

THE MILITARY EDGE

★ The Knives of John Ek ★

by M.W. Silvey

"John Ek is another American putting all he's got into winning this war by giving our boys superior equipment with which to fight. He'd be with you fellows in the U.S. Army if it weren't for the fact that years ago he got his hand crushed in an auto accident. Uncle Sam took a look and told him he'd better stay home and do what he could for the war effort here. Johnny isn't the kind of an American who is satisfied to string along with the bunch. He wanted to feel that he was doing his

utmost for this war we are in. The result is that today he is putting in sixteen hours a day turning out his John Ek Commando Knives, because, as he has been told time and again, 'the boys can always use GOOD fighting knives'.

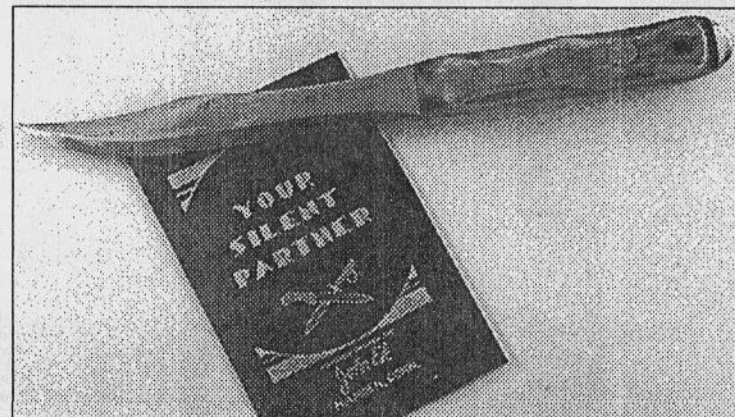
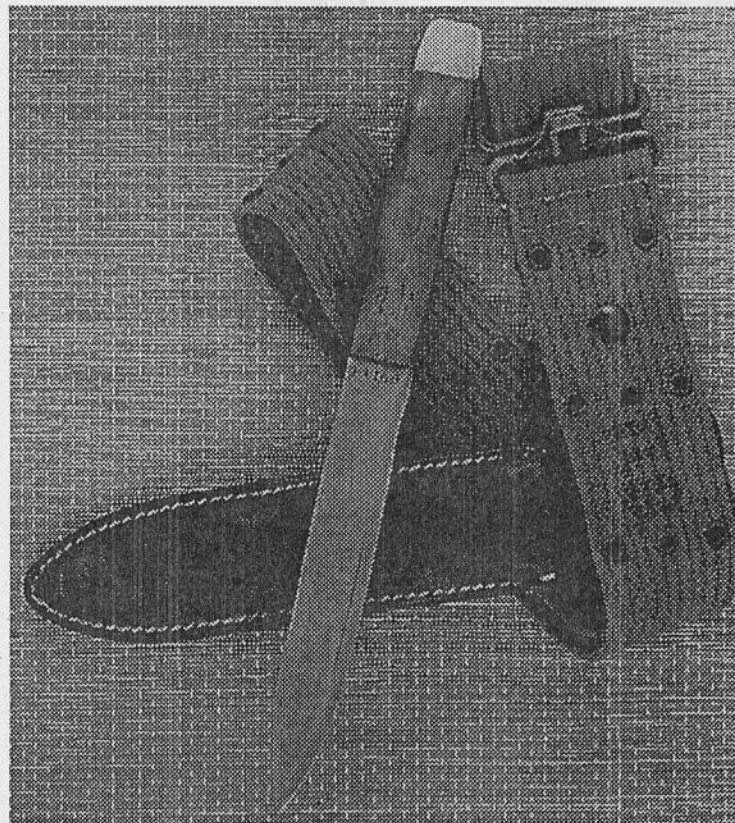
Being a scoutmaster and a Connecticut State Guardsman have opened his eyes to the usefulness of hunting and fighting knives. Shortly after his State Guard bayonet and rifle training almost three years ago, Ek told me that he felt the bayonet was too cumbersome a weapon for

hand-to-hand combat when removed from the rifle. This started him thinking and asking questions and he made up his mind that he would experiment until he developed the knife for the job he intended. I doubt that there is a book on modern knife fighting in this section of the country that he hasn't read. What he couldn't find in books he got straight from the soldiers and sailors themselves. He decided one thing before he had gone very far and that was that his knife wouldn't be "just another hunting knife," but had to be a weapon made by hand to exacting specifications.

