

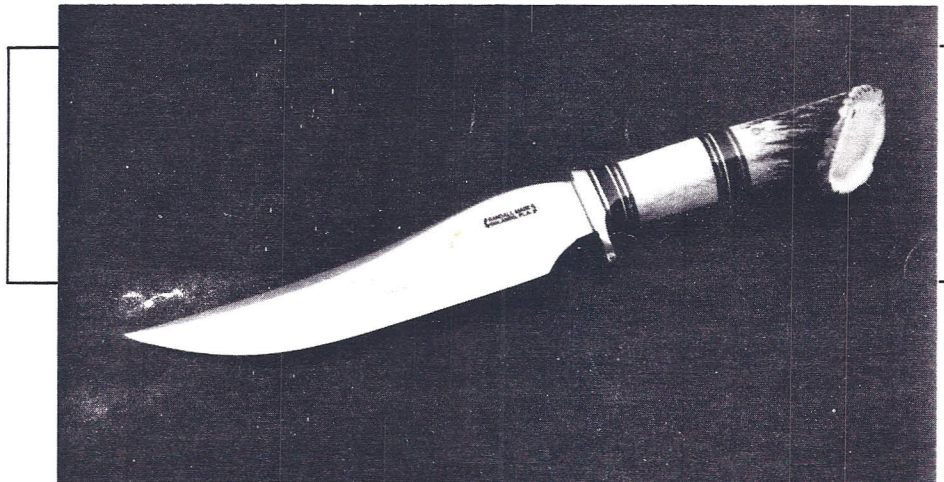
Randall's First Half Century

by Jim Williamson

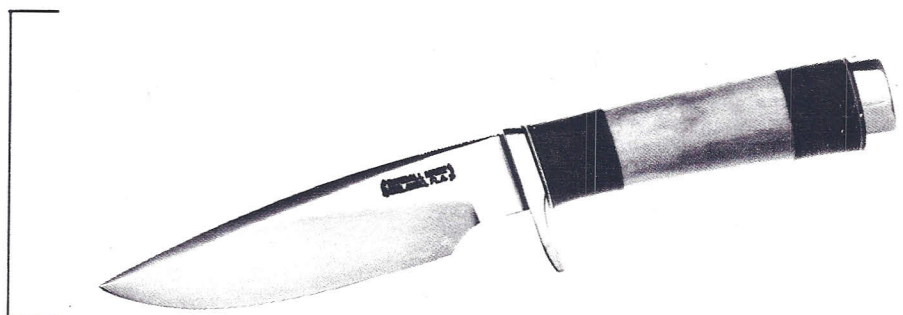
According to anthropologists, the first man-made tools of which we have hard evidence are knives of sorts. These hand-axes and "pebble tools" provided sharp edges for many centuries and were, of course, hand-made. By the early 20th century, the age old tradition of hand craftsmanship was rapidly disappearing from cutlery production. Factories replaced blacksmiths, and even such quality-minded firms as I*XL weren't taking the time they once had with each knife. It seemed as if hand work, let alone custom orders, was a fading memory of a bygone era.

Enter W.D. Randall, Jr., scion of a prominent Southern family whose wealth came from such enterprises as a paper mill, orange groves, and cattle. The Randalls escaped Florida's humid summers at a vacation home on Walloon Lake, MI. One afternoon, young W.D. (Walter Doane) chanced upon a fellow scraping the keel of a boat with a handmade knife of better quality than Randall felt was suited to the use. Some money changed hands, and Randall went off to admire his new knife.

