

History of performance ...

by DEXTER EWING

Camillus History



Camillus Cutlery Company is one of the oldest knife manufacturers in the United States. Ever since the company's inception and in the many, many years that follow - Camillus has

been dedicated to producing the finest knives available. Regardless of whether or not you have used or owned a Camillus product, anyone who is into knife collecting certainly is aware of this company and their products. What some people are not aware of is the broad spectrum of Camillus' far-reaching expertise and the diverse knife markets they serve. Ready to take an in depth look at the rich heritage of America's oldest knife manufacturer?

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

This knifemaking giant came to life in 1876 with founder Adolph Kastor. A young and ambitious German immigrant who came to New York in 1870, riding high on hopes of working in the cutlery business. Kastor's uncle, Aaron, was already in the business and served as a mentor to the young man by providing the young Kastor job opportunities in his hardware supply business - Bodenheim, Meyer, & Company. Kastor started at the bottom - ironically - in the sub basement where he was put in charge of cow chains. As time passed, he worked his way on up through the ranks of the company to the firearms and cutlery department. This particular department at Bodenheim, Meyer, & Company was a seasonal business, with the time period of July-August-September being prime time - and Adolph Kastor was right in the middle of it all, cutting his teeth in the cutlery business. 1873 marked the year that the business suffered the loss of one of its founders and shortly thereafter restructured as Meyer & Kastor. By this time the business was not faring well, plagued with poor sales figures. In spite of the recent hard times, Kastor had learned a great deal about how to run the business - from the tedious financial aspects to the complete knowledge of all branches of Meyer & Kastor and everything in between. By September of 1876, the company closed up shop for the final time; all debts and assets were liquidated.

It was not long after that happened that Kastor set his sights on starting a company of his own. On October 1, 1876, the 20-year old Kastor had his new operation up and running. Housed in a building on Canal Street in New York City, Adolph Kastor & Bros. began to fulfill the dreams of its founder by importing and distributing German-made knives. Everything went smoothly until 1897, which marked the year the Dingley Tariff was enacted. This legislation was drafted to promote domestic manufacturing. Thus, it rendered knives too costly to import with its protective tariff on all imported steel products. The only solution Kastor saw was to manufacture knives right here at home, in order to keep his prices down. Undaunted, Kastor set out to search for the solution. Eventually, his search efforts led him to Charles Sherwood, the owner of a small knife manufacturer in Camillus, New York. Sherwood's small facility had 20 cutlers who were turning out about 15

different patterns, but showed promise of growth with the proper financial support. In 1902, Kastor purchased the company and assumed control. With Kastor firmly planted in the driver's seat, his new company began to grow by adding new machinery and adopting new techniques of manufacturing in order to produce the best quality American made knives. Eight years after Kastor took the helm of the company, production numbers reached 902,976 knives. Adolph Kastor was now fully realizing his dream come true right before his eyes. This company also was a definite boon to the town of Camillus in the sense that it created jobs for the residents and brought in much needed revenue to the community. Thus were the humble beginnings of Camillus Cutlery Company.

In 1910, just eight years after the company was established, Camillus had about 200 employees who turned out an annual average of 75,248 dozens. In 1903 and 1906, two new brands were added: Clover and Sword Brand respectively. This tremendous output was accomplished through the means of adding new machinery and new employees. Camillus had purchased steam driven drop forge hammers and fly presses. The company also tried alumina grinding wheels when those were initially introduced. They found these new grinding wheels to be more precise than the ones they used prior. In terms of personnel, many German cutlers came to Camillus Cutlery Company in search of a secure job and overall a better life in the United States. In fact, Camillus sponsored German workers to come to the States to work in the factory. Camillus even built a "dormitory" to house their German workers, dubbed Germania Hall. With this living arrangement, the German immigrants assimilated easily into their new culture. If the new workers proved to be hard working and loyal, Camillus would reward them by offering to sponsor the immigrant's family members to do the same - come to the United States and help make knives. Hopefully, make new lives for themselves. "Overall, I would have to say that the years 1902-1914 experienced Mr. Kastor's shaping and fine tuning of the Camillus factory" says Tom Williams, Camillus Cutlery Company's historian. All these changes in adding new techniques, new machinery, and new employees set the stage for Camillus to transform itself into a major force in the American cutlery industry.

