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Today's Surplus Trash or Treasure?

If there's a bigger field than surplus firearms, I'm glad I haven't run into it. No other area in the firearms marketplace encompasses such a wide variety of makes, models and configurations; it's almost endless. Surplus guns today can also be collectable, which is another factor of demand that wasn't around a few decades ago, when shooters were the primary consumers.

So where do all these surplus firearms come from? Several weeks ago, after attending the European IWA trade show in Nürnberg, I went down to Oberndorf afterward and was fortunate enough to get a full-blown tour of the Heckler & Koch factory. My host informed me that since WWII, most modern countries update their military weapons on an average of every 26 years. Each time a government does this, the phased-out weapons can be resold, typically in the civilian marketplace.

The good news in America is that, in general, our laws have been very favorable for the importation of surplus military weapons. Indeed, we have been the great dumping ground for surplus guns for decades. The demand created by shooters who want an inexpensive, good-quality gun with plenty of cheap ammo has been responsible for millions of surplus guns ending up in thousands of gun cabinets.

While much has been written on this subject, the focus of this article is to inform you of the market dynamics and how this field has changed since WWII. Rather than spout my opinions about overall collectability and marketplace importance, two of the surplus-gun industry's leaders have been interviewed for their seasoned knowledge in this field.

Century Arms International has been a national leader in the surplus-firearms field for more than four decades. President Howard Sucher has imported well over 1 million guns and accessories in every possible configuration. He has seen a lot of changes, and his knowledge of the marketplace is equaled by very few.

Euroarms Italia was established in Gardone, Italy, during the 1960s by Luciano Amadi. Originally, the company specialized in making black-powder reproductions and replicas, but it switched to the import/export of ex-ordnance weapons during the new millennium. Luciano's son, Paolo, is now involved in trying to buy surplus guns from various countries in Europe.

Giving you an outlook from both Europe and the U.S. is useful, as each company has a different view on how to adapt to its unique and evolving marketplace. Some of the answers may surprise you, and the insight of

these two men will give you a much better idea of what to look for in today's surplus-firearms marketplace.

S.P. Fjestad: Since Century Arms International has been in business for more than 50 years, what changes and/or trends have you noticed over the decades with surplus firearms?

Howard Sucher: We work very hard with our sources around the world in finding surplus material for the American consumer. We have been working with many of our sources for many years to obtain surplus and obsolete firearms. One of the major changes we have seen is that the importation authorities in the United States have changed their importation policies several times, generally in a manner adverse to the surplus-imports community.

For instance, the sporting-purposes test under the Gun Control Act has been modified several times to make it more difficult for surplus importation for the American consumer. As an example, you can no longer import non-sporting barrels, even for purposes of repair or replacement. This means that many people who have lawfully owned military firearms will now have great difficulty getting spare barrels unless we get legislative change. Our trade association,

Surplus Guns:

Experts give us an inside look at the current military firearms market and predictions on what to expect in the future. • By S.P. Fjestad

the Fair Trade Group, is currently working on such legislation in Washington, D.C.

Furthermore, it is not easy to get items of interest that are less than 50 years old classified as C&R [curio and relic] firearms for collectors. Consequently, many potentially good collectable military firearms cannot be imported because they do not have curio or relic status and are therefore prohibited as military surplus.

One important point for your readers to understand is that the Gun Control Act generally prohibits the importation of military surplus firearms unless the firearms fall within an exception, which usually means that the firearm is either a commercial sporting version of a military gun or is classified as a curio or relic.

In general, while it is legally difficult to keep obtaining interesting material for the American collector, we do our homework and find valid legal avenues to continue importing into the United States.

Fjestad: Since Euroarms Italia has been in business for more than 35 years, what changes or trends have you noticed recently with ex-ordnance firearms?

Paolo Amadi: Two facts have emerged: It is becoming harder to find good guns in quantity, and collectors are becoming more knowledgeable.

It is more difficult to find good stuff nowadays, especially in quantity. We bought hundreds of .30-06 Garands and M17s in 2001 and 2002, but since then we haven't seen quantity like that for those models. We find single pieces in different conditions, usually coming from people who died or from someone who decided to give up their weapons.

In recent years, collectors have become more knowledgeable. They read more books, and there is a lot of information available through the Web and discussion forums. However, the Web is an enormous resource of information, but only some of it is true—a lot of information out there is just wrong.

Collectors have become more exigent regarding quality, although this can be seen from a different perspective from the dealer's point of view. The offer is scarcer and the result is the same—a larger gap between supply and demand.

Fjestad: As an importer, Century Arms sells only to dealers and C&R collectors. Do you think more people are buying these guns for collecting today, or do you think the same proportion of shooters exists today as 30 years ago?

Sucher: There is a big interest in the firearms we import to dealers, curio and relic collectors, and

end-users. A firearm can look the same as another, but the markings on it can increase its value. Based on the correspondence and telephone calls we receive, we believe that the collector's market has increased from 30 years ago.

