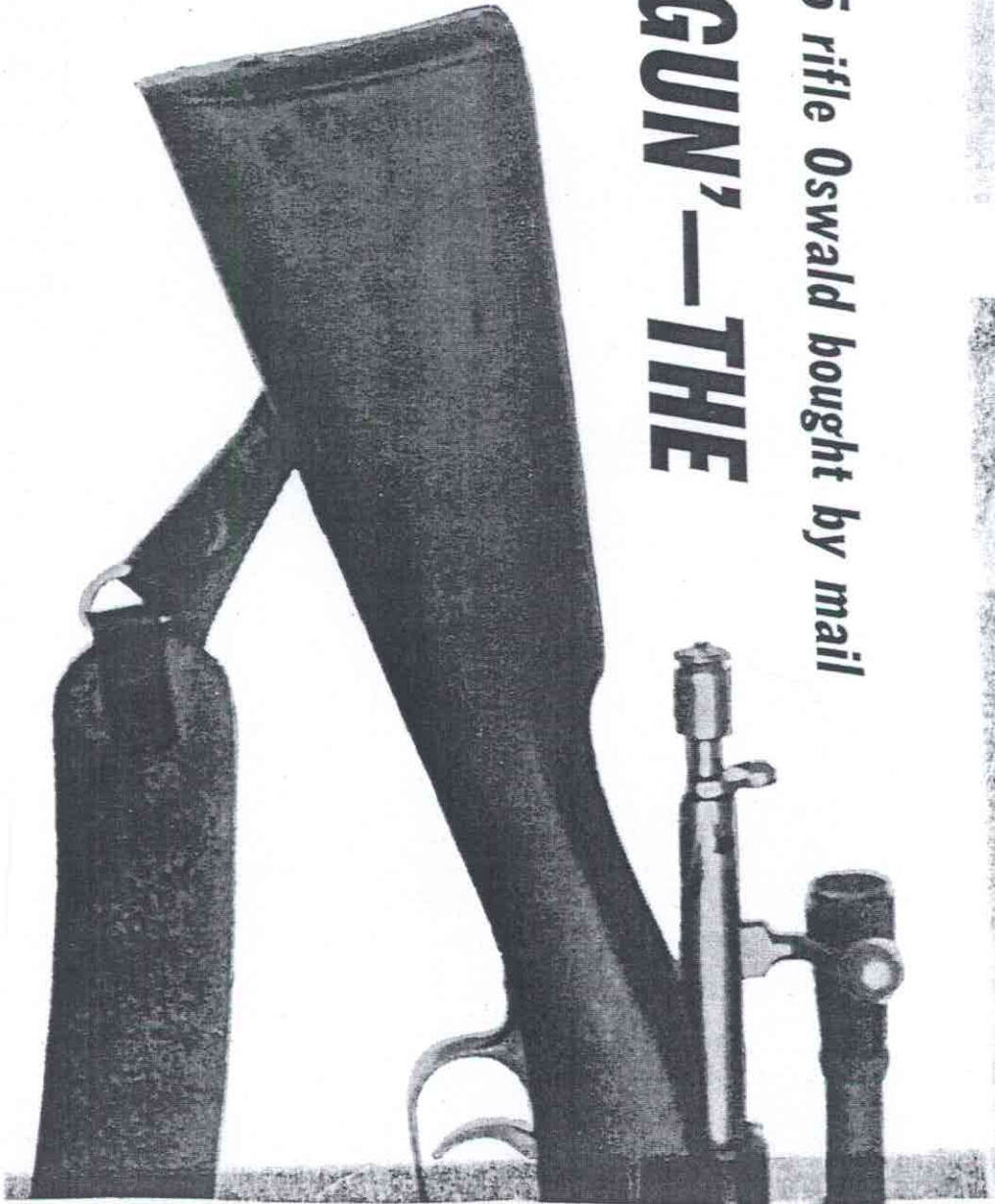


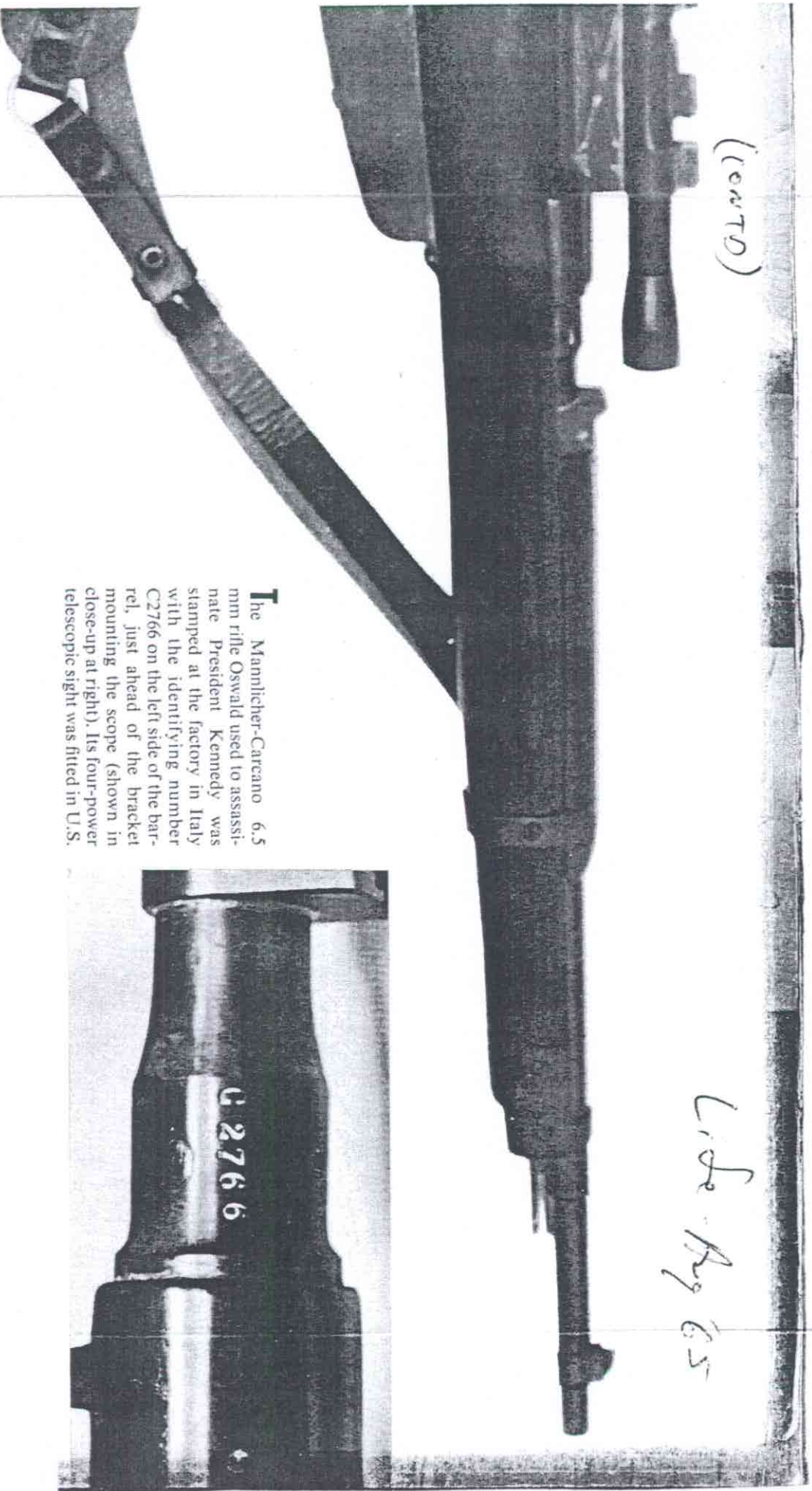
GUNS CONTINUED

Life - Aug 65
The \$19.95 rifle Oswald bought by mail

TRACK OF G2766 'CURSED GUN'—THE

by KEITH WHEELER





(contd)

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The Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm rifle Oswald used to assassinate President Kennedy, was stamped at the factory in Italy with the identifying number C2766 on the left side of the barrel, just ahead of the bracket mounting the scope (shown in close-up at right). Its four-power telescopic sight was fitted in U.S.



What follows is the history of the most infamous mail-order gun of all time. The gun carries an indelible identity: the number C2766.

The history of C2766 began a quarter-century ago. At that time Italy was flailing around trying to fit herself to fight in a war that obviously was already too big for Mussolini's vainglorious bratches. A government arsenal at Terni 50 miles north of Rome was turning out rifles whose design had not changed much since 1891. The weapons were not especially admirable as military man-killers but they were cheap. They cost the Italian government 313 lire (\$16) each and they were as like one another as a handful of shingle nails—except for one fact.

Near the end of the manufacturing process, on each of these mass-produced and otherwise identical machines, a gunsmith stamped a serial number on the upper left quadrant of the barrel near the receiver. Sometime in 1940, the gunsmith's dies branded C2766 for all time.

