An established competitive target shooter, toolmaker and engineer, Dave Walls saw pictures of a Colt 1860 Army and 1873 Single Action Army and pondered whether he might be able to build exact replicas in his spare time using the machines at his place of work. In the absence of manufacturing blueprints, Walls, along with his workmate and Scottish shooting colleague, Dave Caig, started to make drawings by scaling from pictures of the revolvers they found in books and magazines. Although they got to see examples of the revolvers at a local gun auction, they were not allowed to handle them, still less disassemble them, so they had to continue their research until they could find pictures of the inner workings, from which they could create manufacturing drawings.

Eventually, the “two Daves” completed the two pistols and took them to a firearms auction for evaluation. An expert on Colt revolvers spent a considerable amount of time examining each pistol. “They are just about as fine a pair of Colts as I have ever seen but there is a problem with this one you see, a notch on the left side that is missing on the right”. He went on to explain that the notches were included in certain models so that they could accept an optional shoulder stock. At this point Dave and Dave confessed that the pistols were not original but had been manufactured by them in their workshop. The expert responded “If you built these pistols from a photograph, you should be in the business of making guns”.

You could say that Accuracy International started with the creation of two handmade black powder revolvers...
As well as being co-workers, Walls and Caig were both members of the same rifle club and both highly proficient target shooters. Each had represented his country of birth in a number of international tournaments. Together, they repaired and tuned their club’s rifles and pistols to improve their performance for competition. Eventually, the “two Daves”, turned this activity into a business called C&W Products, with the work being performed in a shed at Dave Wall’s home in Worthing, Sussex. It was here that C&W advanced into a higher level of activity by designing and manufacturing its first rifle. Unsurprisingly, it was a target rifle.

Around this time, Caig and Walls encountered Malcolm Cooper, who was later to become World Champion and two-time Olympic Champion target shooter. Conversations about C&W’s activities led to the “two Daves” showing Malcolm the replica pistols they had created. Malcolm was impressed and commented that they had the skills needed to design their own rifle. Caig and Walls replied “But we have already done that”. Malcolm was already in the top echelon of the English shooting community and asked to use a C&W rifle in the 1978 World Championships being held in Seoul, Korea. He came away with a Silver Medal. The continuing relationship between Caig, Walls and Cooper would eventually result in the establishment of Accuracy International (AI) later that year.

AI would continue to perform work on other match rifles to make ends meet but now they were increasingly focused on rifle design. Caig and Walls had only built their 3rd prototype target rifle by 1981 but it carried features that would typify future designs, including the signature thumbhole stock. The rifles we know today had begun to take shape. Serial number 003 still utilized a heavily modified round short action with a 7.62 mm caliber barrel. Affixed to the muzzle was an experimental device using spiraling ports to reduce flash and to compensate for shoulder twist during recoil. The hand-formed wood stock included an adjustable recoil pad, an adjustable cheek rest, sling attachment points and an integral accessory rail below the forearm.

Now Caig and Walls would take their expertise into a new market segment.
THE NEXT DESIGN from AI was a sniper rifle designated the Precision Marksman (PM). Until that time, almost all of the sniper rifles in service were hunting rifles customized for the sniper application. AI designed a rifle specifically for the sniping role based upon their successful target shooting rifles; but it was only by soliciting input from snipers that AI was able to build into the design the required ruggedness, reliability and ease of maintenance needed for this application.

The first customer for the Precision Marksman was the UK Special Boat Service (SBS) which acquired 8 rifles in 1985 after evaluating it in 1984. They were closely followed by the UK Special Air Service, which purchase 32 rifles later in the same year. Feedback from these two important customers was instrumental in further refining the design for the military sniper. As a result of the green color of the rifle and its ability to deliver first round hits, the British users of the PM nicknamed it “The Green Meanie”.

Further sales of the PM were made to the Sultanate of Oman and to a number of UK police forces.

Then the opportunity of a lifetime materialized. From meetings with the British military, Malcolm Cooper learned that there was to be a competition to replace the aging Lee-Enfield L42A1 sniper rifle, which had been in service since 1970. Because of Malcolm’s international recognition as a champion target shooter, the UK Ministry of Defence invited him to submit a proposal based on a military variant of AI’s 7.62mm target rifle. Cooper approached Caig and Walls to see what could be done.

