

Ek Commando Knife

by B.R. Hughes

It was, if memory does not dissuade me, back during the Korean War that I first saw an advertisement for "the John Ek Commando Knife". For the life of me, I cannot recall which publication of that era carried the blurb, but, knowing my literary tastes of that period, I suspect it was either "Outdoor Life," "Field and Stream" or "Sports Afield".

At any rate, according to the information provided, these knives were available only to American servicemen on active duty, and, as an ROTC student with at least a year of college staring me in the face, I didn't seem to qualify, so I dismissed the matter from my mind.

As late as the mid-1960's, despite a strong interest in all knives, I had never so much as seen a John Ek knife, but finally around 1965 I came into ownership of one of them in used but excellent condition. I didn't keep it long, but it was the model called the Style 1, which had a 7" blade, maple handle slabs, and no guard. As was the custom with all Ek knives of that and earlier periods, the slabs were attached by means of poured lead rivets. This supposedly

made it possible to tighten loosened handle slabs by striking the rivets with a hard object. I've never had the opportunity to try this, but it certainly sounds reasonable.

John Ek founded his knife company in the early days of World War II, turning out as many as 1,000 knives per week in his small plant in Hamden, Conn. During that period the British Commandos were receiving a great deal of recognition as elite troops, and Ek sought and received permission from the British War Office to use the word "Commando" in reference to his knives. This did not imply any relationship to the famous Fairbairn-Sykes knife, which was used by the Commandos. His original model was only sharpened along less than half of the back of the blade. Each knife was accompanied by a registration card, to insure that the knives were indeed sold only to bona fide servicemen. Since each knife was numbered, it was easy to match up the knife to the registration card.

Slowly a number of options were added, and by 1943 Ek had six basic styles

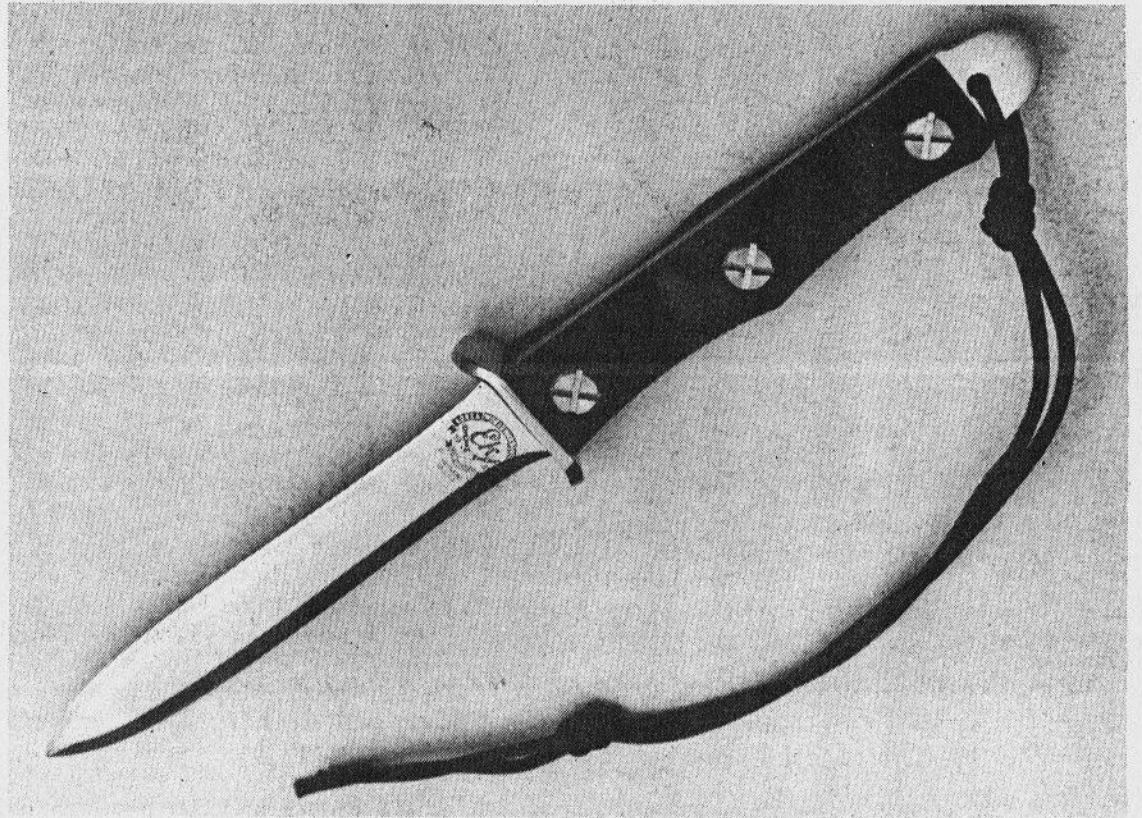
in production, included versions with double edges and/or guards. Originally, only nickel chrome moly steel was used for blades, but later Swedish Sandvik stainless was offered as an option. Steel was at a premium during WWII, but the U.S. War Production

