



**WHERE
ARE
ALL
THE
JOHN EK
COMMANDO
KNIVES?**

by Steven Dick

One of the more frustrating areas of military knife collecting for me has been finding the various models of John Ek combat knives. Many of the knives military collectors search for were produced in very limited numbers so it's understandable when completing a collection proves difficult, but why are John Eks so hard to find? Robert Buerlein's book *Allied Military Fighting Knives* states that during WWII John's company produced 1000 knives a week working all seven days. Total wartime production is said to have been over 100,000 knives and production didn't stop for long if at all when the war ended. John Ek produced many more knives for Korea and Viet Nam. John died in October of 1976 but his company lives on producing combat knives in limited numbers.

To put this 100,000+ knives in proper perspective, consider the production figures given in Harold

Peterson's classic work *American Knives* for the models U.S. 1917 trench knife and U.S. 1918 trench knife by L.E.C.: 113,000 for the 1917 and 119,424 for the 1918. Now look around at any large gun/knife show and count the number of both models offered for sale. I can about guarantee you will have no problem finding specimens of both in a variety of conditions and prices. Not so John Ek combat knives. In 15 years of searching I personally have never found a single one at a show!

The 1944 catalog shows nine models and like most handmade cutlery there are a number of variations of each floating around. After the war several of the original models were dropped and new models added. There have been at least four blade markings and many early knives were either marked very lightly or not at all. WWII knives are marked Hamden, Conn. In 1949 the shop was moved to Miami, Florida and

knives made between this date and John's death in '76 are marked accordingly. The shop operated for a short while in St. Augustine, Florida and then moved to its current location in Richmond, Virginia. With fifteen or twenty models, four different stampings, the usual number of variations, and the difficulty in locating even a single knife, it's not hard to see why a complete collection of John Ek knives could be a lifetime undertaking.

While many consider John Ek a pioneer in the custom knife market, the WWII vintage knives are not even close to the quality standards we expect of benchmade cutlery today. The thin blades (.125") are ground from flat carbon steel stock. Edge bevels are ground back about 1/4" and the rest of the blade remains at the basic stock thickness. Grinding blades in this manner would have been quick, simple and require little training for employees. It also allows a relatively thin blade to retain adequate strength for close combat use, but in my opinion leaves something to be desired as a utility tool. Even with a sharp edge the knife binds on its own thickness when slicing and as the blade wears down from resharpening the problem only gets worse. Most models made during this period lack handguards so the knives are of about the same appearance and materials as a butcher's sticking knife. On guarded models the guard is held in place by the handle slabs and most are loose from the handle shrinking over the years. The handle slabs are usually maple held in place with cast lead rivets. Cast lead rivets are a technique I normally associate with the handmade butcher knives produced on mid-western farms in about the same period. Like many other knives made during the war the sheaths are of very light leather and are not of particularly good workmanship. John Ek knives are basically rough, serviceable wartime items made in a hurry to fill an urgent need. Ads were run in most of the outdoor magazines of the time offering the knives for around \$7.95 each. A knife of this type would be a big improvement over something like the miserable Marine Corps stiletto, but it wasn't a personal possession a soldier could take much pride in.

One collector friend of mine has a theory this is why John Ek knives are so hard to find. He feels that the knives were basic tools that lacked the extra something that say a Randall of the



same period has. According to his theory after the war, when the owners no longer had a need for a rather crude combat knife, they threw them away or used them in such a such manner the knives didn't survive. A few years of digging in gardens, rusting in tackleboxes and being pitched at trees by junior members of the family soon took their toll. As scarce as the knives are I'm willing to believe there is some truth to his theory.

Recently the Ek Commando Knife Co., as the company is currently known, introduced a new model called the Survival/Fighter. The blade is made of high carbon stainless which I feel is an improvement over the original plain carbon steel. Dimensions on the spear-point blade run 6 1/2" long, 7/8" wide and 12 1/8" overall with a 3 3/4" sharp false edge. Blade thickness has been increased to .15", still relatively light for a combat knife. There is a small brass handguard and the full tang handle is wrapped in six yards of parachute cord. An extended tang forms what Ek calls a "skullcrasher pommel." I know many combat knives have this last feature but I have never heard of anyone ever using it in combat. Just sounds good to the armchair commandos, I guess. (I do personally know of incidents when the butt of knife was used to club a potential P.O.W. Because the goal was to stun not kill, flat pommels like the one on a Ka-Bar or M-7 bayonet were preferable to a pointed one.) The sheath is made of nylon with a Velcro retainer strap. Except for the Velcro I consider it much better than the WWII models I've handled. I would like to see some type of reinforcement at the tip of the sheath to prevent the point from cutting through. Any time I can feel the point of a knife through a sheath I get nervous. The knife I handled was razor sharp from the box but still had that narrow blade grind of the old John Ek commandos. For the elite few who have the need this would be an excellent pure fighting knife but for utility and survival use there are better choices. At \$79.00 it is a very reasonably priced handcrafted combat knife and an interesting addition to a military knife collection. I plan to have mine salted away before they are as hard to find as the earlier models. For those who would like more information contact Ek Commando Knife, 601 N. Lombardy St., Richmond, Virginia 23220. ■