

Ek Commando Knives

by Cpt Paul L. Brubaker,
AUS(ret)

"Things are not seen as they are, but as we are!" anonymous aphorism

Knowledgeable and experienced men may validly and sincerely dispute the essential character and properties of their tools. Honest disparities are worthwhile...if for no other reason than each has particular virtue in specific circumstances. Training and combat experience in special operations taught me that no weapon is perfect, that situations are plastic, and that 'common sense' is the critical ingredient in all successful methodologies.

At the "John Wayne School for Boys," a large display of close-combat weapons, both manufactured and improvised, was arranged for class scrutiny. Edged weapons and blud-

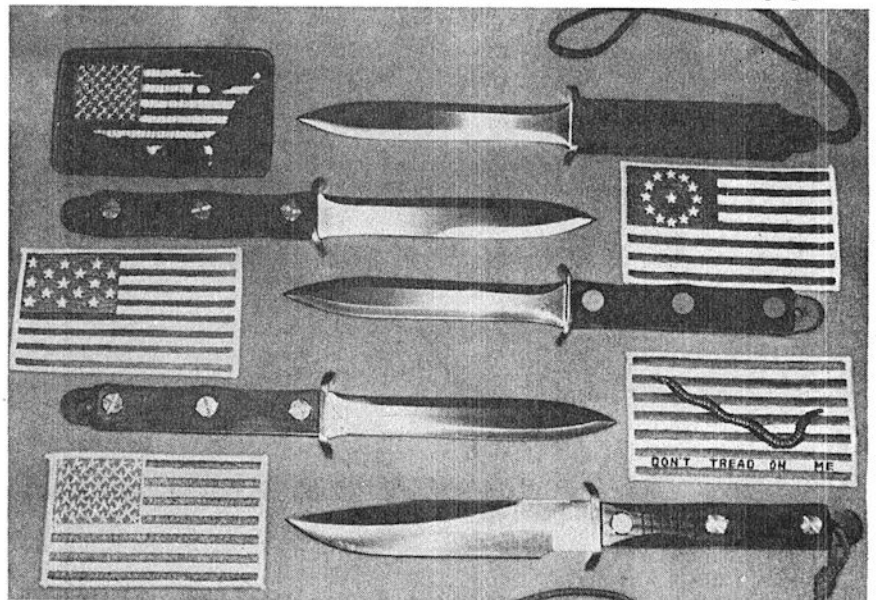
geons preponderated, but the "obvious" choices were not always preferred. This survey to encourage self-awareness (the primary object of any martial art program is to develop confidence) became a puzzle when attempting to decipher the rationale behind other selections. With the exception of special operations forces, the military no longer schedules hand-to-hand combat instruction routinely, due to infrequency of need...nor do they build "character" with KP and other fatigue duty as a matter of false economy and misplaced morale. This policy confounds the principle of uniform preparedness, and perpetuates ignorance at the cost of flexibility. A soldier cannot adequately act or react to the unknown. Because almost every serviceman in the

modern era with any prospect of crisis assignment acquires a 'reserve weapon' (usually a knife, due to military regulations restricting private firearms), the result is that uninformed personal-preference mistakes the tool for the mystique...that inexp-

erience confuses the object with the deed. The novice usually over estimates his anticipated need, or imitates other hyperbolic tyros without understanding or appreciation. By whatever means, it is the fighting 'man' who wins victory...his tools are expedient and an

adjunct to his ability and fortitude. The A-Team that equipped every member with the identical custom knife probably functioned well despite their "distinctive unit" armament (an attractive feature in parades); but I marvel that

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Eks arrayed with flag patches: SWAT-4, M-4, P-4, G-4 and M-5.

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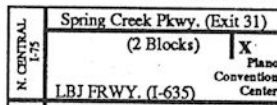
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Continued from page 6
 a group this diverse and idiosyncratic could agree on one single knife style as suitable for cross-specialization.

