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**K&A ARMS**

## TOMMY GUN

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WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.A.

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# THOMPSON ARMS TOMMY GUN

## HISTORY OF THE BEST-KNOWN U.S. SUBMACHINE GUN

MIKE "DUKE" VENTURINO  
PHOTOS: YVONNE VENTURINO

The Thompson submachine gun — better known as the Tommy Gun — has a long, mythical history in both popular culture and reality. Starting in 1962 gun-guys my age watched Sgt. Saunders pack his Tommy Gun all over France every week on the *Combat* TV series. More recently the movie *The Highwaymen* shows Kevin Costner as Texas Ranger Frank Hamer buying Thompsons over the counter at a Texas gun store when preparing to hunt down bandits Bonnie and Clyde.

In actual fact .45 Auto Thompson Sub-machine Guns saw relatively little action

prior to World War II and big city gangsters (mostly in the Chicago area) saddled Tommy Guns with a negative reputation in the 1920s. Their crimes, such as the murder of seven individuals on Valentine's Day 1929, were over-publicized by newspapers and cinema newsreels. When Great Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939 their army was woefully short of weaponry. Regardless some British officers resisted buying Thompson submachine guns from the United States terming them "gangster guns."

Consider this: The first 15,000 Thompson submachine guns were Model

1921s manufactured to beautiful quality standards in the Colt factory. A few thousand of them were still in inventory in 1939. Here's another fact: General John T. Thompson, after whom the submachine gun was named, had almost nothing to do with its design and manufacture!

It was his idea hand-held machine guns would make ideal "trench brooms." To this end he raised financing and founded the Auto-Ordnance Corporation, hiring engineers and draftsmen to design prototypes and having them made in Cleveland, Ohio. Until the early 1940s — after General Thompson ceased his connection with Auto-Ordnance — did the company actually have a factory. Ironically General Thompson and his descendants realized little financial benefits from the weapon named after him.

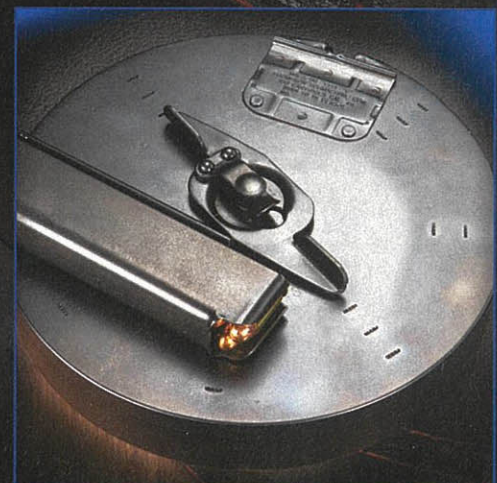
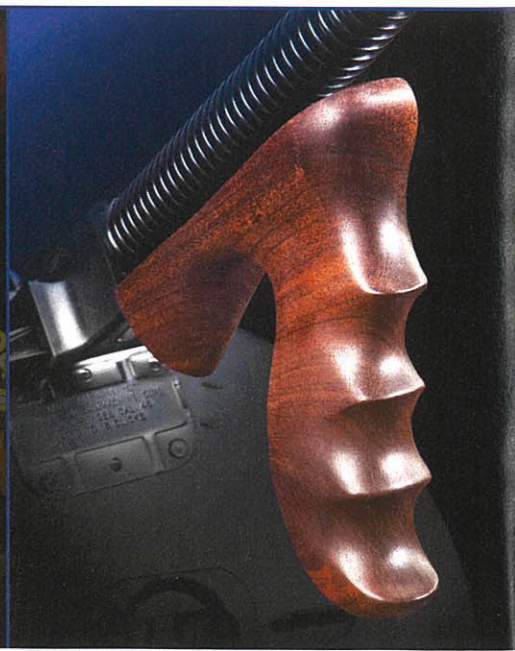
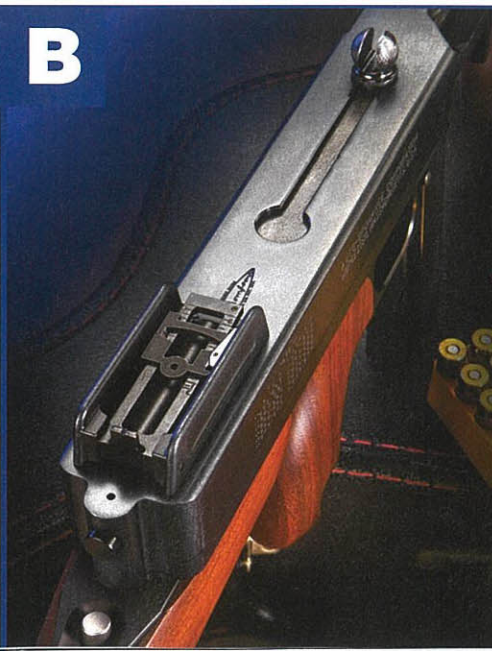
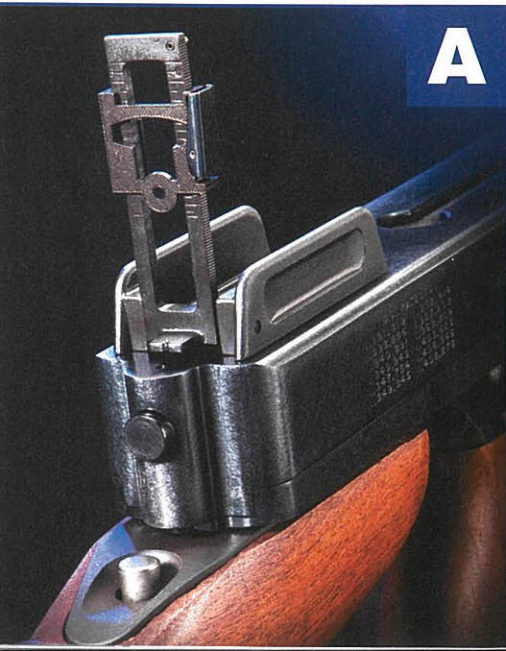
A great disappointment to General Thompson was during his lifetime, the U.S. Army showed scant interest in his brainstorm, a hand-held machinegun with a 10.5" barrel capable of both semi-auto and full-auto function. Other calibers were experimented with but the .45 Auto was its primary caliber. Various ordnance boards tested Tommy Guns, found them reliable but claimed shotguns would be

