

## SPENT CASES



## THE ODD COUPLE

**MIKHAIL KALASHNIKOV**, designer of the AK47, and Eugene Stoner, designer of the AR-15, first met at Washington Dulles airport on May 15, 1990. Kalashnikov came to the United States by invitation from the Smithsonian Institution, which was administered by Edward "Ed" Ezell, author and former curator for the National Firearms Collection at the National Museum of American History. Ezell had gathered oral histories from both Kalashnikov and Stoner independently, which included a visit to Russia in July 1989.

The first interviews with both Kalashnikov and Stoner took place in Star Tannery, Virginia, May 15 through May 20, 1990. The meeting was visually and textually documented for Smithsonian archives. Kalashnikov and Stoner were juxtaposed as they greeted one another, though they had come to know each other through mutual study. Although like-minded in their education, history of overcoming adversity against government opposition, and passion for small arms simplicity and interchangeability, the two men were opposites. Despite the fact that Stoner was rarely caught on camera smiling, this photograph captured the moment the two first held the other's rifle in each other's presence in Quantico, Virginia.

A similar moment was captured again in 1996, the year before Stoner's death. Until then, Kalashnikov continued to

visit U.S. trade events and made public appearances with Stoner at the SHOT Show on several occasions, often posing for photographs with Stoner at the Knight's Armament booth. Still, they considered their relationship as little more than a professional acquaintanceship.

In a conversation, with the help of his daughter Elena as translator, Kalashnikov couldn't comprehend the word "millionaire," which was used when first describing Stoner. Kalashnikov couldn't understand why any designer like himself would accept money for creating arms so widely used by their homeland. Though Kalashnikov was one of his country's highest ranking generals, he wasn't rich. Stoner, on the other hand, earned royalties from Colt for every AR-pattern rifle it produced.

Kalashnikov marveled at the AR-15's impact in advancing firearm manufacturing with the use of different materials, but he remained proud of his creation and often praised the AK47 as being the best and most widely used firearm worldwide. In contrast, Stoner didn't hype his gun, though he was most satisfied with the light rifle's developments during the 1950s and '60s. In the 1990s, Stoner couldn't understand why the military and manufacturers were intent on making the AR heavier. Beyond those comments, Stoner is often remembered as humble. Kalashnikov died on Dec. 23, 2013, in Izhevsk, Russia, at age 94. 