



ou're at the range, and you can't help but notice that the guy next to you is driving nails with every shot. You check out his rifle— it's nice but not any better than the custom-made beauty you're sporting. Your eyes settle on his riflescope. It doesn't appear to be made by one of the big boys. The name engraved on it doesn't start with an L or an S or an N; it reads: "U.S. Optics."

You've heard of U.S. Optics, but you've never seen one of their scopes up close, or in action, and the one thing you remember hearing is that their scopes cost beaucoup bucks. You look through your spotting scope, pretending to check out your target, but you're actually eyeballing the one belonging to the U.S. Optics guy. He puts his next two rounds through the same hole— the one smack dab in the center of the bull's-eye.

During a break, you ask him about his scope. He uses glowing terms like "deadly accurate," "high quality," and "virtually indestructible." You ask if he wouldn't mind

AIMING

To Be The Best

For the past 19 years, U.S. Optics has set their crosshairs on one thing: building the best, most durable riflescopes in the business.

By Sean P. Egen ★ Photos by Ichiro Nagata



John Williams III, son of the founder of U.S. Optics, mounts one of his company's short CQB scopes on an M4. There's no such thing as a model number on a U.S. Optics scope, as every one is custom made. Choices include reticles down to 1/10 of a mil, up to 1/2 MOA, and everything in between.

telling you how much he spent on it. You whistle at his answer, but he follows up with, "Worth every cent." He offers to let you fire a few rounds with his rifle. You take him up on his offer...you don't miss...you don't want to give it back.

Later, that evening, you find yourself online, reading reviews and posts about U.S. Optics scopes. An hour later, you're at their website, custom designing a scope of your own. You've fallen victim to positive word-of-mouth, U.S. Optics' number-one—and, for many years, their only—marketing tool.

"That's what's great about having a bitching product," says U.S. Optics CEO John B. Williams III. "If one guy gets one, and he goes out and smokes his buddy that weekend at the range, his buddy's going to buy one of our scopes."

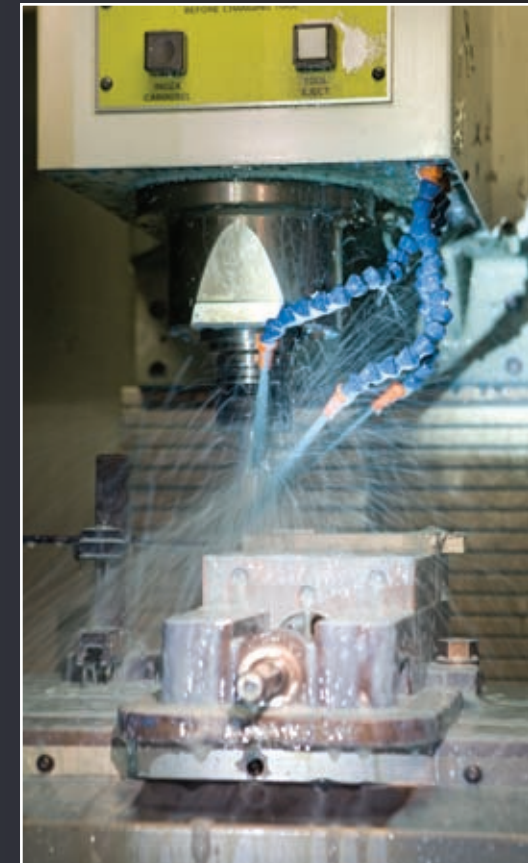
In a world where commitment to quality and pride in manufacturing have widely been pushed aside for outsourcing and cost-cutting, Williams' confidence, bordering on cockiness, is refreshing, even a bit inspiring. And, as you'll see, confidence and inspiration have played key roles in U.S. Optics' success from the very beginning, going all the way back to when founder John B. Williams Jr. started up the company with no more than an idea and determination to build a scope that lived up to his high expectations.

Humble Beginnings

John Williams Jr. was a teacher, a hunter, a competition shooter, a government consultant, and a renowned gunsmith when he decided to set up his own scope-making business in his garage. The year was 1990, and he had a lathe, a mill, and a few other pieces of second-hand equipment. But, most importantly, he had the foresight to identify a need that existed and the desire to take the necessary steps to fulfill that need.