The out growth of all this is that today in his modern shop you can see real craftsmen at work producing knives that he knows and we know will do the job. The blades are seven inches long and are made of top quality, tempered steel buffed to a mirror finish. The handles are of rugged Rock Maple which defies checking. Molded, non-corrosive rivets hold the handle firmly to the blade. The treated, top-grain leather sheaths were designed with one thought and that was accessibility.

Despite the enthusiastic

Continued on page 23



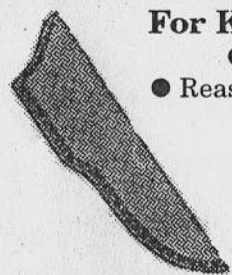
Top: This is fairly representative of an early Model 1 with the narrow rounded handle and absence of a lanyard hole.

Bottom: This is the Model 9, the Marine, shown with the 1944 John Ek booklet and catalog.

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Continued from page 22
reception his knives have been given Ek still reads, asks questions, and experiments in the hope of building an even finer knife. His one thought always is to give you men as good a knife as he would want if he had been able to go with the army."

The above introduction to the John Ek's instruction booklet and catalog was written by Captain Steven E. Madigan of the Connecticut State Guard over 50 years ago. It is still a good introduction to John Ek and his knives.

John Ek was a machinist by trade and as such was interested in making

things that worked. Form was fine but function had to come first. Ek knives are simple straight forward tools designed to help the combat soldier. Blades are made from high carbon tool steel which provides a superior blade. His model 1, for example, has a single edge spear point blade one inch wide and seven inches long. It is made of 1/8 inch stock. The edge bevel extends up the blade only about 1/4 inch so despite the rather thin material the blade retains maximum strength. Although the abrupt bevel yields a stronger blade, it does not provide for a truly fine cutting edge. The tang of the

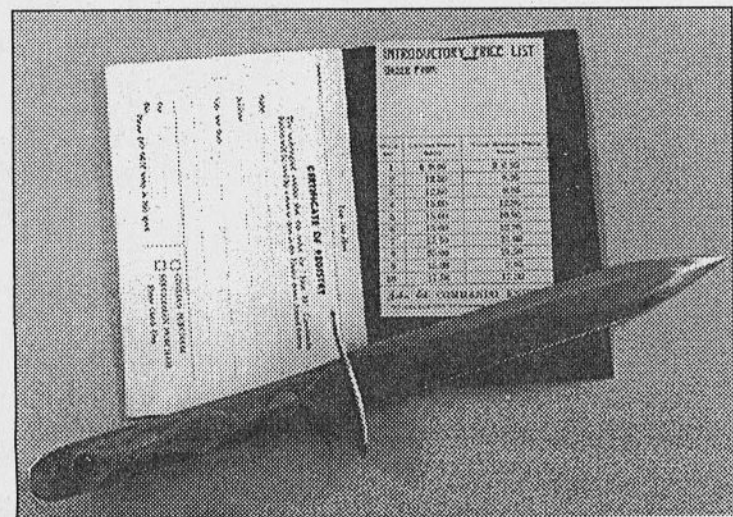
knife is full and it is sandwiched between two pieces of maple wood held in place by three poured lead rivets. The lead adds weight to the handle which enhances the feel of the knife resting in the hand.

