

BEST FACTORY KNIVES

OF BLADE'S FIRST 40 YEARS

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Best Factory Knives 1973-1988

They may have been your father's knives or your grandfather's knives—they may even be your knives.

To help celebrate its 40th anniversary, BLADE released a three-part series recognizing the top 40 factory knives over that span (1973-2013). The first chapter pinpoints the top factory knives from 1973-88.

We compiled a list of some top factory knives over that stretch and submitted them to a panel of veteran knife observers and asked them to select their top five to 10—or however many they felt comfortable choosing.

Though “top factory knives” can be subjective, we determined a top factory knife is one that excelled in terms of setting a standard that other companies attempted to emulate, and/or excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity—or both.

We no doubt inadvertently omitted knives that should be included. As a result, we asked our panel members to add those and rank them in their lists, too.

The panel members: knife writers James Morgan Ayres, BLADE field editor Kim Breed, Durwood Hollis, Blade Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame member Bernard Levine and Mac Overton; Pete Cohan, former curator of the National Knife Museum; writer/photographer Terrill Hoffman; Roy Huntington, editor of American Handgunner Magazine; and Rick Thronburg of William Henry.

Some of the knives ranked herein were made before 1973. However, they remained very popular in the time (1973-88) in

question and so are included for that era.

Also, certain knives introduced between 1973-88 are not included because they did not become widely known/popular until later. We hope to include those in part two of the story.

Finally, though some may disagree, we included knives made by Bo Randall and/or the Randall shop as factory knives and not as custom knives.



Buck 110

“The Buck 110 folding hunter was the first large folder to gain popular acceptance with military and civilians alike,” Ayres observed. “It was worn in pouches on the belts of working guys, hippies, college professors, soldiers, sailors, doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs. It was everyman’s knife for more than a decade and firmly established the place of the large folder, thereby setting the stage for what came next.”



Leatherman Tool

“It was a gadget for everyman,” Hoffman observed. “Basically, it was the Boy Scout knife for adults. However, its greatest fame would come from the number of tools created to imitate it. If imitation is a form of flattery, the Leatherman is blushing.”



Randall Model 1

“While more of a semi-production shop than a true factory, Randall was not only one of the very first ‘custom’ high-quality knifemakers, but also one of the first to both market themselves nationally as such, and then deliver the goods to an eagerly buying public. Their role as a part of the carry gear of combat soldiers helped to keep their legend spreading, and reviews in early knife articles helped to make Randall the knife to dream about owning—especially the iconic Model 1,” Huntington

noted.



Victorinox Classic

“There is no other small folding utility that can match the clever design and construction that is the modern-era pocketknife,” Cohan observed. “It is carried by knife enthusiasts as well as the general public, both men and women, more than any other small knife. It, like others on this list, is an icon that persists across time and cultures.”



Spyderco Mariner

“I had one of the early ones,” Huntington remembered. “Suddenly, every other folder was ancient technology. The thumb hole, serrations and pocket clip [the Mariner was the first Spyderco knife to have all three features] made it a must-have for anyone needing a handy pocketknife. It soon found a place in the pockets of working cops—followed by the Spyderco Police soon after—soldiers, rafters, craftsmen and construction workers. All found this almost magical, lightweight, versatile companion the do-all tool they needed. Spyderco raised the bar on personal folding knives and was—as such things usually go—copied by everyone soon after.”



Case Trapper

“This folding knife pattern has a rich history in American cutlery manufacturing,” Cohan observed. “It’s the iconic Case design that is and continues to be one of the most popular patterns over the past 40 years.”



Gerber Mark II

“The Mark II created a new era of the combat knife by mixing modern materials to ageless designs,” Hoffman stated. “Although its use in combat may have been very limited, it made every soldier feel as he was as prepared as the OSS of World War II.”



AL Mar SERE

“I think this was the pattern that opened the door to the birth of the tactical knife market,” Thronburg opined, “a boom that is still on the upswing three decades later.”



