis always acted "large and in charge," always looked out for his welfare first, and felt he was the smartest guy in any gathering. As one collector stated, "Curtis had an extensive Thompson collection, and he thought this made him an expert, more knowledgeable than anyone else. He was not. He would hold a grudge if

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J. Curtis Earl bought guns from the MGM collection used in scores of memorable movies and Thompsons from infamous federal prisons. Here he holds a Lewis gun bought by Pancho Villa and seized by the police. (Chuck Olsen)



1975. The vault was not even close to being able to contain all his weapons for sale. The guns lined the walls and covered the floor area in separate rooms. Too many to identify here. Curtis took great joy in seeing the reaction of customers to this display. (Chuck Olsen)



J. Curtis Earl with his (L to R) 20mm Lahti, 37mm Bofors, and 25mm Poteau. These went to the Idaho State Historical Society as part of a memorial to himself. Curtis, at left, Chuck Olsen is seated near the truck, and the author is facing Curtis. (Chuck Olsen)



1995. 75mm PACK Howitzer being loaded by at SP Crater. (Kenton Tucker)



Old rounds nearly a century old can have corroded primers or be unstable and dangerous. At the J. Curtis Earl shoot, the Bofors ammunition would not fire due to primer failure. Luckily, it did not explode.



"Surviving Curtis Earl" party living room display. Counterclockwise from the bottom - 1928 Colt tripod; 1919 Browning on 1917 cradle and tripod, disintegrating link and cloth belt loaders, Vickers, 1917 water-cooled Browning, full auto 1911 pistol with stock, 1921 Thompson, and MG 42.

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you challenged him and end the relationship." Personal and business relationships would typically start amicable enough only to end in bitter hostility.

### ■ Surviving J. Curtis Earl Party

In 2010 after my three-part series on Curtis was published, a series of unrelated events brought several dozen individuals to the Phoenix area who had experienced Curtis' wrath or double-dealing firsthand. It was the perfect opportunity for a "Surviving J. Curtis Earl" party.

Invitees were asked to bring their favorite NFA weapon, especially if it had a story related to Earl. I knew this group would walk in with crew-served weapons, so I called the police and told them about the gathering and the possible reaction of neighbors. After all, guys carrying tripod-mounted heavy machine guns down the street might be concerning to most. They responded, "No problem, thanks for calling." What follows are some never revealed learnings from that event.

One guest reported that Curtis amassed his initial inventory by association with a firearms dealer with extensive contacts within major East Coast police departments. The dealer would buy the Title I firearms of entire departments and sell new, upgraded replacements. This individual had no interest in dealing with Title II firearms and opened the door for Curtis to buy the police Title II inventories at incredibly low prices. It was not his clever dealings that gave him the advantage, but pure luck.

Curtis encouraged buyers to become Class 3 dealers to avoid the transfer tax cost. (See earlier comments by Dolf Goldsmith). Some did, but they were soon notified that to hold onto their FFL, they had to deal in weapons. Unwittingly, Curtis had created his competition, and competition was the one thing he hated more than anything.

He undertook all manner of mechanisms to "discourage" competition. One of the most amusing stories concerned a Class 3 business competitor, Tom Spengel, who was going to a major Houston gun show. Curtis met him on the airplane and, thus, knew where he was going and what he was wearing. When Tom went from table to table, he noticed that other dealers shunned him like the plague. Finally, he met someone he knew well and asked, in effect, if he needed to upgrade his deodorant. Instead, he discovered Curtis was circulating, telling key dealers to be wary of a young undercover ATF agent. Curtis described him perfectly, right down to what he was wearing.

Curtis was attracting enough attention and burning relationships to lead to a series of family and legal problems. At the Congressional testimony, Curtis stated, "[A friend, FBI agent Kelley Sanderson] was



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Chuck Olsen, Collector; Glenn, Class 3 dealer at the time; Claire Bymoen, Class 2 and 3 dealer and original supporter of the Big Sandy Range. In front is a German MG-34 on a Lafette 34 tripod.