Ek began producing knives in 1941 and by 1944 his catalog listed ten different models. The model 1 had a seven inch single edged spear point blade. The model 2 had the same

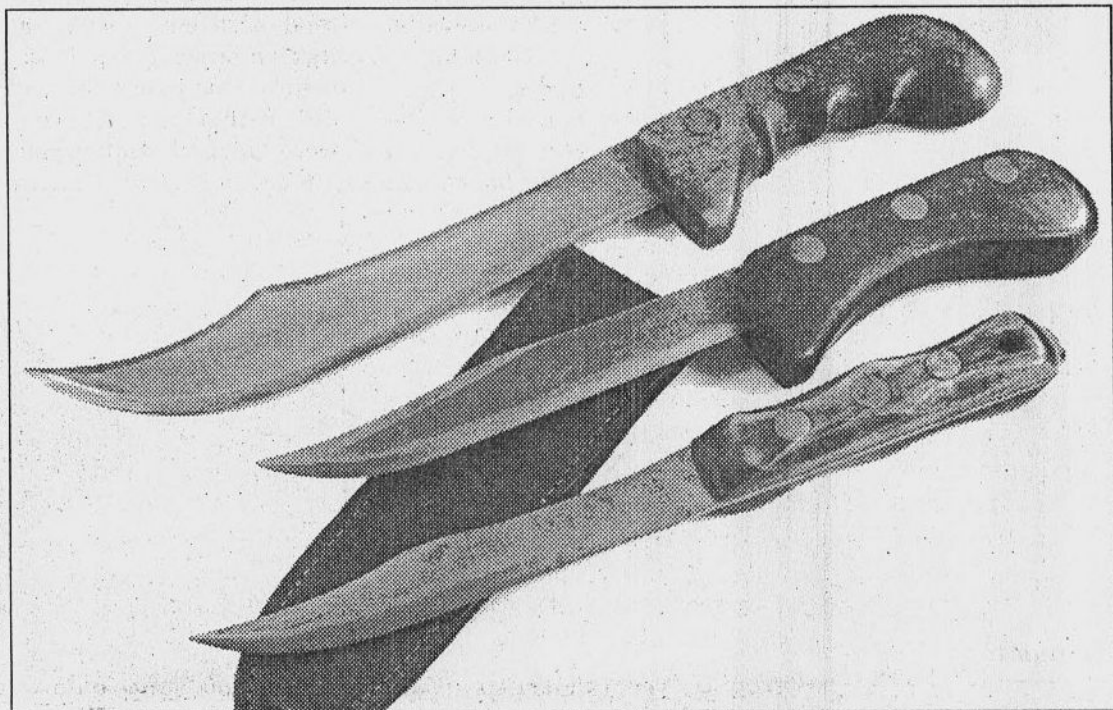
blade only it was double edged. The model 3 had a model 1 blade with bolo style handle. Model 4 had a double edged leaf shaped blade with a bolo handle. The model 5, called the Navy Knife had a seven inch clip point blade and a bolo handle. The model 6 was just like the model 1 except that it came with a double cross guard. Likewise, the model 7 was identical to the model 2

except for the cross guard. The model 8, the Paratrooper, had an impressive nine inch scimitar shaped blade and a bolo handle. The model 9, Marine Knife, had the clip point blade of the model 5 Navy Knife with a model 1 handle. Finally, the model 10 had a narrow clip point blade and a bolo handle with smaller rivets which permitted it to float.

Continued on page 24



This Model 7 is shown with the registration card and a 1944 price list. Today's values show quite a difference in price.



Top knife is the Model 8 Paratrooper. Middle knife is the model 5 Navy and the bottom knife is the Model 9 Marine.



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Continued from page 23

Hence, it was called the Floating Knife.

Ek knives were plain, even crude, yet they were respected as tools of the soldier. His knives were owned by presidents and generals but mostly by the ordinary GI who did service around the world. It was Ek's desire to serve and support this group of active duty servicemen to the exclusion of all others. He developed a registration system that would ensure that his knives went only to those on active duty.