After some initial uncertainty, they set to work...
LACKING A COMPUTER Aided Design system, Caig and Walls started out with a pencil and paper sketch of the proposed design; and so the now-famous L96A1 sniper rifle was born. With the design complete, a competition sample of the rifle was manufactured and submitted for evaluation by the MOD. The rifle submitted for trials was heavily based on the PM design but featured a new lightweight polymer stock, assembled from two halves onto a long aluminum bedding block. The shape of the stock was derived from the earlier wooden thumbhole stocks used on C&W target rifles but modified by input from SBS snipers and using the same polymer material used on Land Rover off-road vehicles to ensure durability. The new stock included an adjustable buttpad, an adjustable monopod at the rear and a folding bipod at the forward end. With the incorporation of a detachable 5 or 10 round magazine and an adjustable two-stage trigger, AI were able to present to the world a sniper rifle unlike anything seen before.

An unusual feature of the Caig and Walls designs also included in the L96A1 is the flat-bottom action, readily identifiable by its flat side slabs. Far from being an intentional design feature, this came about because AI did not have round bar stock of the necessary size when building the prototype. It was convenient and faster to machine the action from rectangular bar stock. A side benefit of this approach is that the design can use a 10-shot double row magazine.

During MOD testing, the rifle achieved 85% first time hits on man sized targets at ranges of 600m and 900m and was able to deliver “harassing fire” out to 1100m.

In 1985 it was quietly announced that the AI PM rifle had defeated the Parker Hale Model 85, the HK PSG-1, the SIG Sauer SSG 2000 and the Remington 700 to become the standard sniper rifle for the British army. On March 11 1985 AI received a contract for 1,212 rifles, the first of which were delivered in 1987.
When they submitted their rifle for evaluation, AI had low expectations of winning and looked upon the competition as a learning opportunity that would improve their products in the future. When their rifle made it onto the selection shortlist and with a looming need to manufacture rifles in high quantities it was time to consider reorganization. A decision was made to capitalize a new company: Accuracy International, with Malcolm Cooper’s company Accuracy International Shooting Sports as its parent.

At the formation of Accuracy International, Malcolm Cooper posed a question to Caig and Walls: “Do you want fame or fortune?”. He explained that the company stood a better chance of success with him as the figurehead because of his reputation among the international shooting community. The “two Daves” had no objection to this so it was agreed that Cooper would be the face of the company while they focused on designing and manufacturing rifles.

AI now faced the prospect of having to manufacture more than 1,000 sniper rifles; clearly, the shed at Dave Walls’ house would no longer do! Initial production was subcontracted to a company in Dartford, England under close supervision from Dave Walls to ensure that the rifles were manufactured to his exacting standards. Soon, AI decided to take over manufacturing of the rifles and they acquired two used CNC machines to fabricate parts and started up a manufacturing facility in Portsmouth. Production of the L96A1 against the MOD contract continued until 1992.
While Malcolm Cooper continued his successful shooting career, winning gold at both the 1984 and 1988 Olympics, Caig and Walls focused on providing service and support to military clients and on continued development of sniper rifles. In response to a request from the Swedish armed forces, the L96 was modified to operate reliably in cold environments and was given the designation AW (Arctic Warfare).

The AW series retains the signature flat-bottom action of the L96A1, permanently bonded and bolted to the full-length aluminum chassis. The rigid construction, coupled with a full-width integral recoil lug eliminates movement to ensure repeatable accuracy. Every component is manufactured from a corrosion resistant material or is given a corrosion resistant protective coating prior to assembly. A key to the success of the AW series is that all major parts are engineered to be interchangeable between rifles of the same caliber. Features of the current AW series include a standard muzzlebrake, a free-floated match barrel, a bonded action, a two stage trigger, a short bolt throw, a three position safety catch, polymer stock sides and a fixed recoil pad with spacers. Optional accessories include a Picatinny rail, a folding stock and a thumbhole grip developed by Caig in 1998.

The modified design (AW308) resulted in an order for 1,100 rifles from Sweden in 1991. Under the designation L118A1, the AW model was subsequently ordered and is still in use by 60 military and law enforcement agencies around the world. By the late 1990s, the L96A1 had been completely superseded by the AW series.

