

Collectors Corner

by LeRoy Thompson, Tactical Knives magazine

Colonial's Seaworthy knives

The classic U.S. Navy Sailor's Knife, along with the civilian Rigger's knife get reborn and ready to set sail!

Most of us who are interested in the history of knives are probably somewhat familiar with the traditional Sailor's Folding Knife, which generally has a sheepfoot blade and a folding marlin spike. I seem to remember seeing a photograph of a civil war sailor's knife that incorporated the marlin spike. I have also seen photographs of fixed blade sailor's sheath knives with a marlin spike that folded into the handle. The U.S. Navy contract for the style of Sailor's Marlin Spike Folding Knife most familiar to me dates from 1910.

Early examples seem to have been made by many of the well-known Sheffield cutlers, including Joseph Rodgers and Wostonehholm IXL. H.M Slater of Sheffield made a Boy Scouts Sailor's or Riggers Knife of typical pattern. Whittingsglove of Australia made a popular version of the sailor's knife that incorporated a bottle/can opener blade as well as the sheepfoot cutting blade and marlin spike. Other makers seem to have included a second blade as well.

U.S –Made Sailors

Virtually all of the well-known U.S. makers of folding knives seem to have offered a sailors knife at some point in their history. In some cases the knives were supplied to the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard. A lot of members of the Navy seem to remember a sailor's knife from Camillus, while Coastguardsmen remember Buck sailor's knives. Case and Schrade also made sailors knives, the former for the Canadian Navy, I'm sure there were others. For example I have seen references to Ka-Bar sailor knives as U.S. Navy issue. Ka-Bar has made a sailor's/Rodgers's folder, so this is entirely possible. Most ex-sailors from the World War II era I've talked to, however, don't remember the sailor's knife as being issue, instead it was available for private purchase from the ship's stores or from Navy Exchanges. Since two of these veterans were ship's storekeepers, they should know, one would assume. It was quite possible that there were some issued to personnel who still worked with sail's and ropes.

Behind The Sail

I did run across two interesting pieces of information about the sailor's knife in gathering information for this article. Sailor's lore has been that the sheepsfoot blade on the sailor's knife came about because sailors were not allowed to have pointed blades. This restriction as an attempt to keep sailors from stabbing each other when they were cooped up for long periods at sea and tempers grew short. I have read of 19^t -century- ship's- mates breaking the points off of sailor's sheath knives for this reason, so there is some likelihood of a degree of truth in the lore. On the other hand, slashes from a blunted blade and stabs from a marlin spike would likely have been deadly prior to the availability of good antiseptics and antibiotics.

There seems to have been a long tradition of tying decorative lanyard knots for the ring of the sailor's knife. Some could be quite ornate.

-Colonial Knife® Treasures-

The reason I got interested in researching the sailor's knife is that I have sitting here two examples from Colonial Knife Company (CKC) of the knife they are currently under contract to supply to the U.S. Government. This knife is based on the original 1910 Navy design contract.

There are actually two versions of the CKC knife.

The first with brown plastic handle is the military-style version and carries the markings "Gov. Issue" and NSN number on the blade. The other, designated the "Riggers Knife", has a cocobolo handle. The cocobolo version being the civilian model and is popular with yachtsmen.

Both knives have the traditional sheepsfoot blade of about 3 inches. Blade, frame, and other components are 440 series stainless steel, with blade hardness Rockwell 58-60. There is not a blade lock. The hand-forged marlin spike is slightly curved and is about 2.75 inches long. It does have a lever lock with a shackle/lanyard ring being pressed to release it.

I'm not a yachtsman or a sailor; I have worked a few yacht security jobs, though I was hired for my expertise with weapons and tactical skills rather than for sailing skills. Generally, I carried the same type of fighting knife I would have on land. Despite my lack of experience with sails and ropes, though, I do find the CKC Sailor's knife very intriguing. Certainly for anyone who sails, it would serve as a useful tool, but also on the cachet of following a naval tradition of a century or more. I can certainly think of uses for the marlin spike beyond standard naval usage on knots so the Sailor's knife should have some general utility as well.

Making the Sailor's knife even more appealing is the very reasonable price. Suggested retail for the military issue style is 49.99 and for the cocobolo Riggers knife \$69.99 lifetime warranty.