WORLD WAR I: SUPPORTING THE USA AND ITS ALLIES

As World War I got underway, many industries in the United States halted regular production in order to devote their time and effort to make products in support of the war effort. Camillus jumped into this production with both feet, manufacturing a total of 471,044 knives that were shipped off to the American forces and their allies (Canada, Dutch, and Great Britain) - though, the majority of the knives went to the allies. These knives included marlin spikes, surgical scalpels, and even a combination folding knife/spoon for the Red Cross. As you will see a little later on, the knives that Camillus made in support of World War II were a little different than those produced for World War I.

GROWTH AND DIVERSITY

The Roaring '20's witnessed the continuing growth and diversity of the Camillus Cutlery Company. Several new knives were added to their line, as well as the introduction of stainless steel to the production process. The company also began producing character knives, which were a different slant



from the working knives Camillus became known for. Such pieces honored President George Washington, super slugger Babe Ruth, and space traveler Buck Rogers. Without a doubt, these knives increased in value years later. Camillus also expanded into private label manufacturing, turning out knives for well-known retailers like:

- **Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Co.** - O.V.B. (Our Very Best). H.S.B was one of Camillus' larger private label customers.
- **Sears, Roebuck & Co.** - Craftsman & Dunlap, and Stay Sharp
- **F.W. Woolworth** - Kent
- **Simmons Hardware Co.** - Keen Cutter
- **A.F. Shapleigh Hardware Co.** - Diamond Edge

The advantage of private label manufacturing afforded these companies the opportunity to offer high quality knives, under their own brand name, to the general public by way of retail stores or catalog orders. All the retailers mentioned above were hardware distributors, selling to various retailers. Though, Sears "broke the mold" by being the first distributor to sell directly to the general public by way of their famous catalogs. Thus, their knives were readily available to a wide range of people. Even today, Camillus Cutlery still devotes a considerable amount of time, effort, and resources to private label manufacturing. Sears' Craftsman brand multi-blade pocket knives are still manufactured by Camillus, as well as manufacturing knives for other well known companies. It's this same dedication to quality in manufacturing - under the Camillus banner or someone else's - that has Camillus still out front as the leader in private label knife manufacturing.

WORLD WAR II:

RESUMING THE UNWAVERING SUPPORT

During World War II, Camillus picked up where they left off with WWI - producing knives that were used by the US and Allied forces. And they did so with a vengeance - between 1942 and 1945 more than 15 million knives were shipped off to the armed forces. These knives encompassed a broad range of styles - from large fixed blade fighters to multi-blade camp style, electrician's knives to sailor's marlin spike knives - these Camillus products no doubt played a role in helping the US and its allies succeed in the two wars. The following is just a small sampling of the extensive line of knives that were manufactured for the war efforts.

- **5678L35 Folding Machete**
Was this a fixed blade or was this a folder? Truth is, it was a bit of both. Camillus made a heavy duty machete for use by the Air Force in their emergency survival kits, mainly for use in the jungle. In order to make this large knife store more easily, the handle featured a pivot much like a modern folding knife that permitted the handle to fold up and rest against the blade, shortening the overall length of the piece. The blade of this beast flared at the tip to put more steel up front for powerful cutting action with minimal effort. Each Folding Machete came with a rugged metal sheath. Total amount produced: 121, 848.

- 5684L77 Marine Corps Sheath Knife**
 (Marine Combat) Of these knives included the extremely popular Marine Combat #5684 7-inch bladed survival/combat fixed blade. Camillus was the original contractor the armed forces chose to produce this piece. Ruggedly built, the Marine Combat boasted such features like a 7 inch black phosphate coated 1095 high carbon steel blade, a stacked leather washer handle, and a riveted leather sheath. The handle is even treated with a special chemical that resists moisture and rot, something that can certainly wreak havoc on leather while exposed to the elements. Undoubtedly, the 5684 was heavily used in the trenches for close quarters combat as well as general survival tasks for the thousands of young men risking life and limb for our freedom. Throughout the years following the armed conflicts, today Camillus is still producing the Marine Combat - for both the military as well as the civilian markets - to the original specs with no changes. The 5684 Marine Combat fixed blade fighter has withstood the ultimate test of time and has remained a popular design for Camillus. Total amount produced: 806,600
- 5677L99 USMC Raider Stiletto**
 With its 7-inch dagger style polished blade and knurled, die cast zinc "Coke bottle" shaped handle - the USMC Raider Stiletto was also another important fighting knife along with the #5684L77. "This knife is the rarest and most valuable model made by Camillus" states Camillus' historian, Tom Williams. It was patterned after the famous Fairbairn-Sykes dagger, a tool known for effective "sentry removal." Camillus basically modified the Fairbairn-Sykes design to make it more user friendly such as making the handle oval shaped as opposed to the Fairbairn's round handle - which tended to have an effect on the user's grip. In total, about 15,000 pieces were made, and a small percentage of that were made with Parkerized blades (model 5677L19). The coated ones were shipped off to the Canadian Airborne, and are the versions that are fetching most value out on the collector market today. Total amount produced: 14, 370.
- 5682L75 M3 Trench Knife**
 The M3 Trench Knife's slender blade design permitted it to be used as both a tool and weapon. Constructed very similar to the Marine Combat with a 6 ¾ inch Parkerized blade with sharpened false edge, stacked leather washer handle, and accented with a steel guard and pommel. This was also a popular model during this time period. Total amount produced: 402, 909.

