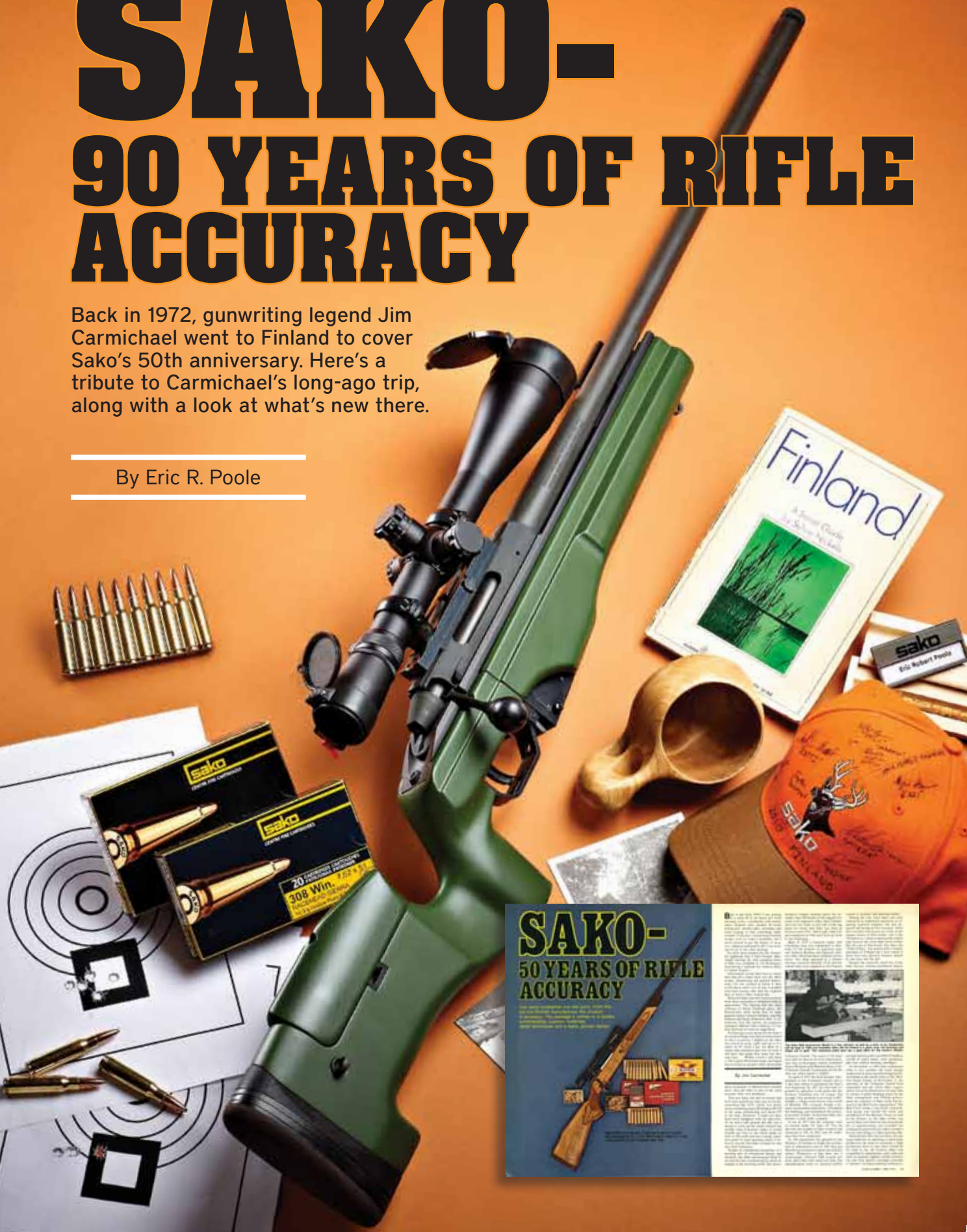


SAKO- 90 YEARS OF RIFLE ACCURACY

Back in 1972, gunwriting legend Jim Carmichael went to Finland to cover Sako's 50th anniversary. Here's a tribute to Carmichael's long-ago trip, along with a look at what's new there.

By Eric R. Poole



I WASN'T EVEN BORN WHEN IT HIT NEWSSTANDS, BUT I STILL HAVE A HAND-ME-down copy of the May 1972 issue of *Guns & Ammo* that I picked up in California as a kid. In it, Jim Carmichael celebrated Sako's ornate 50th Anniversary Model, based on the Finnbear action and chambered for 7mm Remington Magnum. I must have read that issue front-to-back a dozen times in the decades since.

So you can probably understand how nostalgic—and excited—I was to find myself flying to Finland to learn first-hand about one of the finest gun companies in the world. And to write about it for the same magazine Carmichael did so long ago.

FOOTSTEPS IN FINLAND

I arrived to Helsinki through Amsterdam. How culturally unique Finland is became immediately apparent to me. The country seems trapped in its own history. Thick reindeer hides offered for sale were stacked three feet high outside a Christmas shop inside the airport terminal, suggesting Finland was home to Santa Claus. But I couldn't envision bringing back such grim reminders of the fate of Santa's four-legged helpers to the kids back home.

