



An old display board showing original Ek knives. Ek was the only maker during World War II allowed to call his knives 'Commando'. Permission was granted by British Defense Department.

BY SID LATHAM

Over thirty years ago John Ek sat in a small shop on the shores of New Haven's Lake Whitney crafting fighting knives. Ek didn't work alone, he had about forty handicapped men; the lame, the halt and the blind on his payroll and they turned out skillfully crafted knives for our country's fighting forces. Since that time Ek knives have grown into something of a legend among military men.

In fact the regard shown an Ek knife was brought home when I discovered one at a recent gun show. The price was \$75.00. When I commented on the seemingly high cost the dealer told me, "You think \$75.00 is high? John Ek has been dead for many years and it's hard to find one of his knives in this kind of condition." I agreed it was an excellent knife and in fine condition, but since I had just spent a couple of days with John Ek in his North Miami shop, and watched both Ek and his son Gary grinding blades, I allowed as how I would pass this bargain up. I admit the dealer was too polite to call

me a liar, but I saw his lips moving silently as I ambled away.

Yes, John Ek is alive and well and still grinding blades after thirty three years. It all began back in the early days of World War II. When steel was difficult to come by Ek received permission from the now defunct War Production Board to make knives for our G.I.s going overseas. "That first meeting with the W.P.B. was murder," Ek recently recalled. "We met in a school house down in Washington, D.C. and a group of arrogant big-shots from the major cutlery outfits acted as \$1.00 a year advisors. When they saw my first knife, without a guard, it hit the fan. I can still see the sneers on their faces...It won't work...our men will cut their hands...it's no good. Finally, in disgust, I went out to my car and scrapped some grease from the hub caps. Returning to the school I said, Gentlemen, fighting knives have guards, mine is a killing knife. With that I covered my hand with grease, grabbed the knife and

Custom
Knife
Maker

JOHN EK

plunged it into the hard pine floor. My hand never slipped and they couldn't yank it out. I got my permission the next day." Ek made over a half million knives during the war and probably gave away half as many again. His knives are still being used by many servicemen around the world.

Korea, Viet Nam and every brush fire war, including the recent Israeli conflicts have seen Ek knives in battle.

Ek's knives aren't pretty. In fact they have been called downright crude, even John admits that, but how pretty does a knife have to be to kill someone? They are strong, sturdy and practically unbreakable. He uses American nickel chrome steel with a good percentage of molybdenum and carbon. Handles are first grade walnut, rock maple or rosewood. Before beginning a knife the steel is seasoned. This was a term I hadn't heard before and John explained. "I let my steel rust very well before beginning to machine it. This is an old Swedish cutler's trick. I can't explain why it works, but it seems to give strength to the blade." Another unique technique is the highly unorthodox manner used to apply the handle slabs. No epoxy is used. Instead three holes are drilled through the slabs and tang. Then, while all three parts are held firmly with a clamp, a molten mixture of lead and tin is poured into the hourglass shaped holes. It rivets the parts solidly together. Other knife-makers may scoff, but it does the job and in all his years of knifemaking only one knife has been returned due to one rivet cracking.

Over the years John Ek has developed many skills, some highly unusual talents and a bit of mystery still surrounds him. Aside from his knives he is an expert on electronic surveillance and has done a number of assignments for top-secret government agencies. A friend of Castro, he spent time with him in the Sierra Maestre Mountains during the early days. Ek is also well known, and highly regarded, among Florida's Cuban community and was approached a few years ago for an assignment in Washington, D.C. "The thing didn't play right," John



Blade variations of some newer models about to be introduced. Top model, a carving knife, others are underwater, sportsmen's blades and a fisherman's knife.