Amadi: I don't know what the proportion was in the '70s, but today in Italy most people who buy ordnance weapons want to shoot them. It often happens that some models are not a good seller simply because the ammo is not available. I can personally mention at least a couple of examples: Steyr rifle (or the even-rarer carbine), Model 1886 Kropatscheck, 8 Krop. cal. It is a wonderful weapon with a tubular magazine below the barrel, cutoff and an excellent mechanism, but people don't buy it because the ammo is no longer available. Take for example the Winchester Model 1910 in .401 Win. cal. or the 1907 in .351 Win. I love these carbines, but they are extremely difficult to sell because of the ammo scarcity.

The local rules also can affect the situation. In England, for example, weapons for which the ammo is no longer manufactured are tax-free (and this is the case of the 8 Krop). For this reason almost all our Kropatschecks are exported to Great Britain.

Fjestad: When contemplating a surplus purchase, does price

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overrule everything else, or is it the right combination of condition, ammunition availability, make/model recognition and price?

Sucher: We are trying to provide interesting surplus material to the American consumer. Price is not the main factor when we purchase material. If surplus material is available, we try to negotiate the best possible price. In addition, there are some products we have available for which we do not have ammunition. However, there are collectible reasons why we still purchase the material.

Amadi: Price is extremely important but not the only aspect. We buy weapons in quantity, but considering that they could remain in our warehouse for a long time, the price is important. On the other side, if the quality is poor, we are generally not interested in the deal, even if the price is extremely low. Bad-quality weapons are difficult for us to sell.

There are some items of greater or lesser interest, but if the condition is excellent, we always buy them.

Fjestad: How did the Crime Bill and other anti-gun legislation affect Century Arms? Also, are the new inexpensive makes and models coming from Turkey, Russia and even China starting to encroach on your sales?

Sucher: The Crime Bill impacted our business. We buy from and compete with all the countries you name. It is a balancing act.

Fjestad: How do you find these caches of firearms, and how competitive is it to purchase them?

Sucher: We have representa-

tives all over the world, Steve. We also are very well known and are approached by sellers from all over the world. Century has been in business for more than 50 years.

Amadi: Although many governments destroyed hundreds of thousands of guns and others sold hundreds of thousands on the civilian market, there are still plenty of weapons stocked in military arsenals all over the world. There are antique, modern, bolt-action, semiauto, long and short guns.

The problem is to find the way to buy them. Some governments don't want to sell the weapons, even if the guns have been phased out by the military. Also for political reasons, some others would like to sell them but the deal is very difficult because the intermediaries ask for extra money to supply the right contacts or to get the right permissions.

Some countries recently sold on the civil market most of their 20th century bolt-action ordnance weapons. This is the case of Finland for the Nagant Model 39, Sweden for the Carl Gustaf M96 and Switzerland for its Schmidt Rubin K31. Hundreds of thousands of weapons went on the market in the past few years. It was easy to get hundreds of rifles in good to excellent conditions, but unfortunately supplies are gone.

The Russian Arsenals have plenty of Russian firearms, of course, but also German, Austrian, American and Italian guns. There are many weapons also in the ex-Yugo arsenals, in addition to lots of Carcanos in Albania, Greece and Libya. Cuba also has plenty of guns. China has an immense quantity of ordnance weapons in stock, and in Norway there are thousands

of Mauser K98s converted to .30-06 after WWII.

Also in Italy there were (and still are) many hundreds of thousands of guns, but the usual procedure was to destroy them for political reasons or because they were considered war weapons by the Italian laws (like the Carcano bolt actions in the '60s). One exception was the big lot of Enfields sold by the Italian navy in 2005. We all hope something like that will happen again, but now it is a pure dream. In 2001 there were thousands of M1 Garands in .308 scheduled to be sold for surplus, but after many promises, they were destroyed.

Some international distributors have contacts in Russia or in the former Yugoslavia. They usually buy thousands of guns and resell them to the dealers. The weapons they find are generally very common models such as the Mosin-Nagant 91/30, German Mauser K98, Yugo Mauser or Model 95 Steyr Mannlicher carbines. For these types of weapons our main sources of supply are generally these distributors.

Very often collectors are looking for models that are no longer available in quantities, such as the South American Mausers, Springfields, Carcanos and others. For these weapons, the only source of supply for us is the small dealers in Germany or Switzerland who buy them from collectors.

Fjestad: Would you consider most of your surplus guns good, inexpensive shooters, or do you think that some will qualify as good investments at a later date?

Sucher: Firearms in general are a good investment. Our guns are also an affordable way to enter the shooting sports or begin a collection. Over the years, we

have sold many guns at reasonable prices to the collector, target shooter or hunter, and the value of many of our guns has increased, especially after the availability to find additional quantities of the same type of guns diminishes.