The success of the purpose built AW series led to the development of numerous configurations. A partnership with Lapua in 1995 resulted in the .338 Lapua Magnum. The resulting action could also handle the .300 Win. Mag round and a variant with this feature was sold to the German BWB as the G22, which was the first AI rifle to feature Dave Caig’s folding stock. The late 90s saw the introduction of other models including the AW50 (sold to the UK MOD and Australian armed forces) and the AE series, launched in 2002 and designed specifically to meet the needs of US law enforcement agencies.

The AI Chassis System

The chassis system, which is the core of AI rifles offered another business opportunity for the company. For American shooters that could not afford a complete AI rifle, or who wanted to upgrade a Remington 700 for higher performance, the Accuracy International Chassis System (AICS) was a perfect solution. AI developed the product after a US company started selling a copy of the AW stock to Remington 700 owners. After successfully suing this company and making them desist, AI introduced the Remington 700 AICS, enabling Remington owners to benefit from the superior ergonomic and functional benefits of the AI design.
In 1999, 90% of AI was sold to an investment group and the resulting transaction resulted in the company acquiring a very high debt load. The need to service this debt in the face of rising costs and with forecast sales that did not materialize, created an impossible financial situation. Attempts to reduce costs by deploying lean manufacturing processes failed because of a lack of “system thinking” by those responsible.

By 2004, AI was in serious trouble. Attempts to find another buyer for the company to recapitalize it failed and in February 2005, the company began to liquidate assets. Almost at the last minute, the company was saved. When the liquidation announcement was made, Dave Walls indicated to the administrators that he was interested in buying part of the company. Tom Irwin, an independent contractor working for AI in the USA was visiting AI headquarters when the liquidation announcement was made and he also announced his interest in acquiring the assets of the company.

Within 24 hours Dave Caig and Paul Bagshaw, the financial director, had also joined the team. Tom Irwin and Dave Walls started to explore ways to save the company, contacting local banks and accounting companies to understand how the transaction could be organized and funded. From the interest they were able to generate in the next 48 hours it became clear that a solution might be found.

“I knew that whoever was going to be successful had to buy the whole company”, Irwin said, “and we did”. With the participation of the four major shareholders, preferred stock sold to entities associated with the company such as subcontractors, agents or distributors and bank financing, a successful acquisition bid was assembled. “Originally the lenders did not take us seriously but that changed after we were able to put together a strong business plan within 12 days” Irwin recalls. “We developed financial projections, hired an accounting firm to verify them and then approached the banks for an indicative letter. We made our offer and found ourselves in a bidding war in which we were eventually successful”.

All of the company employees had been laid off on February 18, 2005 and AI had ceased operations. It was not until April 29 that the deal was closed and not until May 3 that the business was restarted. The revived company consisted of just 7 employees and 4 owners. According to Irwin, “my first priority was to reassure our existing customers that we were back in business and would continue, I spent my first 10 weeks visiting them to explain the situation”. To Dave Walls, the bankruptcy was a ‘blessing in disguise’, “It gave me the chance to be a part of the management team once again and to assist in radically changing the way we manufacture products”.
THE FORMATION of the new company gave it the opportunity to make a fresh start. Before 2005 AI was contract orientated and manufactured rifles and parts in batches as they were needed. One consequence of this method was that the smaller commercial customers had to wait a long time to receive product.

In an earlier part of his career, Irwin had studied the methods of W Edwards Deming, the visionary who transformed manufacturing in Japanese industry in the 1950s and 60s. He had also researched the implementation of Six Sigma techniques at major US manufacturers such as Motorola and GE and was himself a Six Sigma Black. Now AI put these methods to work in their own manufacturing processes. “We use a rate based workflow process now” says Irwin. “We plan the weekly output from the factory without regard to current contracts. We don’t wait to get an order and then push it through the system like a snake swallowing an elephant. We plan on making X rifles a week and this flows down into making X bolts, X triggers and so on. After we have built the X rifles, we turn our attention to manufacturing spares and accessories.”

This kind of rate based manufacturing system improves the utilization of space, minimizes the distance that parts have to travel to their point of use in the process and reduces the amount of inventory that needs to be on hand. Immediately after the bankruptcy, Walls and Irwin introduced modern CNC machines and new fixtures to improve the manufacturing of key components and reduce cost.

