

# THE MILITARY EDGE

★ John Ek Commando Knives ★

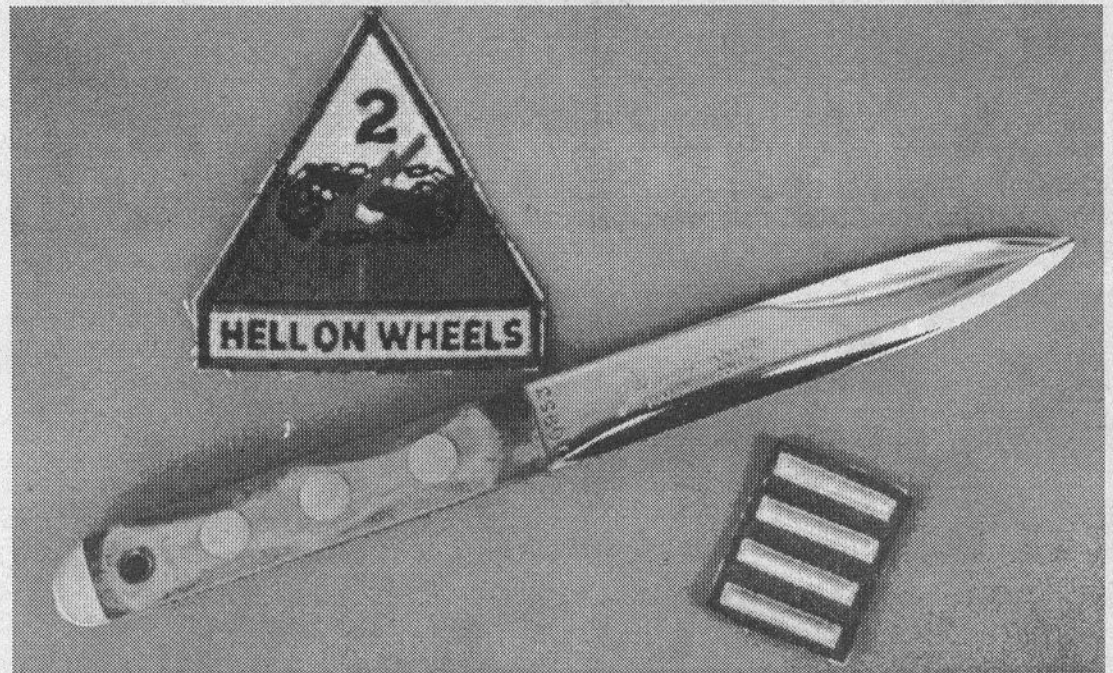
by Frank Trzaska

It all started with an innocent letter to a machine shop. Although unrecorded, it went something like this: *Dear Sir, I just joined the Army and need a good knife to keep with me. Can you build one in your machine shop? Signed Pvt. Snodgrass.* Or so the story goes. Whatever it was that prompted John Ek to make that first knife in his machine shop in 1939 was a prophecy waiting to happen. I'm sure that even John himself could not have envisioned where the piece of steel would take him.

That shop where Ek started his knife making enterprise was located in Whitneyville, Connecticut, a suburb of Hamden. A native of Connecticut, Ek was a deeply patriotic man who could not serve in the military due to a severe automobile accident he had in 1936 at the age of twenty. Although he couldn't serve in the fighting in World War Two, Ek found

another way to serve, a way to serve thousands of G.I.s of every service. At the start of the war there was not a single service that supplied a fighting or even a fixed blade utility knife to the enlisted man. Ek, an old Boy Scout and Scoutmaster, saw the need and decided to fulfill it. Designing a knife that could be easily produced yet give great service was the route Ek intended to take. In October 1941 the John Ek Commando Knife Company was born. Taking the name from the highly successful British Commandos, Ek supposedly had permission from the British Home Office to use the name.

