

# Your Silent Partner

## John Ek's Combat Classics

**Legendary blademaker John Ek (1941-'76) intended his knives for military personnel only. Today, they are collector treasures!**

BY GARY BOYD

**J**ohn Ek claimed to have produced 100,000 knives during World War II, all intended for private purchase by American military personnel. By mid-1944 he reported that his Hamden, Connecticut, shop, manned by 40 handicapped workers, was producing 5000 to 7000 knives per week. If this were true, to this day no other U.S. manufacturer of privately-purchased military knives has ever been as prolific.

Ek designed his first knives at his Whitney Machine Shop in Hamden in 1939. By 1941 production was in full swing and ten different models were offered to the various branches of the military through mailorder ads in a number of popular publications. His knives are best described as "crude and durable" with razor-sharp nickel-chrome/molybdenum blades and rock-maple grips attached with three poured lead rivets.

### World War II Models

The standard World War II models are as follows.

**Model 1 Commando.** A spear-point single edge with no guard. Very popular with servicemen. Often found with the Ek-produced half sheath and the most common version found in collections today.

**Model 2 Commando.** Same as the Model 1 but with a full double edge.

**Model 3 Bolo.** A spear-point single edge with a "bolo" style grip. Often found in the Ek half-sheath. Not as widely used as the 1 and 2, thus somewhat rare.

**Model 4 The New Guinea Brush Knife.** A Roman Gladius style double-edged blade and a bolo grip. Rare.

**Model 5 Navy.** Clip point 7-inch bowie with bolo grip in a half or Mk-1 style sheath. Medium rare.

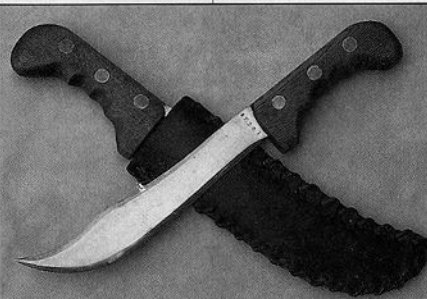
**Model 10 Floating.** A clip-point bowie with an extra large bolo style grip. Reported to float if dropped overboard. Very rare.

John Ek was a super patriot even by World War II standards. Ek believed it was his responsibility to sell knives only to active-duty military personnel; thus he restricted sales through an elaborate registration system. Each knife he produced was serial numbered and the registered serviceman's name was said to

digit was a number, indicating the model. Next came a letter followed by numbers ranging from 1 to 999. As an example, serial number 2, A250 indicates the 250th Model 2 produced. Number 8, B375 indicates the 1375th Model 8 and so on down the line.

Some collectors have questioned whether or not all models carried their own numbering sequence, or were some combined. There is some indication, for instance, that models #3, #4, #5 shared the same numbering sequence with only the model number differentiating the series. The same may be true of models #6 and #7. Regardless, Ek's elaborate record keeping system allows today's collector to establish some basic production time frame for individual pieces.

Even though thousands of Ek knives were produced during World War II, each piece exhibits that "bench-made" or "custom" look. Inconsistencies persist through all models. The very earliest standard models (other than bolo styles) had no thong hole and a 4 1/4-inch-long grip, as compared to the 5-inch grip found on later knives. Some early pieces have been observed with no skull crusher and extended blade lengths. Grips also were thinner, and blade points were ground with a greater taper.

