

MILITARY BLADES

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Vietnam War SOG Knives

In the history of the U.S. military, most issue knives were designed for particular functions, some were intended for specialized units, and a few were created for specific missions or operations. An unusual example of the latter type was the SOG knife. This knife is now well known to collectors, although its existence was secret at the time of its original issue.

SOG was an acronym for the Studies and Observation Group. On January 24, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson approved OPLAN 34A, authorizing creation of this intelligence gathering group. The primary mission of SOG was to provide undeniable proof of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) aggression in the region, particularly in South Vietnam. President Johnson would use this evidence to muster political support for the war effort, both at home and among allies.

SOG was a joint operation among the Republic of Vietnam Special Forces, MACV (U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), and the civilian CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). The initial plan was for the South Vietnamese to supply the intelligence gathering element, for MACV to supply instructors, training sites, and equipment, and for the CIA to provide funds and training assistance. In addition to intelligence gathering, SOG was further designated a Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force that might draw upon all branches of the U.S. armed forces, as well as civilian agencies, for operations in the field. SOG was to be the largest clandestine unit since the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) of World War II.

The operational area of SOG was essentially the whole Southeast Asia region. It included Yunnan, Kwangsi, and Kwangtung provinces in southern China, plus Hainan Island. It included Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. And it included both North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

SOG's first commander, known as "Chief SOG," was U.S. Army Special Forces Colonel Clyde R. Russell. Col. Russell divided SOG into five operational elements. Operation 31 was the Maritime branch, which included the newly formed Navy SEALs. Operation 32 was the Air Branch. Operation 33 was the Psychological Operations branch. Operation 34 was the Agent branch, for agents to be inserted into North Vietnam and Laos. And Operation 35 was the Recon branch, in which American personnel provided behind the lines reconnaissance. Today the Recon branch is the operation of SOG most familiar to the public.

The SOG Knives

As with the earlier OSS, most SOG operations were to be conducted either behind enemy lines, or in hostile though officially non-belligerent countries. For this reason SOG planners sought out

weapons and equipment that were non-standard and "sterile" (unmarked and non-attributable). Thus if SOG personnel or equipment were to be captured, the U.S. could plausibly deny any association with them.

The SOG knife was acquired with this "plausible deniability" in mind, much as the OSS had acquired sterile combat and special-purpose knives during World War II. Of course the only equipment that is truly deniable is items that are sold commercially all over the world, such as Zodiac boats, Walther pistols, or Swiss Army knives. Unusual, unmarked, military style knives might as well have "SPY" stamped on them in big gold letters.

The SOG knife was designed specifically for the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) operating within the Studies and Observation Group. The knife was designed by Conrad B. (Ben) Baker of CISO (the Counter-Insurgency Support Office). Baker had been appointed Deputy Chief of CISO in June 1963. He worked with Army Special Forces personnel in refining and testing the design of the knife. Ben Baker recounted this story in an article he wrote in the Fall 1991 issue of Fighting Knives magazine.

Baker worked up the design of the SOG blade from 1/4 inch steel, and carved prototype handles from pieces of broomstick. The principal tester of the prototypes was Master Sergeant (ret.) Ross Bailey. Baker's inspiration for using stacked leather washer handles on the SOG knives was his experience with a Marble's skinning knife that had served him well for many years.

Much of the practical field testing was done on dead hogs in a commercial slaughterhouse. This experience prompted the addition of finger grooves to the handles. It also inspired the combination of a long finger-grooved ricasso with a contoured double-guard. These features allowed a firm grasp on the knife, when withdrawing the blade after a deep stab.

7-inch Blade

The final specification was approved by SOG / 5th Group on June 6, 1964. CISO sent drawings to contractors in Japan for prototypes to be made. Japan Sword Company's prototypes were rejected due to poor steel quality, although this firm later made commercial versions of the knife.

Yogi Shokai was the Japanese manufacturer selected to manufacture the SOG knives. Baker worked with Mr. Kei Tanaka, Vice President of Shokai, supervising the production phase. The first knives ordered were 1,300 of the Recon 7-inch blade models with blued blades. Blade steel was tested by Nichimen Corporation in Japan. Poor steel was the only consideration for rejecting a knife. This is why there is considerable variation in SOG knife guards, ricassos, spine grinds, and so on. The steel selected was SKS-3.

6-inch Blade

The first 6-inch blade SOG-type knives were ordered in October 1966. This order was for 1,200 sterile blades with black sheaths & whetstones at \$8.40 each. Some of these knives were later plated and engraved for presentation purpose. Although usually referred to as a SOG knife, this 6-inch version was strictly a 5th Special Forces knife, not procured through SOG.

A second batch of 6-inch knives was ordered in March 1967. These were serial numbered 1 to 3700. Their official designation was "Knife, indigenous, hunting, 6", w/Black Sheath and Whetstone". "Indigenous" was a code word that referred to sterile items. This batch was delivered in November 1967.

Also in 1967 the 5th Special Forces Mess Association ordered 1,700 presentation knives, etched with the Special Forces Crest and "5th Special Forces Group (Abn.)/ Vietnam." CISO assisted in the acquisition of these knives but they were paid for by the 5th's Mess Association. These knives were delivered in January 1968.

The final batch of SOG-type knives was ordered by the CISO in 1972, for JCRC (the Joint Casualty Resolution Center) in Thailand. The mission of the JCRC was to undertake raids, find POWs, and search for the remains of allied personnel throughout Southeast Asia.

These were the only SOG-type knives procured through official channels during the Vietnam war. Additional unrecorded quantities were ordered by detachments all over Southeast Asia. Some knives might also have been sold through Post Exchanges, although this has not been confirmed.

SOG was formally ended April 30, 1972. By then all responsibility for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering had been officially turned over to the South Vietnamese government.

The last original SOG knife was presented to Ben Baker on February 1, 1990, in a ceremony at the Yogi Shokai plant in Japan. It was a sterile version inscribed to him.

Variants

Collectors have observed many variations of the SOG and 5th S.F. knives. The original 7-inch Recon models and the first 6-inch knives were unmarked, while the second batch of 6-inch knives was serial numbered. The presentation models followed.

The color of blade bluing varied from dark blue-black to "plum." These colors were an artifact of temperature variations in the bluing process. Leather washer handles were made both with and without spacers. The guards of the original models were large and rounded, and were made of brass. Some later wartime guards were aluminum or steel. Original guards were not plated by the factory.

Later commercial versions of the SOG knife came from Al Mar Knives, from Murphy, from SOG Specialty Knives, and from several overseas sources. Most are clearly marked as commercial products, but unscrupulous sellers sometimes alter these knives, and then offer them as wartime originals.

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