Things changed in 1943 as this was the time of the War Production Board and rationing of steel. In order to receive the allotted steel needed to continue producing knives, Ek needed to prove that he was using the steel for the war effort. At the same time Ek wanted to offer a lifetime guar-



WWII era Style 1. This is the knife most typically encountered as it was the most popular Ek style. Knife courtesy of Larry Thomas.

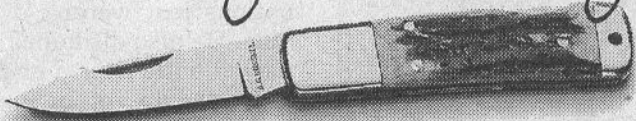
antee on his knives to the original owner, so the registration process was born. Unless you were in the service, you could not purchase a John Ek made

knife. This, you might think, may have hampered sales, but in fact they could not keep up with the demand for John Ek knives. What had started

as 40 knives a week had grown to 1,000 per week, and that was all they could make with the 69 employees working full speed. All

*Continued on page 24*

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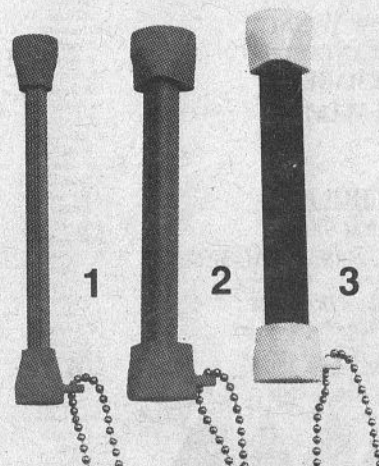
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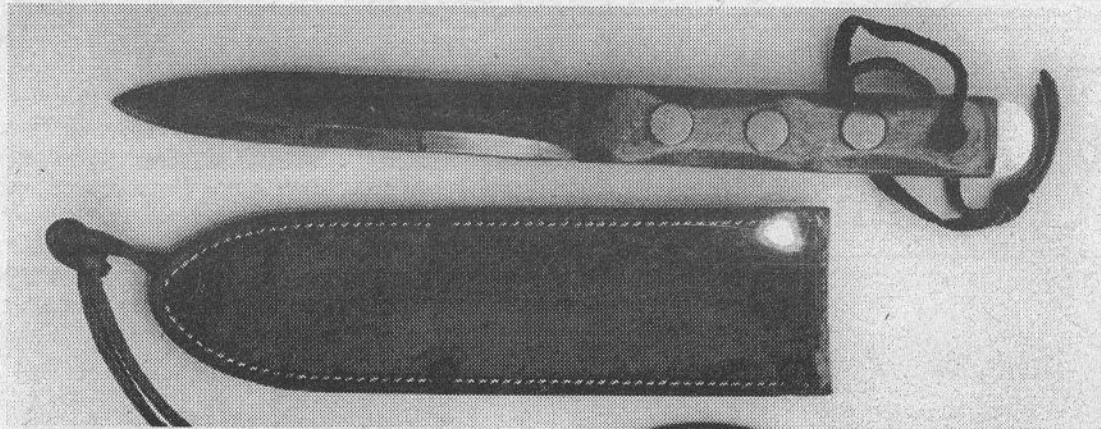
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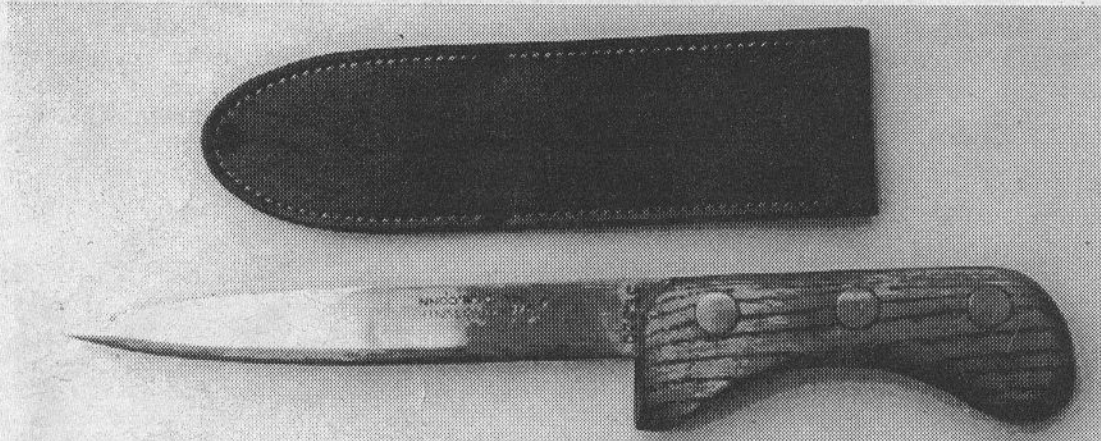
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Above: WWII Style 2 with later short tang and proper sheath. Below: WWII Style 3 in excellent condition with proper sheath. Knives courtesy Larry Schriebman.



