

The Man from Montana

by Dave Pickford

I've been handgunning for over 20 years now and was rather upset by the moves of our elected officials in 2003/2004 to put a stop to the sport as a result of a school shooting in Melbourne. Rather than fall over and take it like many did, I decided to use my financial windfall from selling a few handguns at the buyback centre, to increase the number of guns in my safe. Throughout 2004 I used the taxpayers dollars to purchase a top line security system, a couple of rifles, a shotgun, some barrels for my Contender pistols, a rare .41 Magnum Ruger and a couple of handmade knives. With the remaining money I decided to have an old and well worn stainless .357 Magnum Ruger Blackhawk refurbished to use in the scoped division of Metallic Silhouette.

Years ago I'd bought a custom .44 Magnum and I thought I'd like a similar gun to that. The 44 was originally a blued revolver that, many years ago, was given by its original owner, as a project, to the apprentices at the old railway yards in Launceston. Their job was to stipple the grip frame, selectively bead blast parts of the frame, barrel and cylinder then have the whole gun hard chromed. Could you imagine the furore nowadays if you dropped a gun of at a TAFE or the like for students to work on! The daily media would cast you as the devil incarnate and guilty of trying to encourage another school shooting. The railway yards and apprentices are no longer, so I needed a gunsmith.

Selecting one for this job was a no brainer. It had to be Alex Beer from Montana, Tasmania. Alex has been a gunsmith since before I first met him about 17 years ago and is one of those people you will only ever meet once in your life, if you are lucky. I watched him build a double rifle, virtually from lumps of steel, walnut and self-drawn diagrams and the result is as good as anything you will buy regardless of the money you spend. At this point in time I don't know another gunsmith in Australia that could do what he can and, as such he was my only choice for the project I had in mind.

With most projects such as this you need to find a gunsmith for the actual firearm, then a woodworker for the stock etc. etc. Not so with Alex. He can do it all; he did it on his double, that's a gun that has to be seen to be believed. With his wife Laura being an American by birth, we're damn lucky we haven't seen him shift to a country that respects and appreciates craftsmen such as him.

After a phone call to ask if he was interested, I think I left one very frustrated and annoyed person sitting in his workshop; I was a gunsmiths worst nightmare, apart from saying I wanted this gun to be bead blasted, set up for scope use and to run 180 grain projectiles, I refused to give him a budget or to say what else I wanted done to the gun.

"Grips and grip shape?" - "Don't care Alex";

"Barrel Length?" - "Don't care Alex";

"You're a pain in the arse Pickford!"

"Don't care Alex, build what ever you like, this is to be an example of your abilities, and best of all John Howard is paying so go for it."

After about 6 months, a few progress payments and a heap of phone calls from either Alex or friends in Tassie telling me what was happening with my gun, Alex phoned. "It does go bang big fella" were his first words. It was ready to be shipped back to me; I couldn't wait, my wife and I booked on to the Spirit of Tasmania ferryboat and drove from Devonport to his to his farm at Montana, just outside of Deloraine, that week.

At first glance what I got for near on two grand was a satin finished long barrelled Ruger. A closer look revealed Alex's eye for working art; every edge is subtly smoothed, the grip frame has been cut and filed to be more upright like the Bisley frame to improve recoil absorption yet it still retains that beauty that is the Colt Peacemaker appearance, the standard Ruger grips were ditched in favour of some Alex carved out. These with a more pronounced palm swell whilst the bases are thinned down to allow a better grip with the little and ring fingers; this is how Elmer Keith, the father of the .44 Magnum, designed all his

single action grips as it allows very small grips that completely fill your hand whereas standard grips only allow your average persons hands to grip the butt at the top and bottom of the grips; unless of course you grip so hard it is actually detrimental to your gun skills.

To tighten things up and reduce cylinder slack, the base pin was replaced with a #5 Keith style locking oversize pin from Belt Mountain. The internals had been cleaned up and polished, and when the hammer was drawn back, everything felt smooth yet crisp. A bush was made up and fitted to remove cylinder endshake. The cylinder was faced and each chamber was numbered and a free spin pawl from Power Custom fitted to allow quicker loading and unloading of the cylinder; the days of doing my nut because I turned the cylinder to far to eject the case and have to go all the way around again are long gone now.

He also helped Telstra's bottom line with a bit of international telephone time between himself and Hamilton Bowen and the staff at Bowen Classic Arms Corp in America, (quite possibly America's best custom revolver makers) to get the low down on the latest ideas about what makes Ruger single actions tick like a Rolex.

The fit and finish of this revolver has to be seen to be appreciated, all screws were faced off and the slots aligned, where the grip frame and grips join there is absolutely no gaps, run your nail across them and you wont feel any difference whilst going from wood to metal back to wood, the ejector rod head has been chequered and the rod housing has been filled at the end, and to finish off, all edges carefully detailed. Like I said, subtle changes but changes none the less and all serve a function. The scope mount is a one-piece unit from Jack Weigand fitted with a 4x Simmons long eye relief scope. A surprisingly excellent scope for the money that will fill the void till my Leupold arrives.

Alex had fired a handful of test shots but left it to me to take the gun to the Van Diemens Pistol Range in Launceston for a serious testing session. This range is a beauty, it has over 200 members and is situated only a few kilometres from Launceston in an old quarry; it shoots every handgun discipline apart from Metallic Silhouette; and that issue is being resolved as you read this with a new 100-metre range being built.

The clubhouse incorporates an air pistol hall with bays for about 10 shooters, and a meeting area that can sit over 80 people at one time with full catering facilities, including a fully stocked licensed bar. In addition, it can operate 7 days a week 24 hours a day. If you're ever in Launceston call in at one of the local gun shops and ask them to put you in touch with a club member if you're up for a visit.