Amadi: The customer who buys a standard ordnance weapon generally does not consider it as an investment first but rather a pleasure to satisfy. Of course, as I mentioned before, the market is looking mostly for good-quality guns because everybody knows that a nice weapon will keep its value more than one in bad condition. On the other side, there are pistol collectors (Luger, Mauser, etc.) who know that an Artillery Luger or a Swiss Parabellum 1900 is scarcer and its value is going to rise in the years.

Fjestad: How much work is involved when cleaning up or making guns ready for resale?

Sucher: The firearms we sell are handled a multitude of times prior to being shipped out of our facility.

Amadi: Almost all the weapons are stripped to clean them and to check for damage or rust. We clean them and put grease on those parts that usually are not disassembled by the customer. All the weapons must be CIP test-proofed before selling them to comply with the Italian law.

Fjestad: In recent years, recently imported surplus guns have to be visibly marked by the importer somewhere on the gun. While shooters probably don't care about this marking, what's been the collector's reaction?

Sucher: Some collectors are not happy, but the regulations

must be adhered to.

Amadi: In Italy it is not necessary to mark the importer's name or logo, but since 1975 it is necessary to mark the Government Catalog Number (one to five digits), which is almost the same problem as the importer's name. Of course, weapons imported before 1975 are more appreciated by "critic" collectors, but few people (including collectors) really care about those markings because it is not possible to avoid them. Sometimes, for very special pieces or rare models, the catalog number is marked in a hidden place such as under the grips.

Fjestad: What seems to be the most popular configuration currently—specific makes and models of handguns or rifles?

Sucher: Currently, the most popular firearms we are selling are bolt-action and semiautomatic rifles, which include Mosin-Nagants, Mauser rifles and various types of handguns, including Nagant revolvers and Czech pistols.

Amadi: American and British weapons are generally very appreciated, but in each country the local weapons are more requested: Carcanos in Italy, Mausers in Germany, Rubins in Switzerland.

Fjestad: If ammunition is either expensive or hard to come by, how much does that affect the overall desirability of a military surplus gun that shoots it?

Sucher: Some of the firearms we sell are collectable firearms. If the consumer wants a collectable firearm, it does not normally matter to them if they are not able to shoot it because ammuni-

tion is not available or expensive. In addition, we work with ammunition factories to produce ammunition. In certain cases, such as with the 7.62 Nagant revolver, we are now producing this ammunition under the HotShot label, as many of our customers ask us to obtain this caliber so that they are able to use their Nagant revolvers at an affordable price.

Fjestad: Do you think that there are still a lot of countries that have large quantities of pre-WWII military surplus guns, or is most of the inventory coming from Europe?

Sucher: We try to find material from everywhere around the world.

Fjestad: What do you think about the future of surplus military firearms in the U.S.? Also, do you think America will continue to be the primary dumping ground for both military and commercial surplus guns from other countries?

Sucher: I will address the second part of your question first. America is not a dumping ground for surplus material, but it is a fact that America is the world's largest consumer of new and used guns, as well as ammunition. I believe this is a great testament to its long history with firearms and exercising our Second Amendment freedoms.

Therefore, it is only natural that [because the U.S. is] the world's largest firearms market, our international trading partners would be interested in marketing firearms and ammunition to us. We, of course, do the same with them. American companies actively market sporting, law enforcement and military firearms to other mar-

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kets around the world.

Because we do have millions of law-abiding but passionate gun collectors, particularly those interested in certain period firearms or firearms connected with historical events or certain nations, I believe the future of surplus collecting is good.

I would hasten to add, however, that there is not an unlimited amount of military surplus goods in the world. Collectors must understand that there is a finite amount available.

In summary, while I believe that the strong interest in the collector's community will continue, there is a finite amount of surplus material available to be imported into the United States.

Amadi: Definitely, the USA was, is and will be the biggest market able to absorb any quanti-

ty of surplus. But America is also a big buffer. You can find the biggest importers able to afford the investment of tens of thousands of guns, and these big companies often resell the weapons all over the world, sometimes in the same country where the guns came from.

Fjestad: Do you think there is more demand today for surplus firearms than there was 20 years ago? If so, what do you think accounts for most of the increase?

Amadi: The demand depends on many factors, but in my opinion the first factor is legislation, which usually is going to be more restrictive as time passes. In Italy we are quite lucky because with the exception of the .22 caliber [limited to six weapons per

license] or antique weapons [limited to eight], a person with a shooting license can still buy and keep as many guns as he likes in both semiauto or bolt-action configuration. Germany also had a liberalization of the semiautos manufactured before 1945. However, England and France have more restrictive rules.

Anniversaries also play an important role. In the next few years, as we head toward the 100th anniversary of WWI, I'm sure it will increase the demand of WWI guns.

Last but not least, important people, culture and interest in history are always related with the type of weapons demanded by the consumer. ●

S.P. Fjestad is publisher and author of Blue Book of Gun Values (www.bluebookinc.com).

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