When I first saw photographs of the variety of knives John Ek advertised as "your silent partner," I was impressed by their spare and functional design. These practical and serious combat knives, benchmade only for servicemen, showed ingenuity and style. The rough wooden handles could be smoothed or personalized by the owner; as the lead-riveted side-plate fit could be adjusted in the field. John Ek knew these knives would receive hard treatment, and he planned accordingly. These were the first knives I'd seen where the haft became an integral single-guard. These were also the first I'd seen to use chamfers in shaping the haft. I thought the chamfered angles would be uncomfortable or inhibiting, but several years later I had the opportunity to hold one, and its ingenuity worked! All the grasps I'd been taught were both possible and secure.

When others were using narrow-through-tangs and adding weighted pommels to restore balance, Ek recognized that a fighting knife should "fall into" the hand (instead of the 'blade-heavy' design favored by outdoorsmen for utility), and that the blade's work depended upon a full-tang for strength. A full-tang

knife without a handle could still be used, and an expedient replacement haft could be improvised in the field, with less trouble and more success, than on a narrow-tang knife.

The Ek blades were simple designs that emphasized strength and durability. This was also the first knife I'd seen that was 'hexahedral,' being six-sided in cross-section. This configuration reinforced the tip more than the conventional diamond-cross-section. Although not as simple as the triangular cross-section (such as on the OSS Sleeve Dagger), which continues to endure as the paragon of efficiency, it had none of the defects of over-refinement so favored these days. There were no fancy flourishes in Ek's functional designs, and, knowing the knives must be maintained for multiplex applications, there were no complicated curves or intricate bevels.

Ek was among the earliest in cutlery revivalism to recognize the need for a 'guardless' design, with its hazards and prohibitions; and he lived long enough to witness the reinvention of this style by others. One may cavil at the restraints of patent or the caprice of fame, since superior weaponry by any source is the object, but pride of creativity is an essential motive of craftsmanship. Others may have implied, or even appropriated, authenticity but Ek was the only American firm authorized by the British

Ministry of Defense to entitle his knives "Commando." He was a loyal patriot, a dedicated manufacturer, a decent citizen...and I admire his 'good works,' which live on still.

The modern Ek knives continue the tradition. They not only feature excellent design and fine workmanship of modern materials, but they expand the honors of service to the Grenada

