

Questions from Paladin Press of Ek president Bob Buerlein,
in conjunction with their introduction of his new book,
“Knives of War: An International Guide to Military Knives from World War I to the Present”

“Author Q & A”

1. What do you consider to be the most and least effective designs of military fighting knives?

The least effective military knife design is probably the knuckle knife. This style requires the user to hold the knife in the “hammer” grip which limits the thrusting ability. Slicing is fine, but it is the thrust that is the decisive blow in combat where you need something to happen fast. Also, the added weight tends to make them a little unwieldy. The most effective military fighting knife will have a spear-point blade, with the point on center to give it the maximum thrusting ability. With a bowie-style blade, the point is usually on the high side, offset from the force factor of the knife in the thrust mode. For someone trained in martial arts knife fighting, the handiest knife is one without a crossguard, like the Ek Commando Knife Model 1 or Model 2. With this type of fighting, the butt is often held facing forward, with the blade to the rear. Held in this way, a crossguard would get in the way. This grip is also designed to be held in the cross-palm “fencing grip” position. Similarly, the Ek Commando Model 3 or Model 4, with a crossguard has a long enough grip so it can effectively be held in the cross-palm fencing position for the maximum power in the thrust. Also, all of the Ek Commando Knives have the full tang for maximum strength and survivability. (Note: I am president and owner of Ek, but what other knives can make these claims?)

2. Is your new book geared towards collectors or users of military knives?

The new book is geared toward collectors *and* users. Collectors want to know about all types of knives, and users should also be aware of all types before choosing their own knife.

3. If you were going into battle in Afghanistan or Iraq and could only take one knife with you, which one would you choose and why? What knives are today’s soldiers and Marines carrying?

Our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are primarily carrying private-purchased knives they brought from home. All types - and price ranges - of knives are seen. One knife vendor talks about knives “for the person who can’t afford a cheap knife”. As any firearm can run out of ammunition or jam, I wouldn’t think anyone in theater could afford to carry a cheap knife, but they do. Medium/large folders are also popular. If I were deployed, I would want a knife that I could rely on if my firearm jammed or if I ran out of ammunition. That wouldn’t be a folder or a \$49 mail order special or PX special. As stated above, I would want spear point blade design which maximizes power in the thrust. With my Ek connection, that would be an Ek M3 or an Ek M4.

4. The Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife is probably the most famous fighting knife. Is it the most popular one for collectors as well?

The word “popular” has various connotations. The knives most military knife collectors would want to own? Probably the V-42 Stiletto of the U.S./Canadian First Special Service Force. These are rare and valuable. What knives do most people collect? Just about everything; the volume in military knife collecting is seen in the lower price knives, like the Ka-Bars, variations, and the U.S. M3 Trench Knife. In non-military knife collecting, folders are the most popular. The Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife is desirable among collectors, because there are so many different variations of it, because of its fame and because it stands for one of the most colorful units of all time – the British Commandos.

5. What do you consider to be the most neglected type of knife in military cutlery?

Probably the most overlooked area of knife collecting is the blades of the clandestine services. These are rare, and not much is known about many of them, so not many people get into collecting this type of knife. It just doesn't “fit” into their collection.

6. Is the bayonet still a viable military weapon?

The bayonet will always be a viable military weapon, because a firearm can always run out of ammunition or jam. The bayonet gives you three feet of additional reach over a military fighting knife – a good thing *if* the user knows what he is doing. By the same token, that three additional feet of length can be a real detriment if conditions are tight.

7. In an era where every soldier has access to a firearm, why is the combat knife still important?

As stated several times before, a firearm can always run out of ammunition or jam. When that happens, the fighting, by necessity, gets hand-to-hand. In the case of a jam, you are taught how to clear a weapon in your training, but often there isn't time if the enemy is quickly closing with you.

8. Do you follow developments in military knife design today? What are some of the companies and models you admire?

I have always admired Randall and Ek, because they both go back to the earliest days of World War II and have been in production ever since. This means they have been given feedback over those years from users, and the knife designs have been refined and proven. The Ek knives have a full tang design which is not true of the Randalls or most other knives made today.

I also always liked the Gerber Mark II, but when Fiskars bought the company, I don't think they wanted the “combat knife” image, so they dropped it. That was a spear point design, but it was not full tang – but it was a good knife. There are all kinds of other knives out there that people who are graduates of art/design schools have recently dreamed up, and some of them are rather attractive. But none of them really get on my radar screen or register with me; give me something that has been battle-proven.