In appreciation of Camillus' stout support to producing products in direct support of the war efforts for both World War I and II, the company was awarded the prestigious Army and Navy "E" Award. Basically, the award itself was a flag with the words "Army" and "Navy" on it, along with an "E" in the middle surrounded by a decorative wreath. In a letter dated July 24, 1943 to the people of Camillus Cutlery Company from Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson, Patterson summarizes this prestigious award:

This award symbolizes your country's appreciation of the achievement



of every man and woman in the Camillus Cutlery Company. It consists of a flag to be flown above your plant and a lapel pin which each of you may wear as a sign of distinguished service to your country.

Camillus proudly accepted this award not once, but a total of three times (in addition to 1943, they were bestowed on March 4, 1944 and October 21, 1944). The Army and Navy "E" awards were certainly a high point in the company's history, knowing they have helped our forces and allies succeed in the heat of the battle. Even to this day, the Army and Navy "E" awards remain shining moments in Camillus' rich history.

POST WAR PRODUCTION ESCALATES

More new products were introduced to the market under both the Camillus and Camco® banners. The Camco line consisted of traditional pattern pocket knives such as senator pen knives, barlows, and a corkscrew knife. The new Camillus brand pieces included "character knives" aimed at the youth of America. Back during that time, about every youngster had a pocket knife, and these character tie-in knives were a great vehicle to use to introduce the world of knives to youngsters. Such childhood icons like The Lone Ranger, Dick Tracy, Davey Crockett, and Daniel Boone graced the handles of these novelty knives. These knives offered much more than just a cutting tool, as the Dick Tracy knife illustrates. It had a clip point blade, built-in "crime fighting" whistle, and a magnifying glass that all unfolded out of the handle that sported an illustration of Dick Tracy himself. Add to that, the handle also glowed in the dark too! This was the perfect tool for aspiring detectives to emulate their favorite crime fighter. In a way, these character knives can be seen in the same light as the toys today that are released to tie in with popular flicks aimed at the youth. Speaking of youth, the young men who went bravely into the Vietnam war probably owned some of Camillus' knives when they were younger. During the Vietnam War, Camillus again produced knives for the armed forces. To the enlisted men, being issued a Camillus knife to assist in their armed service is like being reunited with an old friend.

THE VIETNAM WAR

Some of the knives that Camillus manufactured during this time period were the #S1760 four blade utility knife, the #5733 5" Pilot Survival Knife, and the now legendary #5684 USMC Marine Combat fixed blade. The Marine Combat's blade measures 7 inches overall, providing the knife with the capabilities of handling utility, survival, and close quarters combat equally well. The stacked leather washer handle is grooved and contoured for a comfortable and secure grip. The round pommel of the Marine Combat allowed for light hammering duties and possibly as a blunt-strike weapon. Closely resembling the Marine Combat #5684, the Pilot Survival Knife is like a scaled down version of the Marine Combat, but with sawteeth ground onto the blade spine. This compact but powerful cutting tool easily stowed in the cockpit of a fighter and the sawteeth permitted the pilot to cut his way out of a downed aircraft cockpit. Camillus also produced the MC-1 Paratrooper's Knife, a quick deploying switchblade with an orange handle. Finally, the S1760 four bladed utility knife provided both convenience and utility out in the field, with its can opener,



flathead screwdriver/bottle opener, punch, and spear point blade. The rugged all-metal construction withstood heavy usage and a shackle enabled the knife to easily be within reach with the use of a lanyard. Successfully, Camillus again outfitted the armed forces with the necessary blade ware needed to conduct a battle campaign.

HERE THEY GROW AGAIN!