He sought and was granted permission from the British War Office to call his knives "commando knives." His commando knives did well and by 1944 business was boom-

ing. His prices ranged from \$6.95 for a model 1 to \$19.50 for the model 8 Paratrooper. At one point he had as many as 40 employees, all handicapped, producing up to 1,000 knives in a 7 day week. His early knives were unmarked but by 1944 his knives were marked with a number (used for registration) and his logo, "John Ek Knife/Hamden, Conn." Estimates of Ek production range from 100,000 to 500,000 knives. I think these estimates are too high. To a large extent such estimates are based on one's interpretation of the Ek numbering system. Ek's knives were stamped with a two part number. The first part was the model number, i.e., 1 through 10.

The second part was the sequential serial number. The knives started out with 1 and went through 999. When they reached 999 and prefix "A" was added and they started over again with 1 through 999. Next came "B," and so forth. If the knife is numbered "5 D16" you could determine that the knife is a model 5 and it is the 4,016th knife in the series. The assumption is always made that each model had its own number sequence. I believe this is not the case but rather the numbers were applied sequentially

to all models. For example if the 1,211th knife to be made was a model 1 it would be numbered "1 A211" and if a model 3 was the next knife completed it would be stamped "3 A212." Collectors have always wondered why, if over 100,000 Eks were made, were they so hard to find. Well, I believe production was actually about a third of that. Ek didn't get up to speed in production until late in the war. It wasn't until late 1944 that he had all 10 models cataloged. Even if during his peak production he was

able to make 1,000 knives per week the orders were sure to fall off as the War came to a close over the following few months. In addition, it is a fact that the models 1 & 2 were the most popular knives, yet you can find model 9's and other with numbers every bit as high as the model 1's and 2's. This would tend to support the theory that all models were in the number sequence. At any rate, I believe the number of World War II Ek knives produced is closer to 30,000 than to 100,000. If this is

Continued on page 25

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Continued from page 24

correct and then you take into account the other factors listed below that contribute to their scarcity if it is no wonder that it is hard to find an Ek. All of the Ek knives went to active duty servicemen and many were used up in combat. Few got into the civilian market where they could be put away and cared for. In addition the knives were crude and plain and probably relegated to the tool shed or tackle box after the war rather than being cherished as a memento of service done.

Markings on Ek Knives are all over the board. It has been stated that his first knives were unmarked. I have heard of these but I have never come across one. They are probably among the rarest Eks. The Ek knives I have seen have all been marked but in a variety of ways. The Ek logo, "John Ek Knife/Hamden, Conn" is sometimes on the obverse side and sometimes on the reverse, sometimes right side up and some times

upside down. Sometimes it is stamped and sometimes it is put on with an electric pencil. Often times the logo is left off altogether. The application of the numbers was quite similar to that for the logo. Some were stamped on the front and some on the back.

Scabbards on Ek knives were of leather and of rather simple construction. Many were what is called the half scabbard, i.e., two pieces of leather with the back folded back on itself to make a belt loop at the level of the sheath throat. Thus the knife handle rode above the belt. Others were the more conventional type with the back piece of leather serving as a frog complete with a keeper strap. Scabbards for the large Paratrooper model 8 were laced and riveted. I have one half scabbard that is marked on the back with the John Ek logo but most scabbards I have seen are unmarked. The early Ek knives are found without a lanyard hole. Those with bolo type handles never received a lanyard

