

# The Commando Knife Of John Ek

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By Bob Buerlein

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Unlike any previous maker, John Ek designed all his knives for combat use by American military personnel, and during the early years he would only sell his knives to servicemen. He pioneered a classic knife design unlike any other. And he was the first to produce "bench made" knives in production-volume quantities.

Ek knives probably hold the record for being the leading privately-purchased military knives in American history. By the end of World War II, it is reported that production reached 1,000 knives per seven-day work week, and virtually all were restricted to sale to U.S. military personnel. By estimates that are believed to be conservative, more than 100,000 Ek knives were

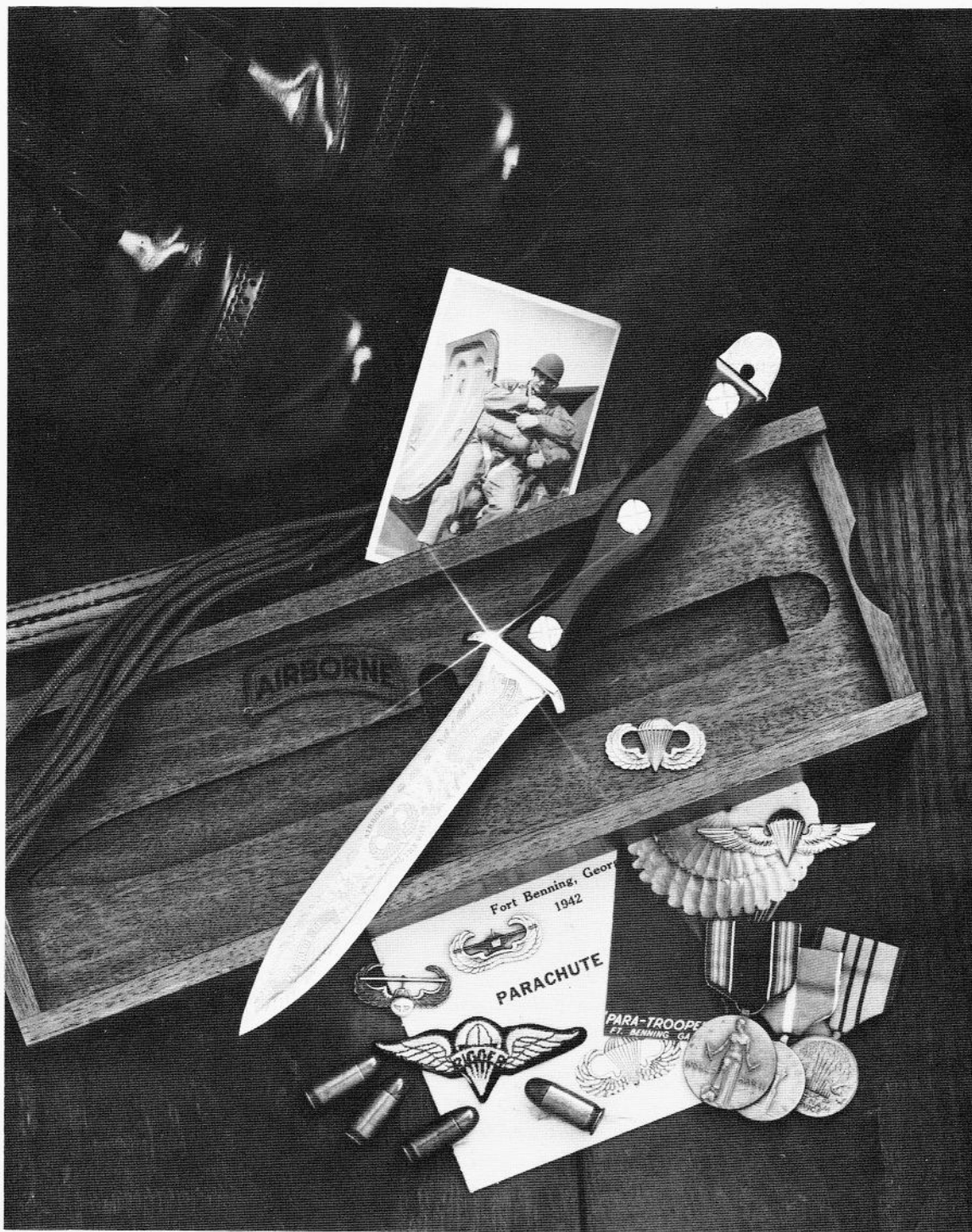


produced during World War II alone, yet each knife has that “custom” knife look—rather than being a carbon-copy look alike.