Continued from page 23  
knives were serial numbered and a registration card was filled out by each new owner. Anyone selling Ek knives as an authorized dealer had better return the cards, or they would find their next order short by the amount of registration cards not sent in.

The knives were all forged from high carbon steel to Ek's specifications. Each forged blank was then delivered to the shop to be made into a knife. The patterns grew slowly at first with the Style 1 and the Style 2 comprising the majority of the orders, but by the end of the war the selection was up to ten styles.

The little machine shop had employed up to 69 men at the height of production, all of whom were physically handicapped in some manner. That's right, John made a practice of hiring handicapped workers from the beginning right up until his death. Many of the procedures of handle making, sheath making and assembly were in fact handled in the workers' homes as they could not physically come to the shop. Along with patriotism was loyalty, and John Ek possessed an abundant amount of each. John felt that the handicapped worker also needed to provide a service to their coun-

try and would work harder and be more conscientious than the fellow who could get a job anywhere. One of the most experienced workers was a final inspector who was blind. That's right, blind — he could feel an imperfection and fail the knife just as good if not better than anyone who worked there.

Ek knives, although not as glamorous as Randalls, were nonetheless purchased by men in high places. Among his customers Ek counted Captain Clark Gable, General George S. Patton, and President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is rumored that FDR kept his Ek knife on his desk as a letter opener right up until his death. The President had selected the Style 1 for his use as many others had; it was the most popular of the Ek creations.

With restrictions on materials during the war, availability was the key in many endeavors. Although not his first choice, Ek used hard rock maple as his choice of wood for the knife handles. Available in abundance, the rock maple handles were an excellent choice of wood although a nice mahogany or walnut would have looked much more aesthetically appealing. John was well aware of that, but he didn't have to worry about it as such options just weren't available. He also disdained the use of leather for a grip as it tended to rot in jungle conditions. The wood allowed a good grip even with sweating hands and could be easily contoured to the individual hand in the theatre without having access to any machinery, as they could be sanded or whittled to the owner's liking. Handles were attached to the knives by way of three large rivets, hot poured of a lead and tin mixture. This allowed for additional weight to be added to the handle area for a better feel and prevented the rusting associated with steel [brass being a hard item to come by as it was generally unavailable during the war.] If the handles were to ever work loose from heavy use, all the G.I. had to do was find two heavy items