Following Vietnam, Camillus added more new pieces to their already diverse product offerings. 1975 saw the debut of the American Wildlife® collector series knives, 4 in total that expanded to 18 models. These knives honored some of nature's most captivating wildlife - bull moose, mountain sheep, and pronghorn antelope. Other fresh new designs during this time included the Lok-Bak, Lok-Rancher, and Cam-Lock. The latter two designs employed a sliding button lock to hold the blade in the open position. The Lok-Rancher was also quite unique in that it was a multi-blade stockman pattern whose main clip point blade worked off of this lock. Today, Camillus produces an impressive array of pocketknife patterns that vary with handle materials and patterns.

In 1991, the cutlery giant grew even more with the acquisition of the Western® Cutlery Company. Originally located in Boulder, Colorado, Western has been manufacturing knives since 1896. Almost in existence as long as Camillus Cutlery, Western shares the same vision to mass producing quality cutlery. Today, the Western line includes such pieces as their brawny Bowie knife, Kraton® handled fillet knives, and a full line of leather handled fixed blade hunters. The two companies are a perfect match!

Aside from manufacturing sporting cutlery and pocketknives, Camillus also offers a full line of knives that are geared towards those who use knives regularly on the job. With the Dura-Tool line, electricians, gardeners, flooring specialists, and handymen can have an inexpensive, well made cutting tool. One such model from the Dura Tool line is the #27B Electrician Knife. With a spear point 440A stainless blade and a locking screwdriver/wire stripper combo blade, this knife will handle wire stripping and general cutting tasks that go along with the job. A riveted metal shackle provides a secure attachment to a lanyard providing ease of access and security against accidental dropping and loss. The Dura-Tool line is no frills, all business work knives.

In 1947, Camillus began to manufacture a full line of official folding knives for the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), which they continue to do so today. An example of such a knife in this line is the BSA068 Woodsman Double Bladed Lockback. One of the largest knives of the BSA offerings at 5 inches closed, this brawny folding companion features a stainless clip point blade and a wood saw in a patented double lockback design. The handles are of jugged brown Delrin® and affixed to one side is a nickel silver BSA fleur-de-lis shield. The blades have a special BSA commemorative etching. With a knife like the



BSA068 Woodsman Double Bladed Lockback any scout would be proud to have this along on his next camping expedition. Within this special series, the BSA chose to honor the late great artist, Norman Rockwell. The BSA064 Commemorative Norman Rockwell Limited Edition multi-blade folder featured a Norman Rockwell scene on one side of the handle, and on the other was the Boy Scout Oath. Every year, the BSA selects a Norman Rockwell print to be featured on the BSA064. This particular BSA knife is a limited edition. Working in harmony - Norman

Rockwell, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Camillus Cutlery Company - together, teaching the virtues of life in America.

PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT: MODERN CAMILLUS OFFERINGS

CQB-1 TERZUOLA DESIGN

For the die-hard tactical fixed blade fans out there, Camillus has tapped the expertise of premiere custom maker Robert Terzuola to bring out the CQB-1 Special Ops fixed blade fighter. Its 5 ¾ inch, 5/32 inch thick 0170-6C carbon tool steel drop point blade has a black epoxy coating for retardation of glare and corrosion protection.. The handle is of rugged canvas micarta and the CQB-1 Special Ops is shipped with a Kydex lined, Propex® nylon sheath. This certainly is a no-nonsense fighter! This is probably the best made tactical fixed blade Camillus has manufactured to date.

BECKER KNIFE & TOOL

In 1999, the Camillus family grew again with the addition of the Becker Knife & Tool line. For those who recall a few years back, BK&T produced very stout field grade fixed blades with such names and the Brute, Machax, Companion, and the Jerry Fisk Magnum Camp Knife. They even added the Patrol Machete - a 14 inch recurved machete for serious work, and the Combat/Utility 7, a USMC Marine Combat inspired design equally at home for armed forces as it is on the camp site. Camillus manufactures all BK&T knives using proprietary 0170-6C high carbon tool steel blades (which will be black epoxy coated to ward off corrosion) and GV6H molded scales. Kydex carry rigs custom fabricated by Edge Works will be included with each knife for maximum carry flexibility (for the exception of the Combat/Utility 7 which has a Propex® nylon sheath with Kydex liner). All the knives in the Becker line are very well made and are strong as an ox. For fans of heavy use fixed blades, there is something in the Becker Knife & Tool line for everyone.