Cold Steel Tanto

“The original Cold Steel Tanto was, as its advertising said later, ‘quality from day one,’ and set the pace for future Cold Steel products, as well as those from other companies, some of which were great quality, some of which were junk—caveat emptor. Its legendary toughness set the standard for Cold Steel and a goal for others to aspire to,” Overton observed.



Gerber LST

“Absolutely. The first one [actually had a Micarta® handle] and then the later version was thermoplastic. But more important is that it was this knife that caused a ‘paradigm shift’ in the market,” Thronburg opined. “Prior to this, knives of any substance had weight—brass bolsters were commonly used.

‘Strong and lightweight’ were considered impossible and at first the market bristled at this ‘new-fangled and flawed’ concept [that of the thermoplastic handle]. But before long, they all caved to the wisdom and the LST opened the door to a new way of thinking about knives. This was a huge contribution.”



Spyderco Police

“Spyderco quality and design in a knife large enough to do some serious knife work, but small enough to carry on your person everywhere,” Overton began. “The addition of lightweight variations to the original all-steel model increased the design’s versatility. It engendered other large models in the Spyderco line, as well as large quality ‘hi-tech’ folders from many competitors.”



Bali-Song, Inc. Wee Hawk Balisong

“The Bali-Song Wee Hawk was another massive craze in the knife world,” Thronburg recalled. “Bali-Song brought the innovation to the marketplace and held it to their high standards. Meanwhile, the copycats literally came out of the woodwork with all levels of quality—all inferior—but millions of this design were sold.”



Schrade Sharpfinger

“Extremely affordable,” Hollis began, “the Schrade Sharpfinger has all the right stuff, lots of blade belly for skinning, plenty of point for detailed trophy work, a simple design, and is rugged and durable.”

Best Factory Knives 1989-2000

From 1989-2000, the factory knife industry saw the rise of tactical folders, factory/custom collaborations and a significant jump in overall knife quality—along with an accompanying increase in prices. “Custom knife prices were starting to climb and it was like the custom world and factories were in a fight to see who could raise their prices the fastest,” writer/photographer Terrill Hoffman noted. “However, it was the same period when knife shows and the entire knife culture were starting to become mainstream events. It was the era the knife industry broke away from being just part of the ‘gun world.’”

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The panel members are: Troney Toler of Knives Plus retail

cutlery store in Amarillo, Texas; N. Brian Huegel of Country Knives retail cutlery store in Intercourse, Pennsylvania; knife writer and industry consultant Anthony Lombardo; Will Fennell, formerly of EDI (Edge Design Inc.) and two other knife companies; BLADE field editor Kim Breed; long-time knife writer Mac Overton; BLADE contributor James Morgan Ayres; and writer/photographer Terrill Hoffman.

By the way, some of the knives chosen herein were made before 1989. However, they remained very popular in the time (1989-2000) in question and so are included for that era.

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Kershaw 1510 Random Task

Huegel: “The most significant development in one-hand opening knives of the decade and beyond, Ken Onion’s patented assisted-opening folders made by Kershaw represent the most

successful custom collaborative invention in this current cutlery renaissance. Since [the 1510's] introduction in 1999, Kershaw has experienced a rebirth to become an industry leader. This unique idea has generated a new category—mockingly, the sincerest form of flattery.”



Benchmade Emerson 970/CQC-7

Fennell: “The knife that exploded the tactical folder/custom collaboration movement, and really put Benchmade on the map.”
Toler: “Emerson was not the first custom designer to collaborate with a factory, but his CQC-7 design was one of the most widely sought-after factory knives, setting a standard for high-priced [over \$100] high-quality production knives. Benchmade used high-quality components to reproduce the CQC-7—titanium liners and lock, G10 handles, and ATS-34 blades machined with

Emerson's chisel-ground profile.”



CRKT K.I.S.S.

Hoffman: “This knife deserves to be No. 1 just for its simplicity and cost factor. This was the era when any new knife that came out was starting to get overpriced for the blue-collar worker, and it brought these buyers back to the fold. It proved that ‘price’ and ‘quality’ are two different words.” Overton: “It proved that a useful folder did not have to anchor the blade between two scales—that one, doubling as a lock mechanism, could do the job.” Fennell: “It took ‘tacti-cool folders’ and catapulted them into the men’s gift world. Its huge sales put CRKT on the map.”