Along with a heap of the donor guns favourite ammo consisting of 158gn XTPs over 16.5gns of W296 in front CCI Magnum primers I had a couple of packets of Federal .357 jacketed ammo. Despite knowing this was only a running in session and that the gun was set up for 180 grain plus weight projectiles I was disappointed with groups of 5 and 6 inches at 50 metres. Alex reassured me this revolver would shoot once it was all run in and had the correct weight projectiles steaming out the end.

Just before leaving Tassie I called in to see Rodney at RK Projectiles in Launceston, and picked up several hundred Starline .357 cases and some buckets of his home-grown 180 grain hard cast non gas checked projectiles. Rodney has been in the bullet casting business for some years now but only recently has the word spread that if you want to drive uncoated cast projectiles without gas checks at rifle speeds without leading and with industry leading accuracy, RKs are the numero uno; he has developed a special blend of lead and additives that are mixed for him in Melbourne and it's shipped over to him by the tonne.

Once home I paid Travis from the Marksman Centre in Shepparton a call, not only show off my latest toy, but to pick up a couple of kilos of W296, AR2205 and AP70 and several hundred 180 grain Hornady XTPs. Travis's primary business is reloading ammo for those that don't roll their own but he also stocks what is possibly country Victoria's largest range of reloading components and equipment, factory ammunition and shot shells and all of it at or below what it costs anywhere else in Melbourne. His shop is also a great place for a chat and he always has the time to stop for a yak.

Since opening his shop he has probably got more people involved in the SSAA than any other person in the area; he will even encourage shooters into the SSAA by utilising his own time and resources to make phone calls, send faxes or fill out membership applications for people.

Now came the fun, locking myself in the reloading room for the best part of an afternoon I started assembling the bits. Using both Australian and American reloading books and starting at their base loads I loaded five rounds per weight of powder up to the books recommended maximum loads. The way I work out my loads is to start at say 10 grains then 10.5 then 11 and so on, up to the max load. Then it's out to the range and over a sandbag to find out which load is the most accurate. I then return home and starting just below the most accurate load work up to the next weight by .1 increments. So if 11.5 gns was the most accurate of the original loads my next tests would be on rounds holding 11.1, 11.2 and so on up to 12 grains.

A quick trip to the SSAA range at Shepparton and about 100 rounds later I had my loads. In the case of the 180 grain RK projectiles, I now run 7 grains of AP100 for 1000fps in the field pistol event and either 13 grains of W296 or 13.5 grains of AR2205 for about 1300fps in the 200 metre shoots. All of these loads group sizes have been getting tighter and tighter as I push more shots down the barrel and on average six shots will now all be less than 3" at a 100 metres over a sandbag. Now I just have to learn to hold the gun unsupported steady enough to hit those bloody lumps of steel!

With the 180 grain XTPs the groups are tighter still at about 1" with both AR2205 and W296, boy can Alex build em. This is rifle type accuracy. My loadings on these are substantially overloaded according to the reloading manuals at 16gns but there are no pressure signs either from cratered primers or by case expansion and they are hitting a comfortable 1500fps. With the 158gn XTPs and Nosler JHPs I've had loads of over 19gns without any problems. Remember, I only take responsibility for loads I myself load. If you load these loads straight up in your guns, you are on your own. Elmer Keith put it something like this, "Remember Brother, I assume the risk and consequences of only such of these loads as I have assembled myself". I can only suppose the reason for the gun swallowing a hell of a lot more powder now than it did in its factory finish is that Alex's work on the cylinder and forcing cone and the slow barrel twist has reduced some of the pressure. There again that doesn't explain how high the projectile speeds are for their given weight. Whatever the reason I don't know, but I do know I can now run the same loads as a mate does in his Freedom Arms, a gun costing near on twice what this did. These will be brilliant loads to use when hunting in those places that allow handgun hunting, sadly at present Victoria isn't one of them. Fingers crossed for the future.

This is the sweetest shooting sixgun I have ever shot. For years I questioned people's sanity in buying a \$70,000 Falcon GT or Commodore Clubsport in preference to a \$30,000 base car as they both get you from point A to point B. I now understand; it's what happens in between that makes the investment worthwhile.

If you had a similar gun built you won't get any change out of \$2000.00. Many will think I'm an idiot for spending that sort of money on a Ruger; the reality is though I now have a one of a kind hand built gun that can hold its own alongside the Freedom Arms and the Korths, guns that cost two or three times as much as this. My only problem now is finding another donor Blackhawk and another couple of grand or so to have a matching gun built, but this time with open sights.

Since then, whilst waiting for the next Blackhawk to come along, I gave him my .22 Ruger Single Six to have the barrel chopped back level with the ejector housing to fix a factory flawed crown and to bead blast the polished stainless finish. With this one, it has gone from 6" groups at 25 metres with flyers outside that all the time, to groups of two inches or less at 25 metres with Winchester or PMC JHP .22 magnums. I suspect he may have tweaked the internals a bit also, as it feels a bit slicker, but maybe it's just me feeling better about owning a nicer gun.

In the final wash, Alex has given me all I asked for and then a whole lot more. I can't recommend him more highly to anyone if you want any work done on a firearm and it has to be perfect. Keep an eye out for this master gunsmith, his reputation can only grow and I have no doubt it will spread overseas. I know that Hamilton Bowen thinks very highly of Alex's talents and skills as a gunsmith. I reckon, if the Yanks could, they would make sure he moves over there. Make sure it doesn't happen.

Dave Pickford.