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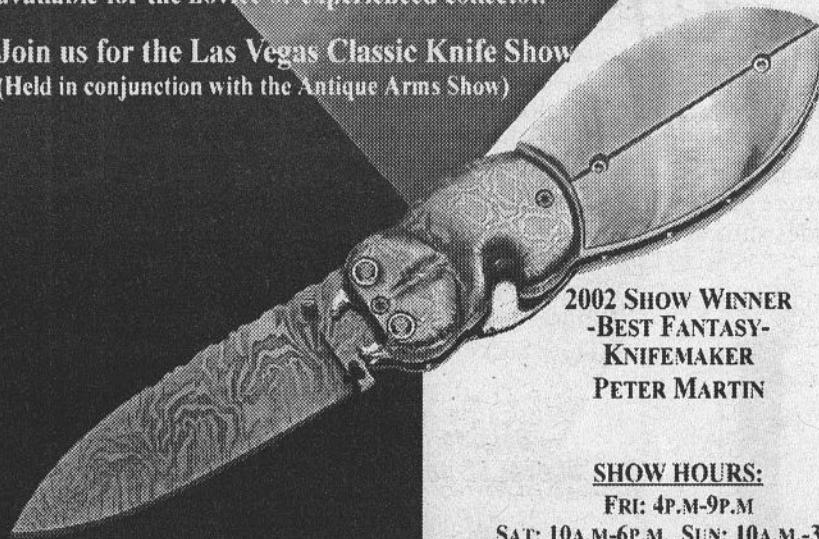


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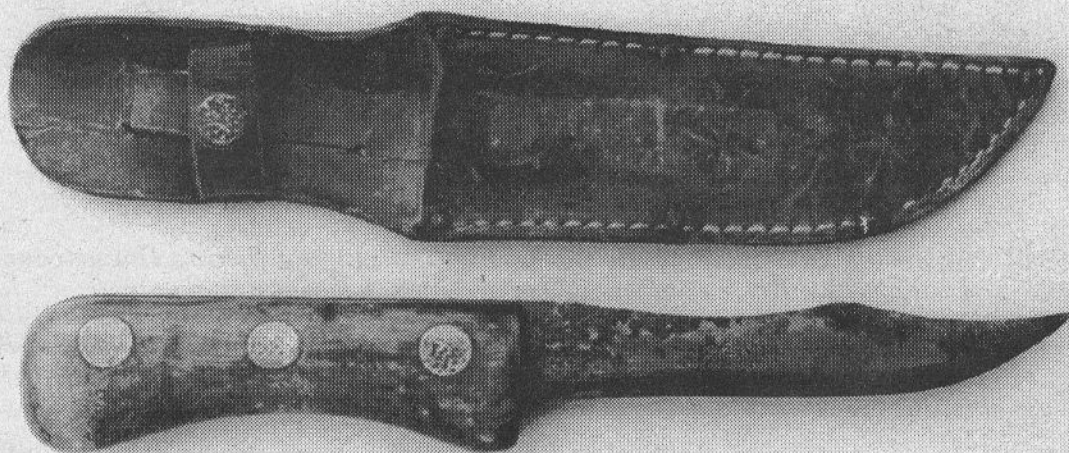
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WWII era Style 5 Navy knife. Large handle allows it to sink slowly if dropped in the water allowing time to retrieve it. This model was discontinued after WWII. The sheath is a replacement. Courtesy Larry Schriebman.



WWII era Style 7 with John Ek's book "Your Silent Partner" and Ek Company Patch. Knife courtesy of Larry Thomas.

Continued from page 24

to pound on the rivets with and they would tighten back up again. Most handles also have a thong hole through the wood and the extended tang.

Another compromise to be made lay with the sheaths. As there was a great demand for high grade leather, the choice was a low grade or none at all, so Ek choose none. He contracted with the Elm City Rubber Company of New Haven, Connecticut to supply a plastic they had developed. When a good supply of quality leather again became available, Ek switched back as most customers had requested it. As you can find Ek sheaths with stitching and rivets you

can also find them with leather lacing. In fact, later in the firm's existence a leather laced sheath was somewhat of an Ek trademark.

Another typical feature of the Ek knife was the extended tang. Depending upon the year it was built, the tang could be anywhere from 1/2" to over 1" in length. This extended tang was a very useful part of the knife beyond even the fighting aspect. It could be used for a number of utility purposes including prying, and could absolutely lengthen the knife's life by preventing the blade from being subjected to the same treatment.