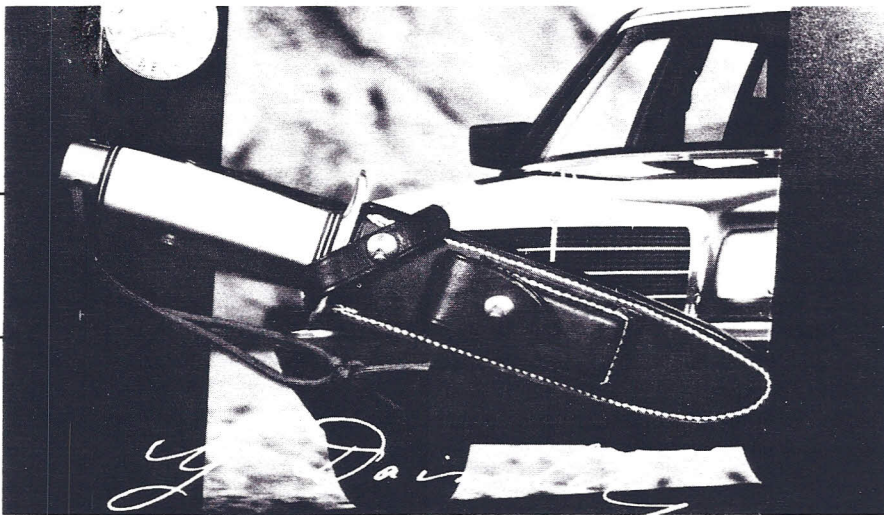
Made by William Scagel, a reclusive artisan whose knives now command a premium well beyond the price paid by Randall, the knife projected a quality not seen in factory knives. The Scagel intrigued Randall enough so he set up a forge back in Florida, and launched a secondary career selling knives that he made. By 1938, the enterprise was in full swing, and has since inspired an international renaissance in handcrafted cutlery. And Randall knives have themselves been sold in more countries than today's average high school senior can name. They are the only custom knives known to



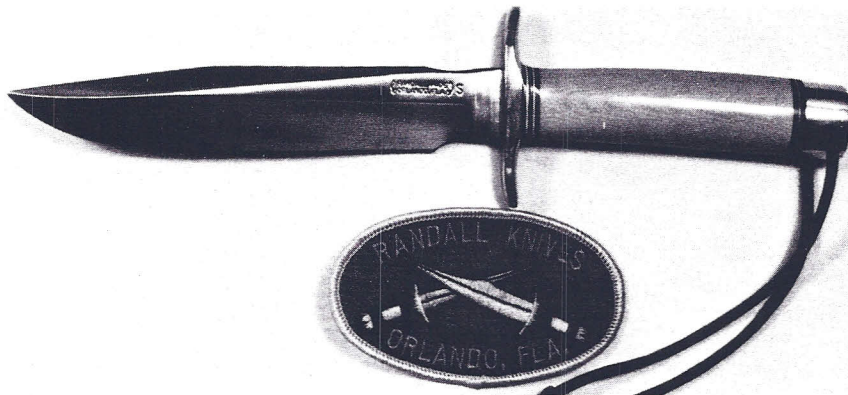
Randall's 50th Year Knife looks like a vintage version of the Model 3 Hunter. The blade is marked 1938-1988. The crown stag handle is secured with the old style pin. (Randall)



Randall's latest is the Model 25, with a five-inch drop-point blade. This one harks back to early days with a handle of leather and stag. (Weyer photo)



As with Mercedes-Benz motorcars, Randall knives appeal to those seeking status through their possessions, but both products gained their enviable reputations through superior performance. They attract many customers on the basis of this functional excellence. (Jim Williamson photo)



Randall Model I with the full color patch sold in the catalog. This knife has several options, including nickel silver hilt, stainless blade, wrist thong, white Micarta handle, and duralumin butt cap. The butt cap is standard on leather handles. (Jim Williamson)



Randall's catalog is now in its 27th printing. The cover features the Model 1. The knife shown is the standard Model 7 Fisherman-Hunter, with leather handle and brass hilt. The catalog is one of the best introductions available to handmade knives. (Jim Williamson photo)

many sportsmen who are not what you would call knife enthusiasts. Randall knives have been copied almost as much as American computers.

By 1942, the U.S. had been drawn into the most widespread conflict the world has yet seen, and "Bo" Randall was a pilot in the Civil Air Patrol. Feeling the need for a survival knife on what amounted to submarine-spotting expeditions, Randall made up a version of his Model 4 hunting knife with the blade sharpened on top as well as the regular edge. "It was a wicked thing," he recalls, but was a quick adaptation of a hunting pattern for his own use. It was never meant as a real fighting knife. The stage was set for a new actor to make a brief, but momentous, appearance.