For years C2766 languished in unprepossessing obscurity. Then, on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas, it made its way into history. In Italy, where people were painfully aware of the gun's origin, C2766 came to be called *il fucile maledetto*—that "cursed gun."

Cursed it was. C2766 would never be allowed to fall back into oblivion—no more than would the pistol Booth used to kill President Lincoln. The proof came last May 24 when a Denver oilman and gun fancier named John Joseph King sued U.S. Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach for its physical possession. In acts pursuant to this court action, King raised the value of old and battered C2766 to at least \$45,000.

Nobody contended that C2766 has anything like this intrinsic value; indeed, its price in the marketplace had once fallen as low as \$3.60. King himself has spoken of it as "a hunk of junk." Other authorities might not quite agree. One, of impeccable credentials, has called it "a very strong, sturdy rifle," though suffering some flaws of mechanism and crudely finished. Robert A. Frazier, an FBI firearms specialist who test-fired the gun, has testified that "It is a very accurate weapon."

Cruel as it may be, C2766 has a distinguished lineage. Technically C2766 is described as a Mannlicher-Carcano Model 91/38, caliber 6.5 mm. The gun's progenitor was a brilliant 19th Century Austrian gun designer, Ferdinand Ritter von Mannlicher. The best known of his several contributions to weaponry, made in 1880, was the first successful system for clip-loading a repeating rifle. Mannlicher's system—with progressive modifications—is still in use today. The World War II Garand M1 employed a version of his device.

The Mannlicher system spread throughout Europe. The Italians adopted it in 1891 and at the Torino Arms Factory two men, M. Carcano and a Colonel Parravicino, made certain modifications, particularly in the design of the bolt action. Subsequently, the Italians put the weapon through at least 15 modifications but for 60-odd years the basic action remained practically unchanged. Mussolini even caused to be produced a lightweight, bayonet-equipped version of the Mannlicher-Carcano that would help make warriors out of children as young as six. The thing

shot blanks, but the bayonet was businesslike.

C2766 is a short-barreled 1938 version of the old design. It is a bastard bit of gunsmithery. Mussolini's armorers had come to the conclusion that, while the Mannlicher-Carcano's standard 6.5 mm ammunition might be satisfactory for slaughtering Ethiopian tribesmen, something heftier would be desirable if Il Duce proposed to gobble up a share of Europe. Therefore in 1938 the design was modified for the gun to fire a more lethal 7.35 mm slug. The notion, like many another conceived in Italy in those days, was disastrous. With distressing frequency Italian ordnance delivered new-sized bullets to outfits equipped with old-sized guns, or vice versa. By the time C2766 came off the line at Terni in 1940, a prudent decision had reduced the bore back to the more modest 6.5 mm for which ammunition was in more plentiful supply. Thus C2766 ended up having the appearance of a heftier weapon than it really is.

What happened to C2766 in the years immediately after it left the arsenal has become impossible to trace. Arsenal records were sketchy to start with, and in any case most files were destroyed in the chaos that followed Italy's surrender in September 1943—burned perhaps by infuriated Germans, scared Italian commanders or outraged civilians tasting the sweet, destructive fruits of liberation.

It seems probable, however, that C2766 did experience some wartime use—either as a lowly train-

ing weapon, a symbol of authority riding on the shoulder of a *carabiniere* (national cop), or in actual combat. Perhaps, in the succession of Italy's calamities at arms, it may have been abandoned on some battlefield. An eminent Italian journalist connected by blood with persons high in Italy's present military hierarchy put this matter with delicacy: "You will understand that a brave man must often retreat. And that when he retreats, he does not wish to be impeded by a heavy rifle." With sling and bayonet, C2766 weighed nine pounds.

When FBI firearms expert Frazier testified about it, he said, "The stock is worn, scratched. The bolt is relatively smooth, as if it had been operated several times. . . . The barrel is—was not, when we first got it, in excellent condition. It was, I would say, in fair condition. In other words, it showed the effects of wear and corrosion . . . it is a surplus type of weapon."

After the surrender, amid the ingathering of Italy's futile old weapons, C2766 found its way home to Terni and for years it lay sterile in the military warehouse there.

It emerged again into the light in 1960 when the Italian Ministry of Defense took it in mind to sell off 570,745 old rifles. Bids were asked and an American organization styling itself Adam Consolidated Industries, Inc., domiciled at Via Sirte 62, Rome, won the contract. The prices for the rifles in this sale ranged from \$3.60 per unit, for the relatively new type represented by C2766, down to \$1.12 for older models bench-

marked between 1891 and World War I. Adam Consolidated committed itself to pay the Italian government a total of \$1,776,658.54 and, as evidence of good faith, presented guarantees of \$592,000 from the Banco di Roma.