"The whole optics thing stemmed from him being a gunsmith, seeing scopes fail all the time, and having problems with different scopes," says his son, and current man at the helm of the company, Williams III. "That led him to the point of saying, We need to make something that's going to survive and do the job—and do it all the time."

Williams Jr.'s goal was to create a militarized type of riflescope that would function not like one of the typical fragile hunting scopes on the market at the time, but be a piece of durable equipment that could be used, abused, endure combat-like conditions, and perform admirably under virtually any circumstances. Quite simply, to build the best scope possible; better than anything he'd seen offered. And, because John was a custom gunsmith, it was important to him that the scopes he made be customizable as well.



Steven Fletcher (left) is a master lens grinder. All U.S. Optics lenses are ground inhouse on precision diamond grinders. Meanwhile, Yoshi Sato (below), an optical machinist 76 years young, machines erector tubes.





At top, Arnold von Bargaen peers into an optical-alignment tool to check the movement of the adjustment turrets on one of U.S. Optics' sniper scopes.

Above left: Steven Fletcher positions a lens for grinding.



Becky Dizenzo (right) works under a microscope to hand-clean the lenses before they're sent over to the vacuum-sealed assembly booth (above right) where the scopes are put together by hand.



"He said, 'Let's offer choices to the customer,'" Williams III explains. "What power do they want? What tube diameter do they want? What size objective do they want? What type of knobs do they want? What type of reticles do they want? Offer all these different things to them and then kind of custom build their own scope."

The only problem was, although Williams Jr. had nearly 30 years of experience as a gunsmith, he didn't know that much about optics. But he didn't let that minor detail hold him back. The important thing was that he knew what he wanted in a rifle-scope—and what he didn't want.

"Neither my dad nor I knew how to build a riflescope from day one," says Williams III. "We just kind of figured it out. We tore apart a lot of scopes, saw the way people were engineering things, and looked at different ways to build a better mousetrap."

This reverse-engineering strategy proved successful. Right around the same time as he started the company, as luck would have it, Williams Jr.'s friend, a lens-grinding expert at Rockwell Scientific, got laid off because of downsizing. Rockwell's downsizing also included selling off much of their optics machinery.

U.S. Optics took advantage of this serendipitous opportunity by utilizing the expertise of John Jr.'s friend and buying some of Rockwell's lens-grinding and polishing equipment. They began doing their own lens grinding and polishing at their new facility (substantially roomier than John's garage) in Buena Park, Calif. By 2004 the company had six fulltime employees and was manufacturing around 300 custom scopes a year.

Tragically, on June 30, 2004, John Williams Jr. was killed in a motorcycle accident. Along with having to deal with the loss of his father, Williams III also had to deal with the future of the company, which, he candidly admits, was up in the air at the time.

"When dad died, we all had to make a decision on what we wanted to do," he recalls. "Do we just fold the place, or do we go balls out and try to make it work?"

John III gathered up the crew and asked them if they wanted to fold up shop and walk away or go for it. To a man, they all said to go for it. It wasn't exactly smooth sailing over the next couple of years, but despite all of the challenges and trying times, the company still managed to grow.

Today, U.S. Optics is located in a 10,000 square foot facility in Brea, Calif., has over 20 fulltime employees, and is on pace to produce around 1,000 scopes this year—and that's just one-off custom scopes. It doesn't include any of their R&D

or contract work, both of which are steadily becoming larger parts of their business.

Built to Hit...and be Hit

What exactly sets a U.S. Optics scope apart from the competition and makes it worth a substantial investment from a shooter? According to John Williams III, the scope is different in just about every aspect, but it all starts with the materials.

"The case of the scope is made with materials that are vastly different from a lot of the other companies out there. Everyone can say they use 6061 aluminum, and they are, but they're not all using 6061 T6, which is the hardness of the aluminum. We make everything out of

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While nothing at U.S. Optics is standardized with a specific part number, due to the countless custom variations, this is an SN-3 T-PAL with a 3.2-17x magnification range. The extra-large elevation turret allows enough mils of adjustment for... whatever the hell you want!

that, and we Type III anodize everything, so the anodizing on the outside of the body is harder than the hubs of hell—about three quarters the surface hardness of a diamond.”