CRKT M-16

Breed: “Combined with the design flair of Kit Carson, this knife was the longest home run. It’s heavy duty in construction but still very affordable. The military seemed to have a knife designed especially for them.” Toler: “With its Carson Flipper, the M-16 was a huge improvement on non-assisted blade opening, making a manual knife open almost as fast as an auto without a secondary thumb stud or hole mechanism. Because it had less moving parts and its opening relied on inertia rather than a spring or torsion bar, the mechanism was inherently stable and reliable.”



Benchmade McHenry-Williams 710 AXIS Lock

Huegel: “The first supremely successful locking system after the LinerLock™, with its ambidextrous ease of use and inherent strength, the AXIS™ Lock design by Bill McHenry and Jason Williams is the symbol of Benchmade’s pursuit of high quality and hi-tech that made tolerances of 0.0005 inch an industry standard.” Fennell: “The 710 popularized the wave of ‘new locking mechanisms.’”



Spyderco Endura/Delica

Overton: “An outgrowth of the ultra-light phenomenon

started by Blackie Collins's Gerber LST, the Endura/Delica allowed Spyderco to make the Spyder Edges [serrations], pocket clip and opening hole in the blade available in a light, cost-effective package to reach a whole new group of users.” Huegel: “Since their inception in 1990, this duo has continued to evolve with many subtle and major improvements, including an ambidextrous pocket clip, David Boye dent, and five different steels. Spyderco's philosophy of uncompromising quality with maximum affordability is epitomized in these two knives.”



Microtech SOCOM

Toler: “Microtech introduced a new level of quality construction in modern production knives. The SOCOM precision of fit and operation was impeccable and unmatched by most of its competitors. Ultra-tight yet smooth-opening and an outstanding locking mechanism and blade centering were hallmarks of the SOCOM knives.” Breed: “When the first ones hit the BLADE Show, it was a feeding frenzy. A premium folder that went to the top of the must-have list by both the military and collectors. It's still one of the popular knives for Microtech.”



Mission Knives MPK

Breed: “The Mission Knives Multi Purpose Knife [MPK] started the exotic blade material”—titanium in this instance—“run. Nonmagnetic and able to withstand the punishment of our nation’s finest military forces, it is the most indestructible knife I have tested. It’s the perfect ‘truck knife,’ as no maintenance is required.” Toler: “The problem with most non-magnetic metals is they’re not as tough or hard as needed for a knife edge. The MPK utilized a non-magnetic beta-titanium alloy that was hard enough to hold a decent edge. Although it’s not widely available to the buying public, its military utility has made it a milestone in combat knives.”



Spyderco Military

Huegel: “The Spyderco Military was designed to ‘meet the requirements of a high-performance, lightweight folder designed for hard use.’ The ultimate expression of this concept is the lock’s liner nested directly into the scale, pumping up lock strength without the addition of bulky liners. Creative and unconventional facades paired with a brilliant design sensibility underneath—in a nutshell, this is Spyderco. This truism has been proven over and over again, typifying the ‘Clipit Revolution’ that began in 1981 and has spawned many inventions and innovations by the creative mind of Sal Glesser. Virtually every locking folding knife made today and in the last 20 years owes at least one design feature to Spyderco.”



KA-BAR Next Generation

Hoffman: “The Next Generation re-introduced an old design with new materials. It also came at a time when the country was

starting to pay attention to the soldiers of the Vietnam War. For years after Vietnam the military had taken a beating on the PR front, and calling out the ghosts of the past propelled [service personnel] back to an honorable status.” Breed: “Take the classic KA-BAR fighting/utility knife and update it with modern materials. This was an excellent choice by the company to keep up with the modern knife market. The newer knives are actually more comfortable to use than the older versions.”