A combination of anticipation and a sun that couldn't set (and shined through the shade-less windows) kept me awake for most of the first night. I woke up early and explored Finland's capital by vividly marked footpaths, observing a Russian architectural influence and old military buildings that had been converted to restaurants, shops and businesses. Small cars and a public trolley lined every street. No trash littered the corners and no bubble gum stained the concrete sidewalks. The country seemed sterile and efficient.



A quiet kind of precision: For discreet target practice, the use of suppressors is encouraged throughout Europe. Here, the author shoots a suppressed .308 Sako TRG-22 from its bipod. He averaged 0.98-inch five-shot groups on five targets at 100 meters.

Shuttled by bus, I arrived later that morning to the Sako (pronounced *sock-o*, not *say-ko*) factory in Riihimäki, a wonderful small town located roughly 20 miles north of Helsinki. Ushered from the bus, I was taken to a former ammunition manufacturing building that had been converted to a conference room and exhibit hall. Raimo Karjalainen, Sako general manager, and Pentti Louisola,

senior product manager, led a group of U.S. dealers and I through a complete history of the company and a

detailed review of the latest products.

Of particular interest to American big-game hunters is the current development of an XL action that will afford the consumer extra-stout Safari-grade rifles chambered for elephant stoppers like the .416 Rigby and .458 Lott. To date, Sako has only been known for small, medium and large actions permitting rifles chambered in everything between .204 Ruger to the TRG-42's far-reaching .338 Lapua Magnum.

As we continued our hands-on tour of the factory, I peered into every open box, inundating Raimo and Pentti with questions. Is this going to be a Model 85 bolt, I asked, holding up an L-shaped piece of cast steel? For each rough, unfinished part I held up, they'd dig out a finished version of that particular component.

A blast from the past: To read Jim Carmichael's original 1972 article on his visit to Sako, go to gunsandammo.com Search Keyword: 50 Years

PRECISION SPOKEN HERE

I've visited numerous factories, and knew the quality of Sako products from my travels in the military and from evaluating many Sako rifles, so I had preconceived ideas of what to expect. But what struck me sideways was the relative absence of



CNC machinery. Raimo indicated more modern machinery would soon replace the old, but here inside the plant there were only a few CNC machines.

For much of what was in operation, older equipment was used to forge the parts and hammer the barrels. I saw skilled craftsmen finishing each part under a critical eye—wooden trays and shelves are still used to keep components organized. It became obvious that history and tradition still plays a critical role here.

After some initial hesitation, Raimo allowed an experienced assembly craftsman to teach me how to build a Sako, a Model 85S as it turned out. My instructor was a legacy there—just one employee who was the son of a previous craftsman. Perhaps it was the language barrier (he was one of the few Finns I met that didn't know English), but he already had the barrel in the action before I realized that he wasn't going to wait for me to figure out what I was supposed to do. He effortlessly pulled

Raimo Karjalainen, Sako general manager, was caught randomly inspecting a freshly built Sako 85 waiting to be tested for function and accuracy at the factor in Riihimaki, Finland.



out and put away various metal and wood fixtures he created to make his job easier.

We rolled the stainless steel action over in a vise and attached the most intricate part, an adjustable trigger group. We threw in a bolt group tested the trigger for function and gauged it for safety. I don't remember what the gauge read since I was caught off guard when I discovered that we were working in kilos.

He kept right on moving, mated a polymer stock held to the action by a forged triggerguard, and pulled down an air tool to set the action screws at the proper torque setting. He finished his part by filling a detachable box magazine of inert ammunition and running the triangular-headed bolt fore and aft while watching the rifle smoothly feed and

properly extract. And just like that, "our" rifle was placed on one of many rolling carts ready to be fired in the factory's basement range.

TESTING, TESTING...

Watching Sako rifles being proofed isn't exactly a spectator's sport. An inspector placed each one in a low-tech fixture drawn out like a file cabinet from the wall. He loaded and mechanically fired a proof round, then pulled out the drawer before removing and visually inspecting the bolt and fired case. He inserted another round and repeated this process four more times before the rifle moved on

The name says it all: The pistol grip caps are unique to Sako and Tikka rifles.



This Tikka T3 Sporter hadn't been revealed to the public until the author's visit. Blending Sako accuracy with Finland's competitive shooting heritage, it's an out-of-the-box .308 match rifle that repeatedly punched dime-sized five-shot groups at 100 meters.



Sako's success can be attributed to highly skilled hands-on labor and a critical eye.

to accuracy testing.

At the accuracy station, two young men fresh out of the country's obligatory military service were verifying (redundantly) that each rifle was capable of printing a five-shot 1 MOA group at 100 meters. Shooting each rifle on a Caldwell Lead Sled, the technicians looked through a Swarovski optic set in rings that were readily transferred to the next rifle with a nominal point of impact shift, a tribute to Sako's Optiloc ring and base system.