and Panama incursions, and the Desert Shield/Desert Storm intervention. The styles are changing with the times, but the practical heritage is
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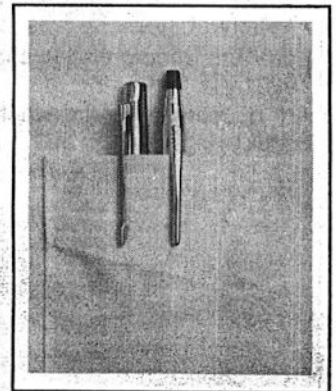
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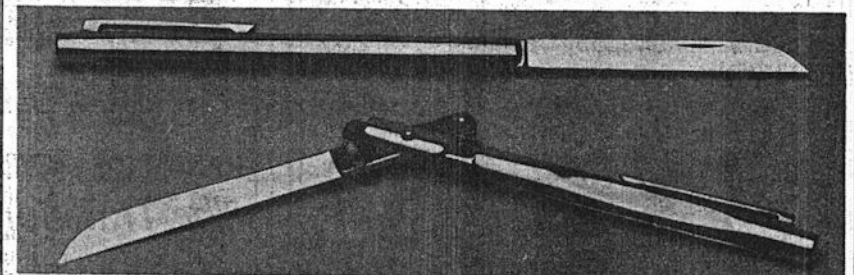
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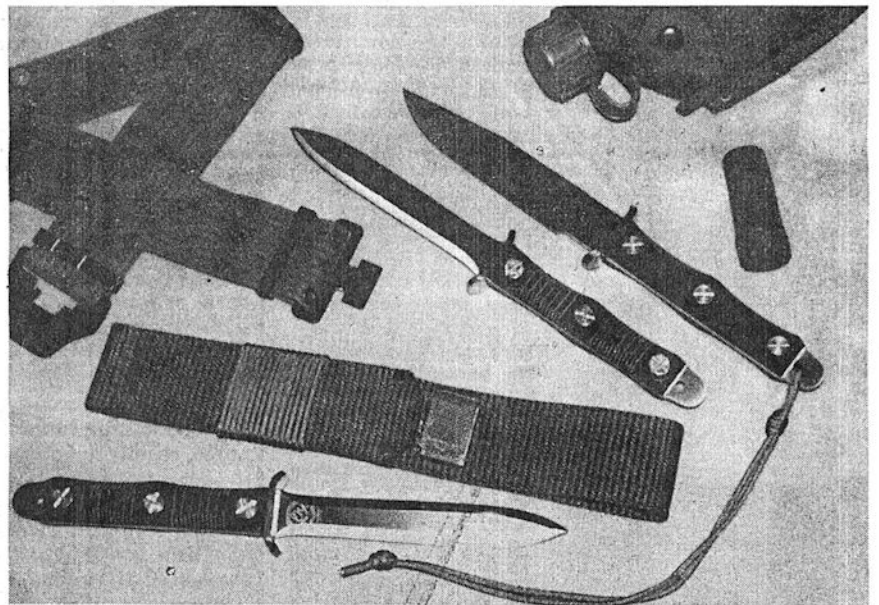
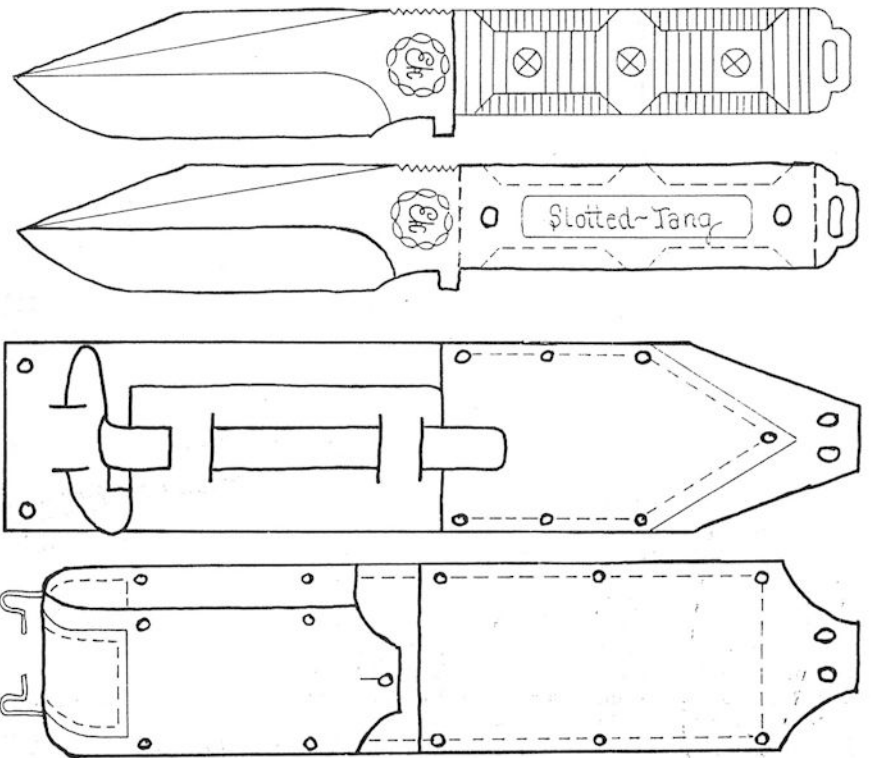
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 obvious. Their latest additions, in support of "Operation Desert Storm" in the Middle-East, are the Ek Desert Patrol models and the Ek Desert Warrior, which feature non-reflective blades and desert camouflage hues. Ek produces knives for professionals, from soldiers and policemen to rescuemen and adventurers, whose demanding standards and great expectations keep the knives functional.

