

[Skip to navigation](#)[Skip to content](#)[Skip to footer](#)

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## News

- [SHARE](#)
- [TWEET](#)
- 
- 
- [Comments](#)

## News

- [Local News](#)
- [Court and Crime](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Investigations](#)
- [National](#)
- [World](#)
- [Survive the drive](#)
- [The Senior](#)

## Sport

- [Local Sport](#)
- [National Sport](#)
- [Newcastle Knights](#)
- [Newcastle Jets](#)
- [Soccer](#)
- [Cricket](#)
- [Rugby Union](#)
- [Juniors](#)
- [Fishing and Boating](#)
- [Commonwealth Games 2018](#)

## What's On

- [Things to do](#)
- [Food and Drink](#)
- [Music and Gigs](#)
- [Family and Kids](#)
- [Theatre and Arts](#)
- [TV Guide](#)

## Community

- [Your News](#)
- [Babies, Weddings, Obituaries](#)
- [History](#)
- [Send us your news](#)

- [Sponsorships](#)

**Comment**

- [Your Say](#)
- [Our Say](#)
- [Opinion](#)

**Life & Style**

- [Life](#)
- [Money](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Fun Stuff](#)
- [Celebrity](#)
- [Shopping](#)

**Classifieds**

- [Tributes](#)
- [Celebrations](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Cars](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Place your own classified](#)
- [Ag and Rural](#)

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- [Features](#)
- [Special Publications](#)
- [Sponsored Content](#)
- [Herald Shop](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [What's On](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Life & Style](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Recommended](#)
- [All](#)

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- [Local News](#)
- [Court and Crime](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Investigations](#)
- [National](#)
- [World](#)
- [Survive the drive](#)
- [The Senior](#)

1. [Home](#)
2. [News](#)
3. [Business](#)

March 12 2018 - 3:00PM

## Comsteel at Waratah has a centenary celebration



[Ian Kirkwood](#)

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**HAPPY BIRTHDAY:** Hundreds of employees and guests took part in Commonwealth Steel's centenary celebrations at the Maud Street, Waratah, factory, on Monday. Picture: Marina Neil

NEWCASTLE steelmaker Comsteel marked its centenary on Monday with a barbecue and ceremony at its Waratah plant that celebrated the company's past and pointed to its high-tech future.

The Commonwealth Steel Company – to give it its full name – is nowadays part of a company called Moly-Cop, which was sold to a private equity fund, American Industrial Partners (AIP), in late 2016 for a reported \$1.6 billion.

Speaking to an audience of Comsteel workers, guests and media, Moly-Cop executive director John Barbagallo and Comsteel general manager Michael Parker ran through the history of the company, which was formed in the shadow of WWI to supply railway products.

It survived the Great Depression by holding its workforce together with part-time employment before becoming a major supplier of munitions and other materiel – including two million steel helmets – during WWII.



**Waratah centenary and a trip down Comsteel's memory lane**

Historical images courtesy of Moly-Cop Celebration photographs Marina Neil

It went through a range of owners in the post-war era, from BHP to Kerry Packer's Australian National Industries to Smorgon Steel, One-Steel and now AIP.

Over the years, it had employed some 20,000 people, and still had 500 full-time workers and about 100 contractors.

Nowadays, the Waratah plant had two products: Comsteel railway wheels, and Moly-Cop grinding balls for the mining industry to grind down ores.

It was Australia's only railway wheel maker, and had 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the domestic market, and made about 40,000 wheel and axle sets a year. Both products were also exported.

Mr Barbagallo and Mr Parker repeatedly referred to the company's workforce as its most important asset. Four long-term employees – Glenn Sullivan, John Wibberley, Brian Hosker and Chris Hinton – were invited to unveil memorials to the centenary. Mr Sullivan had 49 years of service and the other three 47 years. All said they still loved their jobs.

The company thanked its residential neighbours for their support over the years, with Mr Barbagallo noting they were operating a steel mill in the middle of a residential area.

The electric arc furnace steelmaking plant at Waratah runs on scrap steel and Mr Parker told the audience it consumed 1000 old cars a day. Comsteel was working on a number of "green" manufacturing processes, and was in partnership with the University of NSW on a number of ways to use other recycled materials, as well as steel, in its manufacturing processes.

UNSW's Professor Veena Sahajwalla said she was working with Moly-Cop on ways to use waste plastic and glass to have silicon carbides bind at the atomic level on the surface of grinding balls.

 UNSW's Professor Veena Sahajwalla talking with federal Newcastle MP Sharon Claydon.

The ceremony heard from the region's political representatives with the state government's Parliamentary Secretary for the Hunter, Scot MacDonald, and three Labor representatives – federal Newcastle MP Sharon Claydon, state Newcastle MP Tim Crakanthorp and Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes – all thanking Comsteel for its contribution to the community and the economy.

As noted above, Comsteel was previously part of the Arrium (OneSteel) group that included the Whyalla steelworks and the former BHP rolling mills at Mayfield.

The rest of Arrium was bought by in September 2017 by GFG (short for Gupta Family Group) Alliance, a London-based group chaired by businessman Sanjeev Gupta.

The iron ore side of Arrium is now called SIMEC Mining and the OneSteel side, including the Mayfield mills, has been renamed Liberty OneSteel.

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