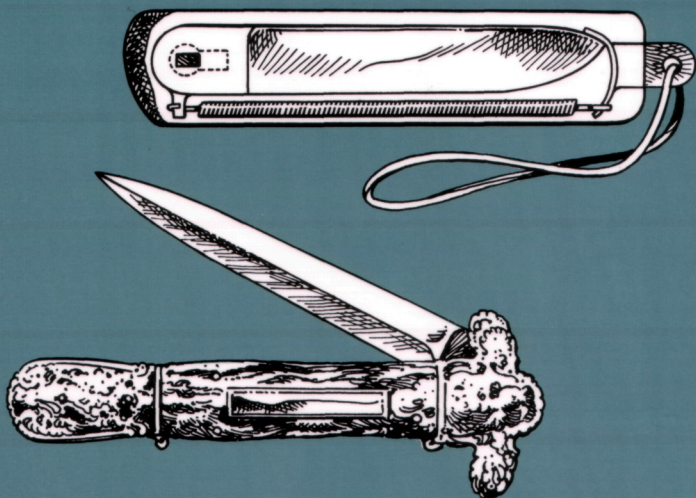


RAGNAR BENSON

SWITCHBLADE



THE ACE OF BLADES

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Switchblade: The Ace of Blades

by Ragnar Benson

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ISBN 0-87364-500-6

Printed in the United States of America

Published by Paladin Press, a division of
Paladin Enterprises, Inc., P.O. Box 1307,
Boulder, Colorado 80306, USA.
(303) 443-7250

Direct inquiries and/or orders to the above address.

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Illustrations by Bill Border.

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Introduction

When we were young, my brothers and I often engaged in a bit of whimsy. We risked nothing but our ideas, and the game often went on for days. What, we liked to speculate, would be the deadliest weapon we could ever hope to own and use?

Perhaps because our scope was limited by the realities of life as farm boys, we did not think it appropriate to include such things as F-4s, aircraft carriers, or tactical nuclear weapons. Besides violating our sense of fair play, these were not, in our minds, weapons we might someday really use, much less own.

Although we searched diligently for other answers, our first choice invariably was a totally silent, totally reliable submachine gun. Close second, we felt, was always a switchblade knife.

At the time, we were too young and inexperienced to realize that the concept of a totally reliable, totally silenced submachine gun was a myth. On the other hand, switchblade knives were real. Each of us carried one. They were sold in general stores off of cards, much like Bic lighters today. We felt that, in an emergency, no better knife existed. Real emergencies test one's tools. In our experience nothing deadlier, nothing more easily concealable existed than a switchblade knife. We were

convinced that a determined assailant, armed with a switchblade knife, could cut our throats ear to ear before we ever knew he was thinking about it.

• • • • •

With desperation born of youthful impatience, I pushed the combine through an especially weedy patch in the soybean field. I thought I might plug the machine with the greasy, green mass of vegetation, and was not disappointed. The engine groaned as the pigweed slid off the mower into the cylinder.

A loud, machine-gun-like noise shook the combine as the main slip clutch disengaged. I slammed the throttle back to idle, leaving the main drive clutch engaged. Sometimes this procedure cleared the machine, but the clutch continued to hammer, although at a greatly reduced rate.

Leaving the engine idle and the clutch engaged, I hopped off the platform intent on pulling the plug on through the beast. The machine was hung up on the main drive from the engine itself.

I grabbed the main drive belt and gave it a hefty tug. My efforts broke loose the slug of weeds in the cylinder, running my gloved left hand into the main pulley ...

Now my hand was plugging the machine.

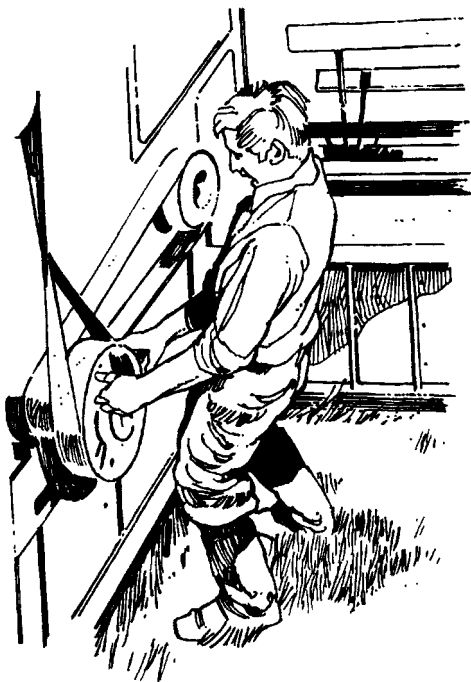
The clutch started ratcheting again, but not because of green weeds. Every time the clutch slipped, the pulley ate a bit further into my hand. If not for the heavy leather glove, I would have already lost four fingers.

Without thinking, I bit my right glove, pulling it off. Instantly my right hand dug into my rear overall pocket where I kept my German Sprenger (switchblade) knife.

Snap.

The knife was instantly open, using just one hand. I slashed at the rubber belt just as the clutch was getting ready to hit bottom a third time. Slowly it stretched and parted, releasing my still-intact hand.

The hand recovered in a day or two, but there still was this price to pay for my foolishness and impatience. A new main drive belt, my brothers reminded me, cost \$78.





It has sometimes occurred to me that we were irrationally enamored with switchblades.

In the fifties, they became the symbol of organization and power projected by street gangs glamorized during the era. Nowadays, these gangs use modern military weapons to duke it out. But when we were younger, switchblade knives were the symbol of allegiance, determination, and commitment of the almost legendary fighting street gangs.



During the fifties, switchblade knives became the symbol of inner city gangs.

Switchblades are very deadly. Unlike guns, there is no easy way to be warned that a man has one in his hand until it is too late. One on one, guns against knives, there is no contest if the gun owner once lets the knife man get close.

But for us, the fascination with switchblades ran the

entire gamut of emotions. They were practical or we wouldn't have continued to bother with all the trouble and expense of carrying them through all our years on the farm. We thought them extremely lethal weapons. That much seems obvious to anyone who has seen one in action, although I have never suffered firsthand at the wrong end of a switchblade.

Unlike other "instant" knives such as paratrooper gravity knives and Filipino butterfly knives, it doesn't take much dexterity or practice to operate a switchblade proficiently. Care and maintenance are more important than handling skills.

Good, solid switchblade knives can be incredible tools in the hands of people determined to use them well. This book is about these remarkable instruments—where they came from, how to use them, where to get them, their history, and the law.

Chapter 1

History

"This beautiful museum-grade coach gun is yours for a mere \$675 cash," the crafty broker explained. He was right; it was a one-of-a-kind in gorgeous condition.

The year was 1962. We still had silver in our coins then. Our dollars were big, round, and hard. Six hundred and seventy five of them was a princely sum.

As the man said, it was a museum-grade gun—made, as I recall, by R. Wilson of London in the Year of Our Lord 1778 (according to the markings). Its "bell" muzzle allowed one to load it while bouncing along in an old overland coach. The weapon looked like the type supposedly carried by the pilgrims.

"If the gun doesn't work, there is always the bayonet," he continued, throwing a long side lever allowing a great bayonet-like spike to rotate to attention from the side of the weapon.

"All this is, is a great, giant switchblade knife disguised as a flintlock muzzleloader," I thought. The blade was almost as long as the diminutive carbine. As a weapon, its greatest disability was the fact that it took fourteen inches of side space to allow the blade to rotate into position. It amazed and intrigued me that a spring almost two hundred years old still worked with such enthusiasm and precision. I almost bought the weapon

for that reason alone.

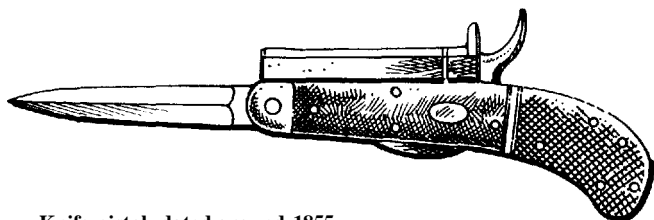
Easily hidden spring-operated knives of one sort or another have been around for hundreds of years. The Romans were reportedly the first makers of folding knives. These were simple affairs, built without springs.

The concept of combining a gun and a switchblade knife did not die easily. Most weapons museums around the world contain examples of flint and cap lock pistols as well as carbines designed to be used with a spring-loaded knife. As late as 1850, at least one American company offered a .22 rimfire single-shot pistol with spring-operated knife. It was nothing more than a curio. New, the price was a dollar or two. Few could be honestly described as offensive weapons; nevertheless, they apparently were rendered illegal by the National Firearms Act of 1934. (Bureaucrats have interpreted the law differently from time to time.)

Yet, because such devices were basically firearms and because selling them even as collector's items was not particularly lucrative, most dealers became cautious about handling them. Classifications from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms have only recently relaxed and clarified the status of these devices, long after they fell from favor even as collector's items.

Mass produced machine-made switchblade knives were first made by the Schrade Company around the turn of the century. The design, with various modifications, was in their line for many years thereafter. The company changed hands and names, but switchblade knives remained in their catalog until external circumstances intervened.

Apparently there was a consistent demand, but not necessarily one that was very large at any given time. Schrade tried various marketing approaches, including



Knife pistol, dated around 1855.

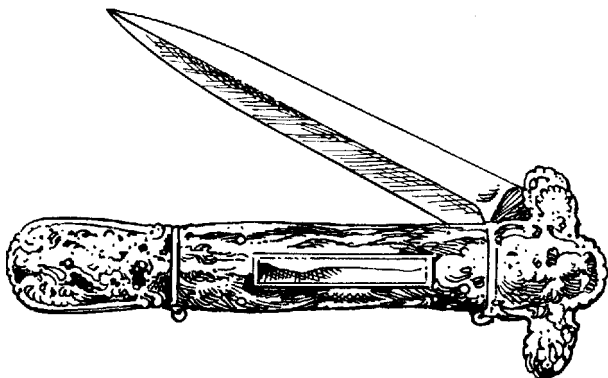
touting the knives as valuable and necessary additions to women's sewing kits, or for those concerned about breaking their fingernails opening a conventional knife. Other advertisements were directed at farmers and outdoorsmen.

While Schrade was the first and foremost maker, other examples of manufacture abound. Case, Kabar, and Camillus all made "Sprengers" (the German term for switchblade) at one time or another. Some of these knives are valuable as collector's items today.

All of these companies produced switchblade knives on contract, showing any brand name the purchaser desired. Even Sears carried them, when it was a rural-oriented, mail order supply company. Now switchblade knives have gone the way of guns, ammunition, and trap sales. Yuppies would, of course, have no interest in these items.

Shrapleigh Hardware Co. of St. Louis, Missouri, using the trademark Diamond Edge, sold literally tens of thousands of switchblade knives around the country. Many were so small and trinkety they only lasted a month or two in actual service. Diamond Edge sales were usually made wholesale to qualified dealers and

distributors. Examples of these knives show up with amazing frequency in cigar boxes full of ancient, insignificant treasures, old tool boxes, top dresser drawers, and other similar places.



1850 Automatic Knife, with handle of stag horn and brass.

Diamond Edge knives are obviously mass produced. They were not built to last even when carried in one's pocket for the occasional cutting of a plug of tobacco. Relative to the number produced, few examples remain, having lived up to their original expectation.

A total of at least 140 U.S. patents have been issued for different types of switchblade knives since 1836. But the United States is not the only country that produced switchblade knives.

As many of the forty thousand people who visit Tijuana, Mexico, each day can attest, switchblade knives are readily available in at least this one foreign

country. The knives are generally sloppy, with ill-fitting, cheap components, plastic handles, and soft locking pins. However, buyers may be surprised to learn that the true origin of many of these knives is the Rizzuto Estileto Company of Milano, Italy. Some knives are made in Mexico but, like the many T-shirts, plastic statues, and other trinkets, close examination will generally reveal that many are imported from some other place.

Germany, Sweden, and Thailand also produce switchblades in commercial quantities. Quality German switchblades are currently the standard of comparison. German Sprengers customarily have polished wood, horn, or bone handles. The parts are sturdy, well-fitted, polished, and generally well made. Virtually every German knife store has at least one or two Sprengers on display.

One very rarely sees switchblade knives in the United Kingdom. Perhaps because they are illegal or because the English feel the same way about switchblades as they do about automatic and pump shotguns, they are few and far between. I have never been able to determine by simply looking if these knives were made in the United States or imported from another country. Cutlery store clerks don't seem to know nor do they have consistent information.

European knives, as well as some of the very cheap Mexican varieties, sometimes have handguards designed to fold unobtrusively against the handle when closed. Others have diminutive blade guards built into the knife handle. Some blade-release mechanisms are built into the blade guards.