The Ek redesign selection was initially small, but adequate. It offered two blade styles, three handle styles, two sheath styles, with or without the crossguard. The early Pakkawood models were smoothly chamfered

(this resin-impregnated wood was actually too smooth), but the hatching on the Micarta handles was so practical and popular that the "P" series was changed. The "M" series featured removable/replaceable micarta grip-plates, retained by large-headed machine-screws (which required no special tools to adjust), that enabled the cross-guard to be dismounted at will (so the sans-guard option, #M1/M2 or #P1/P2, was omitted) and permitted complete hilt disassembly for cleaning or maintenance. The Survival-Fighter model was distinguished by a parachute-cord wrapped handle, which allowed removal or reconfiguration,

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Reporting for duty: M-3, M-4, M-5...they pass muster!

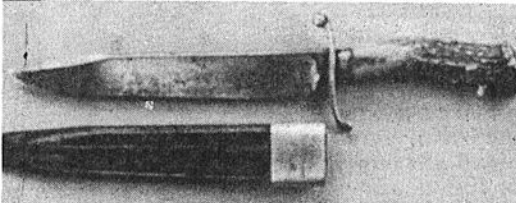
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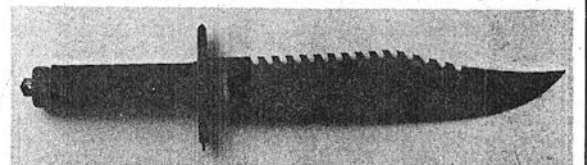
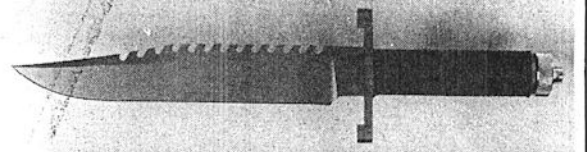
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 for field expedience or survival, as the circumstances required. By changing the color of the Para-Grip handle, with coordinated web sheath, Ek now offers five series: olive-green for S/F, black for SWAT, Blaze-orange for IRS, and khaki-camo for Desert Patrol and green-camo for Jungle Patrol. The Jungle Patrol model's coloration was developed at the behest of a special forces unit. In the latest California earthquake, an EMT used his Ek International Rescue Survival knife to pry-open a car and cut-loose an injured victim who was trapped, and saved her life. Testimonial tributes to Ek knives regularly arrive at their office from grateful and satisfied users, according to the management. Like the Marine Raider Association and the Marine Force Recon Association, fraternal groups apply to Ek for special editions and commemoratives.

Recently Ek has introduced three new blade styles and three more handle materials. While Pakkawood is still available as a factory option, it is being displaced by Oak Staminawood or checkered-walnut grips or checkered-walnut grips, entitled the Gunner series, in all blade patterns. Stag is now being offered for the connoisseur, despite the durability and economy of the other handles. The long-swept bowie-style blades, both single-edged (#5) and double-

edged (#6), are creating a lot of interest because they are thicker and larger than the dirk and dagger patterns. These bowies don't imitate others, but, like all fine knives, their antecedence influenced them by successful forms. Responding to numerous appeals, Ek has scaled-down its dagger into a practical Boot Knife of stout design and reliable performance, featuring a wrapped-handle and versatile sheath. The controversy over symmetry and angle optimums for particular combat techniques will not be resolved by Ek's introduction, but one's preference will be ably satisfied by one of the many Ek patterns.

One of the newest adaptations is the economical Ek Warrior, offered without any frills or options. This "working model" is subdued, with an edge-and-a-half (dirk) blade, steel crossguard, and copper-riveted walnut haft, in a basic web sheath. This no-nonsense outfit is mission-oriented to either green or tan. More than any of the other modern Ek knives, this one reminds me of one from 'the master's hand.' Like the current copper-riveted MOD battleblades, the Warrior is strictly business and deadly serious. It invites dressing or modification, but it's quite affordable.