John Ek supplied knives, on a private-purchase basis, to American military personnel in three wars—World War II, Korea and Vietnam. As he said in the mid 1970’s: “There’s been hardly a break without some kind of military involvement since 1941, so we’ve been busy with knives ever since.

In April or May 1939 John Ek designed his first prototype knives in the machine shop he owned. In 1941, he started producing this knife in quantity in Hamden, Connecticut.

He called his knives “John Ek Commando Knives.” This was a reference to the British Commandos and American Commando-type units who were highly respected for their knife fighting abilities. Ek met with Commandos and Americans who trained with them, and they



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compared notes on knife design and fighting. Company reports indicate that he requested—and received—permission from the British War Office to use the term “Commando”.

It is reported that President Franklin D. Roosevelt kept a John Ek Commando Knife on his desk in the White House until the time of his death.

General George S. Patton, Jr., also owned a John Ek knife (as did several of his subordinates), and John Ek even named his post-war model No. 6 the “Patton knife” after the General. Captain Clark Gable was also a customer of John Ek—thinking that if the situation required him to go into action he would have a dependable knife. Captain Gable flew on several bombing missions over Germany and wanted a knife he could depend on in case the mission did not go as briefed.

The information in Ek’s registry file documents that his knives were owned by men of all ranks in every branch of

service—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine. Their mailing addresses prove that Ek knives were used in every theater of operation around the world.

One newspaper article indicated that Ek knives “became surrounded almost immediately by an aura of fame and invincibility.” John Ek was even referred to as “the Stradivarius of the blade.”

John Ek had strong feelings about making his knives available only to active-duty servicemen. He did not want his knives to fall into the wrong hands. That is why military personnel are usually more familiar with his knives than “civilian” collectors.

Ek felt his knives were the finest made and that they gave the user an advantage over any adversary. His philosophy was: “A knife is more deadly than a gun. A gun will run out of ammunition, but as long as a person is behind a knife, it can kill”.

For this reason, each knife was in-

dividually serially numbered and registered in the owner’s name. The way the system worked, the purchaser had to fill out a registration card certifying that the owner was a member of the armed forces, giving his name, rank, and service serial number. This screening procedure also applied whether knives were purchased directly by military men or individuals through dealers. Before the knife would be made available, the individual had to fill out the same form, and it had to be returned to the company. If a dealer failed to return a registration card, future orders were cut by the number of missing registrations until the missing card was returned.

John Ek could have sold more knives had he not been concerned about the registration procedure. But he was a strongly patriotic American; a newspaper headline once calling him a “Modern Day Thomas Paine.” In fact, one of the mottos of his company







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was—and still is—“Made in America, by Americans, for Americans.”

Also unusual and distinctive were the “poured-lead” rivets which were used to affix the two wooden grips to the blade tang. Most knives at the time used standard cutlery rivets or pins, or they were simply driven onto the rat-tail tang. The poured-lead rivets had the advantage that, if the handle ever became loose, it could be tightened in the field without any tools. All the owner needed to do was take a heavy object, such as a rock, and pound the lead rivets to tighten them.

Another advantage of the poured-lead was the extra weight which made the knife balance far better than most. This caused it to lie in to the hand, rather than fall out of it.

Ek selected nickle-chrome-moly steel for his blades. He found this material to be extremely strong, yet to have some degree of stain and rust resistance. Of Swedish descent, Ek in

later years would also use Swedish Sandvik stainless steel upon request.

After Ek introduced his single-edged version Model No. 1, He had some requests for a double-edged version. This he named the Model No. 2. Then crossguards were added to these versions, making them the Model No. 6 and Model No. 7, respectively (today called the No. 3 and No. 4).

By 1943 he had put six different styles of knives into production, and the quantity of production increased. By August 1944 demand for his knives had grown to the point where three shifts worked around the clock, seven days a week, producing 10 different models.