SIMONICH TALON AND MINI TALON

Clancy, Montana based custom knifemaker Rob Simonich is collaborating with Camillus on a production version of his famous Cetan (chay-TAHN) utility fixed blade, dubbed the Talon. In addition to filling his custom fixed blade orders, Simonich is also the exclusive distributor for Talonite®. This means the Talon is the first mass-produced fixed blade to be shod with this revolutionary blade material, which has garnered rave reviews in the custom knife market. There is also the Mini-Talon neck knife, a scaled down version of its bigger brother for those who prefer small fixed blades. Like the BK&T products, the Talon and



Mini Talon come with a Kydex carry rig.

DARREL RALPH DESIGNS

When it comes to custom folders, Darrel Ralph is a name in which most everyone recognizes off the bat. His designs combine art with function into one stylish piece. Ralph's keen eye for merging form with function caught the attention of Camillus and currently they offer three of his designs for public consumption. The CUDA ArcLite is a skeletonized neck knife made from 420HC. Its Kydex sheath permits the knife to be carried discreetly underneath clothing yet remaining easily accessible. The CUDA EDC (Every Day Carry) folder is a compact lockblade folder that lives up to its name in being a comfortable every day carry (as its name suggests) piece. There is a choice of 154CM stainless steel or Talonite® for the blade material. A rock solid integral bar lock keeps the blade open during hard use. For those who like livin' large, the CUDA Maxx 5.5 is your knife! This is a huge folder, with a 5 ½" D2 steel clip point blade and a coffin shaped anodized titanium handle. Like the EDC, the CUDA Maxx 5.5 has an integral lock mechanism.

JERRY FISK'S OVB BOWIE

ABS Master Smith and National Living Treasure Jerry Fisk was contacted by Camillus to collaborate on what is perhaps the finest production bowie knife on the market today. This bowie is the first in Camillus' revived OVB (Our Very Best) brand. Look for more traditional knives carrying on the OVB banner in the future. Getting back to the bowie, Camillus chose their 0170-6C carbon tool steel for the blade and beautiful stabilized fiddleback maple for the handle. Unfortunately, with prices around and over \$1000 and multi-year wait times, this will be as close to owning a genuine custom Jerry Fisk knife as many folks will get. Working together, Camillus' skilled craftsmen and Jerry Fisk have brought forth a truly awesome production knife, available in a limited production of 500 numbered pieces. Each OVB bowie will have a zippered storage case and a sewn leather sheath.

IN CONCLUSION

The Camillus Cutlery Company is an all-American company with humble beginnings. From its birth in a one-story building and 20 employees, it has expanded today to a company with 6 buildings filled with nearly 200 employees and a host of state of the art manufacturing equipment. Though the passage of time has brought forth changes in production techniques and the welcome addition of hi-tech manufacturing equipment, the commitment is still the same - to produce the best possible knives that anyone will be proud to own and use. Located on the same site since its inception on the banks of the Nine Mile Creek, Camillus Cutlery Company possesses a rich history that envelops manufacturing excellence throughout the years - providing quality cutlery for home, farm, hunting/fishing, and our armed forces. And Camillus still exhibits the same commitment and passion for making knives as they did back in 1876, under the guidance of company president James W. Furgal. Says Furgal, "At Camillus we strive daily to make the very best knives possible. Our rich heritage of knifemaking here at 'The Cutlery', and our advancements in technology and production have blended together to provide the end-user with what we feel is a product that is an exceptional value and worthy of passing down through the generations". Camillus' skilled craftsmen

produce more than 2 million knives annually, an impressive amount for any company. Speaking of the dedicated men and women that make up Camillus Cutlery, some of them are third and fourth generation employees, carrying on the work of their ancestors. Real dedication.

To this day, Camillus still remains the leading private label knife manufacturer. Over 20 different private label brands are produced along with the Camillus and Western products. Camillus has produced innovative products throughout their existence and are forging ahead into the new millennium with knives like the Cyber Knife, CUDA folder, and the CQB-1, with many more to come! Camillus' reputation has withstood the test of time. As one can see, Camillus is truly a "Quiet Giant of Knifedom".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Tom Williams, Camillus Cutlery Company's historian for his kind assistance in providing all the historical information needed for putting together this article. Between studying the information that was received and the numerous emails we exchanged, I have developed an interest in learning more about old military knives. My gratitude also goes out to Will Fennell, Camillus' Product Manager, for providing samples for the accompanying scans and information regarding current and forthcoming production items. During this process of learning the rich history of America's oldest knife manufacturer, I have gained a new-found respect and admiration for the Camillus Cutlery Company.

© 2002 Dexter Ewing