Enter Lt. Zacharias, an airborne infantry officer. Having seen or heard of Randall's hunting knives, he called at the shop to ask for something better adapted to the demands of war. He wanted a Bowie, but Randall hadn't heard of the celebrated Texican colonel or his fearsome "Iron Mistress," as novelist Paul Wellman later dubbed the knife.

No matter: when they had finished designing their All Purpose Fighting Knife, it was essentially a refined, compact Bowie. Randall fears that Zacharias didn't survive the war, or he would have been in touch. The knife lives on. A standby of discriminating soldiers, it has seen service from the frigid bunkers of Korea to the steamy Mekong Delta. The very collectable SOG knife recently reproduced by several companies is a pretty obvious descendant of the Model I.

Close on the heels of the Model I came (naturally enough) Model II. A stouter version of the British commando knife, it graphically illustrates how little knife design has changed in 5,000 years. When Howard Carter peered into the tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen, the "wonderful things" he saw included a brace of daggers. One of them looks remarkably like the Randall Model 2 Fighting Stiletto, with the same "downstep" at the ricasso of its iron blade.

The Models I and II have found their way into the possession of some rather visible people. Generals Westmoreland, LeMay, Gavin and Dawkins, Admiral Halsey, Maj. Richard Bong (the P-38 ace) and a host of lesser known Allied troops have used them. Air Corps Captain Ronald Reagan ordered several, sometimes specifying alligator sheaths. Later, as President, Reagan wrote that he still had a Randall knife or two and continued to admire the workmanship that first attracted him over 40 years ago. One officer in the field wrote to Randall that his knife had seen use on a considerable number

of the 364 enemy that he was personally credited with killing. Another sent a notarized letter that might be a bit too graphic for some readers. It said essentially that the Randall knife performed quite satisfactorily in the South Pacific.

The Korean "police action" produced two new Randall designs that were developed in collaboration with the Marine Corps Equipment Board. The Models 14 and 15 were meant as prototypes for new Marine knives which would be stout and could be produced at reasonable cost. Both were heavier versions of the Model I, with patented, channeled handles with unusually heavy tangs. The Model 14 Attack has a 7½" blade; the Model 15 Airman has a blade two inches shorter. The officers assigned to the project were unfortunately transferred to other duties, and the project never went any further at the official level. However, the new models were placed in the catalog, and became very popular during the Vietnamese conflict with troops who were allowed to provide their own knives. Gary Randall, son of the founder, says today that the Models I and 14 are consistently the company's best sellers. A modified Model 14 became the Diver's Knife, Model 16. It sells well to SCUBA enthusiasts, but also attracts soldiers who admire its practical, strong design.

In 1963, Capt. George Ingraham of the 94th Medical Detachment in Vietnam requested a new form of Model 14. He wanted the handle to be a piece of stainless steel tubing, which could be used to store pills, hooks and fishline. The saw teeth that went atop the blade easily cut the metal skin of a downed helicopter. His knife became Model 18, and probably inspired the recent interest in similar survival knives from other makers.

Although the military models have perhaps done the most to spread their fame, "Bo" and Gary Randall haven't neglected the sportsman. After all, the first sales were of hunting knives.