Ek sheaths are functional and well-made...and superior to most "factory" models. Standard provisions are black, tan, or olive-drab

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Ek SWAT-4 and Ek Warrior with booklet and climbing ascender.



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web sheaths on most series, but may be substituted by black or brown leather sheaths, with double keepers, at reasonable prices. A sheath (which probably ought to be called a "knife holster") is a simple device for covering and protecting the blade while being carried, without undue risk of injury for the wearer. It must withstand abrasion, temperature, climate, foreign matter, and neglect...without noise or reflection in combat. Few typical designs pass muster. A scabbard impervious to saltwater and ice, sand and rock, solvent and fuel, mildew and blood, that also carries a hone and aids, is quite rare...existing only in imagination. Until perfection arrives, these Ek sheaths are good enough.

The company states the "every Ek is a collector's item" and they mention "investment appreciation" as a purchase value. More than most the Ek Company produces special, limited, and commemorative editions of their knives, with particular appeal to collectors. Since Ek manufactures fewer knives than any competing firm, this is a reasonable investment scheme. But the analogy to 'tools' is 'art'...lavishly plated and gorgeously engraved "wall-hangers" are a nice interruption in the mundane routine of processing and producing excellence, but perspective is critical. The company was founded on quality for national service, and the professional line is still paramount. As the sage noted, the lily doesn't need to be gilded!

The principles of design

do not exist independently, and cannot extend definition without compromise. The hypothetically absolute 'best' knife of unequaled design from superior materials would be too expensive; and its use would be sacrilege. "Custom" knives are mostly 'customization' or 'personalization' from an array of options or stock patterns, and are costing, in relative proportion, approximately what similar products cost twenty-five years ago when I bought my first handmade knife. Each of us must rationalize the costs, real and immaterial, of conventional qualitative solutions to problems, obstacles, or challenges, and determine the expenditure likely to achieve a worthwhile result or conclusion. While reminiscing with a friend over a selection of knives...ones we'd carried in combat, ones we'd admired and coveted, contrasting them with ones we wouldn't accept as outright gifts...he raised the one essential question: if you had a warning-order to load your truck for another war, which knife would you pack? Although I wanted to hedge and haggle, to query and quibble, I scanned the arms, by-passing some expensive and exquisite specimens, and chose an Ek! Given the level of sophistication and the controlled performance margins featured by Ek knives, it would be exceedingly difficult to obtain an equivalent product at a better price.

My first fighting knife was a learning experiment, which costs were counter-balanced by lessons. Learning things "the hard way" is not a recommended

method, but it is the surest and most irrevocable. When I first learned to sharpen a knife, and to correct my whetting mistakes, I almost ruined the blade; but I haven't ruined one since...and field maintenance imposes no problems or indispensable honing guides and aids. Empiricism has taught me, on a McGuire extraction through trees, that a totally secure knife is totally useless; in a Florida swamp, that a too large knife is too inconvenient and impeding; in a Panama exercise, that a threat without intent of completion is more humiliating than an insult; on an Alaskan mountain, that shiny and heavy is better for gold than for knives. Ever since, my search for unexcelled cutlery has been by characteristics; with price being the contingency factor that varied my acquisitive success. The inconsistencies evident in almost all handwork, that proclaims its unique individuality and advertises its artistry, have always attracted my scrutiny; and appear to me as 'defects' or 'faults' rather than accents of merit. Of all the benchmark Ek knives that I've handled over the years, none has represented inferiority, nor begged my indulgence for 'human error.' The time-tested and battle-proven qualities of Ek knives reduce the probable considerations to 'budget' and 'aesthetics.'

Given the tenor of this endorsement, one may wonder that any criticism exists...rest assured. Personal taste certainly influences many evaluations, but some are legiti-

mate...though we aspire to objectivity in fairness, we are more than mere objects searching for identity. Some critics emphasize their subjectivity to persuade all 'right thinking' people; while some will 'damn with faint praise.' One memorable review of Ek knives praised with objection, by calling them "over engineered!"...imagine being that flawless and economical. Accusations of "ugly," "ill-suited," "annoying," "uncomfortable," and "awkward" are simply conclusive bias; and cannot be rebutted or corrected by evidence...facts will never persuade prejudice. Obviously, Ek knives will not satisfy everyone, and even if they did, there wouldn't be an adequate supply.

