

THE OWEN GUN STORY IN BRIEF

Around July 1939, the late Evelyn (Evo) Owen, then a civilian, submitted the .22 submachine gun he had invented to the Army Inventions Board, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne. After study, they stated they had no interest in it nor in any submachine gun—the policy of the British Army until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939.

Owen enlisted and when on final leave in September 1940 he was seconded to the Army Inventions Board with an offer from Lysaght's Works Pty. Ltd., Port Kembla, to assist the A.I.B. in making up a trial model for the testing of Owen's last ideas. After some months of delay, Owen was given leave of absence and came to Lysaght's with a personal request from Captain C. M. Dyer, the Secretary of the A.I.B., that Lysaght's make a trial gun to Owen's ideas. Though the Army stated that the gun should be for .38 revolver ammunition—the only small ammunition projected for manufacture in Australia—none was available, so .32 was chosen. The gun with single line side magazine was made by Lysaght's in three weeks and successfully test fired by the end of January 1941.

Owen returned to the A.I.B. and after further discussions came back to Lysaght's at the end of February 1941 with fresh ideas. These were for a gun in .45 calibre (standard with the Thompson) operating on the same principle as the .32 but with a completely different configuration. This configuration became standard with the Owen gun from then on. Using the barrel from a Martini-Henry rifle, the gun was designed, completed and successfully test fired during March 1941.

To meet the request of the Army for a test gun in .38 calibre for the revolver ammunition, production of which was then about to commence, work was started on design and the gun was successfully completed early in May 1941 in five weeks, using the barrel from a Luger pistol.

These three successful test guns—.32, .45 and .38 calibre—were made by Lysaght's at the Company's own expense, and it was not until June 1941 that the first order was placed with the Company; it was for 100 guns in .38 calibre. Production commenced with limited facilities, but it was not until the end of July 1941 that Australian-made .38 ammunition became available. Official trials the following month proved that this ammunition, with a muzzle velocity of only 590 ft. per sec., was useless for s.m.g.'s, though the guns operated well. Lysaght's then reverted to .45 and some had been produced when, at the beginning of September 1941, Lysaght's learned that 9 mm ammunition was available for the Sten submachine gun, samples of which had reached Australia. Lysaght's decided immediately to switch to 9 mm, and three guns were designed and completed in the 21 days remaining before the public trials ordered by the Minister for the Army for September 29th, 1941. In these trials the Sten, the Thompson and the Owen were tested in severe condi-

tions of mud and sand; the Sten and the Thompson failed completely in both, but the Owens came through without fault. The 9 mm gun then became standard, and after minor modifications such as moving the cocking handle from the top to the side, it went into production, limited by availability of machine tools and toolage, which were in critically short supply in Australia at that time. It was not until about June 1942 that Lysaght's were reasonably well equipped. Target production of 2,000 guns per month was achieved in mid-August of that year, and soon an output of 2,400 guns per month was being maintained. Costs—as established by the Costs Investigation Branch of the Ministry of Munitions—fell from an overall average of £10/14/6 (\$21.45) to £9/2/0 (\$18.20) for the current production of a gun with 11 magazines packed for tropical conditions in a hardwood case. By April 1943, 22,000 Owens had been delivered and the Owen was then officially declared the standard submachine gun for the Australian Army. It was finally withdrawn from service about 1966 after Korea and Malaya.

The Owen was not manufactured entirely by Lysaght's, but with the assistance of the following sub-contractors:-

BARRELS—Hastings Deering Ltd., Sydney.

BODIES—British Tube Mills Ltd., Adelaide.

BUTTS—Ricketts & Thorpe Ltd., Sydney.

MAGAZINES & PRESSINGS—Henry Lane Ltd., Newcastle.

SPRINGS—Fletcher Springs Ltd., Sydney.

HAND GRIPS—W.J. Manufacturing Ltd., Sydney.

LYSAGHT'S WORKS LTD., Newcastle, manufactured all recoiling parts, trigger housings and all trigger components, compensator and remaining machined parts, also magazine springs.

LYSAGHT'S WORKS LTD., Port Kembla, manufactured all assembling, test firing and packing, as well as the designing and co-ordination of the project.

In December 1943, the Owen was tested by the Ordnance Board of Britain in competition with five other submachine guns; the Owen was rated first in four out of five tests and first in overall merit.

When the last orders had been completed in September 1944, 45,477 Owens and 500,247 magazines plus spares had been produced. As the manufacture of the gun had been undertaken by Lysaght's as an additional war-time activity, the section was then disbanded and all toolage and detailed manufacturing procedures were forwarded to the Commonwealth Munitions Factory, Lithgow, together with suggestions for future development.

Lysaght's presented a glass cabinet with the historic test models of the Owen to the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

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