In 1949, John Ek moved the family and the factory

to Miami, Florida. Although a Connecticut native, the warm weather had the appeal it does to countless thousands of others. Knives provided from the new location exhibit the new stamping of "John Ek Knives, Miami, Fla." as opposed to the earlier made knives which have the "Hamden, Conn." markings. This is a very easy way to determine the era of a knife said to be a "World War Two" or "Korea" or in fact a "Vietnam" carried item. While it can't nail down the exact date, it can put you in the correct era. Perhaps the rarest markings are those of St. Augustine, Fla., made right before the company moved back north to

Continued on page 26

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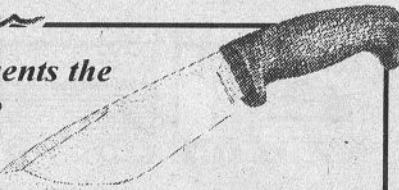
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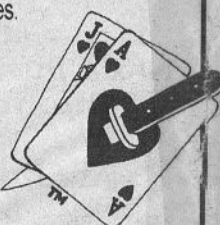
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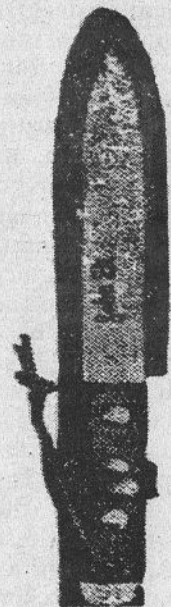
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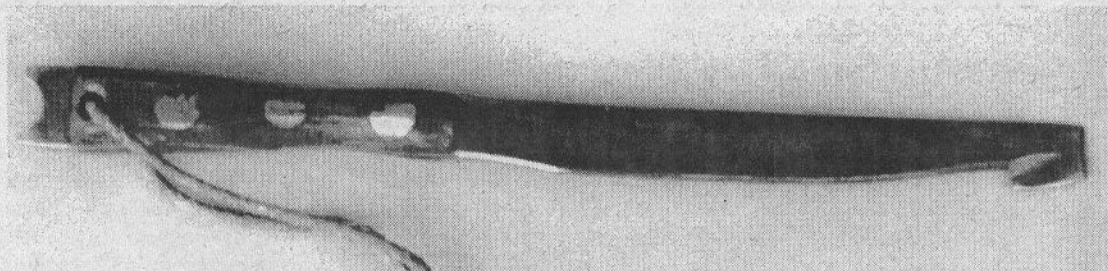
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*Above: Custom Ek Dive knife made for prying and cutting fishing line encountered around wrecks. Knife courtesy of Larry Thomas.*

*Left: This vintage ad, taken from a 1970s edition of Shotgun News, shows that Ek offered knife kits while located in Miami. This may help to explain why Eks are sometimes found with unusual handles and rivets, just as Randall's knife kits were sometimes made into unusual "Randall" knives. Courtesy Garry Zalesky.*

Continued from page 25  
the Richmond location in 1982. The nearest I can track down the dates of the St. Augustine marking is post-1976 but pre-1982.

Knifemaking began in Richmond, Virginia in 1982, when the company went under the direction of Robert A. Buerlein. Initial efforts were concentrated on developing exacting specifications for the knives for more consistent quality. Locations of the grip fastener system were standardized, and a new crossguard was also developed. The new guard was thicker with quillons that curved slightly forward. Poured-lead rivets were used in all production for the first several years, but this gave way to the newly-developed "X-Head Fasten-

er System." These were solid-brass screw fasteners which provided the desired weight of lead (for proper knife balance). After the relocation to Richmond, the knives were available with Micarta handles and the threaded screw system for the first time. Also new to the list were ballistic nylon sheaths and paracord wrapped handles. Different sheath configurations were developed, including the utilization of brown leather, black leather and olive drab, black and tan web material. An interesting aside was the finish of the knives, for up until this point all Ek knives were traditionally finished bright and polished. In the 1980s this was changed with the issue of the "War-

rior" model. It moved back to the original wood grips and sacrificed the high polish for a parkerized finish. Hard to believe this was the first time that the shiny blade had come into question!