The guns were, of course, not all in usable condition. But in Brescia in northern Italy, a man named Luciano Riva maintained a small factory to renovate such weapons. Riva contracted with Adam Consolidated to recondition, process, pack and ship rifles at a price of \$1.72 per unit. He bought a bigger plant in the village of Storo and eventually he shipped 44,490 guns from Milan, Naples and Genoa to New York. Before the contract was completed, however, Riva and the American firm fell out. He claimed back pay was owing him and Adam Consolidated complained that his work was so slow they were missing the American market. Moreover, they alleged his work was so unsatisfactory that many guns would not fire. The case is still in litigation before the Tribunale di Roma. (Adam shortly found another renovator to replace Riva and, according to available invoices, went on to import another 80,835 weapons into the U.S. through the end of October 1963.)

In any event the old C2766 was among the weapons worked on by Riva. It was refurbished at Storo—though not so thoroughly as to erase all the scars of war. And it was included in the very last of 12 shipments Riva dispatched to Adam Consolidated.

It left the Storo plant on Sept. 28, 1960 aboard a truck bound for the port of Genoa, with a police guard fore and aft as Italian law demands for all movements of weapons, loaded or innocent. Two days later the shipment departed Italy aboard the steamer *Elettra Fassio*. Seventeen days later *Elettra Fassio* made landfall in New York harbor and tied up in Jersey City. By Oct. 24 the weapons had been signed into a bonded warehouse, Harborside Terminal on the Jersey shore. C2766 was in a crate containing nine other rifles of the same model. The crate, as recorded on itself and on the manifest, was No. 3376. The nine other weapons nested in Cosmoline along with C2766 bore these serial numbers: AK2305, W4818, AZ3854, I1867, A12842, W9932, AM5143, I2564 and Y6305.

The commercial transmission belt by which this particular rifle was transported from the stores of surplus arms in postwar Europe to the U.S. marketplace—and delivered, ultimately, into the hands of a unique human misfit—has a curious and complex history. Its beginnings, incongruously enough, were in the incorporation of Adam Hat Stores, Inc., under New York law on July 17, 1924. Adam Hat is perhaps best remembered for its radio sponsorship of championship fights from Madison Square Garden. Meanwhile a family headed by one Max Leitman had gone into the junk and retail tire business in Jacksonville, Fla. In 1946, Max's son, Harold N., moved the core of the family enterprise to New York and when Adam Hat

fell into fiscal distress, he bought them out in 1954. Two years later, in 1956, the name of the combined firm was changed to Adam Consolidated Industries, Inc.

Adam Consolidated, as has been noted, at one time had an office at Via Sirte 62, Rome, and was the entity which did business with gun restorer Luciano Riva.

Adam Consolidated became a bewilderingly diversified enterprise. Its main business was selling tires through outlets in such substantial emporiums as R. H. Macy. But it had other irons in the fire as well. At one time the company had at least 17 wholly or partly owned subsidiaries. Traffic in firearms was never formally listed among the company's activities.

Adam Consolidated had another corporate peculiarity—changing its name. The style Adam Consolidated was dropped in 1959 in favor of Vanderbilt Tire & Rubber Co., Inc. Finally it became VTR, Inc., which it is today. VTR, Inc. is listed on the American Stock Exchange.

Another link in the chain that eventually brought C2766 down to dishonor was forged in December 1959 when a firm named Crescent Firearms, Inc. was chartered under New York law. All the guns imported by Adam Consolidated wound up being invoiced to Crescent for distribution here.

Nowhere of record does there exist any formal connection between Crescent Firearms, Inc. and Adam Consolidated, now VTR. All the same, the firms have interesting relationships. VTR has its offices on the sixth floor at 404 Fifth Avenue, New York. Crescent Firearms, Inc. maintains itself at 2

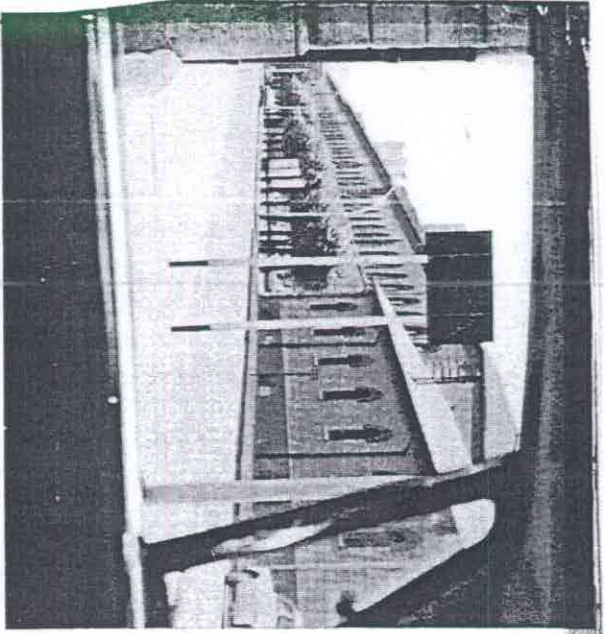
West 37th St., New York. It is the same building, same floor, same receptionist and the same telephone number, WI7-4700.