Spyderco C15 Terzuola

Fennell: “The C15 was the knife that really started the ‘custom-collaboration/tactical folder/LinerLock™’ craze. It was Spyderco’s first custom collaboration—and the first knife I actually bought at a BLADE Show [1990]. I remember going home from the show and showing the president of the knife company I worked for the knife. I told him we needed to make something as functional, well made and as cool. He had no idea

what ATS-34 was, thought LinerLocks were only for cheapo electrician's knives, couldn't pronounce Terzuola [Bob Terzuola designed the C15], and was totally convinced I was an idiot for paying close to \$100 for a pocketknife. And what was up with the 'clip thingy'? He thought it was something off a tape measure!"

Meyerco Strut 'n Cut

Overton: "This Blackie Collins creation started the assisted-opening stampede. Enough said." While Ken Onion's SpeedSafe mechanism for Kershaw was and is the assisted opener most emulated by like knives, the Collins-designed Strut 'n Cut with its rear-of-the-blade "wheel-pull" feature to get the blade starting to open and the mechanism that propelled it completely open from there was first.



Benchmade AFCK

The AFCK (Advanced Folding Combat Knife) combined many of the great features of contemporary knives and Benchmade's design and manufacturing genius in a lightweight,

relatively inexpensive, utilitarian folder. The AFCK's combination of curves and straight lines provided a symmetry seen in few knives, before or since. The fact it was designed in conjunction with a former SEAL no doubt helped immensely in the success of its assorted versions.

Best Factory Knives 2000-1012

BADE is helping celebrate its 40th anniversary by picking the top 40 factory knives over those first 40 years (1973-2013). The first and second chapters pinpointed the top factory knives from 1973 to 1988 and 1989 to 2000, respectively. This time, the final chapter, identifies the top production pieces from 2001 to 2012.

We compiled a list of some of the top factory knives over that stretch and submitted them to a panel of seasoned knife observers and asked them to select their top five to 10—or however many they felt comfortable picking—and to rank them No. 1 up to as many as 10, with 1 being the best, 2 second best, etc.

Though “top factory knives” can be subjective, we would like to think a top factory knife is one that excelled in terms of setting a standard that other companies attempted to emulate, and/or excelled in quality of craftsmanship, originality and creativity—or both.

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The panel members are: Troney Toler of Knives Plus retail cutlery store in Amarillo, Texas, and Dan Delavan of Plaza Cutlery retail knife store in Costa Mesa, California; BLADE field editors Kim Breed and Dexter Ewing; and BLADE contributors James Morgan Ayres, Pat Covert and David W. Jung.



KERSHAW/KEN ONION LEEK

Breed: I have seen more Leeks in use today than any other folder. It's not too big yet able to handle most jobs. The SpeedSafet assisted opening makes this knife a play toy. When

they offered the different-colored finishes, the knives were everywhere. Covert: The Leek might be described as the first factory ‘full-throttle gent’s folder.’ Its broad appeal did more to promote Ken Onion’s SpeedSafe mechanism than any of Ken’s other designs. Kershaw would not give me specific figures for the number of units sold but did hint that it was “in the millions.”



BENCHMADE/MEL PARDUE GRIPTILIAN

Covert: In the food chain of factory knives, Benchmade has always been considered steak, not burger, but the Griptilian went a long way to changing that. This Mel Pardue design was the company’s first nicely affordable folder with mass market appeal. So popular is the knife that a customer can go to the company’s website and design their own Griptilian from a plethora of options. How many manufactured knives are popular enough to pull that off? Jung: With the nested metal liners, the Griptilian series has forced other manufacturers back to the drawing board

to design competitive knives.



KAI CUTLERY/SHUN/ONION CLASSIC CHEF'S KNIFE

Toler: Shun/KAI Cutlery made laminated kitchen knives popular and affordable. Other laminated blades were available but usually at a much higher price. The Shuns came in expensive but low priced enough to sell very well to our customers. Delavan: The Shun knives with the primary right-handed grip and then offering them left handed was a first as far as I know by a large company. This line also opened the door for additional higher-end kitchen knives and other designers such as Bob Kramer to come into the market. Now we have custom makers making primarily household cutlery.