Party goes (L-R) Tom Spengel and Glenn (both Class 3 dealers at the time) with Mike Simmons, licensed explosives manager for shoots.



It was called the "father and son duo" in J. Curtis Earl's brochures for half-scale miniature Thompsons in the mid-1970s. It was Curtis' friend and FBI agent Kelley Sanderson with his son. The ATF pressured Sanderson not to have any further contact with Curtis or risk transfer to some godawful post. (Chuck Olsen)



Kelley Sanderson, retired FBI agent, meets Pat Earl Anderson for the first time at the "Surviving Curtis Earl" party in 2010. Unfortunately, his friendship with Curtis caused a firestorm within the FBI.

ordered officially to not contact me, not have anything to do with me, and this was a direct result of an ATF visit to him. It is a sore deal. . . . I took a picture of Kelley and his little boy, father and son, the kid holding the miniature [Thompson] and Kelley holding the big one. They demanded a statement as to why he would allow himself to be photographed and used in my book and advertising brochure."

Kelley Sanderson attended the "Surviving J Curtis Earl" party and met Curtis' daughter, Pat Earl Anderson, and many of Curtis' friends and competitors for the first time. This gathering culminated in a wonderful experience of meeting and interviewing his relatives and people who had no illusions about Curtis. Instead, they fully understood the enigma represented by this man who could be charming one moment and a terror the next.

■ Peter Kokalis

Like so many others, Peter was initially friends of J. Curtis Earl and Mike Dillon. Peter bought his first machine gun from Curtis, a Smith & Wesson Model 76, paying \$140 plus the \$200 transfer tax. But that

all changed as egos grew, and any form of criticism or challenge to their knowledge was voiced.

Unquestionably, Peter was a brilliant writer, successful collector, and weapons trainer. But he was far from perfect in his relationship with the Arizona machine gun community. For example, we will never know the background that led to the clash between Peter and Curtis, which resulted in a robbery. Maybe Peter felt that Curtis did wrong by him and thought to right that wrong. Who knows? But the incredible story of what happened next follows.

Curtis was heading out of town to another gun show. He told Peter about his plans. At the last minute, Curtis decided not to go and went to the local show. When he walked around, he saw several Model 1918 WWI brass-handled fighting knives that looked like those in his collection. He asked the sellers where they got these, and they accurately described Peter. Indeed, they were missing when Curtis got home and checked. As implausible as it may seem, sometimes Curtis would leave his saferooms unlocked. My three-part series, "Who was J Curtis Earl?" includes another such occasion.

Curtis called Peter later that same day, and finally, after small talk, he confronted Peter about the theft. Curtis was ruthless in making his demands, "The more the police get on this thing, the more difficult it will be to get out of. Tomorrow morning, I will sign a complaint with the police." Terms were worked out, but Peter would only meet in a public place to settle up.

Curtis told this story to many, but is it true? Few knew, besides the ATF, that Curtis would secretly record telephone conversations. An electronic copy of the 12-minute conversation with Peter was found in his house after he died, and a copy was given to me.

As mentioned earlier, Peter clashed with Mike Dillon and threatened an Arizona gun writer whose views he disliked. Indeed, an editor told me he was running out of articles because Peter would berate other authors to the point where they refused to submit articles. The relationship had to end, and it did. I asked Bob Hunnicutt, the editor for *Shotgun News*, the forerunner to this publication, about potential conflicts when Peter started writing for him. He told me, and I'm paraphrasing, "I figured out how to handle Peter."

■ Why Convey These Stories?

Readers may wonder by now why these stories are included in *Shooting Arizona*. Why not focus only on the positive?

Just like the unusual characters in the movie *Raising Arizona*, these stories add color and depth to understanding the shoots, the people who attended, the organizers, and the challenges involved in forming the Big Sandy Range. More about these individuals in the epilog *Part 3 - Progression to Current Shoots and The Epilog*. [7]