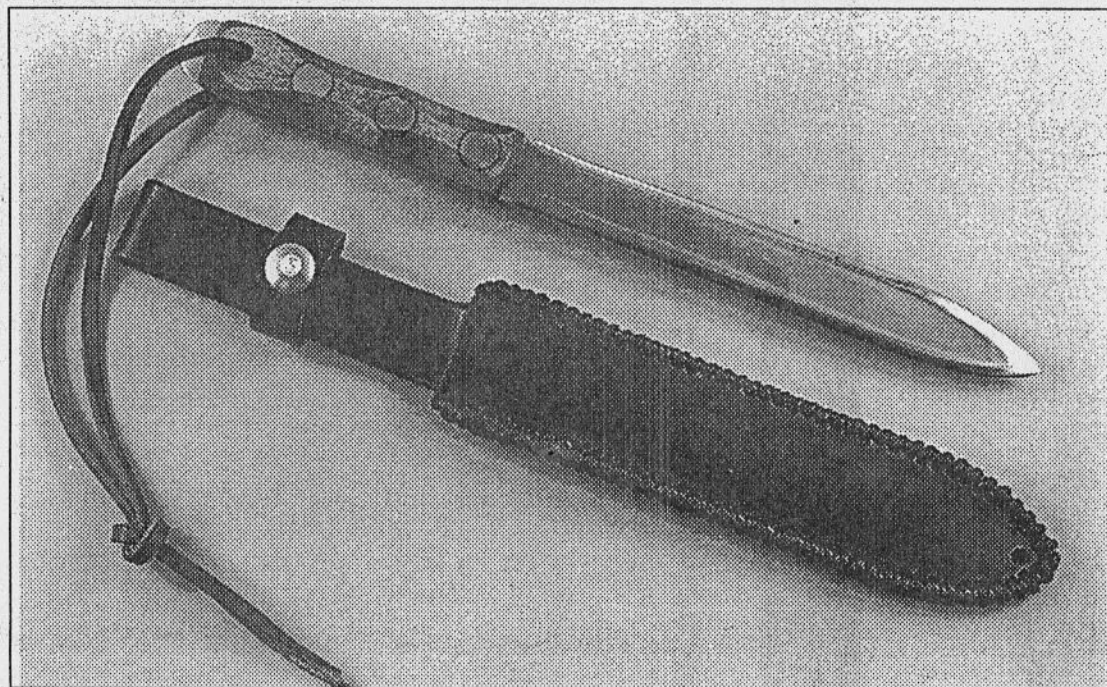
hole.

In 1949 Ek moved to Florida and continued to make knives but at a much slower pace when compared to the War years. These knives marked, "John Ek Knife/Miami, Fla" are harder to find than the World War II Eks and they are especially prized by collectors who focus on the Vietnam War. Knives of this period are a bit shorter than their predecessors and a number of utility knives, some with saw

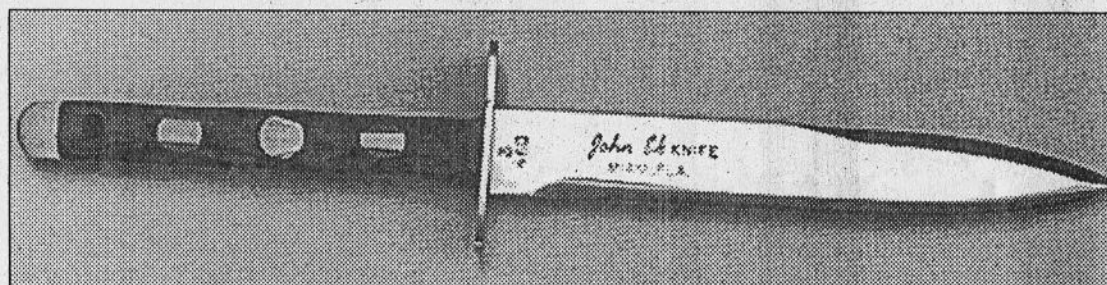
teeth on the back, were offered. Ek's model 1 and 2 were the same as the World War II versions but the new model 3 and 4 corresponded with the old models 6 and 7 of the forties. Ek continued to hire the handicapped and his sheaths during the sixties and seventies were assembled by disabled individuals who worked out of their homes. Many of these sheaths are ink stamped on the back with Ek logo.

John Ek died in October

1976 but the company continued as the Ek Commando Knife Company operating out of Richmond, Virginia. The company has produced an improved product but unfortunately it has also lost some of the mystique generated by the man, John Ek and his handmade knives. The old John Ek knives and their mystique will, however, continue to live on in the hands of collectors.



This Miami Ek is typical of those made in the sixties.



This Miami Ek is one of a dozen that were ordered by the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam in the early seventies. The knives were never delivered, probably because the 5th left Vietnam in March, 1971.

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