To the left of each shooter is a computer that reports each impact on an electronic target positioned downrange. Once accuracy is verified, the rifle is placed back on a cart for final inspection, packaging and shipping. I took a picture of Raimo handling and inspecting rifles from a cart that was similar to Carmichael's image of Col. Elias Hyden doing the same thing more than 40 years ago. Some things never change.

We left Riihimäki for regal accommodations at Vanajanlinna, a magnificent hotel and restaurant that's considered a castle. Built in 1924, it's a magnificent combination of Baroque and Scandinavian Renaissance architectural styles and sits along the shore of Katumajärvi Lake on 500 hectares. After a customary lakeside sauna and a bottle each of Finland's excellent beer, the group moved to dinner in the castle's salon and closed the evening with warm cognac and a fine cigar.

With the sun completely up by 3 AM, the next day couldn't begin soon enough. After a light breakfast and a self-guided exploration of the grounds, we were off to the Finnish Hunting Museum which celebrates the country's gun culture, starting with a vivid diorama of a shot reindeer



Cast as a single piece, this L-shaped component will become a bolt for a Sako 85. Sako still uses many of the same machines, wooden organizers and tools that originally built the company's reputation.



Clearly organized in a wall of wooden shelving, Sako barrels are hammer forged, polished and finished at the factory. Calibers currently range from .204 Ruger to .375 H&H.

that continues into Finland's Olympic achievements before covering military arms (ever hear of Valmet?). The tour ends with a history of wintery challenges faced by Finnish moose and wildfowl hunters. By the time we departed for the Loppi shooting range, we were perfectly primed to pull triggers.

RANGE TIME

Like most clubs, the Loppi range features areas for different types of target shooting—rimfire and centerfire at varied distances. I felt lucky to be reunited with the TRG-42 in .338 Lapua Magnum, a rifle that I've now shot in four countries. When I was cleared to go hot, I jumped at the open ammo can of Lapua 250-grain Scenar in 10-round boxes. It was only 100 meters, but as usual, the TRG-42 punched one-hole groups.

The suppressed TRG-22 offered a different experience than the thunderous TRG-42 with its three-chamber muzzle

brake. The bench setup wasn't the most ideal for getting the best accuracy out of this specialized sniper rifle, but I did manage to repeat my earlier sub-MOA groups on a few targets just by utilizing the bipod. If I could have just one Sako, the TRG-22 would be it.

I've been a quiet fan of the Sako Quad for about six years now. I evaluated one alongside Glenn Gilbert back in 2004 when the first one came in to the NRA. It's an innovative rifle that allows the shooter to choose from four different calibers—.17 HMR, .17 Mach 2, .22 LR, and .22 WMR.

I've heard shooters voice concerns about having to completely re-zero each time you switch calibers, and while the point-of-impact shift *is* slightly different with each caliber, it turns out to be minimal once you return to the caliber you started with. The Quad Varmint has eclipsed the Quad Synthetic as my favorite in this line due to the flat-bottomed extra-wide wooden

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fore-end and heavy barrel. With it, I punished a three-inch doughnut at 100 meters, firing at least 50 rounds through each barrel just to see how tight I could keep things.

Next up was the running moose target; a real challenge. The best technique is to hold at the tip of the moose's chin as it moves. Besides being an actual competitive event, it's great training for moving targets, and a good test for how a rifle actually *handles* in the field. The Model 85 in .308 worked best for me, and the weight of the .30-caliber suppressor attached to the muzzle didn't interfere with tracking the target. I finished second in our group and just missed cleaning the course by a few points.

The rifle that impressed me the most was a Sako 85 chambered in 9.3x66mm Sako. Introduced in 2002, this cartridge was originally developed for the Sako 75 and, even though it has gone unnoticed in the States, it has enjoyed quite a bit of popularity in Europe. Registering 4,100 to 4,200 ft.-lbs. muzzle energy with Sako's 286-grain Hammerhead soft point—at 2560 fps—it's comparable to the .375 H&H Magnum and is a proven load for moose and bear at close range. Sako also offers a 250-grain Nosler for additional range as well as two additional 286-grain Barnes loads for enhanced penetration.

My stay in Finland continued for a couple more days, which allowed me to enjoy a



Hunters must qualify on a running moose target to obtain a permit. The author placed second in an impromptu match at the Loppi shooting ranges with an suppressed Sako 85 in .308.

traditional dinner at the cabin of Finland's famed Winter War hero, Marshal Mannerheim. At the Finnish Arms Museum Foundation, I got to experience exclusive access to one of the largest privately held arms collections in the world. After being overwhelmed by the contents of the main building (it makes the NRA's National Firearms Museum look like someone's hobby shop), I was allowed to wander outside through acres of anti-aircraft weaponry, artillery including German 88s, a semi-truck-sized naval gun, and even a pair of captured Harley Davidson military motorcycles from World War II.

Even after reading Carmichel's article as a kid, I'd never thought of Finland as a summer travel destination. But if I hadn't made this trip, I would have missed the firearms experience of a lifetime.

Not to mention the opportunity to follow in some long-ago footsteps. **C&A**



Helsinki Cathedral is guarded by Tsar Alexander I. He declared Finland autonomous in 1809. Sako was created in 1921, four years after Finland declared its independence.