Interest in switchblades in Europe is about as it was in America twenty years ago. Some people like and buy

them, but the demand cannot be characterized as being especially strong. American interest in switchblades came to a screeching halt on August 12, 1958, when new federal laws went into effect. Congress, in all its wisdom, prohibited the "manufacture or distribution of any knife having a blade that opens automatically by pushing a button."

Interest in switchblade knives has revived recently. But for twenty years, this style of weapon slipped into obscurity simply because it did not have a constituency! A constituency in this case would have been a reasonably alert, reasonably articulate band of informed owners who would have been willing and able to call or write their congressmen about the law. Knife manufacturers saw switchblades as a minor item contributing only marginally to their bottom line. Most did not even bother to testify at the hearings pertaining to the bill. Competitors of Schrade, the largest switchblade manufacturer, are reported to have lobbied *for* the bill in hopes that making switchblades illegal would weaken Schrade's position in the market.

Renewed interest has occurred for several reasons. A small but significant number of potential users have rediscovered that switchblades are practical and fascinating, and very good as outdoorsmen or survivalist knives. This interest has been heightened by the general realization that federal laws pertaining to switchblades are probably not constitutional. Now it is the switchblade *laws* that don't have a constituency.

It appears that only one case involving the Federal Switchblade Act of 1958 has ever gone to court. The merits of that case have little to do with private ownership and are not significant. Thinly spread law enforcement people have not elected to take relatively minor

switchblade cases before a judge.

Even the passage of the law is clouded with questions when viewed from a perspective of thirty years. Most Americans remember or have heard of Estes Kefauver, the coonskin-capped senator from Tennessee. Good ole Estes was the original sponsor of a 1957 bill prohibiting switchblades.

Popular interest in "doing something about switchblades" probably goes back to a 1950 article in *Women's Home Companion* magazine. In our current age we tend to look with disinterested humor at such journals, but at the time the magazine swung a pretty big stick. The magazine articulated and influenced public opinion against the large, often militant youth gangs that operated in our larger cities. The article stated that switchblades were being used with great frequency by our children to kill each other in the streets. These cruel instruments, the author noted, should be made illegal, thus saving many children's lives.

Logically, one could have argued that, without switchblades, gang members would turn to butcher knives, hunting knives, or even sharpened pieces of steel. As it was, they actually turned to shotguns, rifles, pistols, and MAC-10's.

Inanimate objects have little influence on human behavior. Social behavior continued to deteriorate despite laws regulating firearms, switchblades, or bologna sausage. Alert politicians such as Senator Kefauver, always looking for a cause and a constituency, jumped feet first into the fray. Kefauver's popularity, however, was waning. The full Senate summarily rejected his first bill.

The next session, a representative from Illinois, presumably where street gangs were numerous, took up

the banner. His bill passed the House June 26, 1958, and was sent to the Senate where it was approved July 31. Reasoning that knife buyers, if prohibited from buying switchblades, would simply purchase other knives, the Schrade Company, our nation's principal knife maker, offered only token resistance to the measure. Since the switchblade act was an interstate commerce bill falling into the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission, it is interesting to note that this agency chose to sit this one out, making no recommendation. They were not alone. The Justice Department, which would be responsible for enforcing the measure, filed a letter with the house committee, saying, "we are unable to recommend enactment of this legislation."

Both American and German forces used automatic knives in the Second World War. The most common designs were technically gravity knives and not true switchblades. Both countries made their knives principally for issue to paratroopers.

The German knife was well made, having a grip of heavy polished wood with a stainless steel blade. The Solingen Knife Works, in the German city of that name, manufactured the knives, which are much sought after by collectors. The American OSS (Office of Strategic Services), a forerunner of the CIA, used a gravity knife almost identical to the German model. This knife was manufactured in Sheffield, England, by George Ibberson. This was a limited and obscure model that is seldom encountered today.

From late 1940 to quite recently, American paratroopers were issued genuine side-opening, spring-activated switchblade knives. Various makes and models were produced by whichever American company

submitted the lowest bid. Some had a second blade hook along with the conventional spring-loaded blade. All were relatively small, weighing about four ounces. Length was about seven inches.

Although the 1958 act specifically exempts military use of switchblades from provisions of the law, GIs are no longer issued switchblade knives of any type. Since these knives are not generally available commercially, most GIs simply do not carry switchblades.

Switchblades, both the kits and the completed knives that are available in the United States today, are generally manufactured in Europe, Asia, and sometimes Mexico. American makers such as Camillus and Schrade-Walden, who have been in the business both for military and domestic consumption, no longer carry kits or completed knives in their line.

A fact: light, well-made switchblades would certainly have been useful in Vietnam. Since there was nothing of this nature available, our soldiers elected to buy and use belt and boot knives. Gerber, for instance, made a fortune selling knives to Americans in southeast Asia. These knives were only handy because they kept an edge and would fit in a sheath, on a belt, or in a boot.

Chapter 2

What Is a Switchblade?

Section 1241 of the Federal Switchblade Act of 1958, under "Definitions," reads:

. . . (B) the term switchblade knife means any knife having a blade which opens automatically.

1. By hand pressure applied to a button or other device in the handle of the knife; or
2. By operation of inertia, gravity, or both.

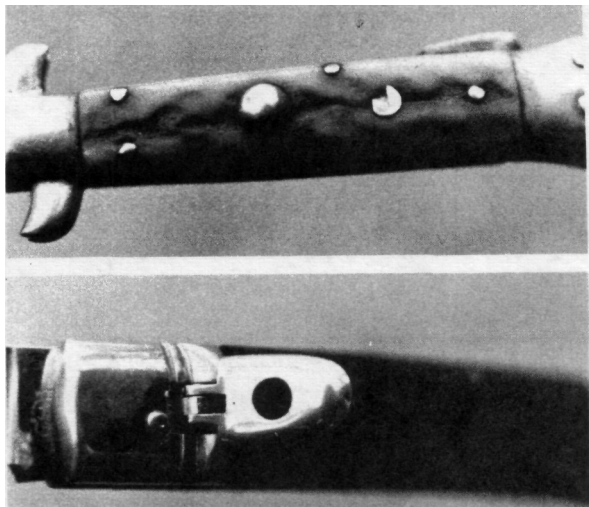
As youngsters we used to horse around with each other quite often. More times than I care to admit, one of us would roll over onto an older, worn switchblade with a marginal safety, resulting in a partially open knife in a pocket.

The knife wouldn't, of course, have enough power to open completely, only far enough to cut little triangular holes in our Levi pockets. Our mothers often asked about the wounds in our pants, but usually we "couldn't remember" how they got there.

Even at such a young age, we knew that switchblades had to have a switch or button. But Section Two of the federal code speaks of operation by inertia, gravity, or both . . .

During the congressional debate on the bill, one of the representatives asked Representative Mack from Illinois, the floor sponsor of the bill, "Does this piece of legislation apply to straight razors?"

People who have taken the time to become familiar with straight razors can, with practice, open them as fast or faster than switchblades. Users must snap their wrists to make them work, making them slightly different from switchblades. The sponsor, who had a big, black, ugly switchblade knife with him to hold up as an example, assured his colleagues that, "the law does not apply to razors as we know razors referred to."



The activating button and slide safety are characteristic of the switchblade knife; some models operate using a lever.

This statement seemingly removed gravity knives from the purview of the law. I know of no individual who has been prosecuted purely for transporting conventional gravity knives across state lines (but prosecution for carrying a switchblade is very uncommon, for that matter). The few actions that have been undertaken are usually for dual offenses, e.g., machine guns and switchblades. The conclusion is that a "switchblade" required a switch or button to open, no matter how the legal definition read.

At times our knives got dirty and/or worn and would fail to snap resolutely into place. Either we cleaned and oiled the blade, replaced the spring or the blade pivot rivet, or—as often happened—we learned to flick the blade out with a snap of our wrists. This latter expedient, while not ideal, did reflect life in the country as it often was. Given the opportunity, I would have liked to ask good old Representative Mack from Illinois if, at that time, I owned a switchblade, a gravity knife, or neither. My knife was, after all, big and ugly, similar to the one on display in front of Congress. It had a switch, but it opened no differently than a straight razor.

Virtually all of the testimony related to the types of knives covered by the Federal Switchblade Act was ambiguous, perhaps explaining why enforcement activities have traditionally been so uninspired.

Obviously, it is not practical or even possible to rely on the government to define or identify switchblade knives. Perhaps the best we can hope for is the good old, simple definition we have used for many years: a knife with a switch that, when activated with one hand, automatically opens.

This definition purposely excludes Filipino butterfly knives, which can be opened very quickly with one

hand, but do not have a switch and do not open automatically. Although the law seems to cover these knives, the U.S. Customs Service has been uneven in their interpretation and enforcement. Once in the country, it seems that they are largely ignored; virtually no reports of prosecution are on record.

Entrepreneurs have openly advertised small, thumb-activated drop-in devices that, when used with a locking-blade knife, produce a very fast, very efficient knife. These people have not been censured or prosecuted for this activity, although the opening devices are often shipped across state lines. Again, having neither switch nor spring, they do not fit the definition used in this book nor, perhaps, the federal definition.

Traditional switchblades activate the blade from the side of the handle. Not all switchblades are traditional. Both the OSS and the United States military at one time issued a knife that ejected a blade out of the end of a hollow handle. These knives are sometimes referred to as gravity knives, but they have a switch, spring, and they work automatically. Agreement probably could be reached between the feds and the author that these are also switchblades.

Another popular little knife works only with a switch that mechanically pushes the blade to an extended position. Often the three-inch blade is made of high quality stainless steel, very sharp, and very useful for those who work in construction or who open many letters. These knives are fast, practical, and, to a limited extent, can be used as weapons, but they are not switchblades. Many were given away with key rings.

Another knife that may be more easily classed as a weapon that works by purely mechanical means is the Bench Mark Rolox. The blade is pushed forward by

one's thumb, rolls through the center of the hand, and is locked in a fully extended position. This unusual knife isn't a switchblade, and it isn't terribly exciting. The Rolox blade, relative to the bulky handle, is extremely short, creating an undesirable combination for many users that takes up valuable space without an accompanying increase in utility. The knife was made briefly by Bench Mark Knives of Gastonia, North Carolina.

One of the most commonly encountered true switchblades is called a "straight-line knife." It has a switch to both extend and retract the blade stored in the handle. The spring arrangement is ingenious, complicated, and works well. This type of knife can be purchased virtually anyplace in the world except the United States. Generally, they are made in Germany or Italy.

While modern straight-line knives are interesting, they are generally cheaply made with relatively short blades compared to the handle size. They definitely do not project the power of a normal switchblade. The opening blade will not penetrate so much as a grocery bag. No matter, however: they have switches and springs, and are thus classed as switchblades.

Front-line law enforcement people have little problem identifying switchblade knives. The problem is that well-intentioned lawmakers want to outlaw an image. Americans are familiar with the kid with the studded black leather jacket who suddenly appears out of nowhere—the one with the distracted "nobody is home" look in his eyes, induced by a sadistic nature, drugs, or a borderline IQ. He looks really bad, you think, but—things are not desperate. He has no weapon.

Then, there is a *snap*. As if by magic, there is a knife. At times like these, you hope to God you are not so close that your .357 can't blow him away.

Chapter 3

Federal Law

Theoretically, switchblades are illegal. In previous chapters, we alluded to the fact that illegality is theoretical, however. Very few cases of prosecution exist but, nevertheless, most dealers and collectors won't touch these knives with an eight-foot Hungarian.

The American Blade Collectors Association will not allow them at their shows, nor will they carry advertisements for switchblades in their publications. Spokesmen for these groups admit that they don't know for sure if the prohibitions are constitutional, but they want to avoid all "appearance of evil"—thereby avoiding any interest on the part of the feds.

Considering the fact that the Department of Commerce did not support the original federal legislation and that there have been only two or three half-serious court challenges in thirty years, it is easy to support the contention that these knives are *theoretically* illegal! Both legal cases were brought by the Department of Customs. In one case, they were after a man who was importing butterfly knives that opened by gravity no more than one inch. In another case their victim was an importer bringing in a number of switchblades that had been decommissioned but could be reactivated quite easily. In the case of the butterfly knives, the court ruled that the dealer could sell them in interstate com-

merce, but that he could not import additional supplies. The alterations expert was found guilty, indicating that the federal act could not be circumvented so easily. Neither case settled any constitutional questions.

Obviously, the Customs Service is acting as the main enforcer of the federal law, but no constitutional questions have been addressed pertaining to *ownership* of switchblade knives. Similarly, the ambiguous writing of the law has never been addressed by a proper legal entity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, testimony given in support of the original bill in 1958 makes it very difficult to determine the definition of a switchblade. The Switchblade Act of 1958 supposedly makes it illegal to transport these knives in interstate commerce. American citizens are only prohibited by federal law from owning a switchblade if it has been carried across state lines.