Board recognized the contribution of the Ek factory to the war effort, and sufficient blade material was assured to meet the plant's needs.

Originally, maple was the only handle material, but later, in the 1970's, walnut, rosewood, and micarta were

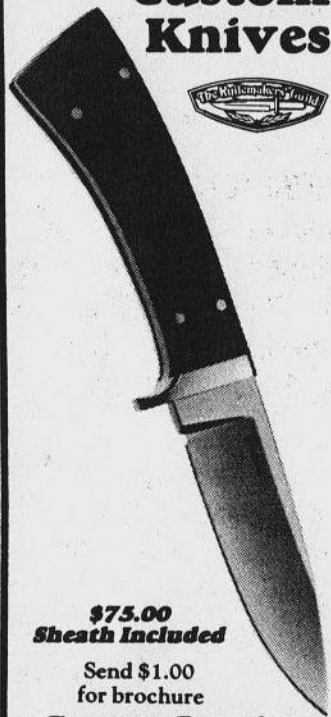
all offered. Ek greatly preferred wood to leather, which was one of the other "standard" materials for knife handles in the 1940's, since he felt the latter was prone to rot, particularly in humid climates.

In 1949 the company mov-
Continued on page 13



The grind of the Ek begins very close to the edge, leaving a thick middle section, which makes for a very tough knife!

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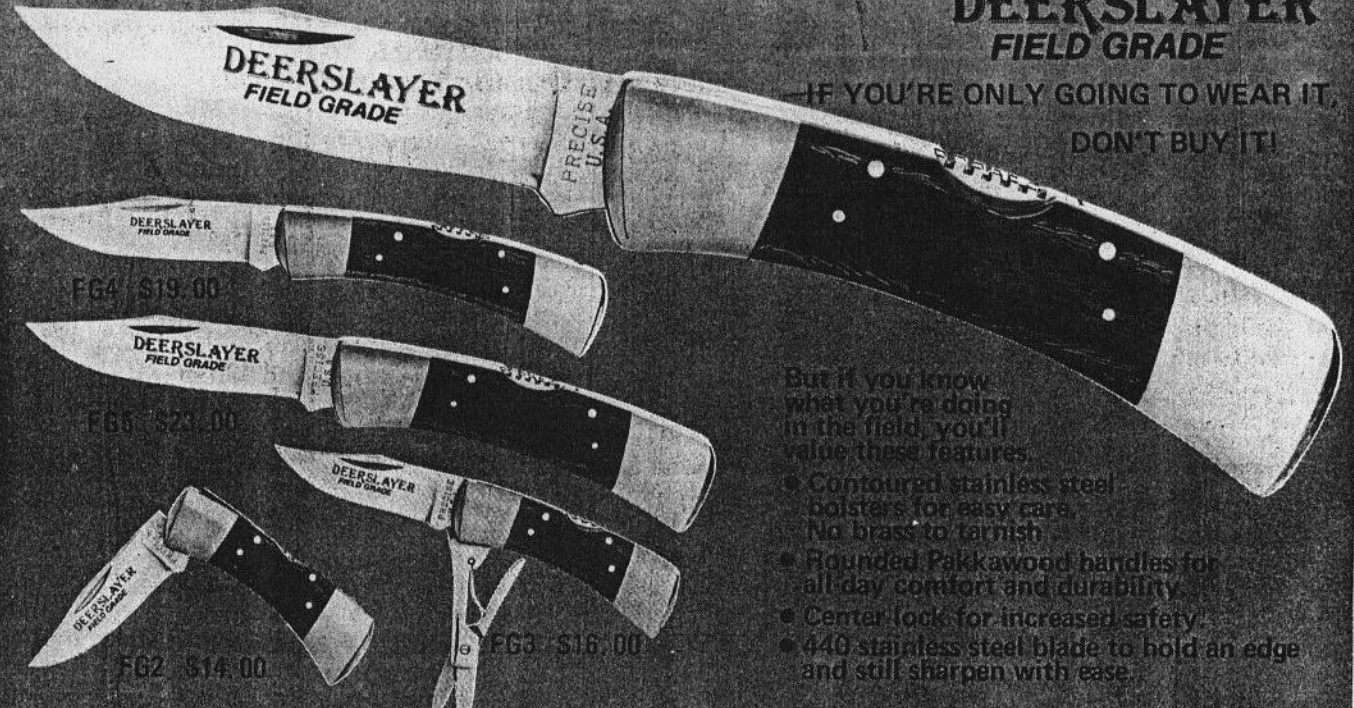
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Continued from page 9
 ed to Miami, Florida, and the knives made at that site helped supply the demand for combat knives created by the Korean and Viet Nam Wars. Knives made at Miami were so marked, and there is a story that a number of those who waded ashore at the Bay of Pigs fiasco carried Ek knives. The Florida knives were different from those made in Hamden in that they were approximately half an inch shorter and were made of thinner stock. The original Ek knives were made of .150" steel, but those made in Miami were made of .125" stock. Ek collectors generally agree that the knives made in Florida were, all things being equal, inferior to those made in Connecticut.