The two firms have enjoyed other detectable intimacies. The vice president, secretary and treasurer of VTR is Joseph Saik, an attorney, and as late as 1964 VTR's comptroller was one Irving Weiss. Saik is also the secretary-treasurer of Crescent Arms and Weiss is comptroller there.

Another set of recurrent names has attached itself to the saga of C2766. These are Louis and Irving Feldsott, brothers. When the Italian gun restorer Riva made his deal with Adam Consolidated, he made it with Louis Feldsott. Louis Feldsott is president of Crescent Firearms and treasurer of H.&D. Folsom Arms Co., Inc., 154 Ludlow St., Yonkers, N.Y. His brother, Irving, is a vice president of H.&D. Folsom. It is difficult—well, impossible—to find anybody around Crescent Firearms or VTR who admits to being well informed about either C2766 or the firearms business in general. Inquiries made there are likely to be referred to Irving Feldsott out in Yonkers. Irving is polite but says he is unable to be of much assistance.

"The night after the President was shot, the FBI came down from White Plains and we gave them all our records. Don't have anything here. Sorry," he says.

To turn again to such records as are available, by Oct. 24, C2766 was resting in a bonded warehouse in Jersey City, N.J. The next known entry in the gun's log was not made until Feb. 21, 1963—al-



WHERE IT WAS MADE. C2766 was produced in 1940 at arsenal in Terni, Italy, which made thousands like it.

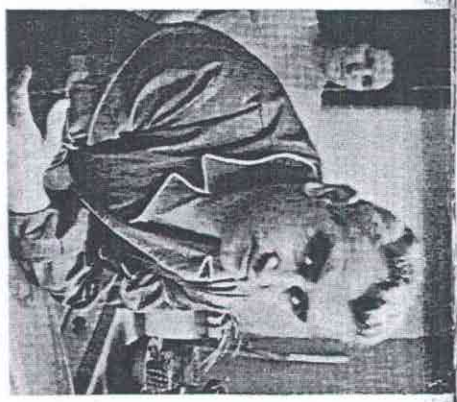
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FROM A FACTORY IN TERMI TO A COLLECTOR IN DENVER

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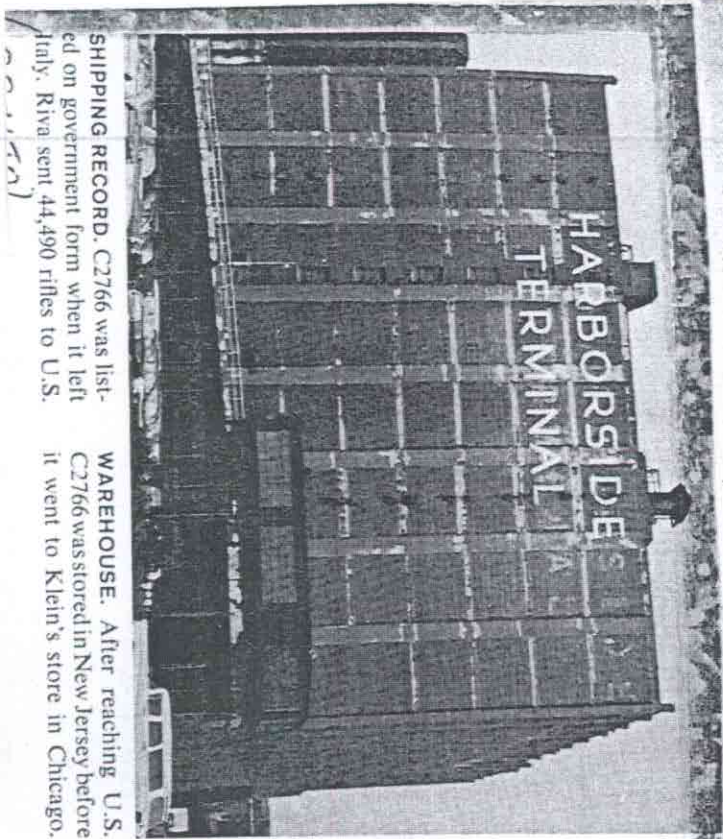


RENOVATOR. Luciano Riva (above), who is convalescing, owns the factory where C2766 was reconditioned.