During the thirty years since enactment, even this part of the law has not been widely enforced. When arrests have been made, they were generally in conjunction with firearms violations or, as previously noted, by customs officials claiming the knives were contraband.

There are several practical reasons for this curious state of affairs. They boil down to the fact that few federal prosecuting attorneys have felt that a switchblade violation was worth his or his employees' time. American courts seem to be jammed full of more significant cases.

Constitutional questions plague switchblade laws and those who enforce them. Federal prosecutors must decide if laws prohibit switchblades because they are actually more dangerous than other knives, or if one-hand operation sets them apart from other knives. Obviously, a great many legal knives can be operated

with one hand and switchblades are hardly more deadly than samurai swords, for instance. Federal prosecutors who are graded on their successful handling of cases do not seem to want to fool around with something as uncertain as switchblade laws when other, more prosecutable offenses exist.

The claim, even on the part of some regular knife collectors, is that switchblades have no legitimate purpose and that they are primarily offensive weapons. Obviously, these allegations are directed at the fact that switchblades are very symbolic. Symbols in our land are not, in and of themselves, illegal, even if they are often portrayed as representing the Forces of Evil. Twenty years ago, for instance, the three-pronged, circular peace symbol became the sign of the American traitor, but no one was prosecuted for using it, although treason is a federal offense.

Possession of weapons used for self-defense has never been illegal in the United States. There are folks who would like to circumvent the Second Amendment but, as a general rule, this has never occurred on the federal level.

The Federal Switchblade Act of 1958 prohibited manufacture and distribution of switchblades in interstate commerce. If the law could agree on the definition of switchblades, this would mean that a manufacturer in Bridgeport, for instance, could not ship products to dealers and distributors in Miami. Sans legal, commercial distribution channels, and given the relatively small volume of sales that precluded anyone from stepping forward as a spokesman, switchblade designs were seemingly doomed.

The law did not appear to affect individuals who owned and/or purchased their switchblades intrastate

(within the state without crossing state lines). No record exists of individuals being prosecuted for simply owning a switchblade not otherwise used in a crime or transported across state lines. People have continued to own switchblades but, of course, those were supplied by local custom manufacturers or purchased in foreign countries. Some are military surplus or older, pre-1958 models, many of which are becoming valuable antiques.

Dealers in the Frankfurt Airport in Germany, for instance, have sold high quality Sprengers. This practice may be winding down. Do not be surprised if even conventional pocket knives are no longer offered in these places.

It is common for U.S. citizens visiting Mexico to purchase switchblades that they bring back in their pockets. Mexican vendors have been quick to capitalize on this lucrative business. Many shops in Tijuana, Nogales, and Juarez have racks and racks of real, authentic, extra el-cheapo switchblades.

Profit margins on Mexican knives must be incredible. In all of my travels, I have never observed one of these little wonders being confiscated by U.S. Customs, although I am sure they would oblige, given the opportunity. It could be that the customs people know these knives are of such poor quality that they could never be serious weapons. Most fall apart after a couple of months.

Good, serviceable switchblades have been available in the United States in quasi-legal kit form for several years. They are definitely a grey-area item. Assembled, these kits may run afoul of state laws.

From time to time one sees ads and brochures touting switchblades in assembled, fully functional condition. These are fortuitous for those wanting the knives

but are not common and certainly not consistent. Watch the *Shotgun News* classified section for ads. The Edge Co., of Brattleboro, Vermont, has the best stock of switchblade kits. At the time of this writing, the kits were displayed in a beautiful, full-color brochure. They also have a nice line of well-made butterfly knives and gravity knives which, according to a straightforward reading of federal law, may be prohibited.

Enforcement of statutes often relates back to testimony given defining these laws at the time of passage. Because straight razors are definitely gravity knives but were specifically excluded from the act by the sponsor, a great deal of uncertainty remains. Gravity and butterfly knives are shipped in interstate commerce with regularity.

This leaves the issue of state and municipal laws. Many of these are reviewed in a separate chapter. Some states and cities have laws prohibiting the ownership and carrying of switchblades. These change dramatically from time to time and are virtually impossible to track accurately. Just because one cannot find code sections relating to switchblades does not mean they do not exist. It simply means you can't find them.

Responsible citizens can make an attempt to discover the extent of local laws by going to the sheriff's office and simply inquiring. Since sheriffs are customarily predisposed against switchblades, one can expect a negative answer. Yet, by asking to see chapter and verse of the local code, some headway can be made. Asking one's attorney would probably be a better route, assuming, of course, that the reader has an attorney with whom he has a good working relationship.

Given the state of our laws and, more important, the state of their enforcement vis-a-vis the climate in which

they were passed, simple ownership of switchblades does not appear to be particularly difficult-especially if one does not intend to use them illegally or in a threatening manner, and is willing to go to the legal wall with federal prosecutors.

Chapter 4

State and Local Laws

Those who research state and municipal laws need to keep a basic axiom in mind. Very simply put, it says:

If one cannot find mention of a specific issue or law on the subject one seeks among the various state and municipal code sections, this should not be taken as evidence that no code section exists. It may simply mean that the researcher has failed to find the code.

Always bearing this truism in mind, the laws of more than half the states were carefully and painstakingly researched in preparation for this chapter. Although it is almost certainly a gross oversimplification to claim that fourteen of the twenty-five states surveyed prohibited switchblades outright, that is what the laws appear to imply.

Some states completely and absolutely prohibit the carrying or use of switchblade knives. Other states make no specific mention of switchblades, but code sections related to deadly weapons might very easily apply. A "deadly weapon," as defined in most codes and by most courts, is a weapon that is used or has been designed for use to inflict death or significant bodily injury. Under this definition, a piece of bicycle chain, a

stone in a stocking, and a tire iron all have been determined by courts to be deadly weapons. Since even a simple little pocket knife having a two-inch blade could cause great bodily injury, one can safely assume that a switchblade knife could and would be considered a deadly weapon even in states where switchblades are not specifically mentioned in the code. This is especially true if the owner has been involved in the violent use of such a knife.

Many states hold certain weapons to be inherently dangerous. Weapons of this nature are covered in code sections known as "before the fact" prohibitions. These laws usually cover deadly weapons such as brass knuckles, pistols, and blackjacks, among others. California mentions ninja throwing stars among its prohibited deadly weapons. In this category, prohibited knives usually are listed as dirks, daggers, and stilettos. Many states also throw Bowie knives into the classification, probably reasoning that in the case of Bowies, one is actually dealing with small swords.

Legal scholars refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary* as their ultimate source when defining questionable words found in code sections. A close reading of this material does not lead one to believe that switchblades inherently and certainly fall within the classification of dirks, daggers, and stilettos. However, many states go on to add the phrase, "or any other dangerous knife or instrument capable of inflicting cutting, stabbing, or tearing wounds." This bit of information puts us right back at broken bottles and letter openers as defined under dangerous weapons. Theoretically, such items would fit the category of "any other dangerous knife or instrument capable of inflicting cutting, stabbing, or tearing wounds." Many juries have concluded that this

definition covers switchblade knives.

Juries attempting to decide if a crime has been committed with a "deadly weapon" would look at the supposed intent of the owner, his character and background, and, most important, the situation under which the deadly weapon was discovered. However, if the statute is so vague that the average person of normal intelligence must guess at its interpretation, that statute is sometimes ruled to be unconstitutional. Judges, as led by smart attorneys, are likely to find that vague code sections violate due process of law guaranteed by the Constitution.

Severe problems arise over the fact that law enforcement personnel and lower courts can initially exercise almost complete discretion when determining if one has an illegal knife and/or a deadly weapon. Switchblade owners who are found by law-enforcement people to be in possession of these knives may eventually be exonerated by the court, but the cost in time and money may prove to be exorbitant.

Contrary to public opinion, knife blade length is generally held to be immaterial when dealing with deadly weapons. Perhaps the misconception originated with the Federal Switchblade Act, which defines a knife as one having a blade two inches long or longer. A few states have specific length code provisions but, again, one must refer to the specific code section in an attempt to determine what exactly is covered. No categorical prohibition on length seems to exist.

Another grey area that applies more specifically to switchblades has to do with the ability of the knife to lock its blade in an open, ready position. The fact that a common knife folds when used in a stabbing motion severely limits its utility as a stabbing weapon. Should

the blade hit something "solid," the danger exists that the blade would close, endangering the fingers of the user. Common knives, the law reasons, are not designed primarily for stabbing. Switchblades, on the other hand, lock their blades in a manner that tends to look dangerously suspicious to the average jury.

As mentioned previously, some states completely and absolutely prohibit switchblades. California Statute 653(k) is typical. States that have specific switchblade statutes often have something similar to the California law, which reads as follows:

Every person who carries upon his person and every person who sells, offers for sale, exposes for sale, loans, transfers, or gives another a switchblade knife having a blade over two inches in length is guilty of a misdemeanor. For the purpose of this section, a switchblade knife is a knife having the appearance of a pocket knife and shall include a spring-blade knife, snap-blade knife, gravity knife, or any other similar type of knife, the blade or blades of which are two or more inches long and which can be released automatically by activating a button, pressure on the handle, flip of the wrist, or other mechanical device, or is released by the weight of the blade or by any type of mechanism whatsoever.

Obviously, the last section of this law covers far more knife designs than those considered to be switchblades for purposes of this book; it is a catchall definition. Butterfly-or balisong-knives would definitely fall into

the category of knives prohibited by this code.

California-type statutes attempt to regulate carrying and thus use of switchblades, as well as any commercial activity involving this type of knife. Although the law is more specific than many others in states that make no mention of switchblades, ambiguity exists as to the lawful purpose of some knives. Knives such as the Bourbon Street, Sharktooth, and the Assassinator, to name a specific few, carry monikers that have made it difficult for juries to find a lawful purpose. Names alone, in these cases, have become the knives' worst enemies.

Case law in this area is characterized by confusion and contradictions. Most actual switchblade cases brought to court usually involve other offenses thought to be more serious. These include firearms violations involving machine guns, felonious assault, attempted robbery, rape, and others in which switchblades played at best a partial role.

Quick-opening devices are, in these cases, usually held to have a felonious intent. Though commonly offered in some knife publications and in *Shotgun News*, they are clearly prohibited under California law. In this regard, the popular and useful "Buck" Folding Hunter would be a prohibited knife in California. Most outdoorsmen learn to instantly bring this knife into action with a flick of the wrist, a skill that is easily learned by most people after a couple of hours of practice. They depend on the intrinsic weight of the Buck knife to pull the blade from the handle when properly "snapped."

One bright spot of California-type statutes relates to carrying and lawfully using switchblades on one's property. Specific prohibition regarding keeping these knives in one's home or carrying them on one's farm or ranch

are not included in the statute. Thus it would appear that survivalists and adventurers could legally carry switchblades in their homes and on their rural properties with little or no likelihood of running afoul of state law. However, this is not much help if one is going from California to Connecticut, Alaska, or Idaho for a survival retreat, for instance. Unless one was cautious, embarrassing questions might arise regarding how a switchblade owner managed to move his knife collection to his home from points of origin not on his property.

Obviously, owners in such cases have to step lively to avoid legal problems. There appears to be no legal answer. The best course of action is for collectors and users to be reasonably discreet about how they display and use their switchblade knives.

As young adults, we carried switchblades on the farm. They often saved our fingers and perhaps, in one case, a life. We felt they were so damn handy that no other knife would replace them.

One of my brothers had a fine, black-handled German fulcrum lever work knife. He went into our local bank and while making out his deposit slip, pulled the knife out and laid it on the counter. I came in behind him and, of course, was horrified. There he was, in the lobby of a bank with scores of people milling around, with an ugly switchblade laying in front of the teller.

Fortunately, no one took notice of the knife. Discreetly, he put it back in his pocket and went about his business. Yet it was a momentary lapse in discretion that could have caused problems.

Many states prohibit carrying or selling switchblades outright. In other states, it would be very easy for despotic law enforcement officers to use existing laws that made no mention of switchblades to make life very

miserable for owners. The only reasonably certain method to discover if you live in one of these places is to discuss the issue with local law enforcement officers. It might be wise to ask them or an attorney to show you the applicable state code sections.

Using this approach, there is at least a 50-50 chance these people will come up with laws pertaining to deadly weapons including after-the-fact use of switchblades in some sort of hypothetical altercation. Reference may be made to dirks, daggers, and stiletos but, since these are not switchblades, the fallback to "or any other dangerous knife or instrument" may occur.