One insidious criticism has disturbing implications. It challenges the "originality" of Ek manufacturing

and design. A company with a commitment to excellence in support of servicemen has an obligation to keep the production costs within the range of its intended customers. One method is administrative: low-overhead and high-efficiency. Another is to subcontract specialized parts or aspects, which are inspected and assembled for distribution. Ek is certainly not the only company so engaged...most successful companies today, along with some so-called "custom knifemakers" do it too, because it is labor/cost effective and a sound business practice. The starving (or rich) artist is no more 'noble' than a working artisan... or a dedicated businessman. While nobility and purity of design may be good philosophy, a customer wants product utility and reliability. Artistic creativity

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 ty and originality have been disputed concepts longer than recorded history. It seems to be human nature to modify and adapt our ideas as we learn and change. These relationships may spawn an excellent innovation, which is nonetheless "excellent" for not being "original!" John Ek was inspired by the Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife...as were Rex Applegate, Bo Randall, et al. The Ek inheritance is being translated and interpreted by successors who have renewed the essence of the 'Ek' marquee.

When a prominent and knowledgeable critic complained about the Ek's "gripping grooves" (lines perpendicular to the thrust

axis) on the slab handles, the Ek Company agreed to restore the smooth-handle alternative, despite its general unpopularity. Ribbing and "sweat-grooves" have existed on many brands and types of knife because they're beneficial. Being accommodating and responsive is a trait that can be abused, but the components of a trademark are distinctive beyond compromise. While a company may alter a feature or fitting to accommodate some special interest, whether as smooth grips or a new boot knife, the recognizable style of the object is as important as the logo it bears.

The para-cord wrapped models have been criticized as too "vulnerable" and too



New Ek knife commemorating MACV-SOG comes in a tiger-stripe display case.

"messy." It's most interesting that the Japanese bound-haft has endured combat through the centuries, but a modern interpretation is inadequate. Like the bolted grip-plate models, this versatility is a 'virtue'...to some. It allows the grip to be adjusted, replaced, reconfigured, augmented, and cleaned without much trouble. This is the same class of objection as 'inappropriate camouflage'...none is best, since

the owner can easily apply or remove any suitable type (eg: tape, grease-paint, shoe-polish, make-up, ink, etc). Anytime a process or a finish requires more manufacturing time or treatment, then the buyer will have to pay more. It would be hard to find a more practical, economical, and versatile grip than wrapped para-cord.

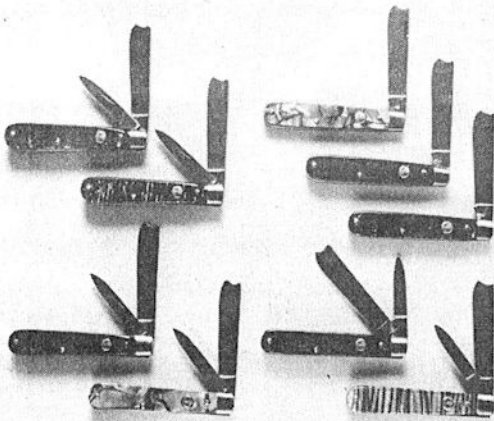
Ek knives do have some room for improvement. They must be the last modern knife not furnished with a kit or hone in a pocketed sheath for some models. A very narrow diamond-rod sleeved beside the blade would be very convenient. Although a

recurved edge is harder to resharpen...a task made easier by a cylindrical hone...its cutting ratio offers more surface and less resistance in the 'force/function formula.' The presence of Velcro in a tactical situation is absurd and anathema, despite being ubiquitous. Even though Velcro works well enough (I tested the resistance of it with an incremental Prussik knot and was surprised by its performance), the retaining straps on all sheaths should be replaced with 'silent keepers' (eg: quiet-snaps, button-and-loop, flap-over mushroom-post, tuck-