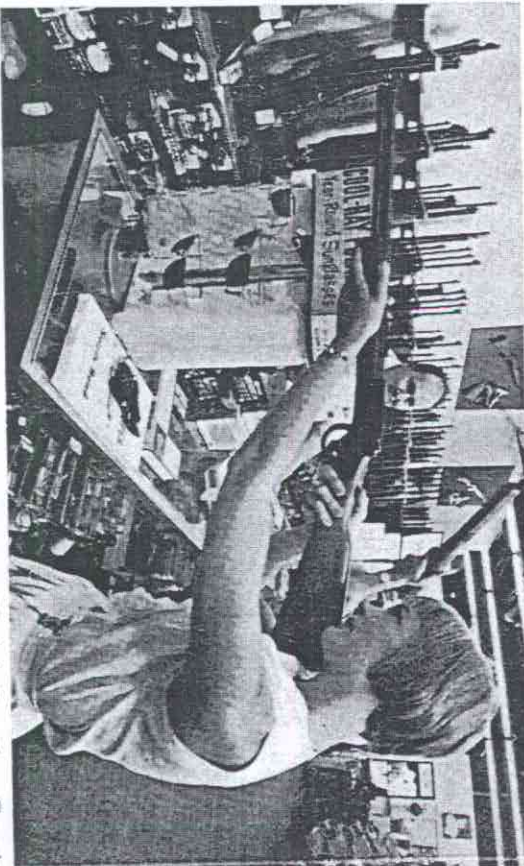
FOREMAN. Supervisor in the Stofo factory where C2766 was worked on in 1960 was Silvio Zontini (left).

926	AD 1366
AC9	DP 4845
298	BE 2811
129	BY 1815
998	Z 557
50	W 40 856
854	C 2766
67	AX 2842
597	Ab 1321
67	AM 399
342	PR 79
511	DK 5-36



SHIPPING RECORD. C2766 was listed on government form when it left Italy. Riva sent 44,490 rifles to U.S.

WAREHOUSE. After reaching U.S. C2766 was stored in New Jersey before it went to Klein's store in Chicago.



SELLER. Klein's Sporting Goods store sent C2766 off to Lee Oswald, who saw it advertised in a magazine.

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'CURSED GUN' CONTINUED

most 28 months later. On that date Crate 3376, including nine other rifles as well as C2766, was dispatched by Crescent Firearms to Klein's Sporting Goods Inc., 4540 W. Madison St., Chicago.

Klein's is a large firm doing both retail and mail-order business in general sports equipment including firearms. The firm was established in 1885 by Jacob Klein, who left the pawnbroking business to do so. It is now run by Jacob's son, Milton Paul Klein.

Klein's regularly advertises in *The American Rifleman*, which is the organ of the National Rifle Association. In February, 1963 the *Rifleman* ran a full-page ad from Klein's featuring a white-on-black headline whose message was: RECEIVED TOO LATE FOR HUNTING SEASON! KLEIN'S LOSS IS YOUR GAIN! SAVE NOW! BUT HURRY! CASH OR CREDIT. NO MONEY DOWN. 30 DAY FREE TRIAL.

The ad was illustrated. The third item down in the left of two columns offered: "6.5 ITALIAN CARBINE. Only 36" overall, weighs only 5½ lbs. Shows only slight use, lightly oiled, test fired and head spaced, ready for shooting. Turned down bolt, thumb safety, 6-shot clip fed. Rear open sight. Fast loading and fast firing. Specially priced. . . . \$12.88. Carbine with brand new good quality 4X scope—¾" diameter as illustrated. . . . \$19.95."

The telescopic sights, it later developed, were fitted to the weapons by one of Klein's gunsmiths. It was his habit to use only two of the three available screw holes on the scope mount and to tap the

rifle barrel to receive larger screws than the scope was originally intended to employ. The sights were 4-power, manufactured in Japan but stamped with the name Ordnance Optics, Inc., Hollywood, Calif. These sights have since been described as cheap and they probably were. But they were apparently good enough. In answering a question about finding the target with C2766, firearms expert Frazier has testified: "It would not be difficult at all with a telescopic sight because your target is enlarged four times, and you can estimate very quickly in a telescopic sight, inches or feet or lead of any desired amount."