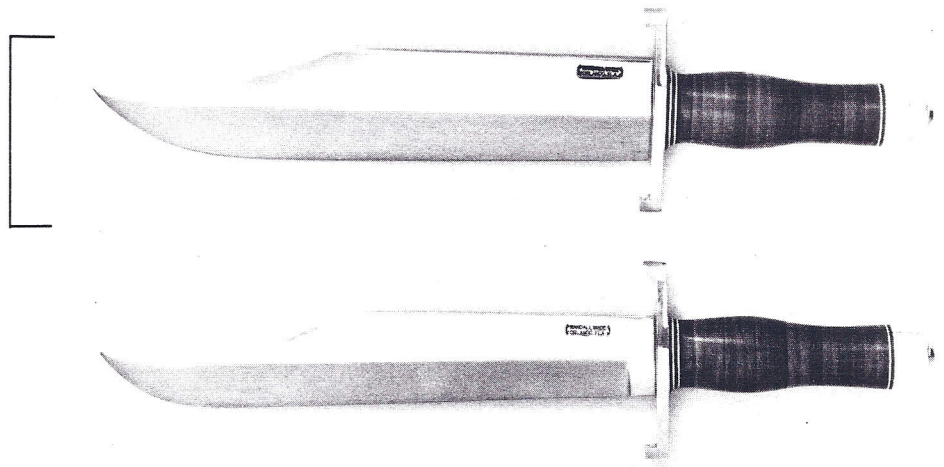
The Model 3 Hunter is the present form of a very early Randall design that bore considerable resemblance to the Scagel knives that inspired it. It comes with blade lengths from five to seven inches. The noted outdoor writer and knife authority B.R. Hughes has a Model 3 with seven-inch blade. He prefers smaller knives for deer hunting, but says that the long Model 3 makes a fine camp knife. *Outdoor Life* readers may recall the "Deer in a Dishpan" article published many years ago. In it, famed nature photographer L.L. Rue proved that the long Model 3 worked quite well for butchering venison. Different strokes for different folks. Experience with a six-inch Model 3 convinced this writer that shorter blades are handier for skinning bunnies and

squirrels, but the Model 3 made a great all-around outdoors knife. It's heavy enough that a rap on the noggin from the spine of the knife will whisk a good sized trout or walleye away to heavenly visions of mayflies and minnows.

Nevertheless, many will be better served by the Model 7 Fisher-Hunter, the Model 3's little brother. It comes with 4½ or five-inch blade of 3/16th's-inch stock. (The Model 3 has the same quarter-inch blade thickness of the combat knives.)

choice of wilderness author Bradford Angier.

Most other selections in the catalog are also sporting models. These include the Model 11, perhaps the first modern custom knife with a "dropped" point. It was initially made in the early '50's for an Alaskan guide who wanted to avoid damaging valuable hides with his knife point. The newest Randall, Model 25, resembles a Model 11 that's been on a diet. Too new to be included in the present brochure, it looks like a very practical knife. Maybe to celebrate his 50th



Randall's Model 14 was a favorite in the Vietnam war years. The writer's knife is shown with mementos of Strategic Air Command from the period. (Williamson)

The best general outdoors choice in the line just could be the Model 5 Camp and Trail Knife. It's especially handy in the five-inch blade, but comes with blades to eight inches. Sort of a civilianized Model I, it lacks the top quillon on the hilt, and the false edge isn't normally sharpened.

A Model 5 is in the Harvard museum, and it is widely favored by boaters and yachtsmen. One was worn by reptile authority Ross Allen in many of his appearances, and the Model 5 is also the

year, Randall is showing Model 25s with combination leather and stag handles. These harken back to the early days.

Need an exquisite carving knife, maybe with a fork to match? What about a kitchen utility design also suited for filleting bluefish or stripers? See Models 6 and 10.

Over the years, most of the original patterns have been slicked up a little. The finger cutout in front of the ricasso tends to be less pronounced than it was. Pins that held the fancier handles in place were superceded



Two versions in the lineup of Bowies. All the large Bowies are designated as subtypes of Model 12. These are a bit ponderous for field use, but excite collectors. (Randall photo)

by modern epoxy glues. The dome nut that secured pommels is now usually cut off and the pommel polished. Model 14 (and similar) handles no longer get bobbed off short, with the end of the tang protruding for a hole to attach a wrist thong. The newer handles are Micarta, too, in lieu of the green Tenite used on early examples. Leather wrist thongs are now nylon, which is lighter than leather and more resistant to jungle rot.