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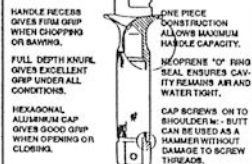
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 sleeve, lace-down, rubber O-ring, molded-cover, etc). Two optional sheaths may be useful to some persons in specialized circumstances...such as, a self-locking Kydex sheath for aquatic applications, and a reinforced flap-cover version (similar to military pistol holsters) to protect the tang-extension from interference or injury. Actually, an 'amphibious' Ek equipped with synthetic-grips and a molded-sheath with drain holes would be very appealing to sport and professional seafarers, from snorkelers and yachtsmen to Marines and SEALs. Furthermore, an "outdoors survival" knife (acronymed "Ek O/S" for use in the 'ecosystem,' in universal 'ecology') sporting a four inch bowie blade, an integral single-guard, and perhaps a slotted-tang for survival items (thus becoming the first manufacturer to do so) would be a welcome innovation to the sporting cutlery market. The new compact and concealable Ek Boot knife will be welcomed

by security agents and undercover operatives, even though its appearance will complicate municipal regulation of dangerous weapons... a challenge to liberty as well as authority. The twenty page brochure, "Your Silent Partner, A Booklet on the Care and Use of Ek Commando Knives," is inspiring and informative; and can only be improved by expansion. The Ek offerings are fine, but not perfect...at least, not yet.

When buying an Ek knife directly from the Company, you will be automatically enrolled in the Ek Collectors Club. The Club newsletter will inform you about other members and new products...not unlike collector's clubs affiliated with other manufacturers. If you locate an old Ek knife, they will search their records for you to discover its origins. If you travel to Richmond Virginia, the Ek Museum is located with the "Military Knife And Bayonet Museum." The Ek Company also distributes fine military cutlery from

Sheffield's H.G. Long Company and Oregon's Murphy Combat Knife Company. The arrowhead Ek Thrower, with scalloped blade, available as a single knife or as a triplet, has been devised to fill a professional niche in this increasingly popular art. Ek has also just revived the WWII Australian Commando dirk, with slight, though positive, revision to its reproduction. But best of all, when buying a handsomely packaged Ek knife, you will hold a piece of history in your

hand. For all its provisions and restrictions, a combat knife is a convenient, compact, light-weight, low-maintenance, low cost, quiet weapon, which is completely reliable and may be fully integrated. While swords represent the privileges of status and the noble history of ancient battles, the knife, being a symbol of fortitude, preserves the martial spirit and individual pride of a soldiery still necessary despite technical and strategic progress. The knife is a weapon of last

resort, when all else has failed, that may preserve life and secure the mission. I would trust an Ek Commando knife to ultimately sustain my affairs with distinction and dispatch. Whether Ek knives are the epitome may be debatable, but I cannot bestow a greater accolade than 'it will serve with utter dependability and faithful performance'... no one could ask more. The unofficial Special Forces motto could well apply to Ek Knives...any time, any place, any way!

MODEL CHART					
double edge 3-1/2" boot	edge and half dirk	double edge dagger	single edge bowie	double edge bowie	
Agent	SWAT-3	SWAT-4	SWAT-5	SWAT-6	black p-cord
S/F Jr	S/F-3	S/F-4	S/F-5	S/F-6	olive-drab p-cord
DP Jr	DP-3	DP-4	DP-5	DP-6	khaki-camo p-cord
	JP-3	JP-4	JP-5	JP-6	green-camo p-cord
	IRS-3	IRS-4	IRS-5	IRS-6	orange p-cord*
	P-3	P-4	P-5	P-6	Pakkawood*
	O-3	O-4	O-5	O-6	Oak Staminawood
	M-3	M-4	M-5	M-6	Micarta
	S-3	S-4	S-5	S-6	Staghorn
	G-3	G-4	G-5	G-6	checkered walnut
	Warrior				walnut w/copper (* optional)

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