

SPECIAL RAMBO 35TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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THE MAN WHO CREATED RAMBO

45 YEARS LATER, DAVID MORRELL CONTINUES
TO REAP THE REWARDS OF HIS INVENTION

David Morrell (above left), author of First Blood, and Sylvester Stallone share thoughts on the set of Rambo III near Eilat, Israel. (image courtesy of Carolco Pictures)

A novel by David Morrell, *First Blood* inspired the most famous knife in modern history, created one of the world's most recognized characters, has never been out of print in its 45-year existence and has been translated into 30 languages.

Not bad for a writer's first book, eh?

Morrell, 74, has enjoyed a stellar career as an author, penning a number of fiction and non-fiction action books and series of books that have brought him international renown. However, as entertaining as his other books have been—including one series, *The Brotherhood of the Rose*,

that was adapted into a TV mini-series for NBC and has the distinction of being the only mini-series to immediately follow the telecast of a Super Bowl—none have had the impact of *First Blood*.

As the Rambo phenomenon celebrates its 35th anniversary, it is almost impossible to pinpoint exactly what transformed the knife, the book—which just so happens is celebrating its 45th anniversary in 2017 as well—and the Rambo character into such a collective smash global hit. And perhaps therein lies the secret: it was no one specific idea or occurrence that captured the imagination of so many but

a series of events that were part planned, part happenstance and most all good fortune for the principals involved.

RAMBO GENESIS

Born in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, Morrell came to America to study literature at Penn State in 1966 near the height of the Vietnam War, and the student unrest and riots that, as Morrell recalls, seemed to have the nation on the brink of a civil war. In 1968 Morrell taught a first-year writing class of students that included returning Vietnam vets, a number of whom showed the classic symptoms of the then-un-



Exclusively for David Morrell, Jimmy Lile stamped "Author's Copy" on these original *First Blood* (bottom, with sheath and sharpener and unscrewed buttcap with compass), and *Mission* (second from top) knives. At top is Lile's Rambo Stiletto. (from the David Morrell collection; image courtesy of David Morrell)

heard-of post-traumatic stress syndrome, and were struggling to adapt to civilian life. The two factions—student protesters and returning war veterans—along with the older authority figures with whom the 18-to-20-somethings butted heads in the middle of the generation gap of the '60s, gave Morrell an idea for a novel.

"I was reminded of Audie Murphy, America's most decorated soldier of World War II, who had similar problems returning from the war, and it suddenly occurred to me what if the person I was going to write about was truly exceptional as Murphy was, and came back from the war hating himself, and how would he have reacted if a police officer started hassling him because he didn't like the way he looked?" Morrell said. "Since Murphy had such a capacity for anger, I could imagine how as Rambo he would've reacted."

It took Morrell about three years to write the book by 1971, but only six weeks for a hardback-book publisher to accept it—an unusually quick turnaround back then, he noted. It was reviewed widely and favorably by the major magazines of the day, sold to a paperback company and then a film company—Columbia Pictures. However, Carolco eventually acquired the movie rights and Sylvester

Stallone's name surfaced for the part of John Rambo. "Stallone had not had a hit in anything other than *Rocky*," Morrell recalled, "so this was a big deal for him to have a hit with another character."

A STAR is BORN

Ironically, there is no knife in Morrell's *First Blood*. "Sylvester, who is very good at knowing he has to do something in front of the camera besides deliver dialogue, thought quickly that [the character of Rambo] should have a prop," Morrell said.

And so the Rambo knife was born (page 12). What was Morrell's reaction?

"I was delighted," he noted. "My interest in knives dates back to *The Iron Mistress* in the Alan Ladd movie about Jim Bowie made by Warner Bros. in the early 1950s. The first time I saw that movie I was a kid and the knife in it absolutely astonished me—and I'm not the only one. I know Gil Hibben [the *BLADE* Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame® member who made the knives for the third and fourth Rambo movies] talks about the influence that movie had on him in terms of being a maker [as it did so many other makers of Hibben's generation], so I always had an interest in knives in the movies. It disappoints me that it never occurred to me to put one in the novel."

One reason Morrell said the knife wouldn't have worked in the novel is because when Rambo breaks out of jail and escapes on a motorcycle, he's stark naked—not exactly the best circumstances



Since it was first published as a hardback book in 1972, *First Blood* has never been out of print and has been translated into 30 languages, a number of which are represented here. See if you can guess which is the original cover. The answer appears at the end of the story. (image courtesy of David Morrell)

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in which to carry a big knife. “I suppose I could’ve had Rambo find someone up in the mountains and take a knife from them but it never crossed my mind,” Morrell said. “It’s one of those ironies between books and the movies.”

