

***Monday 12<sup>th</sup> June marks the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the birth of AMACS. This is my perspective of our incredible story and our influence on both national and international stages. It is also an appeal for support over the next two years to bring our community's dream to fruition.***

My involvement in the world of firearms came about through my fascination with historical arms and militaria. I was just eleven when I acquired the first military collectible, an Italian marine's steel helmet that was picked up in North Africa in 1942. I treasure it to this day as the foundation stone of my collection. It was not long before I acquired my first firearm, a rusty WWII Browning Mk.II aircraft machine gun, which was purchased on my late father's licence.

Collecting put me in contact with interesting people all over the world. Over the next fifteen years I was buying and exchanging militaria at a growing pace until in 1985 I was faced with the prospects of Parliamentary Bill that proposed taxing collectibles upon import into Malta. It was this threat to my passion that changed the course of my life and led me to take an active public role in defence of collectors. On 12 June 1985, I called a meeting for friends who shared my passion. It was the birth of the Arms, Armour & Militaria Society (AAMS) and we were just fourteen members then. However, our enthusiasm was the driving force behind a coalition of collector organisations from all sectors that lobbied for the withdrawal of this Bill. We succeeded.

We next turned our attention to firearms, which were severely restricted by the 1931 Arms Ordinance that gave absolute discretionary powers to the Police. The prevailing attitude to firearms was far from favourable: although firearm ownership was widespread as a result of our Islands' rich military history, the subject was taboo and importation of any firearm other than hunting shotguns was forbidden. Something had to be done.

AAMS met this challenge by succeeding in gradually breaking the ice through the organisation of public exhibitions featuring firearms in their historical context. We invited politicians, police and army officers to our events. We provided them with tangible proof that responsible firearm ownership by passionate enthusiasts did not pose the slightest threat to public security.

In 1989, we organised the first-ever muzzle-loading event and promoted it as a re-enactment event to secure a Police permit with Army support. It worked: we established target shooting in Malta and with it, inadvertently, historical re-enactment.

The time had come to turn our attention to the obsolete Arms Ordinance and its outdated restrictions. Our persuasive lobbying led to the establishment of a Cabinet-approved policy in 1996, permitting the importation of modern muzzle-loaders, airguns and most importantly, any type of firearm that was fifty years old or over. We gave local collectors the opportunity to link up with the world to enhance their collections.

Still, this was not enough. The 1931 Ordinance did not live up to current realities. Sport shooting with pistols and rifles could not be practiced. A totally new law was required. The Parliamentary Secretary for Sports, Michael Frendo, had the foresight to recognise the benefits that this sport could bring to Malta. He invited me to set up a working group to propose a new law. I looked up the 1991 EU Arms Directive to use it as the basis of our proposal and we set to work drafting a Bill. Malta was not yet an EU member at the time, yet it appeared logical to align our laws with European ones. We studied the regulations of several EU Member States to come up with the most sensible draft. A series of twists and turns resulting from changes in government, ministries and officials delayed the process but we never gave up. Home Affairs Minister Tonio Borg finally tabled the Bill in Parliament in 2005 and it

received almost unanimous approval from both sides of the House. The new Arms Act came into force with the publication of the Arms Licensing Regulations on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2006. Malta could boast of having the most modern and sensible firearm law in the EU that had been drafted by passion and tempered with responsibility.

By this time, AAMS had evolved into an association of clubs, the Association of Maltese Arms Collectors and Shooters (AMACS). Membership exceeded five hundred. AMACS had affiliated itself with several international bodies, including IPSC (dynamic shooting), NRA (all sport shooting disciplines) and FESAC (arm collecting). I served as a legislative director with the former and as a board member representing Malta and a legislative official with the latter. This brought me into direct contact with the reality of EU politics and the Firearms Directive.