There are enough options in the catalog to

confuse a computer, but the standard Randall knife is supplied, for the most part, with a leather handle and brass hilt. A duralumin butt cap (pommel) is also usual. Blades are of 01 Uddeholm tool steel, imported from Sweden. 440B stainless steel is a popular extra cost option. Works better in the forge and has a bit more carbon than the more common 440C, they say.

Collectors will like the heavy series of Model 12 Bowies. Another favorite is the

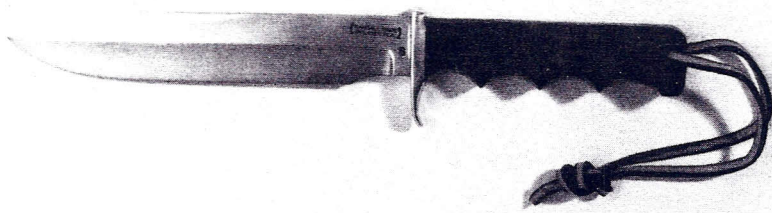
Model 17 Astro, the knife that equipped the Project Mercury astronauts and was the first knife in space, unless the Soviets know something they're not telling. Major Gordon Cooper assisted Randall in modifying the Model 15 Airman into the Astro, and the catalog has a photo of Bo and Gary with the same knife that Major Cooper carried on his monumental 22 orbit mission. It's not widely known, but Randall donated the knives to the original astronauts, and they thought so highly of the Florida shop's work that it got considerable mention in their book, *We Seven*.

Astronauts weren't the only prominent users of Randall's knives, of course. King Faisal II of Iraq ordered a gorgeous set, and novelist James Jones ordered "one of everything" when his books hit bestseller status. Venom-researcher William Haast of the Miami Serpentarium got a Randall before an African trip. He had seen one on fellow reptile authority Ross Allen's hip. Haast, incidentally, has survived bites from both a king cobra and what one writer called a "blue" krait (probably *Bungarus caeruleus*).

The late Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond, owned a Randall. It would be interesting to know whether it was the inspiration for the American knife described as an excellent weapon in *From Russia, With Love*. Real life sky-spy Francis Gary Powers had a Model 8 Trout and Bird Knife with him when his U-2 was downed over the Soviet Union in May, 1960. Pictures of it, along with the rest of Powers' escape kit were in many major magazines of the time.

Numerous magazine articles have been published on the Florida shop, and its knives have appeared in several movies and in such comic strips as "Buzz Sawyer," "Rick O'Shay," and "Mark Trail." — all of whose artists own Randall products.

Where once Randall was the only custom knifemaker known to the sporting public, there are now hundreds struggling to fill orders. Quite a few are well known, too. All can thank the publicity given Randall over the years for the increasing awareness of expensive handmade knives. Bo and Gary have shown the way and set the standard that spawned a new art. They richly deserve the acclaim that has accompanied their first 50 years, and they have a couple of new knives to celebrate the anniversary. It appears that one will be available only during 1988. For a catalog, send a dollar to Randall Made Knives, P.O. Box 1988, Orlando, FL 32802. And if you get to the Knifemakers' Guild Show in Orlando this summer, drop by the shop on Orange Blossom Trail. For practical purposes, that's where the modern custom knife movement began. There's a lot of history in that little building!



The Model 16 Diver's Knife. This is an older example with a leather thong. The new ones are water-resistant nylon. The sheath for this model is wax-impregnated. (Randall photo)

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February 11, 1944

Mr. W. D. Randall, Jr.
P. O. Box #1988
Orlando, Florida

Dear Mr. Randall:

Your knife was received and is everything I had hoped for. The only way I can assure you of that is to tell you that I have become your personal representative, and I hereby submit two more orders, one for the seven inch blade with the name RR on the blade, and the other, the six inch commando type, with no name on the blade, both of these with alligator sheaths if possible. You can address them to me C.O.D.

Again, my thanks and sincere best wishes,

Ronald Reagan
RONALD REAGAN
Captain, Air Corps

RR/be

P.S. hope you dont mind my shaving off

Randall gets quite a few letters from customers. Here's one from a fellow whose name readers may recognize. (Jim Williamson photo of Randall photocopy)