Knowing the law of the state in which one lives regarding the carrying of dangerous weapons can be very helpful. In Texas, for instance, it is considered to be a very serious crime to take any firearm into a bar. In this case, a person in a threatening situation might very validly conclude that his interests of safety and defense would be adequately served with a skillfully operated switchblade. One must look at the respective state laws that apply and make a calculated decision weighing all the pros and cons.

Just remember that those intent on making an issue of switchblades can find a state law with which to do so. The best advice is to not act in a criminal manner and not display one's switchblade except on one's property or in a reasonably legitimate context.

Should a switchblade owner be forced to use his knife in self-defense, a knowledge of the state laws that will apply can be invaluable. If the risk of prosecution increases because of current public sentiment, as is true with firearms in Massachusetts, it may be prudent to substitute a conventional butcher knife or folding knife for the switchblade before the authorities arrive.

You may still get into trouble with a switchblade, but your attorney may be able to help. Like well-drillers, attorneys are only too happy to keep on working until your money is gone.

Chapter 5

How Switchblades Work

On the basis of the old, old adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," I decided to browse through a genuine Italian knife shop.

The store was a tiny hole-in-the-wall establishment a street or two west of the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. The agreeable, English-speaking proprietor happily hauled out literally thousands of knives in all shapes, sizes, and makes. As one would expect being in Italy, a great number were stiletto switchblades.

It was like dying and going to switchblade heaven. Never in my life had I seen that many switchblades in one place at one time. More important from my standpoint, every last one was for sale. All it took was Italian *lire*, giving one the odd sensation that it was possible to trade worthless paper for something of such great value. (A few years later, I paid for 24 karat pure gold chains with plastic money. It was only the second time in my life I have had this experience.)

Two knives immediately caught my eye. The first is presently lying in front of me on my desk as I write. It is retired from service after a long, illustrious career. Its blade is a relatively diminutive two-and-a-half inches long. The handles are beautiful polished horn, set in polished stainless steel. Bolsters are mellow, aged brass. Overall trim color is silver with blond handles. As

Italian stilettos go, it does not project the power one might expect. At the time it was the smallest operating switchblade in the shop.

The second meritorious knife is probably still in the shop in Rome. Nobody in their right mind would have carried it out the door. The shopkeeper doubted my sanity, I am sure, for wanting to take it out in the street for a picture. It had an eighteen-inch blade, weighed almost six pounds, and recoiled so viciously when activated that one had to pay close attention lest it start an independent crime wave.

I purchased the small knife principally because it fit nicely in my pocket. This may have been an error, because collectors now offer up to \$1500 for mint copies of the bigger, spring-loaded Italian "samurais."

Since then, I have used the small knife in Africa to skin snakes, slice pineapples (the juice tended to plug the mechanisms), and cut the strings on bags of ground corn called *posho*.

The knife's all-time record adventure occurred the day of the great ostrich hunt. But for the hand of fate, my little stiletto would have performed the ancient and honorable act of ritualistically cutting the critter's throat.

A huge male ostrich jumped up ahead of our Land Rover and went pounding across the dusty, trackless bush. With a mighty Somali whoop, the trackers and driver expressed their interest in the giant chicken. Not being one to discourage the hired help, I instructed the driver to take up pursuit.

Our Rover, in customary African fashion, was equipped to drive on the wrong side of the road. There were few roads to drive on but the arrangement gave me an opportunity to brace my left arm against the wind-

shield frame. There were no windows, doors, or even sides on these vehicles. Over the braced arm I dropped a stubby little Austrian Franz Sodja .458 caliber double rifle. Officially, we were out in search of the dreaded black buffalo. The .458 was the only rifle that I had along with which to put the ostrich in the pot.

Bird and rifle sights crossed momentarily. I jerked off the first barrel. The round, greatly influenced by the Rover's erratic motion, went someplace other than through the bird. Round number two seemed to penetrate the critter end to end, but we were not sure. We saw the bullet kick up sand beyond the bird but both round and bird kept on going. Even a three hundred pound chicken couldn't slow a big .45 caliber slug much.

We cruised on along behind at a more rational speed while I reloaded. Even so simple a task was a chore in the bouncing Rover piloted by a man who was undoubtedly much more at home on a camel.

Then, in the distance, our bird went down. Much like their domestic cousins who carry on obscenely long after being separated from their heads, this critter was determined to live on. After what seemed like a very long time, it started waving its grotesque long legs skyward. For a fleeting instant, I was reminded of dancers I had once seen in Paris.

Ever anxious to satisfy the religious needs of my Muslim trackers, whose duty it was to eat the damn thing, I jumped out of the Rover, snapped my little switchblade, and went racing over to perform the ritual throat cutting. Unless the throat is cut while the animal is still alive, the Muslims refuse to eat the meat.

Not three feet from the bird, I was rudely and severely sideswiped. It was one of the trackers, who may have gone on to play defensive rib crusher for the

Dallas Cowboys. As much as I hate to admit it, that timely block may have saved me from a life of shame and humiliation. It may even have saved my life.

From my position flat on the sand, I watched in awe as the bird lashed out with its horned feet in an attempt to keep the tracker at bay. Slowly he circled it until the bird relaxed and he was able to swoop in and grab its neck.

On a relative scale, being lion-bit, buffalo-stomped, or elephant-tossed in Africa is okay. It's something to brag about at the inevitable cocktail parties. But to go home with a stitched-up stomach after being ostrich-disemboweled is definitely not cool—not something one can brag about.

My trackers were impressed with my intentions and my equipment, but not with my execution. They thought switchblades might be okay, but were unsure after my initial introduction.

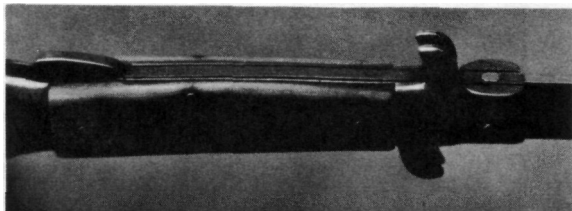


As mentioned earlier, switchblades have a switch, spring, and a blade that opens without other effort. Literally hundreds of different lines have been designated and manufactured that fit that definition. Collectors have an interest in the many different types, but fortunately hunters and survivalist-type users can be well-informed knowing about only two or three basic designs.

The basic switchblade designs one might encounter are:

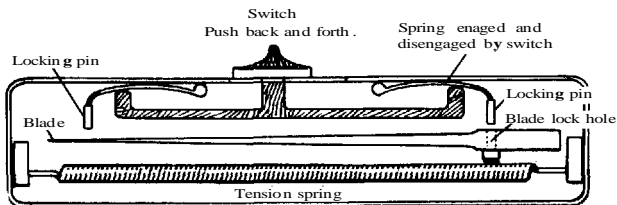
Locking Backspring Design

German- and Italian-made editions of this knife are extremely common. From a user standpoint, these knives are rugged, reasonably inexpensive, and fairly long-lived, indicating that the reputation they enjoy is deserved.



Backspring locking system with button release.

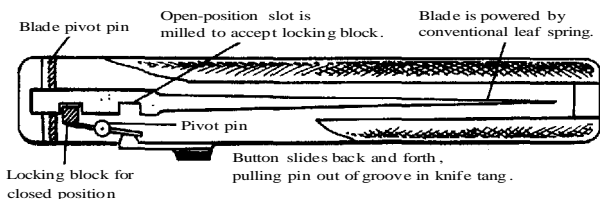
The backspring is defined as the strip of steel running down the back of the knife against which the cutting edge of the blade rests. The piece can be made out of common brass or, in the case of locking backspring designs, out of high quality stainless steel. The piece is cut and polished so that it fills the end of the handle perfectly. Rivets hold the backspring in place.



Modern straight-line knife.

On locking backspring designs, the blade pivots on a central rivet through the bolster. The blade is securely locked when a tit on the base rotates into the keeper hole on the backspring. Release is effected by either rotating the bolster, built on a cam, or by depressing a backspring release button built for that purpose.

Activating switches (buttons) are simple spring-loaded devices set into the right side of the handle. A slot in the handle allows a safety to slide back and forth.

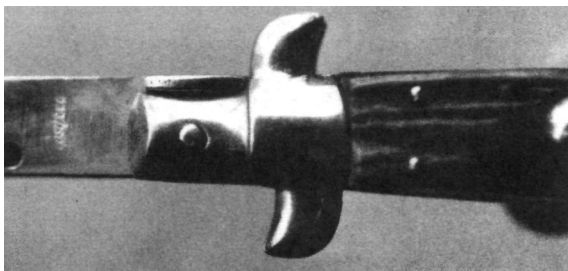


Safety release design.

When on safe, the button is mechanically blocked. Depressing the button pulls a keeper pin set forward in the handle out of a hole milled in the blade base, releasing the blade, which is thrown out by a powerful internal spring. On knives having a release button at the base of the knife, a properly placed pivot allows the backspring to be levered in and out with surprising ease.

Closing backspring lock knives can be bewildering unless one clearly knows the difference between bolster release and backspring release mechanisms. Readers had best look at the pictures. They save thousands of words.

Because of the location of the locking stud milled into the base of the blade, and due to the stress placed on the

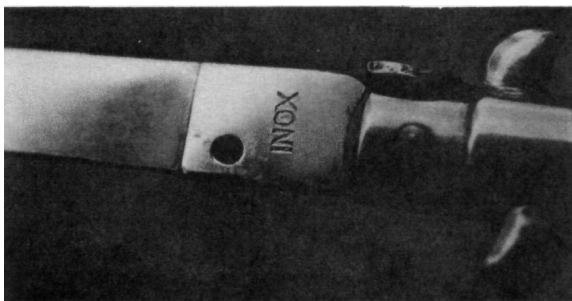


Bolster release in locked position (top), and pushed, tipping lock to close blade (bottom).

blade pivot pin, cheaply made versions of this design deteriorate rapidly. Those carefully made of quality materials can last forever if given even modest care.

"INOX" stamped on the knife blade translates as "stainless" from Italian. Germans use the word "Rost-

frei." Often, this is the only indication of where the knives have been made.

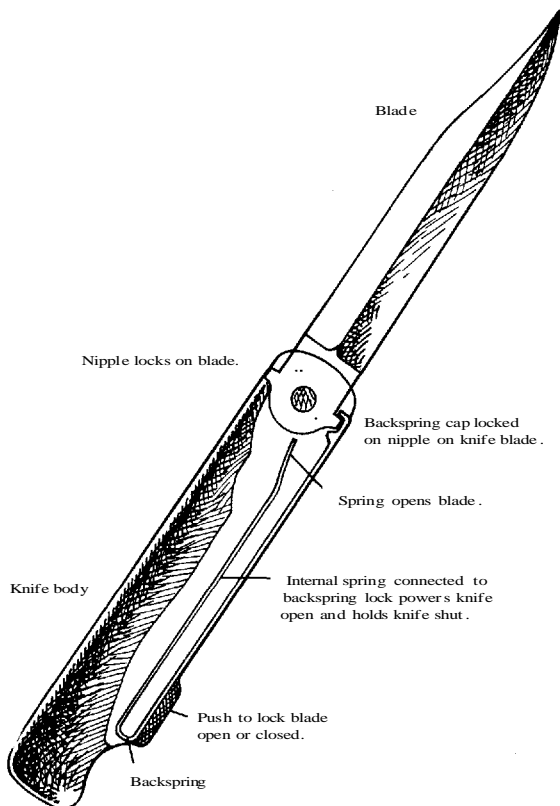


The locking pin hole milled into the blade base of the locking backspring knife holds the knife in closed position.

Backspring Lock-Open-and-Lock-Close Knives

An obscure subset of the backspring lock knife was invented about 1930. Using the backspring to both open and lock the blade, the inventor attempted to decrease the number and complexity of parts. Considering the fact that the backspring design itself is complex and difficult, the inventor succeeded. At least two companies manufactured knives of this design.

Starting sometime in 1931, Kabar and Aerial manufacturing companies produced knives of this design. Apparently, the design was not as simple and trouble-free as expected. They were produced for only a few years. Presently, examples are collector's items. Everyday hunter and survivalist switchblade users will seldom, if ever, encounter these knives.

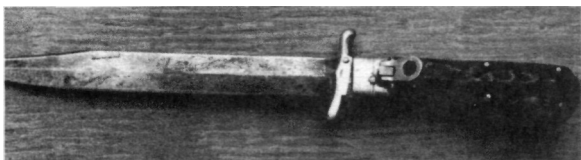


Backspring lock-open-and-lock-close design.

Fulcrum Lever Knives

As a general rule, the best made, best finished switchblades in cutlery shops are of this design. Every switchblade user has a favorite design. Worldwide, this one seems to be most popular. It and the backspring lock account for 90 percent of the world's currently manufactured switchblades.