During a time of steel shortages, the U.S. Government War Production Board tested and approved the designs of the Ek knives and authorized John Ek continued availability of the high quality nickle-chrome-moly steel, a strategic material. He was also made a

member of the Army Ordnance Association.

Several aspects of his design made his knives distinctive and rugged. First of all, the knife was of “full width tang” construction. Not only did the tang (the extension of the blade which runs through the grip) run the entire length of the grip, but the tang was also the full width of the grip. In other words, the grip was about one inch wide and five inches long—and so was that portion of the steel blade tang, for maximum strength. By comparison, most knives of the day (even today) had narrow tangs—some running only one third the length of the grip.

Also unusual was the extended butt—a direct extension of the blade and the blade tang itself. Depending upon the year of manufacture, the butt could vary in length anywhere from nearly 1 inch to approximately ½ inch beyond the grip. This butt could be used as a pry bar for opening ammuni-



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tion crates or, according to Ek's 1944 manual, "Your Silent Partner", for "an upstroke to lay your opponent out." Another use of this extended butt was to protect both the hand and wooden grips when the butt was used as a hammer.

The grips were generally of rock maple, selected for a number of reasons. John Ek preferred wood to leather, as the latter rotted, particularly under tropical conditions. He also chose it over the brass or alloy grips of the British Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife, finding it to be more comfortable and to provide better gripping

power, especially when the hand was wet with perspiration. This also allowed the user to custom fit the grip, by sanding, to the exact contour of the owner's hand. In the late sixties he started occasionally including a piece of flint paper with each knife for this purpose. Starting in the 1970's, walnut, rosewood and Micarta were also used for grips, in addition to rock maple. Epoxy was also introduced to further help secure the large grips.

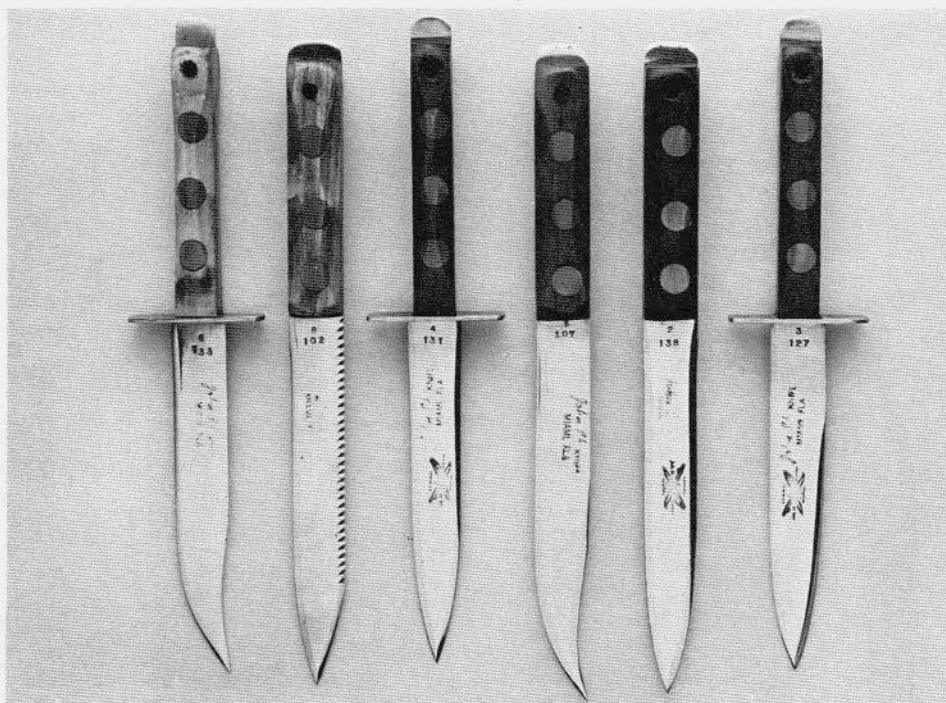
He preferred his knives without crossguards for ease of concealment and for quick withdrawal (no crossguard to snag on clothes). In fact,

when his range of knives was finally expanded to 10 different sheath knives, only three of these models had crossguards. Evidently, military men agreed with him, as his model No. 1 and Model No. 2 (single-edge and double-edge, respectively) were always his most popular knives, and neither of these had guards.