To reinforce the sturdiness of the body, wall thicknesses are greater than many other brands, and knobs are made from brass or stainless steel instead of aluminum. And a U.S. Optics knob isn't simply a plunger with a spring behind it. Instead, U.S. Optics uses an encapsulated tungsten ball with a spring behind it that's in a threaded case, so they're able to adjust the tension of the clicks.

They're also hand-wrapped during the assembly process for zero tolerance. Williams admits that these touches do add a bit of additional weight but argues it's extra weight where it's needed, to make the scope more robust and able to take a hit.

“We've really tried to make things to the point where, even if the scope did take a severe hit, things would give before the part that doesn't need to give breaks,” Williams explains. He cites examples of a tank door falling on a scope in the heat of combat; a big-game hunter dropping his rifle on some rocks, and his scope taking the brunt of the hit, right before his hunt was about to start; and a couple of other horror-story scenarios

where a U.S. Optics scope took a blow but still performed flawlessly.

A typical U.S. Optics scope has 13 pieces of glass in it. All of this precision-ground glass is securely bonded so it stays put and can't be easily taken apart—by an operator or the experts who made the scope in the first place.

“With our scopes, we use a lot of bonding agents—things that make it so the scopes don't come back apart,” says Williams. He acknowledges that this durable construction actually “shoots the company in the foot” a bit because they lose out on modification work, such as changing out a reticle. “Changing out the reticle on a U.S. Optics scope takes the better part of a day,” he adds with a prideful smile.

All of the company's scopes are backed by a lifetime guarantee, so if a scope does come back for a repair, Williams typically replaces it with a brand new one and uses the returned scope to determine if there's any room for improvement in the scope's design.

You Design it, They Build it

“We are the custom gunsmith of the riflescope industry,” reads the quote from the late John Williams Jr. on the inside cover of U.S. Optics' product catalog. What this means is, unless you purchase a pre-configured model

from an authorized dealer (a few of their best-sellers are available directly from some retailers), when you order a U.S. Optics scope, you get a whole lot of input in what the company ultimately builds for you. And what should a customer's number-one consideration be in selecting a scope? According to John Williams III, it's fitting the scope to your needs.

“What application are you going to be using that scope for?” he says is the main question a customer should ask himself. Along with the application, he should also consider the weapon on which it will be mounted, the round he'll be firing, and the distance from which he plans on making shots. “All of those things kind of throw a different twist on the type of scope you'll buy.”

Once a customer decides which of U.S. Optics' 20 basic models (as of this writing) best meets his needs, it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty of customizing the scope with the options and accessories that will make it truly his. Depending on the basic model selected, choices include tube diameter, lens objective, eye relief, color or finish, and knob and reticle selection.

Williams points out that U.S. Optics has always led the way in making sure a scope's knobs and reticles match, making it easier on an operator in pressure-packed situations.

“A lot of people had MOA knobs with a Mil-based crosshair reticle. So what they're doing is, they're ranging targets with a Mil reticle, and then they're having to do the math equation to convert it over to MOA, then they're able to turn their knobs and make their shot. What we're doing is matching Mil reticles with Mil knobs, MOA reticles with MOA knobs, so it takes one part of the math equation out and makes the time from when they range the target to the time they actually pull the trigger about half the time.” He acknowledges that other companies are starting to catch on now, but that, for many years, U.S. Optics was one of the only companies doing this.

A customer's choices aren't limited strictly to the

selections offered on the U.S. Optics website, either—he can get as specific or creative as he wants. Want a custom BDC (bullet drop compensator) so you can simply set the knob, based on the laser range, and pull the trigger? U.S. Optics will work one-on-one with you, take your ballistics information, crunch the math, and engrave the BDC right on the knob for you to clearly see and easily set.

Or, if you know exactly what it is you want down to the last detail—like many of their Special Ops customers—U.S. Optics will work with you to build a scope just the way you want it.

Of course, the more bells and whistles and customization you add, the more you can expect to pay—but name a product where it isn't that way. And a riflescope customized to your specific needs could just mean the difference between a successful or unsuccessful hunt, competition, or mission. Depending on your line of business, it could even save your life.