With the growing success of the company, AI has been able to expand into an additional building and completely modernize the existing facility. It has also invested in state-of-the-art instrumentation including a high speed camera and a rapid prototyping 3D printer. This expansion has also resulted in the hiring of many new employees.

The new approach to product development and manufacturing was matched by success in capturing new business. In 2007, the UK MOD awarded AI a contract for 582 systems in .338 caliber to replace the L96A1. The new rifle, designated L115A3 entered service with the British Army in April 2008. One of the exhibits proudly displayed on the wall at AI’s headquarters is a certificate from Guinness World Records recording the longest confirmed sniper kill in combat. This was achieved at a range of 2,707 yards with an L115A3 rifle by CoH Craig Harrison.

AI seeks to be a company that can design, develop, test and manufacture quality products on a continuing basis. Quality people and systems are the foundation of this plan.
As the largest market in the world for its products, AI had long had their eyes on selling in the USA. “The US market has always been a major target going back to the Cooper days” says Irwin “but the market is a huge challenge because of the long gestation periods for military contracts and the presence of entrenched and favored indigenous manufacturers. Opportunities existed with non-military customers but their limited budgets usually made our rifles unaffordable to most agencies. We identified the enthusiast market to be a great starting point to begin market penetration and build a reputation for our products.”

In the meantime, AI had reestablished links with the US Navy, with whom it had been discussing the provision of a new Sniper Rifle Stock System (SRSS) before the bankruptcy. A successful bid resulted in the award of a 5 year contract from the Naval Surface Warfare System center at Crane, Indiana. Shortly afterwards, through Badger Ordnance, AI captured an opportunity to supply the battle proven AI magazine for the US Army’s Remington M24 and the US Marine Corps M40 rifles. These two activities gave AI the opportunity to establish a manufacturing capability in the US in 2006, greatly enhancing its ability to serve this market.

In 2009, AI dramatically expanded its US presence by establishing a larger manufacturing base in Fredericksburg, VA. From this location, AI serves its military customers directly and ships products to its distributors serving the non-military market. Through its Vice President, Accuracy International USA also plays a vital role in feeding back to the company the inputs from customers for future design and development to meet the unique needs of US users. Although AI sold a number of AW series rifles to the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) most of the growth in this market has come from sales of the AE variant. This rifle model was developed to be a low cost alternative to the AW and targeted specifically at law enforcement agencies. As AI products proliferated among police forces and competition shooters the brand started to become established in the USA.
ONE PHILOSOPHY IS KEY TO AI as a whole. The company puts great emphasis on staying in close contact with its military customers to understand emerging needs and has hired many competitive shooters and former snipers in order to gain insight from their experience. This approach has been instrumental in AI winning more military contracts.

Since 2005, the company has built upon its success. The market has evolved to create a demand for tactical rifles mounted on an AI style chassis. AI responded to this with the AX series rifle, which is currently the main rifle sold by the company. AI also participated in the competition with US SOCOM for a Precision Sniper Rifle and came away with an advanced and highly versatile Precision Sniper Rifle System that it can offer to other potential users. The PSR is revolutionary in that the platform is multi caliber, the barrels are rapidly interchangeable, the folding stock protects the bolt and the new cheekpiece and stock are fully adjustable in situ. It combines the adjustability of an Olympic competition rifle with the ballistic versatility of every bolt action sniper rifle from calibres .308 to .338.

“Our products are rugged, reliable, accurate, easy to maintain and built to last” says Irwin “because they are built to last, we have a growing and lucrative refurbishment market to supplement our sales of new rifles”

As the beginning of the 21st century has shown, the nature of conflicts around the world has been changing dramatically. New technologies have transformed military capabilities in ways unimaginable 30 years ago and the standoffs between superpowers in the Cold War have given way to asymmetric warfare in many parts of the globe. Despite this, and in some cases because of this, the continuing role of the combat sniper is assured.

AI has transformed itself into an organisation focused on addressing the unique needs of this community and its plans for the future are clearly described in its mission statement:

“Accuracy International is based on the principles of world class manufacturing, teamwork, mutual respect and trust with the objective of maintaining our reputation as producers of the ‘Best Sniper Rifle in the World’”

You can expect to see them around for many years to come.