more appropriate for trench warfare.

According to the book *American Thunder II* by Frank Iannamico, in 1931 the U.S. Army Infantry Board said the Tommy Gun "has no place as a standard article of the Infantry." They did allow the weapon might be usable for riot control and guard duty. It wasn't until 1939 when the U.S. Army decided to buy 951 Model 1928 Thompson submachine guns for issue to armored vehicles.

The U.S. Marine Corps — as always willing to be out of step with the U.S. Army — welcomed Tommy Guns and requested 50- and 100-round drum magazines. They began with the Model 1921, but changes were requested by the Navy and Marines and some Model 1921s were converted. The Model 1921's rate of fire of 800/900 rounds per minute was slowed to about 700 RPM and a Cutts Compensator was attached at the muzzle to hold down muzzle

**A** The rainbow trajectory of the .45 ACP round required a complex and fragile Lyman sight for long shots, though most users relied on the "Spray and Pray" method for closer targets. **B** The reciprocating bolt handle on the top of the receiver — grooved to allow sighting — can be disconcerting to shooters. Military models M1 and M1A1 moved the handle to the side.



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# TOMMY GUN



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climb. These were over-stamped "Model 1928." According to Iannamico's book, in the '20s and '30s Marines used these Thompsons in the Banana Wars of Central America and also in China.

In the late 1930s an astute businessman named Russell Maquire obtained controlling interest in the Auto-Ordnance Corporation. What he got were patents, spare parts and a small quantity of the first 15,000 Colt-made Thompsons. However, Maquire predicted a new war would break out in Europe and prepared for it. Colt rejected his requests for more Tommy Gun manufacture so Maquire convinced Savage Arms Corporation of Utica, N.Y., to accept a contract for 10,000 Thompson Model 1928s. The French beat the British to the draw by buying 3,000 Model 1928s early in 1940. They ordered 3,000 more but were conquered by the German Wehrmacht prior to delivery.