CRKT/ONION RIPPLE

Breed: It has the look and feel of a full-blown custom knife. The company kept the original look and it was a big hit. It's one of the best folders for your pocket, classy yet functional.

Toler: The Ikoma Korth Bearing System (IKBS) combined with a flipper-style opening produced a knife that opens almost as smoothly as an assisted knife without the addition of a torsion bar or cams.

Jung: It captures how to make a ball-bearing flipper knife without excessive size, weight and complexity. With the extensive CNC machining, the biggest surprise about this knife is how light it is without sacrificing strength.



CHRIS REEVE KNIVES MNANDI

Ewing: The Mnandi represents the best in a gentleman's folder. It has a friendly and useful blade shape packed into a slender handle with a solid lock. The choice of inlays dresses up the knife with an organic flair. Ayres: It makes the list for excellence in design and manufacture, and showing that a tactical folder can also be a gentleman's pocketknife. Covert: This upscale gent's folder has all the bullet-proof construction and airtight quality of Reeve's Sebenza in a sleek, curvaceous package.



CAMILLUS/ROB SIMONICH CUDA TALONITE TALON

Breed: This gave the general knife world a chance to own an exotic-material knife. Talonite is very hard to rust and is tough. The Talon made knife people think outside the box when choosing what their knife is made out of. Toler: Camillus mass produced a knife with a nonferrous blade metal, Talonite, which is a version of Stellite. The metal incorporates excellent edge-holding characteristics with a non-corrosive metal blade. The use of Talonite spawned the use of nonferrous metal blades by other companies.



CHRIS REEVE KNIVES/BILL HARSEY GREEN BERET KNIFE

Jung: For a military son or daughter in harm's way, this is one

knife that I would want to send with them into battle. The knife exhibits outstanding ergonomics, excellent blade steel, comfort and exceptional workmanship. Delavan: It is one of the first modern-day knives used by the U.S. armed forces from a smaller company. Designed by Bill and Chris, this knife set the bar for other companies. It's a great design, strong and a versatile tool.



STRIDER KNIVES SnG

Covert: These bullet-proof, hard-use tactical folders with

their triangulated handles broke the design rules and became wildly popular overnight, and remain so today. Ewing: As far as I can remember, the SnG was the first titanium framelock folder I've used that had the "half-and-half" handle construction—lock side is titanium, non-lock side is G-10. This not only lightened the knife a bit but also the G-10 could be textured for an enhanced grip.



STRIDER KNIVES SMF

Delavan: One of the few folders made for both law enforcement and military use. Most folders do not hold up but the SMF is a tank and it takes abuse other knives simply cannot! The military models are some of the most cherished knives in the world, not only by the people who use them but collectors that somehow get their hands on them. There are not many out there

as the service members love the knives so much they do not want to give them up.



KERSHAW/ ONION CHIVE

Toler: Most all attempts at a small assisted knife have been very hard to open with a traditional thumb stud release. It is just difficult to curl an adult hand around a tiny knife handle to manipulate the stud, open the knife and hold the knife at the same time. The Chive solved this problem with the flipper release.

Jung: When knife buyers look at the Chive and want a little larger size, they move up to the Kershaw Leek. When they want to move down from the Leek, they choose the Chive.



BUSSE COMBAT FUSION HEART

Ayres: I pick it for its pure cutting and chopping ability, and the ability to absorb punishment and hold its edge. I don't know what Busse's INFI steel is, or what heat treat Busse uses, but the knives work. I slashed the hood of a junked Honda to ribbons with this blade and it would almost shave hair from my arm afterward.



CRKT/ED VAN HOY SNAP LOCK

Toler: Though it's not a very practical knife, the CRKT/Van Hoy Snap Lock and its pure innovation of design is worth a place on the list. This item was looked at by almost everyone that came into our shop; it is a great conversation piece and a great selling novelty knife.



DPx GEAR HEST T3

Ayres: I like this folder for its innovation and combining hard use functions, features and materials in a handy folder, for excellence in build quality, and for exceptional strength in a folder of manageable size. This is as close as anyone has yet come—to my knowledge—to creating a pocketable folder with strength approaching that of a fixed blade.

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