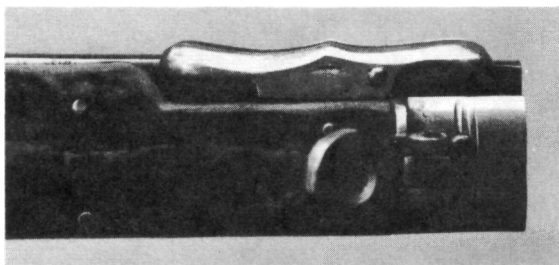
Older, antique German knives of this design still exist but it is not known if these examples predate American patents issued in 1894 and 1913. German makers may have produced these knives before American patents were issued but failed to protect the design in the United States.



Fulcrum lever knife in folded and locked position and open position. This example is not spring operated.

In the closed position, with the hinged lever rotated forward, the knife is locked shut as securely as any

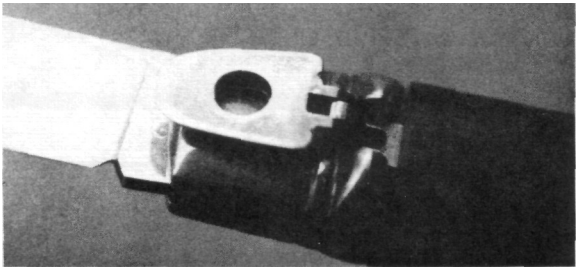
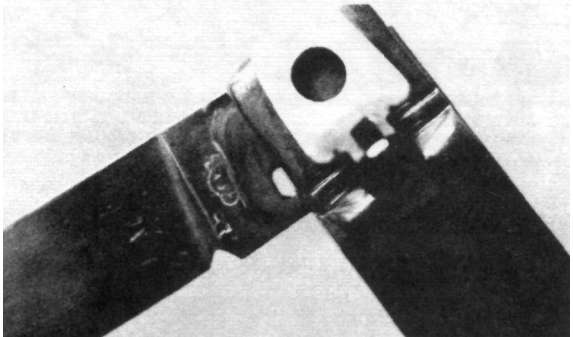
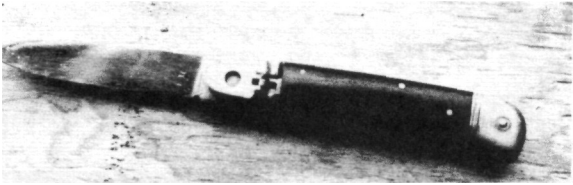
switchblade made. Virtually no accidental opening can occur no matter how this knife is carried or handled.



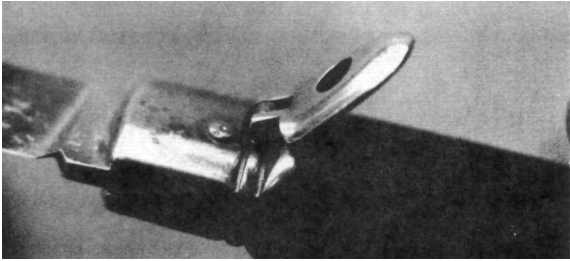
Folding hilt and operating lever on unique folding hunting knife.

In the closed position, with the hinged lever rotated forward, the knife is locked shut as securely as any switchblade made. Virtually no accidental opening can occur no matter how this knife is carried or handled.

A single pin raised by the lever pressed over the fulcrum both locks the knife either open or closed. The pin is energized by a long spring running down through the grip handles between it and the knife bed liners. No slots or holes complicate the manufacture of the handles. A hole milled in the base of the blade allows the single pin to hold the blade tightly closed. The retaining hole is shielded down in the knife bolster body. (It does not accumulate dirt and grime nearly as rapidly as other designs.) Another notch milled in the base of the blade engages the same single pin locking the knife open. Only general periodic cleaning is required to keep the notch in proper working order.



Top: Fulcrum lever knife. Center: locking hole in base of blade. Bottom: lever in forward safe position. Pin is down and cannot be moved until lever is flipped into active position.



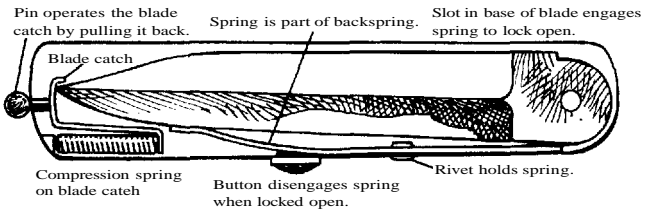
Lever flipped up, ready to pull pin, allowing knife to close.

Cheaper fulcrum lever knives made of softer steel will wear. German fulcrum lever knives usually come with canoe blades needed to perform general chores. Stiletto blades on this type knife are a rarity. One seldom sees a cheaply made, flashy fulcrum knife.

Pin-Pull Knives

George Schrade invented this knife in the early forties. By 1958 they were illegal, but he still had time to crank out literally millions of this design.

As a general rule, these knives were very cheap.



Pin pull design.

Most examples, if they were used at all, have not persisted. Their shoddy manufacture doomed them to the scrap heap after only modest use in the field.

Blades on pin-pull knives were kept under tension by a relatively conventional flat spring riveted into the knife. A very simplistic U-shaped spring-loaded catch that slid back and forth over the blade tip held it in a closed position. Pulling a pin on the end of the knife that ran through to the U-catch released the blade. The flat spring that activated the blade also seated itself in a notch in the blade, holding it open. Thus, the back-spring and the opening spring were one and the same on this knife design.

Problems using this type of knife are fairly severe. Two hands, for instance, are required to activate the blade, robbing the unit of much of the utility one looks for in a switchblade. Also, the design is virtually impossible to use with gloved hands. Because the blade-catch mechanism requires quite a bit of space, blade length relative to handle length is very unfavorable.

Pull-Spring or Pull-String Knives

Switchblade users may never in a lifetime encounter one of these knives. They are occasionally manufactured in a few places around the world, but never in large numbers. Like the previous design, the principal disadvantage lies in the fact that these knives require two hands with fairly nimble fingers to operate. Under such circumstances, most users would rather practice up with a butterfly knife.

Like the pin-pull design, the blade is retained in the handle by a spring-loaded, U-shaped blade catch. The

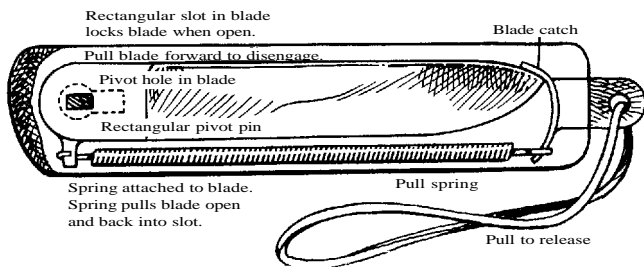


Blade and catch mechanism with operating spring of string pull design.

blade pivots on a beveled pin. When the catch is pulled rearward, releasing the blade, it swings open, also moving forward into a square end slot. The knife blade is pulled into the slot by a long, thin tension spring running from the blade to the U-shaped retaining catch. A single spring powers the blade and the retaining clip.

Releasing the blade requires that one pull the blade forward, disengaging it out of the square slot into the round hole where it can rotate. No accurate estimates exist as to how many users have amputated fingers since these knives were first produced in 1895.

A curiously well-made German knife of this type gives one the impression that the maker could not decide if it was to be a long-lived hunter's companion or a breakfast cereal box trinket.



Pull spring/pull string knife.

Modern Power-In/Power-Out Designs

A thin, powerful coiled spring pulls the blade in and out of this knife's handle as the user pushes the switch. Knives of this design are extremely common around the world, but most examples are actually made in Germany or Italy. They come marked NATO, Military, Automatic, Super Automatic, Scout, and just about anything a contract buyer wants to put on them. Some models are very well made of virtually solid aluminum. Others are not so well made.

The design is sufficiently complex to make it difficult to adequately describe the mechanism. Opening one of



Straight-line knife in open position.

these wonders for a closer look isn't much help, either. Owners who have tried to repair these knives often found they are at a loss to discover how the knife functioned in the first place.

A thin, powerful retention spring runs the length of this knife. This spring is anchored on each end to a metal block, made possible by the fact that the handle is about two inches longer than the blade. By necessity, the blade is short and light.

A two-way cammed switch unlocks the pin running both in and out. When the pins are unlocked, the spring compressed against the blocks throws the knife out to its extended, locked position. Pushing the switch backward covers up the front loading pin, allowing the back pin to seat and throwing the blade back into the handle.

The blade will not penetrate three sheets of paper during its forward movement. If its momentum is lost, the blade seems to go completely loose. Until reseated behind a pin, it will rattle around seemingly without tension of any kind. In this case, the blade must be thrown by gravity force either completely in or out, reestablishing tension on the internal spring.

Because of its complex design (which is subject to dirt blockage) and because of the relatively short, light blade, knives of this design have never been particularly favored by thugs and assassins. They are not particularly practical for hunters and survivalists, either.

This knife should not be confused with a German paratrooper model, which is a true gravity knife without springs of any kind. The several other designs one may occasionally encounter are covered in the next chapter on collectibles.

Chapter 6

Collector's Knives

Participants in larger U.S. knife shows generally are prohibited from engaging in any commerce or showing any kind of switchblade knife. Dealers who know each other will sometimes trade a few examples among themselves, but the average citizen will see little of this.

In Europe, it is common to see hundreds of switchblades laid out on velvet-covered tables at the larger knife shows. Although blanket prohibitions do not exist, a few European countries are Japanese-like in their paranoia regarding knives of any type. The Danes, for instance, ban the carrying or keeping of any knife having a seven centimeter (2.8-inch) blade or longer in any public place. As with most laws regulating and prohibiting inanimate objects, one must wonder at the common sense of those promulgating such drivel. Are restaurants and kitchens, for instance, public places? What about workshops, carpet stores, butcher shops, or bakeries where knives must be used as tools? How are these defined?

On the positive side, most Europeans see little difference between a regular folding knife and a switchblade, other than speed of deployment and mechanical complexity.

European dealers and collectors sometimes display ancient switchblade-type knives made as many as two

to three hundred years ago. Casual observers would conclude that such specimens should be kept in museums rather than be offered to the general public.

Because American collectors often view our laws as being ambiguous and unenforced, dealers at our smaller shows may wink at the law. Some openly display switchblades at regional and local shows. If switchblades are not on display, buyers can often track down people at these shows who have them available.

Genuine, dyed-in-the-wool switchblade knife collectors exist but do not seem to be common. There is no national association that sanctions their activities. They cannot advertise in many of the knife publications, and regular knife collectors often treat these people as though they are renegades.

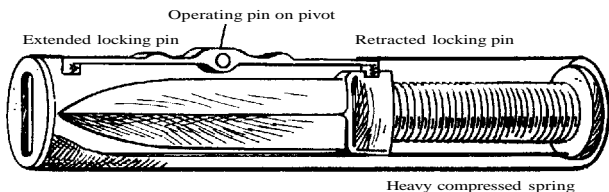
Most switchblade owners apparently are users. The field could be interesting if it were not for the cloud cast on this species of knives by state and federal law.

The following summary of collectible switchblades is certainly not exhaustive. It is fairly complete by virtue of the fact that new designs are rare, particularly in the United States. The only new designs come out of Europe. Without profitable American markets, these designs will be a long time coming.

Compressed-Spring Handle-Held Blade

Most of these knives were made before the turn of the century. For this reason, even collectors seldom encounter actual working examples of this knife.

From a design standpoint, this knife is impressively simple. The blade is held securely in a hollow handle. This blade is often more of a pin or pick, but can just as



Compressed-spring knife.

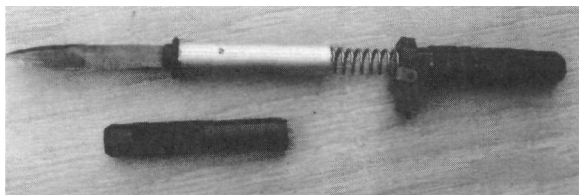
easily be a commonly configured blade. Handles are usually constructed round or oval, but can be found in rectangular shape, similar to conventional knives.

Compressed springs seated behind the blade drive it forward. A simple catch on the handle locks the blade and then secures it in the extended position. Depressing the button on the handle releases the blade that is driven forward with some force. It is stopped against the forward guard, where it is again locked.

Retracting the blade is accomplished by pushing it against an expendable solid surface, thus driving it back into the handle. The act of extending the blade, driven by a powerful spring, can do considerable damage.

Mostly apocryphal tales of assassins who did their victims in using such knives probably had their origin with this style of switchblade. These are the knives that uninformed citizens envision when they think of switchblades.