John Ek died in 1976, and in 1982 the company was again relocated, this time in Richmond, Virginia. The firm is now under the leadership of Stuart T. Ashton, IV.

That's a brief history of Ek knives. Now, let's take a closer look at the knives themselves, with a few personal observations.

First, permit me to say, right off the bat, that the John Ek knives in current production are far and away the finest ever to bear this name! The earlier Ek knives which I have inspected over the years, particularly those made in Florida, did not overwhelm me. This is not to say that they were not functional and rugged, as they certainly were that. The workmanship, however, left something to be desired. In a wartime crisis there is much to be said for the availability of a functional tool, but there were other sturdy knives available whose overall appearance and workmanship would shame that of those early Ek's. Names such as Randall, Ruana, Cooper, Staeger, and Morseth all come to mind.

Moreover, on the Ek that I owned briefly back in the 60's, the handle was actually thicker than it was wide, making a normal grip all but impossible. Ek actually included a strip of sandpaper with his knives for a period of time so the owners could shape the handles more to their liking, but those poured lead rivets were tough to cut down with a piece of sandpaper! While we're on that subject, those rivets gave Ek knives a decidedly handle heavy feel, which was probably satisfac-

tory for those who used their knives in the same manner as a fencing foil, but for those who preferred to chop and slash, more blade weight would have been welcomed.

Today's handles are much better shaped, and the knife sent me for testing has brass cutler's rivets instead of the poured lead, giving it a much better balance. The handle on the test knife is neatly finished, with deep and well executed scribes to

insure a positive grip.

The grind on Ek knives begins relatively close to the blade, leaving a great deal of strength in the blade. Because of this, I cannot imagine anyone's breaking an Ek blade, unless someone set out deliberately to accomplish the feat, and even then I suspect they'd need a vise, a cheater pipe, and perhaps even a hammer! The grinds are well done, and the polish is excellent.

These current production

knives are made of .150" stock, as were the early Ek knives in Connecticut, and they are made to the original length.