John Ek made it company practice, beginning sometime in 1943 or early 1944, to serially number all knives. Knives made prior to that were not numbered, according to Elsa Ek, Mr. Ek's widow. The first number on the blade is the model number; the subse-



A representative range of Miami-marked Ek knives. Right to left: Model 3 (single edge); Model 2 (double edge); Model 5 (clip point); Model 4 (double edge); Model 8 (saw back); Model 6 (clip point). These all have extra large diameter poured and hammered lead rivets in the grips, which are associated with 1970's Miami knives. Four of the knives from the right have either walnut or rosewood grips, while the two left knives have rock maple grips.



quent numbers are the serial number, preceded by a letter of the alphabet. The first 999 knives of each model were numbered sequentially between 1 and 999. Starting with the 1000th knife of each model, the numbering started over again with serial number A1. The serial numbers went up to A999, then shifted to B1. This continued with successive alphabetical prefixes. For example, a knife numbered 1B299 means this is a Model No. 1, serial number B299 (the 1,298th knife made of this model).

Ek serially numbered these knives and kept the owners' names on file to document that he was selling his knives only to military personnel. This also helped the owners keep track of their knives if they were ever lost. Ek also

started this system because he guaranteed each knife for the lifetime of the original owner. By keeping the original owner's name on record, he could follow up his lifetime guarantee system.

In 1949 John Ek moved to Miami, Florida, where production of his knives continued. From here his company provided knives to American forces during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Miami-produced knives were marked "John Ek Knives, Miami, Fla.", whereas earlier knives bore the "Hamden, Conn." mark. Most Miami-marked Ek knives were made in the 1960's. Some were even made for the CIA-supported 2506 Assault Brigade, which aspired to liberate Cuba at the ill-fated Bay of

Pigs Invasion.

The overall length of most of the Florida-produced knives (notably the Models 1, 2, 3 and 4) was 11½" to 12", whereas World War II production tended to be 12" to 12½" for most of these models.

As was the case with earlier production, the Vietnam production received acclaims from owners—such as this letter from a helicopter gunship crew chief, received in 1965: "When your ship is shot down in VC territory, your rifle or pistol is of no use to you if you have to walk back to friendly lines. You can't afford that much noise, so your knife and knowing how to use it are your best weapons. The only knives suitable for this type of war and for survival use are your Commando

The two most important—and most popular—knives in the entire John Ek range were the Model No. 1 and the Model No. 2. These early production knives are unusual in that the grips are only 4¼" long, compared to the usual nearly 5" length grips. Also, there was no thong hold as on other production. Also note the longer extended butts. Overall length is 12½", which is approximately the same as the longer-gripped Ek knives. The grips on the knives shown here were also slightly thinner, and the blade points were ground more slender as fighting knives rather than fighting/utility knives.



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knives.”

Although John Ek died on 21 October 1976, the business continued operating in Miami and St. Augustine, relocating in 1982 halfway back to the earlier Connecticut location to Richmond, Virginia.

Current production knives are once again back to the larger, original World War II dimensions, and the steel is thick (.150” vs .125”) for even greater strength. These and other subtle modifications to the classic Ek patterns were designed with the help of military personnel to make these knives of even greater value to the men of the armed forces.

Many an American life was saved in three wars by John Ek Commando Knives. The thousands of letters he received from satisfied GI’s were a source of great pride for this patriotic American. His name, his knives, and the Ek Commando Knife Company live on today as a legacy of his ideas, his skills, and his patriotism.

To help clarify the identification of World War II and post-war production knives, two editions of company catalogs are reprinted here.

The second printing (August, 1944) is followed by the 19th printing (1966).

The designation of the Models 1 and 2 remained the same but after the war, the wartime Models 3 and 4 were discontinued. The wartime Models 6 and 7 were redesignated Model 3 and 4, respectively, after the war.

The large Model 8 (Paratrooper) was discontinued, but a new Model 8, the “Survival Skin Diver” was added.

The knives designated 9 and 10 during the war were redesignated 5 and 9 after the war.

Other new knives added to the line after the war were the Model 4A (not shown in catalog—a sleeker version of the post-war Model No. 4), the No. 6 “Patton”, the No. 10 “Professional Thrower”, the No. 11 “Utility” and the No. 12 “Secret Agent.”