Diverse Customers

“The majority of the customers are really competitive shooters and guys that just really want a heavy-duty scope that's going to last forever,” says Williams of his customer base. Of course, U.S. Optics also services military and law enforcement professionals and



John Williams III (left and above) shows us a Kestrel wind gauge set up to plug into U.S. Optics' own software and PDA. The company tests and then tests some more to make sure their riflescopes are dead-on.



One of the company's test rifles, a duplicate of the current USMC-issue sniper rifle. Note the mount here and below. U.S. Optics manufactures its own line of mounts and hardware.

competes with some of the bigger scope-makers for contracts with federal agencies.

"A lot of the special operations forces are buying them right now," says Williams, who adds that the company is currently working on a bid with SOCOM for the new PSR rifle.

They're also aggressively going after the hunting market because, says Williams, he's heard too many horror stories about big-game hunters spending thousands of dollars to go on hunts, only to find that their scopes were banged up and damaged beyond repair during

shipping. "We're making a scope now that works for a hunter but is still durable as all hell," he adds. "So you don't have to worry about that—it takes that one thing out of the equation. You show up, your scope's still zeroed in, and it's ready to rock and roll."

The company's customer base also includes corporations and agencies that request research and development work for specific projects. U.S. Optics' smaller size allows the company to jog and weave and turn things around quickly, which is why Williams believes they get a lot of R&D work. That and being a respected name in the industry.

"We do a ton of R&D work with

Ratheon, Cubic Defense, Teledyne, DARPA, and Norwich University," he elaborates. "There's a lot of people that come to us to design some pretty outrageous optical designs. Things that are pretty out of the norm."

Just how out of the norm he's not at liberty to say, but a lot of the cutting-edge technology the company develops or comes across in its R&D work winds up making its way into its scopes. Williams emphasizes that staying at the forefront of new technology and incorporating that tech-

nology into future U.S. Optics products is a priority with the company.

"Some of the things we're working on right now are going to totally change the riflescope industry pretty quick," he teases without going into specifics. "We're using some technologies that were never thought of to use in a riflescope. I don't want to go too far into it, but all I want to say is keep your eye on us, because you're going to see some pretty crazy stuff pretty soon."

The look in his eyes makes it clear he's confident the compa-

ny can deliver on this promise of things to come. It's no doubt the same confident look John Jr. had in his eyes 19 years earlier when he started the company with not much more than a notion of what a truly fine riflescope should be and the gumption to bring it to fruition.



To learn more about U.S. Optics or to design a U.S. Optics scope of your own, visit www.usoptics.com, call 714-582-1956, or email the company at sales@usoptics.com.

Made in America for Americans

U.S. OPTICS scopes aren't merely assembled in the United States; they're designed and manufactured there as well. From the machining of the aluminum components to the grinding and polishing of American-made optics to the final assembly and testing, every U.S. Optics scope is made in America by highly trained employees who, according to CEO John Williams III, require about a year of on-the-job training to become completely sufficient at their jobs.

Even the company's CNC machines, used to mill aluminum stock into parts, are made in America.

"We are truly an American company," says Williams. "We're made here in the USA. I know all the other scope manufacturers out there, and I know where they're getting their stuff made."

Williams explains that some of the bigger scope manufacturers may be "based" in the U.S. but much of their manufacturing and assembly is outsourced to the Philippines and other foreign countries. Being an American-made product is a source of pride for Williams, especially given that U.S. Optics products are used not only by law enforcement professionals here in the States but also by U.S. troops overseas.

"We get a lot of feedback from the guys, especially if they're overseas," he explains. "I'll donate scopes for the guys to take overseas and beat on them for a year, as long as they bring them back. I'll give them a brand new scope when they bring it back. But when they bring it back, I'm able to see what physically happened to the scope and take their report and go into it and make sure we can continue building a product that's going to outlast a soldier's trip over there." Making sure a scope survives a serviceman's entire tour of duty is important to Williams. "If that \$1,200 piece of equipment kept that soldier alive that whole entire time, then we did our job, and we did it right," he says with pride.

"Right now we have an army unit over there that's had one of our scopes on a Barrett [.50 caliber semi-automatic rifle] for five years, and before that they broke every scope they ever put on it. This is the only scope that's ever lasted for them. That's a pretty good tried-and-true testament of how good our stuff really is."