On March 13, 1963, in answer to its ad, Klein's received a money order for \$21.45 (to include postage) and a coupon clipped from the lower right-hand corner of the ad, ordering a Mannlicher-Carcano with scope. Money order and coupon were in the name of A. Hidell, Post Office Box 2915, Dallas, Texas. On March 20, 1963, the gun numbered C2766 was mailed, parcel post, to Customer Hidell without demur. There was no reason for demur; there was no law against it.

The real name behind A. Hidell was, of course, Lee Harvey Oswald. Nobody knows for sure how much practice Oswald ever had with C2766. There have been some indications that he took it to a rifle range. He also obtained a supply of ammunition especially chambered for the weapon by the Western Cartridge Co. of East Alton, Ill. The bullets had been made to supply U.S. allies in Scandinavia at a time when they were contemplating equipping their forces with the Mannlicher-Car-

canos. But more modern firearms made the cartridges obsolete. They were then reimported to the U.S. two million strong. Such ammunition was, and is, freely available.

Whatever the previous combat record of C2766, it was now at last to be fired in anger. The event came on the night of April 10 in Dallas when Oswald squeezed one off at Major General Edwin A. Walker, U.S. Army, Resigned, through a window in the general's home. Oswald missed.

C2766, as we know, ejected three more shots in anger on Nov. 22 from a sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository. This time Oswald's aim was true. Afterwards, C2766 was found half hidden there.

A lot of people were watching television around 11:20 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 24, 1963. John J. King of Denver was among them. It was 10:20 a.m., Mountain Time when he—with the other millions—looked on as a frenzied Jack Ruby aimed a Colt .38 revolver at Lee Harvey Oswald's midriff and killed him. In some ways King's reaction was the universal one of fascinated shock—in other ways very different.

John J. King is not a usual man. A Westerner and the son of an oilman, he is an Annapolis graduate who stayed with the Navy until 12 years ago when he resigned because he yearned for the adventure of his father's business. He now holds federal oil exploration leases on 100,000 acres on the north slope of Alaska above the Arctic Circle. At 43, he brims with energy, self-confidence and hobbies to which he is dedicated. His shoes

are made by Peals and Co. Ltd. of London. And he admires guns. Generally, he admires modern weapons crafted by the world's greatest gunsmiths. His gun racks in the village of Cherry Hills glow with double-barreled rifles and shotguns made by Westley Richards and Holland & Holland of England. "They are jewels," he says.

Now, on this Sunday, for the first time in his life, he lusted after a junk gun. The object was C2766—and he lusted immediately.

From long working acquaintanceships with lawyers, King had become moderately well versed in the law. Watching TV, he began to think like an attorney. "I had been subconsciously under the impression that Oswald would be convicted and that the weapon would therefore revert to the state," he recalls. "I was reading this in the context of Colorado law, not really being a lawyer. But when Ruby shot Oswald, it all of a sudden struck me in a blinding flash that under American jurisprudence, Lee Harvey Oswald is forever innocent. He has not been convicted and you are not guilty until you've been tried and there's no way to try him.

"This led me to the conclusion that Oswald might still own the Kennedy gun—or his estate might. So I called up my good friend Bill Garrett, who was a lawyer in Dallas. Bill put an associate on it and he briefed the hell out of it and came up in two days and said—no question about it, that gun belongs to Lee Harvey Oswald."

Over the next year King learned a lot more about Texas law—and the law in general: 1. Under Texas law the weapon would not have reverted to the state even had Oswald lived to be convicted. 2. Texas is a community-property state, and since Oswald died without making a will, community property acquired during marriage would revert to the spouse. 3. The administrator of a community-property estate has a right to dispose of the

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estate's assets in order to meet the estate's obligations, without referral to probate court.

Meanwhile, King lost no time. On Dec. 4, 1963, 13 days after the President's death, he wrote Mrs. Marina Oswald in care of the U.S. Secret Service in Dallas to this effect: "I am advised by my Dallas attorneys that your present whereabouts is being kept secret but that mail will reach you at the above address. I am most anxious to discuss with you a thoroughly legitimate business proposition which cannot be handled through correspondence—one which involves thousands of dollars for you. . . ."

But making actual contact with Marina Oswald took time. At first all negotiations were arms-length between King's representatives and Marina's, but the process was complicated by frequent changes in Marina's spokesmen; they kept getting fired. Finally in July 1964 King sent his own representative.

"He walked up and pressed the doorbell and got her out of bed at 10 o'clock in the morning and said he wanted to chat with her," King remembers. "She tried to close the door but he said he'd come all the way from Denver to talk to her, so she let him in and turned on the hi-fi and made him some coffee. He got her signature."