All in all, I am very favorably impressed with the current Ek product. In a true combat survival situation, I can think of few knives which would prove more serviceable or tougher than the current Ek. I'm equally impressed with the prices. You can purchase one for as little as \$79.95, which

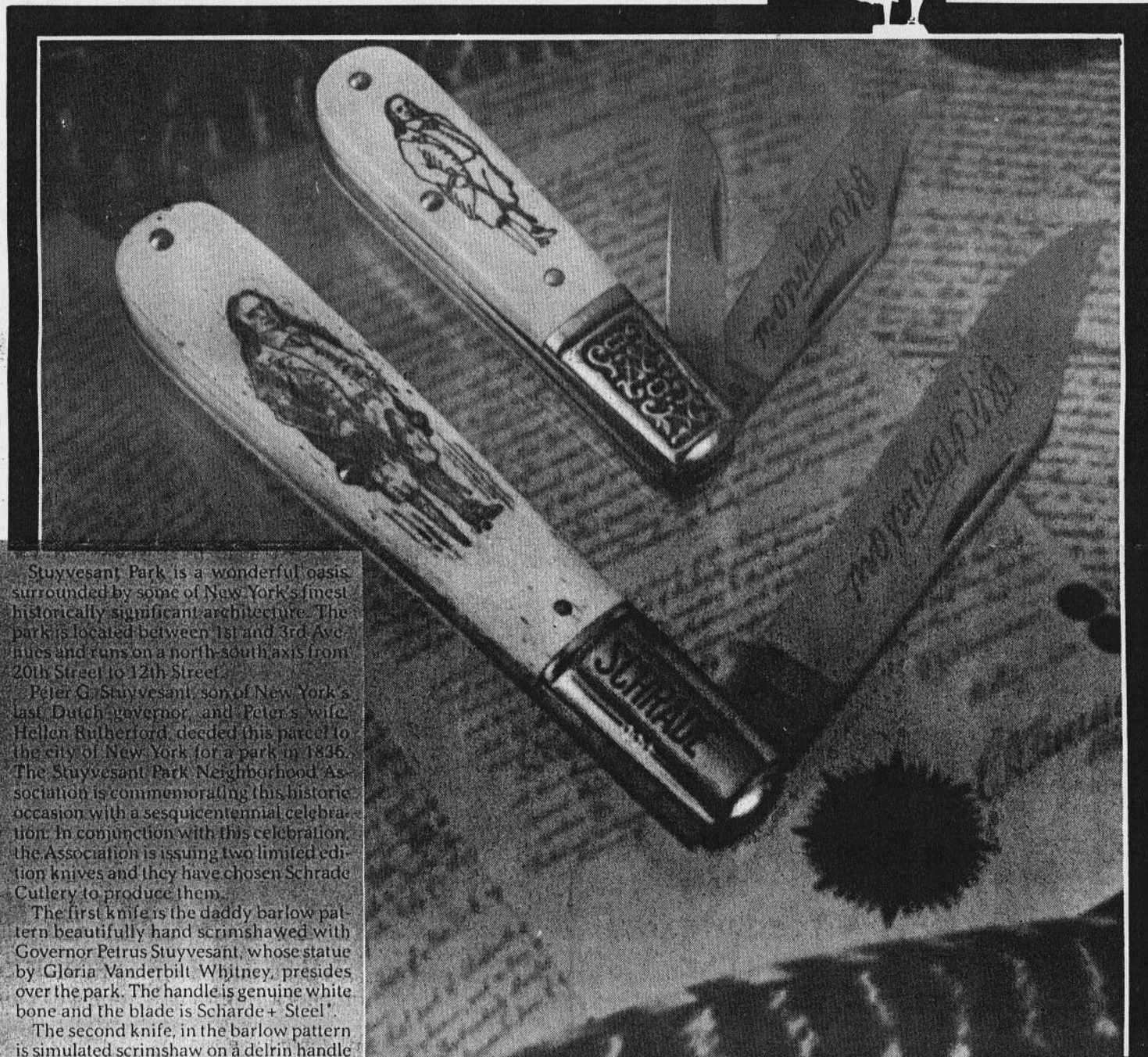
includes a first class sheath. I'm not kidding when I say that you could very easily spend half again as much, and not buy nearly as much knife!

Ek knives have been around for more than 40 years, but they've never been as good as they are right now. If you're interested, send a buck to Ek Commando Knife Company, Box 6454, Richmond, Virginia 23230, and ask for one of their new catalogs.

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