This design should not be confused with Soviet Spetz-natz (Special Forces) knives. Soviet thinking in the case of this knife is hard to imagine. The device is designed to throw a blade with considerable power. It does not retain the blade and, although officially described as a



Spetznatz knife. Top: cocked, with blade shield removed, the knife is ready for use. Bottom: blade spring tube slips over driving spring of knife.

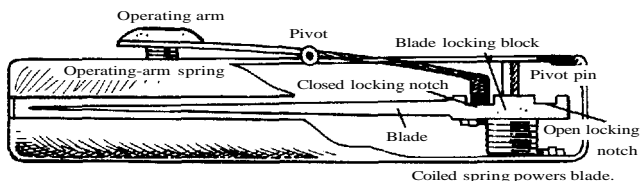
knife, it cannot perform cutting and slicing functions normally associated with conventional knives. It would also seem as though the Soviet knife is extremely dangerous to the user, especially given the limited rewards one might expect from something that erratically throws a knife blade into the wild blue yonder.

As a conventional switchblade, the compressed spring knife has design problems that can only be described as monumental. Because of this, they were only manufactured briefly. Even a small amount of wear on the latches and catches or a bit of errant dirt could cause a malfunction. Users found that spontaneous

springing of these knives in one's pocket could be exceedingly embarrassing, not to mention painful. Other than a very few, novelty-type weapons that look more like ice picks, devices of this nature are no longer manufactured.

Clock-Spring Knife

Tension from a coiled spring continually tries to open switchblades of this design. A blade-lock hole is milled both ahead and behind the pivot point. Opening is from the side similar to other common, clasp knives. A forward retaining hole in the blade holds it in a closed position. A hole rear of the pivot lines up with the retaining pin to secure the blade in an open position.



Clock spring design.

Makers placed a relatively powerful spring under the switch arm so that the lock would function reliably. Because of the constant tension on the blade from the tightly coiled spring, plus the relatively heavy latch arm spring, operation was often brittle to tough, to downright difficult. Normal finger pressure on the button was often insufficient to open the knife.

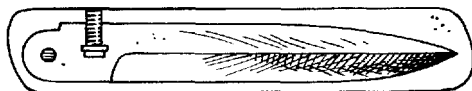
Other than tough switching, these knives—properly

made of reasonable material—were reliable and fairly long-lived. As with many other switchblade designs, however, few examples remain.

Compression-Powered Side Opener

This knife was designed to function as the result of a powerful compression spring pushing down inside the grip into a stop on the blade tongue. The block rotated when a button was pushed, allowing the spring to engage the blade. As a practical matter, this design substituted a flat spring for a slightly cheaper, more reliable compression spring. Few were ever made. The design seems adequate, but until one can actually use and wear one out, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions.

Powerful compression spring



Block on blade compresses spring.

Spring-loaded button on side of knife is pulled to release spring.

Compression spring is extended.



Stop holds blade open.

Compression spring side opener.

Double-Pin Lock Side Opener

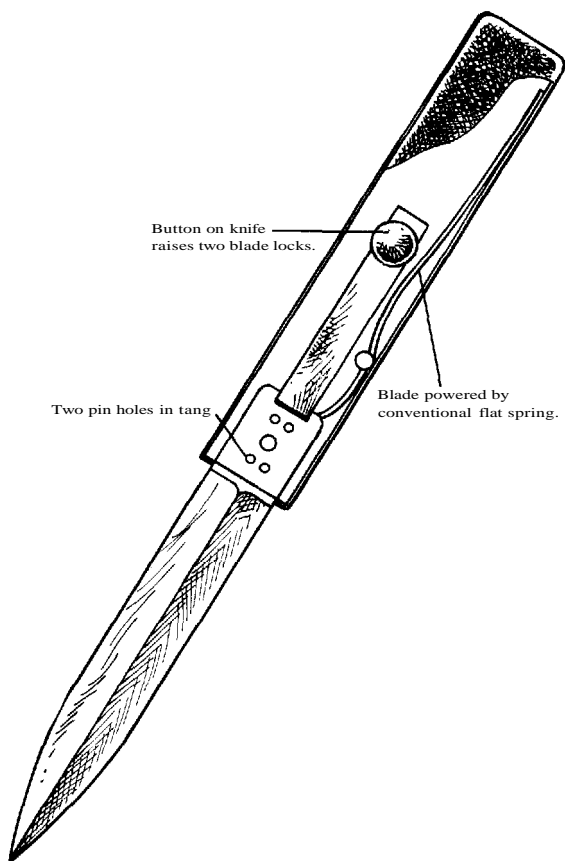
In a valiant attempt to develop a reliable automatic knife that was truly and solidly locked open or closed, a turn-of-the-century inventor brought out a knife having two sets of locking holes for both the open and closed position. The blade was activated by a conventional leaf spring. It opened to the side. In many respects, the knife looked much like most modern designs.

Opening or closing the knife required pushing a lever that was located at the very base of the handle. Use of two locking pins (that often failed to line up as accurately as the designer envisioned) necessitated that a rather long switch lever be employed. The long fulcrum gave the necessary leverage but put the switch awkwardly at the palm end of the grip.

Only a relatively small number of these knives were manufactured. The design was mostly experimental. Users demanded a more convenient, reliable knife and inventors quickly went on to other designs to oblige.

Slide Release Button

Several knives were designed in an ongoing attempt to place the activating button in a more convenient forward position. The most common of these utilized a sliding switch that looked very much like a safety on a modern switchblade. Lock pins set up front in the bolster cammed into notches milled into the base of the blade. A pivot pin set in the knife body provided a place through which the pin could rotate. By pushing the slide switch to the rear it engaged the pin lock assembly, lifting it out of the lock slot in the blade. Pin seating in



Double-pin lock side opener

the milled blade slot was accomplished by mounting a compression spring on the switch which bore in on the pin lock holding it in place. Blade power was provided by conventional flat springs mounted inside the knife blade slot.

Knives of this design were complex and relatively expensive to manufacture. The design apparently was mostly transitional in nature. Few remain.

Bolster-Button Release

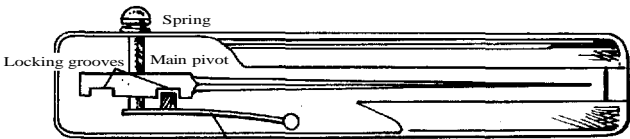
Although tens of thousands and perhaps millions of this design have been made and sold, this knife must be considered to be obscure. Apparently, no one in the world is currently making knives of this design. Most other examples have been consumed by normal use.

Users, other than seasoned collectors, who encounter this design may find themselves at a loss to make the knife work. Power necessary to activate the blade is provided via a conventional leaf spring anchored inside the blade slot. As in other conventional switchblades, the hold-open and hold-close slots are milled into the base of the blade, forward and aft of the pivot rivet. In that regard, the design is less than remarkable.

The feature that sets these knives apart is the design of the locking button. On these models, it is built into the pivot rivet. In the far forward position, the button is extremely easy to activate, creating a very handy, easy-to-use design. The button in the pivot design allows for inexpensive manufacture and a subsequent lower price.

By giving the pin the ability to be pushed through the blade, engaging a flat catch on the opposite side, the makers achieved the greatest simplicity and great-

Push on pivot pin
to open or close.



Spring steel piece with locking pin. Blade is powered with
conventional flat spring
under blade.

Bolster button release.

est reliability one could hope for in a switchblade. Catches were built of stainless steel. They were positioned between the grips and the brass lines, out of sight, sealed away from dirt and lint. Although current manufacture seems unlikely, many older examples of these knives remain in collectors' hands. Persisting examples seem to be reasonably rugged and long-lived. The design was the only one that permitted double blades, both of which opened automatically.

The only serious design problem was that these knives generally had no safety. Theoretically, the knives should have often opened spontaneously in the pocket of the user. In actual practice, however, recessed buttons along with stiff switch springs relegated this concern to the status of a nonissue.

Perhaps because they are constrained by U.S. patent regulations, European manufacturers do not commonly produce knives of this design. Occasionally, an example can be seen in a knife shop, but these may be from inventory dating back twenty years or more.

Pinless Automatic Locking Design.

It would seem inevitable that knife designers contemplating the problems of manufacture, assembly, and

maintenance of pin-locked knives would eventually design something that locked open and shut without pins.

By cutting a shallow groove through the blade tang end to end, engineers allowed for the use of a simple spring-loaded bar to do the job of locking the blade open or shut.

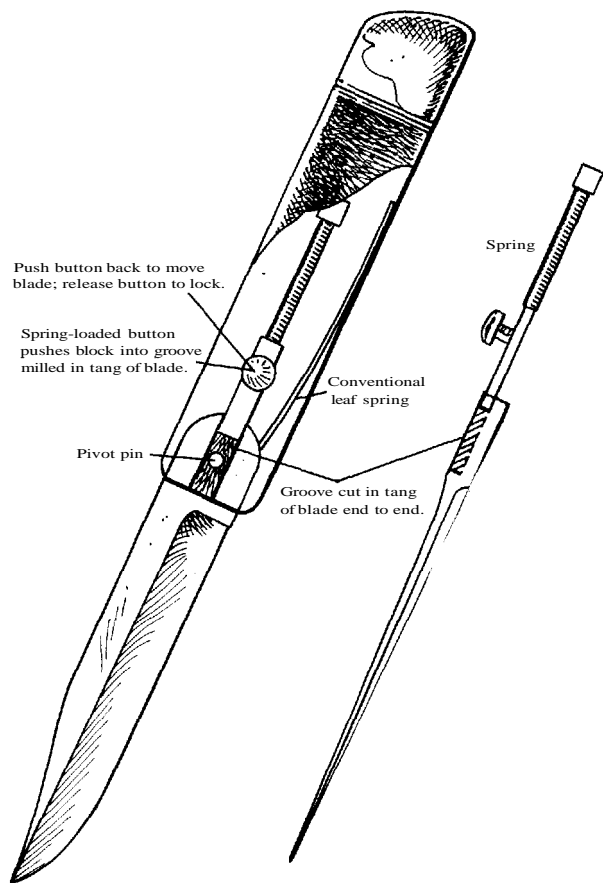
The switch with no safety (but heavily loaded by a compression spring) is recessed deep within the forward half of the knife's grips. While spontaneous opening is not a particular problem with this design, users often find that it takes considerable effort to get the knife into operation.

Switches are activated by rearward pressure similar to disengaging the safety on other, more conventional models. Knife blades are not actually locked open until the switch is again released, allowing a floating block to seat in the groove milled in the tang.



Switchblade enthusiasts may seldom encounter most of the knives described in this chapter. Utility knives described in Chapter Five comprise the vast majority of the switchblades currently in production.

A dedicated collector having one or two of each of these various designs would have a quite valuable collection. It is also possible, but not likely, that our laws will be changed, allowing people in the "land of the free" the freedom to choose the type of knife they like best. If that happens, free enterprise may deliver some extremely unique knives.



Pinless automatic locking design.

Chapter 7

Butterfly Knives

Butterfly knives—and their close cousins balisong knives—are a product and invention of the Philippine Islands. As in the sale of pianos, they are best demonstrated by people who have taken the time to become proficient and can handle them with expertise. Learning to deploy a butterfly knife takes about as much time and energy as learning to use a yo-yo, which, incidentally, was also invented and developed in the Philippines.

It is fascinating to watch Filipino experts operate butterfly knives. Their opening speed easily rivals conventional spring and switch knives. One instant there is nothing. Next, as if by magic, one is faced with an ominously flashing blade. Although it certainly isn't common, the most threatening practitioners of this art are Filipino women. In my view, there is something slightly effeminate about using a balisong, and women using them project a consistent image.

GIs who fought in the Philippine Islands after the Spanish-American War were the first to report the existence of butterfly knives. The knife became synonymous with guerrilla or resistance fighters, although few certifiable casualties from butterfly knives were substantiated. As has been typical throughout history, our soldiers who saw them traded other goods for

examples of the nifty little folding knives and brought them home as souvenirs.

The first commercial appearances of butterfly knives in the United States occurred about thirty years ago. Examples offered for sale were extremely limited. Many were built to look like a fat steel pen or an oversized mechanical pencil. These knives could be carried in one's vest pocket ready for instantaneous action without arousing suspicion.

By their nature, butterfly knives had a very long, slim blade hidden away in the handle. As part of the market pitch, Filipino sellers claimed that the metal used to make the knives was salvaged from Japanese Zeros shot down during the war. There never were many of these knives, but it was easy to be skeptical that even the few there were could have been made from crashed fighter planes.

Yet, if one used a bit of imagination, the sales pitch made some sense. The metal out of which the knives were fashioned was a kind of dull, brushed grey aluminum. It was very, very tough. The blades were always honed surgically sharp.