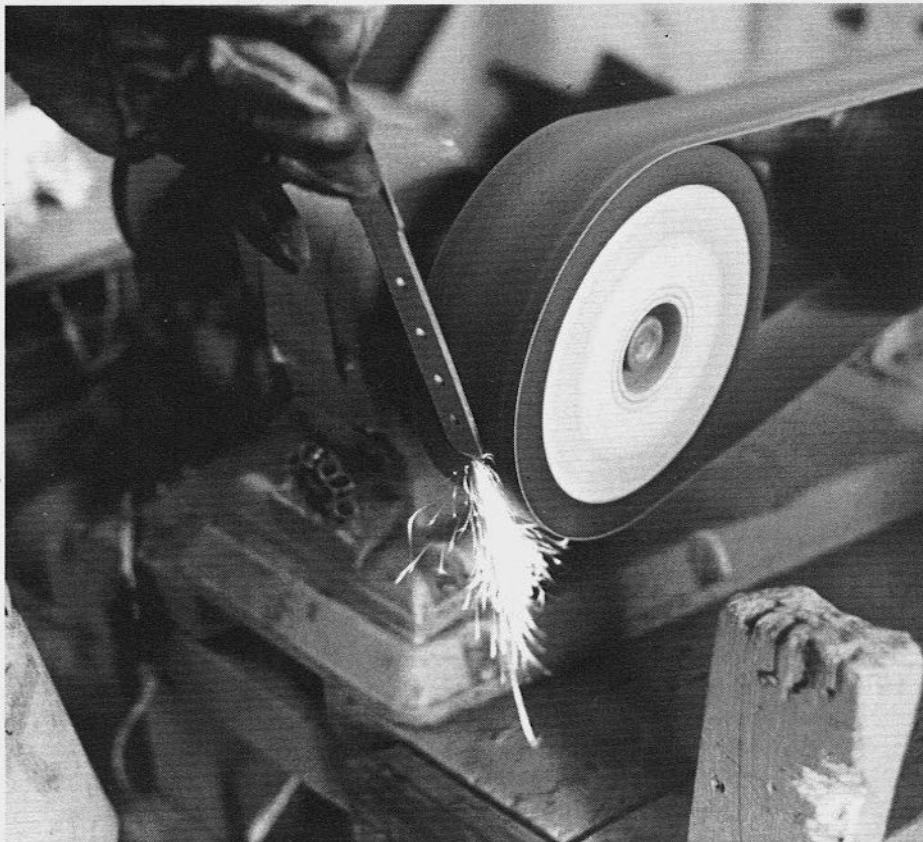
said, "and I turned it down. I'm glad I did because I think it was the start of the whole Watergate affair."

His hobby, aside from running two popular gun shops, is coin collecting. His is probably among the finest collections in the country. Gold coins, rare items from South America and many from mainland China. Before any would-be burglars take this as an

open invitation, let me advise his home is protected by the most sophisticated devices available. Infra-red scanners, electronic sensors, automatic television taping equipment and assorted bugs and recorders are hidden about the premises. It might be easier to crack the neighborhood Mint.



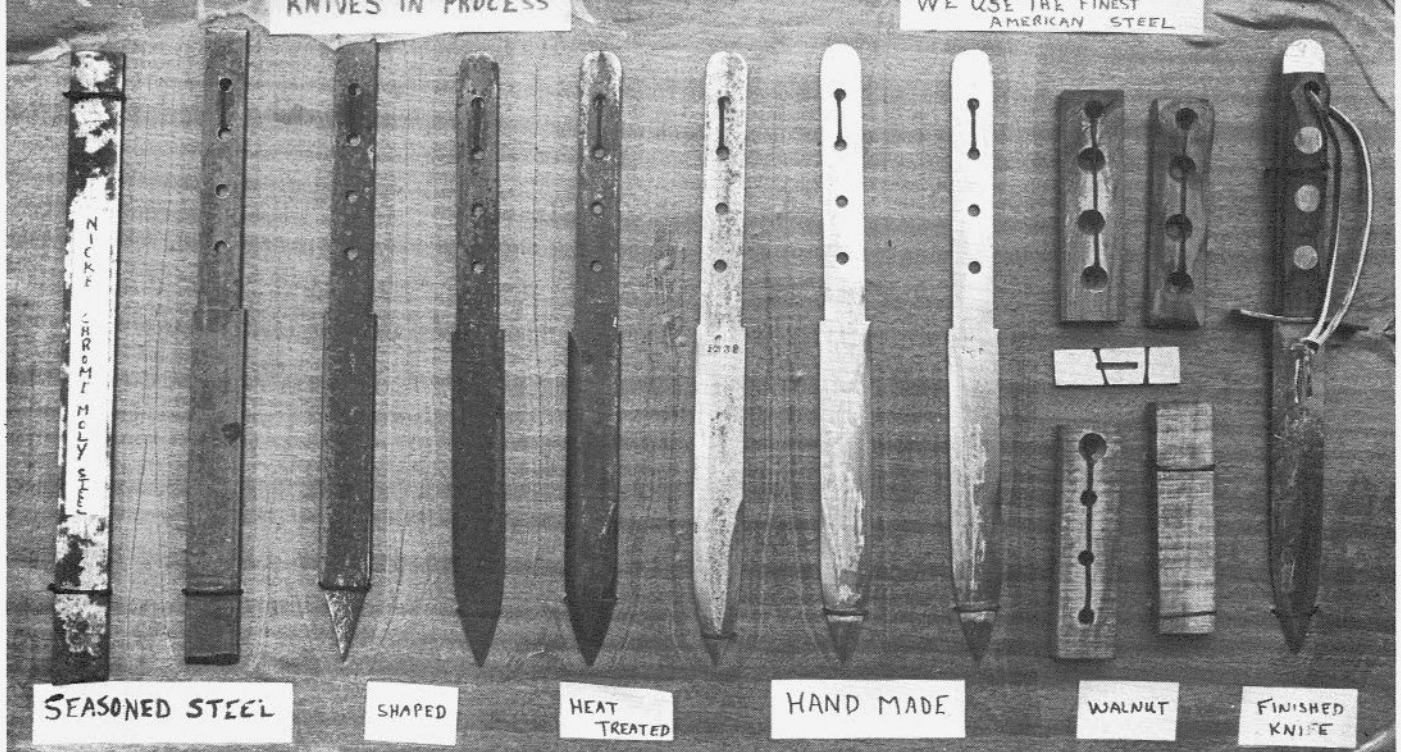
John Ek on left and son Gary Ek inspecting recently completed knives.