Stallone became well versed with the custom knife scene (page 22) and chose Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame member Jimmy Lile to make the knife for the first and then the second Rambo movies. Moreover, Morrell wrote the “novelization” for the second Rambo movie—the novelization spent six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list—and contacted Lile for information about the second movie knife for the novelization.

“First of all, anyone who ever talked to Jimmy Lile, after two minutes you had an Arkansas accent,” Morrell laughed. “I wanted to get a whole lot more stuff in the novelization than was in the movie and one of the things I wanted to do was make up for the fact that I hadn’t had a knife in *First Blood*, but by God there sure was a knife in the second movie, and I really wanted to go with that knife so everybody would know how unique and beautiful it was. And so Jimmy and I talked and he told me a little about the history of the knife and what he had in mind and all this shows up in the novelization. It’s been since the early 1980s and I can still hear that Arkansas twang.”

Lile made only 100 of the original Rambo knives for each of the first and second movies, and made one separate from each of those limited runs marked “Author’s Copy” for Morrell as gifts.

After Lile, Stallone chose Hibben to make the knives for the third and fourth Rambo movies. As Morrell noted, Hibben was experiencing difficulty making ends meet as a knifemaker at the time, and had decided to make a “last-ditch stand” at the California Custom Knife Show in Anaheim in 1984 when he walked Stallone (page 12). He bought several knives on Hibben’s table and later commissioned him to do the knives for the third Rambo movie. It basically turned Hibben’s knife-making career around. Hibben also made the knife for the fourth Rambo movie, as well as versions from each film marked “Author’s Copy” for Morrell, just as Lile had done.



Though they had corresponded by phone and mail before, David Morrell and Gil Hibben (left) did not meet in person until the 2003 BLADE Show in Atlanta, where David received the BLADE Magazine 2003 Industry Achievement Award.



In another exclusive for David Morrell, Gil Hibben stamped “Author’s Copy” on these original Rambo III and Rambo IV (top) knives. In the middle is a Rambo dagger Hibben made for the third movie. (from the David Morrell collection; image courtesy of David Morrell)

RAMBO AFTERMATH

Rambo created a big knife fan in Morrell—so much so that he subsequently wrote two novels, *The Protector* and *The Naked Edge*—with knives as a main focus, including Ernest Emerson’s CQC-7B as the cover knife for *The Protector*, and Hibben’s repro of an 1865 Michael Price dress Bowie as the cover knife for *The Naked Edge*. (Author’s note: I remain deeply humbled and honored that Morrell includes a fictitious appearance by me as editor of *BLADE**, among other knife personages, in *The Naked Edge*.)

In 2003, Morrell was invited to the BLADE Show, where not only did he join Hibben for a seminar on the Rambo phenomenon, but he also was presented with the BLADE Magazine Industry Achievement Award for writing the book that resulted in the most famous knife of the





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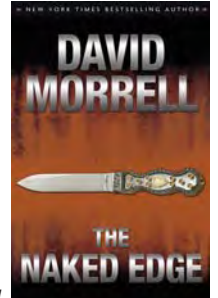
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*Thanks in no small part to Rambo, David Morrell became an avid knife fan and outfitted one of his characters, Cavanaugh, with knives in Morrell's Cavanaugh/Protector series of novels. One of those books, *The Naked Edge*, features a Gil Hibben 1865 Michael Price dress Bowie on the cover. (image courtesy of David Morrell)*



modern era (page 18, November 2003 *BLADE*). Though they had corresponded many times before by phone and letters, it marked the first time for Morrell and Hibben to meet in person. They immediately hit it off and, thanks in large part to the Internet, have stayed in close touch ever since.

As a side note, to help in the research for the lead character of Cavanaugh in *The Naked Edge*, Morrell attended one of Ernest Emerson's self-defense training courses. Jumping right in with the burly law enforcement and military types who also attended the course, Morrell jumped so hard that he suffered a broken collarbone. In fact, the break was so severe that the bone pushed against his skin and was plainly visible immediately after the injury.

"It wasn't that painful. I guess all the nerves were shut down, so I kind of pushed the bone back in and sort of set it myself," he recalled. "It was almost a Rambo moment."

It was but another of such moments among many in the career of the man who created Rambo.

*The original cover of **First Blood** in the montage of **First Blood** covers on page 37 is third from left in the bottom row.*

*For more on **First Blood** and other of David Morrell's books, visit <http://davidmorrell.net>.*

For more on the Rambo phenomenon, see the stories on pages 10, 12, 22 and 28.

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