A Knife for Life

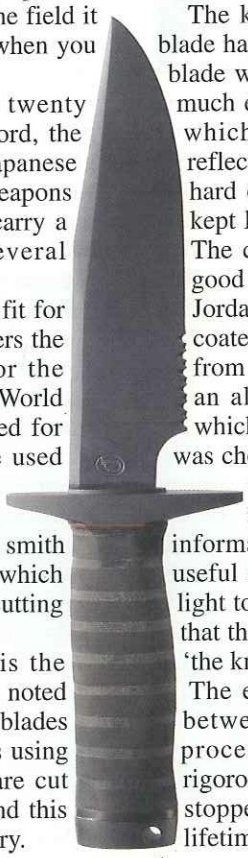
by J Farncombe and A S Jordan

Andrew Jordan is the fourth generation of his family to work with steel. His great-grandfather was a farrier working for the Light Calvary during World War 1, his grandfather was a ship's smith during the 1930s and 40s, and his father worked with 'hot metal' on Fleet Street. Andrew continued the family tradition by leaving England to learn sword making in Japan in 1995. On his return to the West in 1997 he won a scholarship from the American Bladesmith Society and studied blade making in the USA. Since then he has worked in Holland making swords, military blades, hunting knives and collector's pieces.

A knife for military personnel is one of the most important parts of his personal kit. When you need a knife in the field it is most important to have one that will not fail you when you need it.

Soldiers have been using edged weapons for twenty thousand years. The flint axe, the Roman short-sword, the double-handed broadsword of the Crusades, the Japanese katana, the cavalry sabre and the rapier were all weapons that redefined combat in their day. Even today we carry a bayonet, whose purpose has not changed in several hundred years.

Jordan believes that the British bayonet, although fit for its purpose, is not an elegant weapon. He much prefers the Sykes-Fairburn Commando Knife developed for the Commandos and SOE for special operations during World War 2. This double-edged stiletto blade was designed for unarmed combat by Fairbairn and continues to be used today.



These blades were designed to be mass-produced at low cost. Hand-made blades are better because the smith can produce a much finer grain structure in the steel, which makes the blades stronger, lighter and enables the cutting edge to hold its bite during prolonged use.

One of the best-known hand-made weapons is the Khukuri used by the Gurkha regiments. This blade is noted for its slashing and chopping abilities. The military blades have been made the same way for at least 200 years using steel from Victorian railway tracks. These tracks are cut down and turned into blades by master craftsmen and this has given the blade its distinguished and bloody history.

Redesigning the Fighting Knife

No-one understands the needs of a soldier better than the soldiers themselves, so when Jordan set out to design a military knife he talked to a number of ex-army personnel. His principal 'consultant' was Lee Hopgood, who in addition to his own experiences in the British Army also took into consideration the requirements of jungle warfare, mountain and artic warfare.

Hopgood's view is that the blade needs to be at least six inches long (15 centimetres). It must be strong enough to cut and chop wood and rope, and needs some serration to saw through fibrous materials. The hilt must be non-slip and take extended use in a damp environment, and there must be a way of preventing loss of the knife in difficult situations. In combat situations, a double guard would stop and parry any incoming blows, and the butt cap needs to be solid so that it can be used as a blunt weapon (or a hammer). An added bonus would be a 'choil' between the guard and the cutting edge. This area is useful to catch and hold incoming blades, to strip branches of vegetation while building camp, and also a place to lodge your index finger during whittling and delicate cutting applications. The knife must be able to cut, chop and slash and must have a dropped point for maximum penetration.

Jordan has built on these requirements and has designed a very practical and strong blade. The high carbon steel holds an edge well and can be easily sharpened in the field. The back of the blade is softer than the edge (similar to a Japanese sword), which means that the blade is strong and impact resistant, and much less likely to chip under constant use. It will survive better in very cold weather, because of its soft back, whereas a mass-produced knife can become brittle.

The knife has a dropped point, and the upper part of the blade has a 'false edge'. Taken together with a distal taper the blade will tend to find the space between bones and make it much easier to retract. The blade has a hard laquered finish which is scratch-resistant and is matt black and non-reflective. In the maritime environment, the conditions are hard on steel so the blade, like the SA80-A2, needs to be kept lightly oiled, as it is made from similar type of metal. The care that is good for a personal weapon will also be good for the knife.

Jordan makes the guard and butt cap from stainless steel, coated in the same way as the blade. The handle is made from alternating layers of industrial non-slip matting and an almost indestructible resin/linen mix called micata, which comes in the colours black and green. This material was chosen because it is easier to grip in muddy, wet or cold conditions. An added feature to the handle is that it is ergonomically designed to fit the hand and gives you information as to which side the cutting edge is facing, a useful advantage at night. The blades are evenly balanced, light to the touch and will not move in the hand. This means that the knife is not suitable for throwing, but as Jordan says 'the knife is designed to be used - why throw it away?'

The edge of the blade is a carefully controlled balance between hardness and durability. The result of a long process of practical research, Jordan tests his knives rigorously. The blade will pierce an oil drum and will not be stopped by standard body armour. He backs it up with a lifetime guarantee 'If you want a screwdriver or a crowbar', he says, 'don't use my knives, but otherwise these blades are made to perform the tasks of slicing and piercing'.

The sheath is almost as important as the blade. Jordan's advisors recommended a selection of carrying options including a Velcro closure on the belt-loop, a small Velcro attachment at the bottom of the sheath so that it can be attached to combat vests, and a thong so that you can secure it to your leg when it is hanging from your belt. The sheath has a tough lining for safety and to reduce movement noise of the blade within its housing. There is an adjustable thumb-break, which can be turned for right or left handed opening. On the front of the sheath there is a pouch to hold a sharpening stone, a firelighter or a leatherman tool, depending on your personal requirements. The sheath is available in black. With the sheath, Jordan supplies a strong three-foot lanyard to prevent loss during operations on water or when climbing obstacles. 'Who wants to lose such an important part of his kit?'

Owning a Blade

Jordan is respected internationally for his collector's blades. His Japanese training, coupled with extensive research in European knife-making, means that he is one of the few people who can make traditional plaited steel, or 'damascus' blades. In addition to looking stunning, the plaits mean that the edge has an invisible saw tooth and this will produce cuts that cut longer than a normal blade.

Jordan has experimented with Damascus blades for combat use, but they are expensive to make for use in the field, unless specifically asked for. Affordability is important, and he sells his high carbon steel military knives for around £300 including sheath and lanyard. This knife is only available to military personnel. Jordan is not prepared to compromise on materials or manufacturing quality. He produces his knives in small runs of twenty to ensure that the quality control is kept to the highest standard possible.

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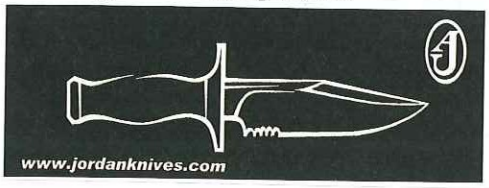

Andrew Jordan has kindly donated a knife which will be auctioned to raise funds for the RMBF. Anyone wishing to 'bid' for the knife (military personnel only) should send their offer in a sealed envelope marked 'Knife Auction' to *The Globe & Laurel*. Please do not send any money with the bid. The highest offer opened on 20 November 2003 will be the winner.