Shaping the extended tang which is used for opening cans and used for prying. Originally introduced in service knives this sturdy extension was put to many uses in the field.

With a semblance of peace these days, Ek still makes military knives, but is turning his hand toward sportsmen's blades as well. Like most products crafted by hand, Ek's knives aren't cheap, but are certainly less costly than most. The least expensive, the utility knife, was originally a combat knife but is popular with local hunters and fishermen. It has a four inch blade and sells for about \$25.00. Others run higher. The most expensive, (one of these was owned by the late President Roosevelt) is the Commando fighting knife costing about \$50.00. Most knives in the fighting line have seven inch blades and some have attached guards depending on the model. The Patton knife was carried by the late General George S. Patton, Jr., and even the late actor, Captain Clark Gable, purchased one of Ek's carefully constructed Commando blades to carry in the service.

What has caused Ek's knives to falter in sales these past few years has been the time devoted to clandestine operations in Latin America and Cuba. Before the Bay of Pigs Ek practically commuted to Cuba, but is



A visual display showing the various steps used in crafting an Ek knife.

fairly reticent about this part of his life. Son Gary, not yet twenty, obviously inherited his Dad's skills with steel and is designing knives for sporting use. Many of these newer knives are about to be introduced. Even to this day the Floating Knife is a big seller. Originally designed for airmen, it has a big bolo-type handle with a seven inch blade. The handle is of coco bolo and will float thus giving opportunity for recovery. Since it always returns to the surface it makes an excellent skin diver's knife. Some years ago Ek discovered knife throwing and designed a simple all steel thrower. While he admits the sport may never become an Olympic event he concedes throwing is fun

and the blades, 3 for \$12.00, won't put a dent in any wallet.

Ek is still interested in the handicapped and his practice of hiring those less fortunate is still carried on. While he does most of the finishing work in his own shop, rough shaping of handles and assembly of handmade sheaths is jobbed out to those working in their homes. Of Swedish descent, Ek is a Connecticut Yankee by birth and grew up around the arms factories of New Haven. In fact his dad, Robert E. Ek, worked for Colt, High Standard and Winchester during his career and in the early 40's contributed to John's expertise of steels and heat treating.

There was a time when only servicemen could purchase an Ek knife, but that has changed. However, Ek still registers all his knives to the individual buyer and maintains a file in his office. Ek is also the author of an interesting 28-page booklet, "Your Silent Partner". It is an excellent treatise on combat and knife fighting and loaded with such juicy tidbits as the proper throat slash, kidney penetration and how to slice tendons effectively. The booklet sells for \$1.00 and also serves as a catalog.

Although his knives have been used from New Guinea to Viet Nam, John missed out on military service because he was seriously injured in an automobile crash in 1936. For awhile boat construction held his interest, but he never strayed far from knives. Now they are made in the Miami area and Ek still receives letters from servicemen expressing gratitude for his gleaming blades.

Now, more than 30 years after the first Commando Knife was introduced, John Ek is still crafting knives. A pioneer in the trade, along with the late Harry Morseth, Rudy Ruana and Bo Randall, Ek has perhaps received less fame than many of his peers, but it will be enough for many of his fans to know they can still buy a John Ek knife.

Sid Latham



After pouring, the excess is hammered away leaving a firm, tight handle.