The British received their first 450 "machine carbines" (their terminology) in February 1940 and by 1941 had ordered a total of 108,000. Interestingly, the British bought these guns directly from Auto-Ordnance because the U.S. Lend-Lease law had not been passed yet. Early on the Brits paid Auto-Ordnance \$168.75 per Tommy Gun but by contract's end, the price was reduced to \$130 each. After Lend-Lease, Britain acquired many thousand more Thompsons from the U.S.

Government and used them in all theaters of the war by their own Canadian, New Zealand, Indian and Australian troops.

When Savage took over production of Tommy Guns, the Model 1928 had 1" finned barrels with a Cutts Compensator. The finning gave more barrel area to dispense heat quickly. Sight for rear was an intricate Lyman model adjustable for windage and elevation while the front sight was a simple blade. Walnut buttstocks were capped in steel; the fore-grips were also wood. For the U.S. military, the front handguard was horizontal but for foreign sales it was usually vertical. As the Model 1928 evolved into Model 1928A1 many changes were phased in. The rear sight became an L-shaped piece of steel still made by Lyman; the barrel became smooth but the Cutts Compensator was retained. This model also retained the ability to use both drum and stick magazines. Cost to the U.S. Government for the first Model 1928A1 was \$202.50. By the end of 1928A1 production in 1942 the price was down to \$70 each.

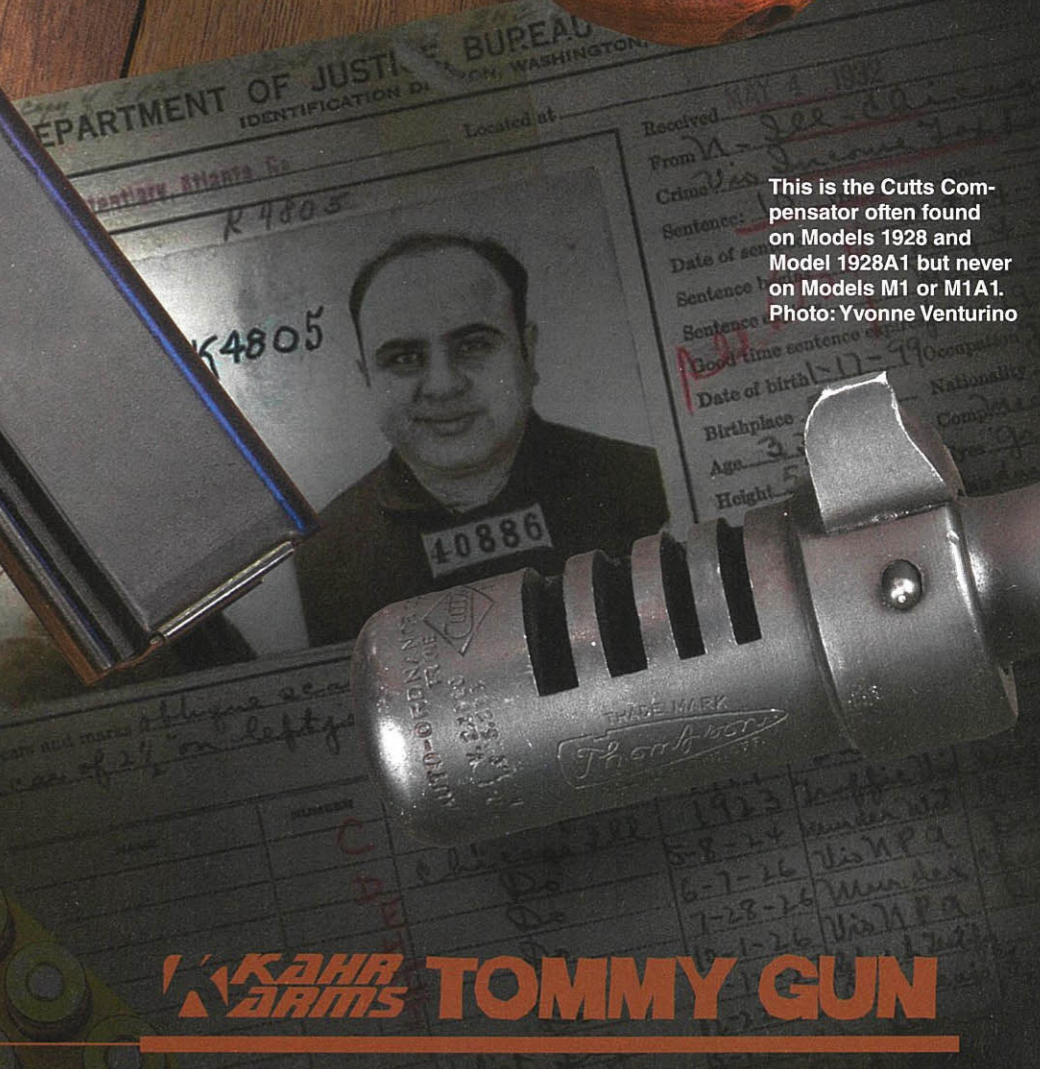
While Savage was going full-tilt making Tommy Guns — maxing out at over 55,000 in one month — Auto-Ordnance was busy building and equipping a factory in Bridgeport, Conn. The new factory produced their first Model 1928A1