Early butterflies had two serious drawbacks, but these difficulties are no longer problems in modern designs. Blades on the mechanical pencil version were so long and thin that they were virtually worthless for anything other than filleting another human. No one seriously considered doing any work with them. Even as a strictly defensive weapon, the design was not very effective.

Practical modern butterfly knives have been re-designed with standard-width blades only partially hidden by flat handles with slots cut in them. These days, no one is going to mistake them for mechanical pencils.

The second problem with early butterfly knives involved the exceedingly stiff joints with which their makers usually endowed them. Opening and closing one of these jewels was much like unfolding an aluminum deck chair. They weren't fast and they weren't convenient. If the maker hasn't done so, modern butterfly owners loosen up the joints so that they can be put into action more easily.

Redesigned blades, better assembly and workmanship, and nicer, more convenient grips have all added up to a one-hand knife that sportsmen and survivalists can take seriously. Still, it is tricky to successfully operate butterflies (it is virtually impossible with gloves).

Other one-hand knives are available that do not require the skill needed to operate a butterfly. At the risk of alienating readers who have their own favorite one-hand knife, or who are traditionalists believing that if the old-fashioned switchblades were good enough for Dad and Mom, they are good enough for them, I recommend the A.G. Russell knife. Write to A.G. Russell Knives, 1705-W 87 Highway 471 N., Springdale, Arkansas 72764-2397, for more information.

Russell knives are well made, require little practice to operate, and are designed for serious work. Best of all, they are legal under the 1958 Federal Switchblade Act. But they are not switchblades. They are merely well-made, rugged, one-hand knives.

For a number of years, butterfly knives were imported into the United States with a fair degree of impunity. Perhaps stung by their inability to deal with other forms of contraband material, the U.S. Customs Service has decided to tighten up their interpretation of the 1958 Switchblade Act.

Taken at its face value, the 1958 Act prohibits

gravity knives from entering the country or crossing state boundaries. Unlimbered, polished, and oiled butterflies that have had their joints relaxed can fall into the category of gravity knives. A federal judge who closely scrutinized imported butterflies recently found that, as issued, gravity would only open the knives a half inch or so. The case was a dreary exercise in bureaucratic intervention. It was intensely costly for the defendant dealer, who could not possibly see enough future profits to justify the legal costs he was asked to assume.

As a result of the litigations, the dealer was allowed to place his butterflies in normal marketing channels. The judge was silent about future importation, implying that the current shipment was the last. As a result, dealers are claiming that existing stocks are all the butterflies that they will have for sale. Given what must be a very modest demand for butterflies, there must be a great deal of truth to this statement. As is often true regarding these types of knives, they have no constituency. It isn't worth the hassle and cost required to stand up and defend them.

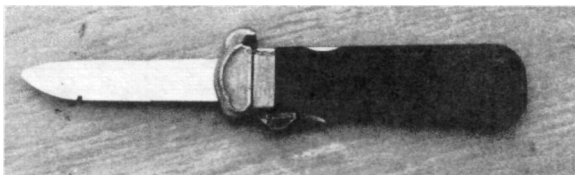
The entire issue may resolve itself nicely. Some American dealers have developed a very nice business selling switchblade kits. Should butterflies ever become popular, it would be very easy to put together butterfly kits that owners could assemble themselves at home. As it now stands, the demand is so limited that dealers are not using this option.

Users interested in one-hand knife operation should get to know butterfly knives. But, as indicated, they may not fill the needs of outdoorsmen and survivalists.

Chapter 8

Switchblade Kits

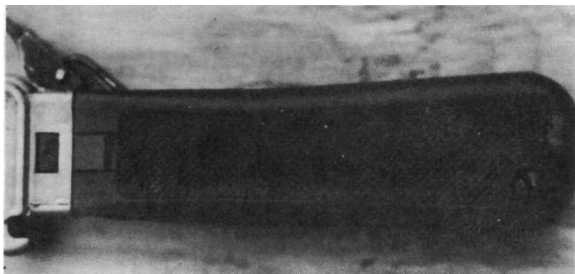
Perhaps the easiest and most consistently successful method by which most Americans can obtain a switchblade is to buy a kit and assemble it themselves. At this time, self-assembly appears to be the method of choice. A recent issue of *Shotgun News*—the adventurer's focal point for acquiring arms, munitions, accessories, and knives—carried listings for at least five different switchblade kits. These included kits for modern, straight-line knives, backspring lock types, fulcrum lever knives, and string-pull designs. An advertisement was also included for a remarkable reproduction of the venerable Fallschirmjager, or German paratrooper, knife.



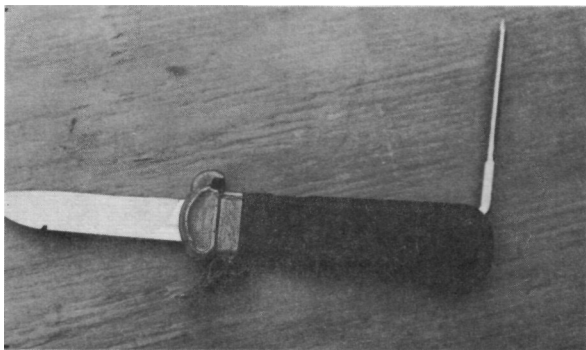
The German paratrooper knife is a very well-made gravity knife. A switch locks the blade open and closed.

These reproductions were supplied in assembled, ready-to-go condition, although technically, they might

violate parts of federal and state laws. Apparently, because they do not share the negative notoriety of switchblades, law enforcement personnel tend to ignore them, more than they might ignore conventional switchblades.



Well-made hard plastic handles characterize the German paratrooper knives.



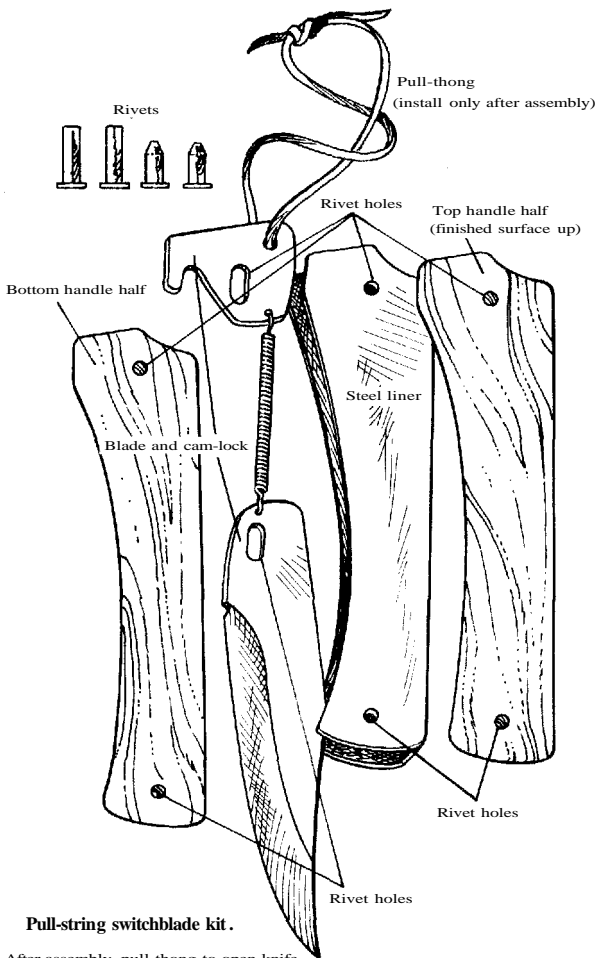
German paratrooper knife with the marlin spike extended.



Operating lever ready for use on German paratrooper knife.

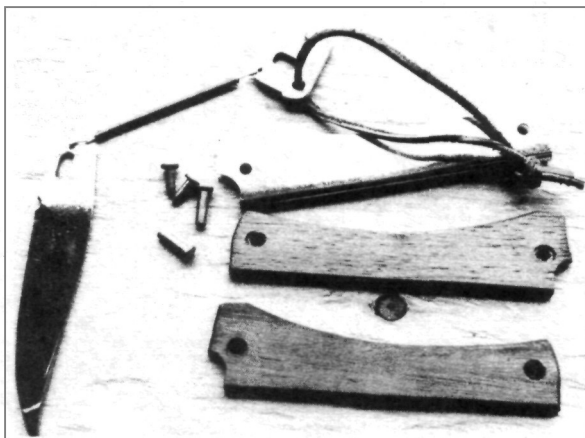
The conventional kits range in price from about \$9.95 for a straight-line knife to around \$15.00 for all the parts needed to assemble a very nice fulcrum knife, or up to \$25.00 for a nine-inch Italian stiletto with back-lock blade. This top-of-the-line knife was advertised as having heavy gauge brass liners, a 440 stainless blade, and blue or red plastic handles. After assembly, the owner would certainly possess a classic switchblade, easily worth \$25.00. Sellers offer quantity discounts running to \$10.00 a kit when purchasing 120 kits at a whack. Those who are distressed by bargain basement prices of \$9.95 for straight-line knives can pay as much as \$14.95 for something that looks identical to one from another competing dealer.

Awards for the big money go to the vendors of the paratrooper reproductions. They ask \$39.50 plus \$3.00 for the box and postage stamps.



Pull-string switchblade kit.

After assembly, pull thong to open knife.
 To close, pull thong and blade in opposite directions.
 Fold blade into handle.



Pieces of kit ready for assembly.

Assembly of the kits is not particularly difficult or time consuming. Most require only a screwdriver and absolutely no mechanical skill. A few go together with standard, soft brass knife-type straight rivets. These rivets require a bit of skill to install properly, but nothing beyond the scope of the average handyman.

Technically, the modern straight-line kit that I assembled was the toughest to get up and running properly. This is entirely due to the design, which is at best bewildering. However, by carefully following the detailed instructions included with the kit, everything seems to work out okay. Should the assembler become bewildered, it is extremely helpful to ignore any questions regarding operational theory—just follow the assembly instructions and let it go at that.

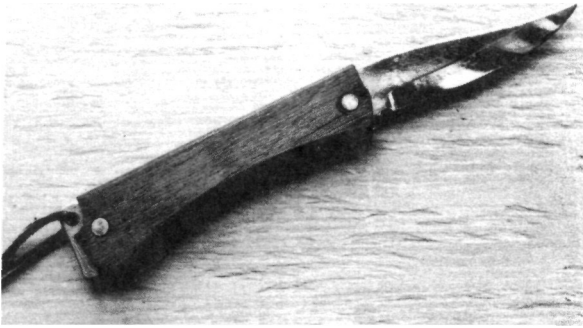


Use a hammer to set the rivets.

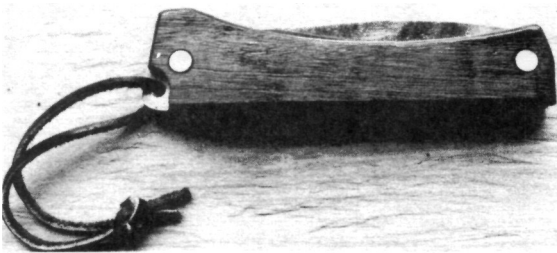
Instead of rivets, these straight-line kits use a small screw and nut. Everything fits nicely in place and is locked in position when the screw is cinched up. Once assembled, one may wonder a design so complex works at all.

Several knife companies have evolved that now sell nothing but switchblade and gravity knife kits. The most aggressive of these is currently distributing a 27-page, full-color catalog listing over thirty different kits. Their selection of butterfly knives, belt knives, and locking folders is excellent. Prices range from around \$7.45 to \$39.95 for an extremely nice fulcrum level switchblade with polished wood grips. For \$49.95, they offer a completely screw-assembled backspring lock stiletto with ridiculously gaudy red plastic grips!

As evidenced by the increased activity seen in trad-



Pull-string knife, of the type the author used to free himself from rope entanglement.