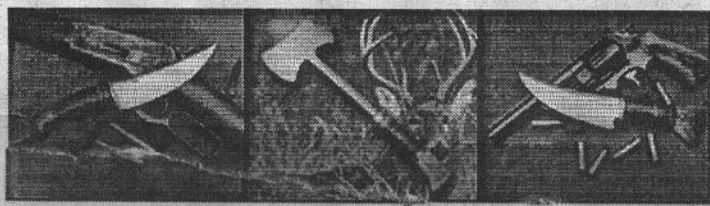
In 1993 Blackjack Knives, Ltd. took over manufacture of "production" knives for three years, while the Ek Knife Company in Richmond continued primarily with custom and commemorative knife-making and sales, through its Ek Custom Shop. Later yet, the Ek Knife Company produced several commemorative knives through the American Historical Foundation. These knives were highly engraved and embellished. They were

*Continued on page 27*

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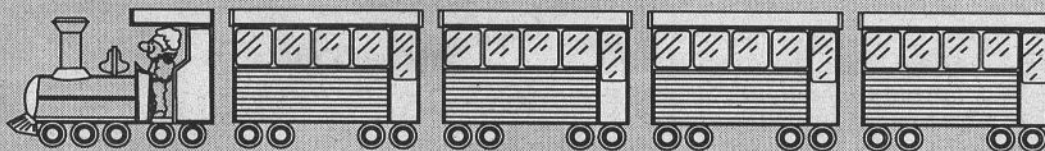
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*Continued from page 26*

available in a walnut presentation box along with letters and were serial numbered as part of a limited edition. This is not to be confused with the original serial numbers as assigned by John Ek, these were to count the number of knives made only. The original serial numbering ended with the move up north from St. Augustine. When Blackjack ceased their Ek production efforts in 1996, production returned to the Richmond operation. The original Model No. 1 and Model No. 2, which had been discontinued in the late 1980s, were re-introduced through the Custom Shop in 1997. In mid-1997, leather sheaths were completely discontinued as they were in WW II, and replaced by the familiar nylon web sheaths. In early 1998, poured-lead rivets were also re-introduced, but only on special order from the Custom

Shop.

While we are at it, let's put to rest the serial numbering system. I have never seen the exact date pinned down, but most agree it was in 1943 that John started to serial number his knives. The numbering system worked on the power of tens, and the serial number was also designed to contain the model number. To achieve this, John selected an alpha-numeric system. The knives would be numbered 1 through 999, then a letter would be inserted into the serial number. This would continue through 999 again, after which the next letter in the alphabet would be inserted. Hence serial number 2G546 signifies a Model 2 with a serial number of G546, or the 6,546th Model 2 knife produced. A very simple yet effective system of counting, and still keeping production levels somewhat of a mystery.

In a recent conversation

with a fellow collector, he was describing an Ek knife which, he told me, was mis-stamped with the wrong nomenclature. It seems the knife was stamped with the No. 3 prefix to the serial number, but according to the collector it was a No. 6. He assured me it was a No. 6 and I told him it was a No. 3 knife, that I was certain of. He hunted up his copy of the Ek catalog and produced a picture and description of it. I agreed with him that the knife in the picture and the catalog was a No. 6 but that did not change the fact that his knife was a No. 3, it was marked correctly and again I was sure of it. The fellow was becoming annoyed so I had to tell him the truth, he would have been right if the knife had been made in WW II, but it wasn't — and that, dear reader, is the key. Most folks are not aware that John Ek changed his numbering system at some

point after WW II. Several knives were discontinued and several more were added at that time. Due to the elimination of some of the WW II era knives, the remaining knives moved up a notch in the numbering system and the newer models filled in the higher numbers. So, a WW II era No. 6 knife became a No. 3 post war knife due to the elimination of the WW II model numbers 3, 4 & 5. Just for the record, the No. 8 WW II era knife, the Paratrooper, was also eliminated from the lineup. A short table accompanies this article in order to make all this a little easier to visualize.