Upon being appointed to the Chair of FESAC, I was immediately drawn into the negotiations and lobbying taking place in Brussels with the aim of amending the Directive and restricting firearm ownership across the EU. We defended our position with the utmost tenacity and the resulting revision of 2008 did not have any negative consequences for legal firearm ownership. At the time, I had remarked that our success did not go down well with the clique of EU officials and national representatives that harboured an irrational fear of legal firearm ownership and the anti-gun lobby groups that influenced them.

In 2011, EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malstrom set in motion plans for an assault on legal firearm ownership. The initiative was camouflaged as a logical process to close any loopholes in the Directive. However, the true intent was to severely restrict legal firearm ownership and to ban the larger part of firearm categories. What was missing was a pretext.

The 13 November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks provided the Commission with the perfect opportunity. Five days later it presented its 'ambitious proposal' as an urgent and indispensable reaction meant to protect EU citizens. Strong in its belief that public emotion would allow it to wage Blitzkrieg and stun the entire community of firearm owners to reach its objectives in a few months, the Commission opened a war on several fronts. No one was spared; museums, collectors, sport shooters, hunters, re-enactors and practically anyone who possessed firearms legally. The Commission singled out collectors and slandered them to justify its proposal to bring them within the scope of the Directive.

The EU was in for a shock surprise: its brutal attack galvanized all European firearm organisations into action as a united defensive front. In the weeks and months that followed I led the European Sports Shooting Forum (ESSF), which is composed of all firearm sectors including the industry and the end users, in drafting a common position and presenting it to MEPs and the EU institutions. I am thankful to those Maltese MEPs who supported us and did their utmost to defend our positions.

The Commission proposal also turned a small and relatively unknown body into an EU-wide grassroots movement that bombarded MEPs and officials with emails and letters, organised conferences and set up a fighting fund to provide financial support to those fighting the Commission proposal. I have been privileged to work alongside FIREARMS UNITED and support its initiatives. This young and vibrant organisation is not hemmed in by any political borders or allegiances, consequently it does not shy away from calling a spade a spade.

It is this unity among all firearm sectors that defeated the worst elements of the Commission proposal. The final version that made it through all stages of the EU legal process is a far cry from the original destructive proposal. However, it still contains the residue of its proponents' vindictiveness, resulting in useless and cumbersome regulations that must be implemented by Member States. Our mission is to ensure that these unnecessary changes are introduced into our law with the least possible

disturbance to its adequate and sensible approach. This is the job of the new Weapons Board, which will require the presence of experienced and able members more than ever before.

The intense fight against the Commission Proposal did not distract us from two very important objectives for the local community of target shooters and firearm collectors:

Firstly, building on the excellent cooperation between AMACS and its sister association AACTS to set the up the Federation of Arms Collectors and Target Shooters – FACTS. This is now a reality and we finally have a national body that caters for all the new shooting disciplines that were introduced when the Arms Act came into force. Talks with other clubs willing to join the Federation are at an advanced stage and the future is bright. FACTS is an inclusive society that will set standards and help applicants to achieve them.

Secondly, the National Shooting Range project at Ta' Kandja that we proposed to Government is set to reach fruition. The project was announced by the previous Government and endorsed by both major parties and even two smaller ones. FACTS is now hitting the ground running to meet this challenge, which requires our focus over the next two years.

AMACS will be holding its AGM on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> June. My position as president is uncontested, hence I am privileged to serve our community for the next two years. I pledge my commitment to reach our objectives and to protect our community to the hilt. To achieve this, I need your support. Hence, I urge you to do your duty to attend the AGM and elect the right candidates to form a motivated and technical team that works towards our stated goals.

I take the opportunity to thank all the colleagues that I have had the pleasure to work with over the past years and whose contribution is firmly set in the fabric of our success. Last but certainly not least, I congratulate the Hon. Dr. Clifton Grima for his appointment as Parliamentary Secretary for Sports and the Hon. Dr. Michael Farrugia for his appointment as Minister of Home Affairs and National Security. I look forward to working with them for the benefit of our community and our country.



**Stephen A. Petroni**

President AMACS