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The Model 1927 Thompson submachine gun by Kahr. Whether you call it a Tommy Gun, simply "Thompson" or even a "Chicago Typewriter," it is one fun — perhaps notorious — piece of shooting history.

This is the Cutts Compensator often found on Models 1928 and Model 1928A1 but never on Models M1 or M1A1. Photo: Yvonne Venturino



**KAHN ARMS** TOMMY GUN

in August, 1941 and their last in October, 1942. In between, about 142,000 Tommy Guns passed through their doors. Counting both Models 1928 and 1928A1 Savage made over 552,000, therefore by fall of 1942 about 663,000 had been made.

In 1941 Savage engineers gave the U.S. Government some ideas on how to make Thompson Submachine Guns more quickly and less expensively. The changes were accepted by the government and resulted in a significantly altered Tommy Gun. Its bolt cocking handle was moved from the receiver's top to its right side and the Cutts Compensators were eliminated. Machining to allow 50- and 100-round drum usage was dropped and the intricately machined bolt was simplified. Cost to the government was reduced to \$43.

Later in 1942 a few more changes caused the model to become the M1A1. The firing pins were machined integral with bolts, protective ears were added alongside the bent piece of steel serving as rear sight and a reinforcing crossbolt at the stocks wrist. Sources vary but in total from Model 1921 to M1A1 about 1.5 million Tommy Guns were made.

Despite the thought and efforts going into remodeling the Tommy Gun, their time was limited. The government had moved on to adopting M3 "grease-guns" so the last Tommy Gun was delivered in February 1944. Regardless, many thousands were still in service during the Korean War and photos taken in Vietnam in the 1960s often show Thompsons of several versions being used by both sides.



Two basic Thompson Submachine Guns. Top is an M1 made in 1942 by Savage Arms. Bottom is Model 1928A1 made by Auto-Ordnance also in 1942. Both have 30-round stick magazines. Photo: Yvonne Venturino

## KAHR TOMMY GUN 1927A-1 RETRO-RESPLENDENT "GAT"

ROY HUNTINGTON

What weighs 12.5 lbs., is more than a yard long, tends toward obstinacy when carried, is hard to shoot accurately and pokes and prods when you manipulate it? Why, a Thompson, of course. And, in spite of this running series of inconvenient traits most of we "gun-people" love them and generally want one — badly.

"Hey, want a Tommy Gun?"

"Who me? Oh, no thanks ..." has never been heard by a human being — ever.

As Duke reminds us in his feature, many of us watched "Sgt. Saunders" fling his Thompson around like it was made of plastic in the iconic 1960s TV series "Combat." I've handled real ones and it almost takes two hands to "fling them around" like he did. I

wonder if his was, indeed, a prop gun most of the time? Gads, that'd dim the bright light of heroism somewhat. Nonetheless, the images of flying .45 ACP brass and "mowed-down" Nazis remains as firmly implanted in my 66-year old brain today as it was when it was initially seared into my then 10-year old brain. Gosh.