It was not all that simple, however. Negotiations dragged on for months. There was a question of total future validity of Marina's title to her husband's estate. Her lawyers arranged for Marina to file a formal intention to become a U.S. citizen. That done, it was arranged for her to be formally appointed administratrix of the community property by the Probate Court in Dallas. As such she had the right to dispose of the estate.

But Marina was unwilling to kick up her heels and demand her rights in a strange country. "She was very reluctant about pressing these things," King remembers. "We tried to get it done in her name but she wouldn't stand hitched for that. She was afraid they would

cut her off at the pass someplace. Her desire all the time was to become a citizen of the U.S. and she was afraid to get too tough with any of these bureaucrats for fear they might, just whoosh, send her back off to Minsk."

Marina may have been bashful about asserting her rights, but that didn't mean she wasn't resentful about the manner in which the FBI had gathered up artifacts left behind by her husband, King recalls. The authorities had also taken her Russian-language cookbook in which she had made notes and between the leaves of which she kept her children's birth certificates. The FBI didn't want to give it back, King says.

Then came the question of price. What was C2766 worth? Obviously its intrinsic value was the \$21.45 Oswald had paid for it—or something in that neighborhood. But now C2766 was no longer some forgotten Italian private's G.I. issue; it was a piece of history.

The price was finally agreed upon. Marina Oswald wanted \$50,000. King was willing to pay that, but ahead loomed the possibility, the likelihood rather, that Marina would have to go to court to get possession. The lawyers thought a law suit might cost \$10,000. In the end they agreed to split the difference; Marina would get \$45,000 and King would pay the full cost of any suit. On New Year's Eve last, Marina signed the bill of sale. King paid her \$5,000 cash at once and later another \$5,000 and committed himself to pay the other \$35,000 whenever delivery could be effected. Thus Oswald, the life-long failure, finally left an estate.

Now King could finally get the gun—he thought. But letters to the Justice Department, Chief Justice Warren, the FBI, the Archivist of the United States and personal visits and demands by King and his representatives have thus far failed to produce results. The government has declined even to dis-

cuss the matter with him. King does not, in fact, now know where C2766 is being held, or by whom. And so, late in May, he sued Attorney General Katzenbach in U.S. District Court in Denver for its physical possession.

The Attorney General did not reply. The court had given him 60 days to reply and has since granted an additional 30 days continuance. Instead, on June 29 last, Colorado Representative Byron G. Rogers introduced in Congress a bill, H.R. 9545, which would empower the Attorney General to decide which items among the evidence concerning the President's assassination should be acquired by the United States. King demanded that he be permitted to testify before the judiciary subcommittee considering the bill and was advised that he might. However, on Aug. 13 Representative Rogers advised him that the subcommittee had decided against holding public hearings "and hence you will not be extended the privilege of testifying. . . ."

King's suit, as it happened, disturbed the composure of another John King, who, by chance, lives across the road from him in the exclusive Denver suburb of Cherry Hills, who belongs to the same Cherry Hills Country Club, who is also in the oil business, who also maintains offices in Denver's new ultramodern Security Life Building, and who is also a gun collector by hobby. The second King—no relation—is John M. King, as opposed to John J. On July 4 last, John M. expressed his dismay in a press release which said: ". . . I am . . . writing to disassociate my name and intentions from that of John J. King who is now allegedly suing the federal government for possession of the assassination weapon.

"As a Christian, an American and a registered Republican, I deeply deplore the untimely passing of our great young President. I hold the instrument of his murder in repugnance and would not under any conceiva-

ble circumstances wish to own it."

Why, then, does John J. King wish to own it?

"I wanted to keep it out of the hands of the wax museum crowd. I knew they would be after it. Why, some bastard even offered her \$150,000 to exhume Oswald's body and travel around the country with it. I've signed it into the bill of sale with Mrs. Oswald that it'll never be exhibited publicly in her lifetime in any state where she resides. It belongs in a proper museum. I'm a Navy man. Kennedy was a Navy man—even though he was Reserve. I'm touched by that. I owe the Navy a lot. I really believe it belongs in the Naval Academy Museum—either there or in the Kennedy Museum they're building in Massachusetts. The point is that it's my property; I own it. The federal government does not. I'd rather trust myself to see that it goes to the proper place than trust some damned bureaucrat. How do I know they won't let it go to the wax museum crowd?"

Il fucile maledetto. That cursed gun. Cursed indeed. C2766, in which particular hall or special hell does it belong? *END*

GUN FANCIER. John J. King bought C2766 from Marina Oswald and is suing the U.S. for possession of it.