John Ek died October 21, 1976. Upon his death the company file held thousands of letters from G.I.s

along with countless registration cards. John believed that to be the greatest thank you of all, a happy customer. □

Original Style	Post-WW II Style
1	1
2	2
3	Disc.
4	Disc.
5	Disc.
6	3
7	4
8	Disc.
9	5
10	9
New	4A
New	6
New	7
New	8
New	10
New	11
New	12

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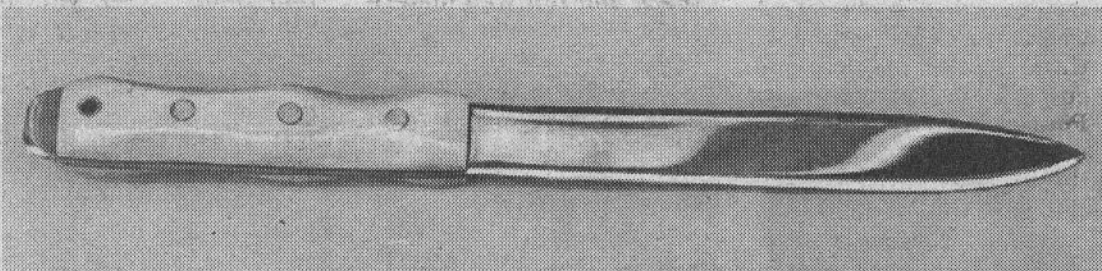
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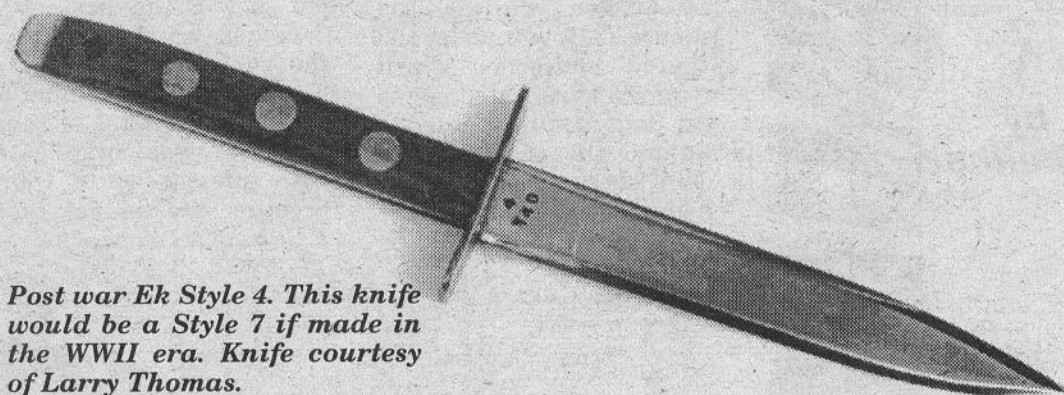
I have been retained by attorneys, police departments, and insurance adjusters in more than a dozen states for telephone consultation, written reports, depositions, and courtroom testimony.

**References Available**

- 28 years experience
  - 19 years expert witness experience
  - 10 knife books
  - Knife World's "Whut Izzit" editor since 1978
- BERNARD LEVINE, PO BOX 2404, EUGENE OR 97402**  
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*Custom Ek Style 2 with ivory micarta handle and brass rivets. Knife courtesy of Larry Thomas.*



*Post war Ek Style 4. This knife would be a Style 7 if made in the WWII era. Knife courtesy of Larry Thomas.*

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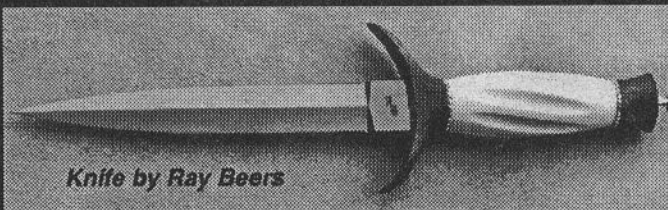


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