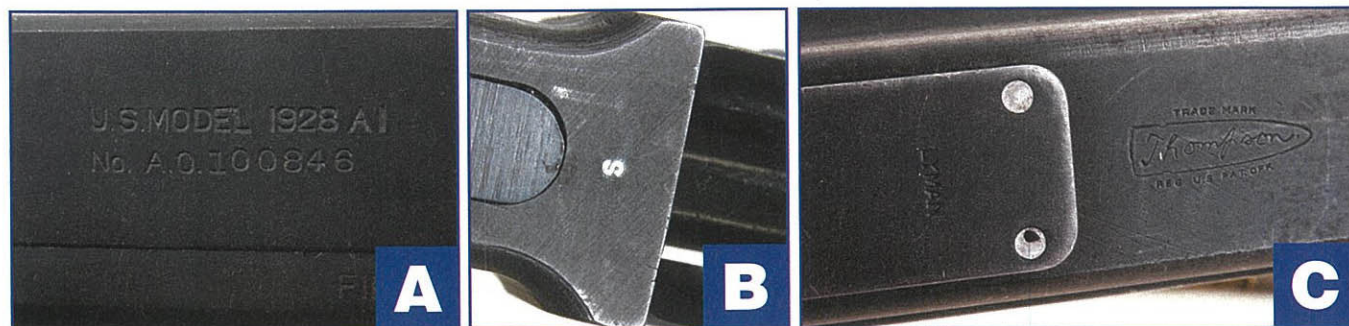
So, like most Boomer Boys, this genetically tattooed image finally came to life when I was a cop in the middle 1970s. Our small agency had not one, not two, but three genuine WWII era full-auto Thompsons — and a BAR — and a belt of

Pineapple grenades too. Ha! I was able to shoot the Tommy Guns, depleting cases of WWII military ball ammo — "Shoot up that old ammo, kid," said my grizzled WWII vet sergeant. Instead of getting it out of my system, all this simply made things worse. Or better?

### DECADES PASS

The modern Auto-Ordnance company struggled to stay afloat over the years and once purchased by Kahr, was able to gain momentum and traction with an influx of funding, engineering skill and solid

**A** This serial number with AO prefix means the Thompson was made by Auto-Ordnance. Photo: Yvonne Venturino **B** This tiny "s" on an M1 Thompson denotes it was made by Savage Arms during WWII. **C** Note the Thompson "bullet" trademark and the Lyman on the base of this M1's rear sight.



marketing. What they found was a ready market for "civilianized" Tommy Guns of all sorts, albeit with some concessions for the all-seeing BATF's rules. Compromises like 18" barrels and re-designed innards impossible allowed this iconic beacon of unfulfilled wishes to be owned by mere mortals.

Over the years Auto-Ordnance has offered some eye-catching variants, like a "solid" gold model, commemorative models and the latest — the T1B-14. Having a 14.5" barrel, extending to 16.5" with the genuine Cutts Compensator installed, keeps the package slightly shorter overall yet pleases the BATF at the same time. Since the original Thompson had a 10.5" barrel, the pesky longer barrel has always miffed us, detracting from the hearty look of the original and making the heft feel just not quite "right." Surprisingly, the slightly shorter barrel does actually feel better, so thank you Kahr — we're getting closer.

If you want your very own, there are many models to choose from, running the gamut from, say, \$1,300 or so for an aluminum-framed 9mm version, to upwards of \$3,400 if you need your very own gold one. They also have genuine 10.5"-barreled models but those are classified as "Short Barreled Rifles" (SBRs) and need special transfer protocol. Think around the \$2,000 to \$2,500 mark to get one similar to our test gun.

What can we say about operation and shooting? First off, let's get this out in the open right now. This magical 12.5-lb. beast is not practical today in any way you could possibly imagine. But we all know it's not about this, don't we? We've covered 9mm Gatling guns, full-auto BB pistols and .600 Nitro Express double rifles, so don't dare point your finger and act like we've lost our minds. We haven't, and neither have you if you see the delight in all this. Yes, we're able to hit the 50-yard torso gong with it. Yes, it shoots America's favorite

.45 ACP cartridge. Yes, we want to wear a Fedora when we hold it. And yes, we tend to keep it leaning against our desk as we work and stare at it now and again.

But the real reason to own one? Take it to the range, tote your genuine violin case to the bench. Causally flip the latches open, lifting the lid with a flourish — but don't be too obvious about it. Then, nonchalantly look around with a thoughtful look, as if you're thinking, "Oh, did I leave something in the truck?" What you'll see will be stares of interest, desire and envy all around you. Usually either a kid — or an adult who hasn't lost his youthful enthusiasm — will make a beeline over, stop, point and say, "Mister, is that a Tommy Gun?"

"Indeed it is," you'll say. "Want to shoot it?"

"Boy, would I ever!"

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