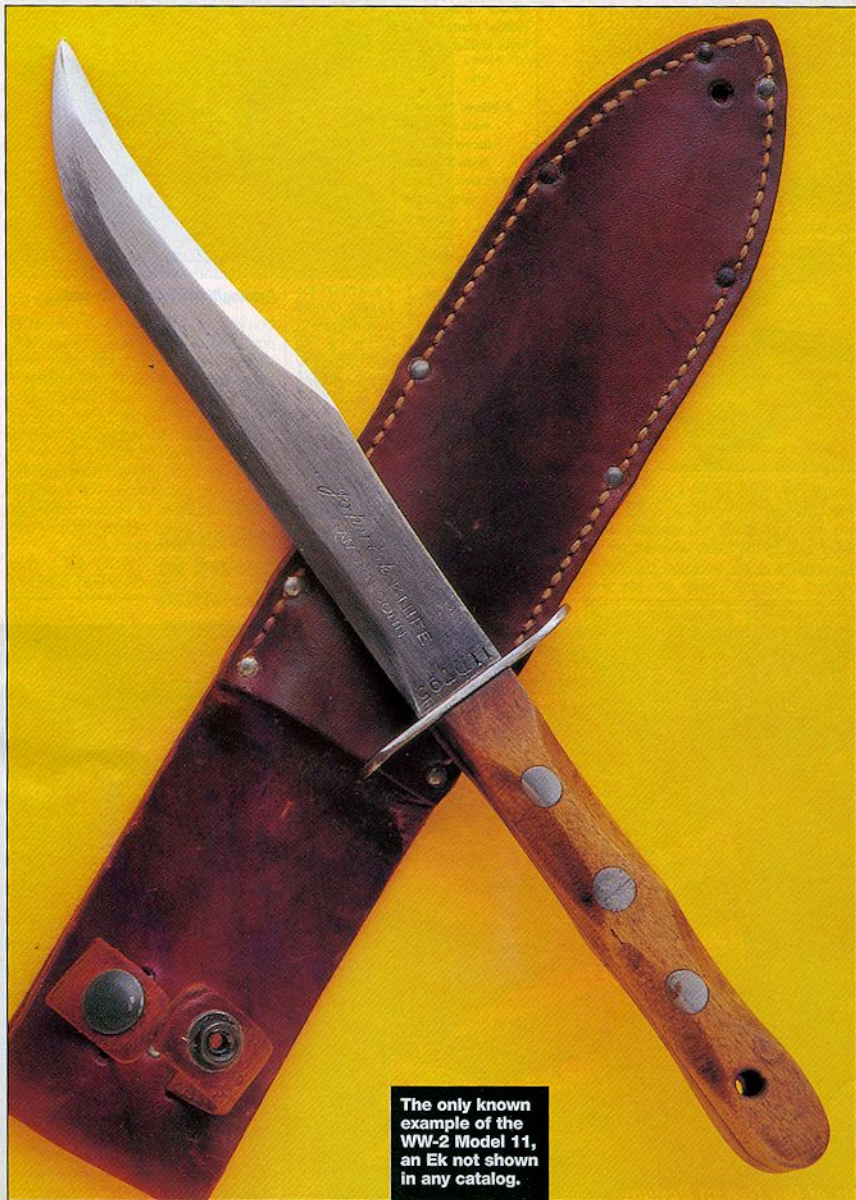


**A pair of the super-rare Model 8 "Paratrooper" with the original stitched sheath.**

be kept on file at the Ek company office.

### Serial Numbering System

Ek's serial numbering system was simplicity itself. The first



The only known example of the WW-2 Model 11, an Ek not shown in any catalog.



Vietnam period model 1's with a typical Miami-style sheath.

A Miami Model 1 with a typical laced sheath. Note that the logo was applied with an ink stamp!



WW-2 Ek's (from top) 5, 2, and 7 with an original copy of "Your Silent Partner."

issue with Ek during the hectic war years). Examples with four poured rivets vs the normal three have been observed.

Given the general low quality of wartime sheaths, Ek knives are found today in every conceivable style of scabbard, making it difficult to establish which are original and which are replacements. The traditional Ek half-scabbard is the most prized. Some of these are marked John Ek on the back but most are not.

examples (quality control was apparently not a big

#### Catalog/Knife Fighting Manual

During both World War II and Vietnam, Ek published a combination catalog/knife fighting instruction booklet titled "Your Silent Partner." Most of the booklet is devoted to pictures and descriptions of the various Ek models. A brief section delves into Col. Rex Applegate's methods of knife handling.

With over 100,000 Ek knives reportedly produced during World War II, why are they so difficult to find today? Where did they all go? Three factors probably contribute the most to their scarcity:

1. Most John Ek World War II knives were sold to active US military personnel



Although the John Ek logo was generally stamped on the blade, occasionally it was applied with an electric pencil. Either side of the blade was utilized for markings, and on occasion they were omitted altogether—even on late war

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WW-2 models 3, 4, and 5 with the so-called "bolo" grip.

and a large number of them probably saw heavy combat use. Ek knives were not things of beauty to begin with and were likely considered tools rather than ornaments by their owners.

2. Those Ek's that survived the rigors of military use were either discarded or came home for use as hunting/fishing/gardening tools. While samurai swords and Marine stiletos were adorning trophy cases, many Eks were probably cutting bait and digging dandelions.

3. There is no hard evidence that Ek actually produced 100,000 knives during World War II. Due to a flood in Miami after the war, all records were reportedly lost. Again there is some question as to the reliability of his serial numbering sequence. As an example, the model 9 in my collection is numbered P809 indicating that up to 17,000 floaters had been produced, yet this is one of the most difficult models to find today.

#### Miami Operation

In 1949, John Ek moved his operation to Miami where he continued to produce knives for American forces during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Most Miami-made knives were produced during the 60's and were marked John Ek Knives, Miami, FL, by either die- or ink-stamping the blades. Florida-made knives tended to be slightly shorter, and the grips came in either black walnut or rock maple. Many of the WW-2 models were discontinued in Miami, and their numbers were reassigned to new models. The 1 was now the Commando; 2, the Ranger; 3, the Jungle Combat; 4, the Jungle Combat with/hilt; 5,

the Army Occupational; 6, the Patton Occupational; 7, the Survival Chopper; 8, the Skin Diver; 9, the Floating; 10, the Professional Throwing; 11, the Utility; and 12, the Pen Knife. Handmade models 1 and 2 remained the same in Florida and continued to be Ek's most popular styles among military users. Florida sheaths were distinctive in that they were generally full length black or reddish leather with laced sides and marked John Ek Commando on the back.

It appears that Ek utilized the same serial numbering system in Florida as he had in World War II. Based on pieces observed, it would appear that only a limited number of Ek knives were made from 1949 until Ek's death in 1976. Most collectors would

agree that Miami-produced Eks are far more difficult to find than those produced during World War II. My own collection contains a Miami Model 3 manufactured in 1970/71 (according to Gary Ek) with a serial number suggesting that at the late date less than 500 of this popular model had been produced. Other low serial numbers observed seem to confirm limited production of all Miami military-style models.

John Ek was truly an American patriot, and his classic knives served thousands of servicemen through three wars over a span of 35 years. Although never considered a thing of beauty, an Ek knife could be counted on for durability and simple, useful design.

As Ek once commented, "How pretty does a knife have to be to kill someone?" Whether considered a weapon or just another useful tool, Ek knives are legendary and the pride of many military knife collections.

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