Pull-string design switchblade completed from kit.

ing post-type papers, a number of new companies are trying their hand at this business. Given the state of our federal, state, and municipal laws, plus the transient nature of many of these companies, it would be counterproductive to list addresses here. Members of

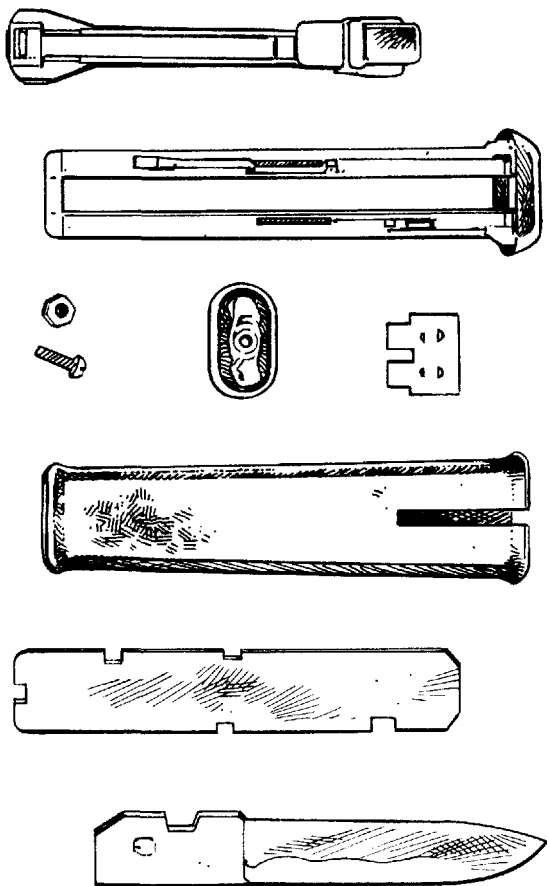
the mainstream knife-seller fraternity gleefully predict that new laws will soon be enacted prohibiting interstate shipment of these kits. While this is certainly possible, it does not seem likely. Knowledgeable observers see little public agitation and outcry related to gang warfare employing switchblade kit knives. The general public seems educated about youth gangs, but probably longs for the good old days when rumbles were carried out with knives and bicycle chains as opposed to MAC-10s and CAR-15s. The sour-grapes attitude of the old-line knife dealers may be nothing more than wishful thinking.

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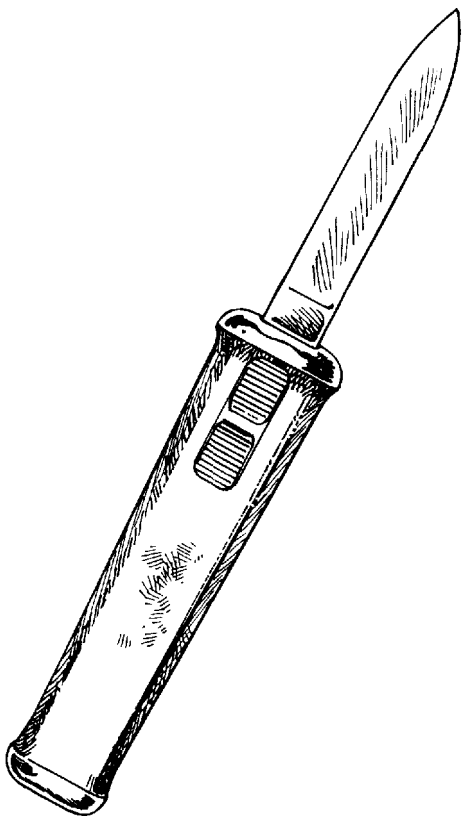
My little pull-string switchblade made from a cheap Mexican kit recently turned an ugly situation into just another work day in the mountains of Colorado. The kit itself was had for a mere \$2.00 extra as a bonus for ordering over \$30.00 worth of other kits from a hard-charging, fast-promoting knife company. It became my custom to carry the knife on its lanyard hooked to my suspenders with a large safety pin.

Greasy yellow mud squished out of the soles of our Vibram boots as we walked the log deck to the Skagit GT-3 line skidder. Our task for the day was an ugly one that the rest of the lumbering crew gladly left for our doing. Both the heavy 7/8-inch skyline cable and the 5/8-inch running line were dangerously worn. I threw the skyline clutch in neutral and hooked the cables to the bumper of our 3/4-ton pickup. We pulled the heavy line off the drum, strung out along the soggy logging road.

All went well until I went to sleep at the switch,



Kit parts for straight-line knife.



Straight-line knife, assembled from kit.

allowing the truck to not only unspool the old cable, but to pull it off the drum and out over the boom pulley onto the ground. As a result, our only recourse was to climb the boom and, using a heavy piece of new sisal rope, thread it out through the cable run so that we could pull the new cable back into the machine.

Our new cable lay wound on wooden spools in the back of the pickup. I climbed back onto the line skidder and started pulling the rope by hand, trying to snake the new 7/8-inch cable through the pulleys. A helper fed the cable off the spool from the pickup backed below the boom.

I wrapped the rope around my arm, leaning with all my weight into the task in an attempt to get the cable threaded through the machine. Perhaps twenty feet had passed through the pulleys when, without warning, several loops sprung off the spool, pitching my helper out of the truck into the soft mud.

Impact from the spring-like cable jerked the rope violently upward, jerking me off the machine. In an instant, I was hanging suspended with the new rope cutting viciously into my chest and stomach. Even through the heavy work jacket—my weight dangling five feet up in midair wrapped round and round with the tough new rope—the situation was very uncomfortable.

It seemed as though the rope might slip, allowing a loop of the new sisal to wind up around my neck. There was no time to even bite off my glove. My right arm was in the wrap but, using my free left arm, I was able to pull the knife loose from my suspenders, opening and locking it. The knife was virtually new, having cut nothing more serious than some lengths of twine until that morning.

Reaching over to the right, I cut one of the ropes that

held me. I could barely see what I was cutting. It was not the tighter of the two, but severing it seemed to remove the imminent danger of hanging myself. The remaining rope started to unwind, dumping me unceremoniously into the greasy mud below. So as not to cause additional problems with the open knife, I threw it as far as I could before falling to the ground. Although we spent a long time looking, we never found it. We later discovered that the only safe way to pull the cable was to double the rope around the winch drum, drawing it through in this manner.

It was a good lesson illustrating the need for working men to keep a one-handed knife close at hand. For the foreseeable future, switchblade kits are the only reasonable means by which this need can be met.

Chapter 9

Care and Maintenance

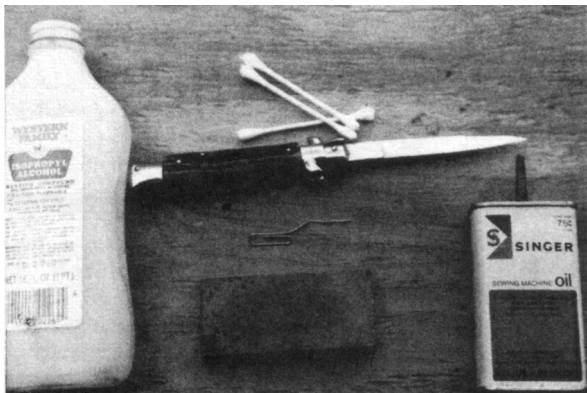
My fifteen-year-old brother carefully set cotton swabs down on a towel laid out on the kitchen table. Reaching into his jeans pocket, he withdrew a bone-handle forester's switchblade and snapped it open. Carefully, ever so lovingly, he worked on the fine stone until the blade was sharp enough to easily shave the hair from his forearm. He dipped a cotton swab in a bottle of alcohol. Along with a bent paper clip, he worked every bit of dirt and grime out of the pin-lock hole at the base of the blade.

Keeping one's switchblade sparkling clean and in excellent repair is very important (especially if the blade is one of the tools of your trade). Start by checking the main spring. It is the heart of the machine and often the first part of the knife to go. Other common parts that wear quickly are the switch safety or stop, the blade lock pins, block lock hole, and—worst of all—the blade pivot pin.

Pivot pins often become worn, causing the blade to slop around. Once this starts to occur, it is tough to get the locking mechanism to properly hold the blade open or closed. It may be necessary to silver solder the old hole shut and redrill a new one. The old pivot pin can be taken out with a good drill press and sharp bit. Occasionally, an especially adept craftsman may attempt

this with hand tools, but usually with little success.

Cutting out the soft body rivet pins with a drill press is not particularly tricky. Take off the head and punch the remainder out or drill the whole pin out. Finding replacement rivets can be very time consuming and difficult, especially if one lives in a rural area. Start by asking knife dealers, knife repair shops, or locksmiths, or check hobby shops and good old-fashioned, full-line hardware shops. Brass and rod stock can be purchased from which to cut and make new rivets.



Switchblades must be kept clean under difficult circumstances or they will not remain reliable.

Replacement blades are usually impossible to find. Either rob one from a conventional knife and rebuild it or salvage one from a junk switchblade. If this is not possible, the old one must be rebuilt.

Occasionally, replacement springs can be secured from larger knife houses. Those that handle kits seem more likely to have springs. In many cities, locksmiths also work on knives. They or the skilled hobbyist can make replacement springs from flat spring stock purchased from good hardware or hobby shops. Homemade, nonstandard springs must be cut, bent, and polished to fairly severe tolerances before they will work properly. We often did the job in our farm shop, but not without much accompanying anguish.

Many problems are caused by dirty pants pockets. Apparently, more dirt and grime reside in this spot than one would imagine. In this instance, the blade retaining hole fills up and won't engage the locking pins or the blade itself gets sticky and won't pivot in the bolster. An old toothbrush and some Hoppe's gun cleaning solvent will usually take care of this situation.

At times, dirt will not slow or clog the spring mechanism but will plug the safety lock button. The narrow slit cut in the handle for the safety to move in is an easy victim of pocket grime. When this got especially bad, we cleaned our knives in the ultrasonic pressure oil bath in the shop. After this sort of treatment, the entire knife must be thoroughly washed out with alcohol or oleum; otherwise it collects dirt like a magnet.

One of the more difficult problems owners are likely to face is broken handles. A dab of superglue or epoxy might work, or it may be necessary to make new handles. This is generally not as difficult as it sounds. Those with a band saw and belt sander have an easier time of it but, after taking out the rivets with a drill press, the job can be done with hand tools if necessary. In the case of broken grips, it might even be possible to clip the pins with a side cutter to avoid any need for a

drill press. The toughest job is milling the long, thin slot for the safety.

New grips can be purchased in the rough from knife parts supply houses or simply cut from a slab of bone, cow horn, or piece of walnut. Knife parts suppliers advertise in *Knife World*, Box 3395, Knoxville, Tennessee 37927. A sample copy of this helpful magazine can be ordered for \$1.00.

Some well-cleaned, well-oiled switchblades can open *too* fast, causing the blade to bounce back to half cock. As one quickly discovers, a half-cocked switchblade is worth very little. At times, the main pivot pin is adjustable and can be tightened up a bit. However, most makers use simple rivets for main pivot pins. These rivets can be set a bit tighter, or one can clean all of the oil and grease out of the pivot head in a usually unsuccessful attempt to slow things down. Inventive designs have been proposed to handle such problems, but the buying public has generally decided that adding bumpers and shock absorbers makes the knives needlessly complex. Examples of these types of knives are now collector's items.

The much more common problem is a blade that opens too slowly. In this case, it is best to begin where my brother started. Take cotton swabs and a bottle of alcohol or Hoppe's gun-cleaning solvent. Work the wet swabs in under the spring into the blade lock holes, around the bolster, and wherever else dirt and rust could accumulate. Most owners are surprised to see the amount of dirt and grime that comes rolling out of their knives. It may be necessary to dribble a small amount of alcohol into the switch to flush out the lint and dirt obstructing movement of the release button.

Switchblades definitely take more maintenance and

care than regular knives. On the other hand, no switchblade built today rivals the quality of top-of-the-line conventional knives made by knife makers.

Many people believe there is a market niche for an extremely well-made sportsman's knife that is also a switchblade. In spite of years of searching, the author has not found a really good, well-made, rugged automatic knife—not in Germany, Italy, Austria, Mexico, or Thailand.

Chapter 10

How to Use Switchblades

Two seemingly conflicting axioms must always guide owners who want to be effective users of switchblade knives. These guidelines are not contradictory, as those who take a minute or two to reflect will quickly discover. The guidelines address slightly different situations, although, like overlapping circles of black, they may at times address similar issues.

Areas in which the circles overlap are the common ground that most switchblade users—including survivalists, hunters, outdoorsmen, and "action career" workers—find that they share with owners who fancy switchblades as a self-defense tool.

Axiom One says that effective users who rely on switchblades must absolutely, always, under every conceivable circumstance, keep their knives close at hand. This rule is based on the truism that a person carrying a switchblade in a tight, inaccessible Levi pocket, zipped jacket pocket, or similar place, might as well have his knife on the moon when things are going in the tub. At the moment of extreme need, the knife has to be easily accessible with either hand.

Because this is so very true, effective switchblade users tend to run through an amazing number of different knives lost out of one's pocket, dropped in the lake, etc. When I was much younger, I carried the same knife

in the loose, open pocket of a pair of coveralls for three to four years. This has got to be the absolute, all-time world record. On reading this, the people from Guinness will probably call.

It is far more common for an owner to replace his knife every two or three months. In that regard, switchblade sellers have always been absolutely, thoroughly in love with the real, dyed-in-the-wool users of their products. They know that under normal circumstances that person will be back several times each year for replacement knives. They also know that thoroughly committed users are junkies who must have their spring-activated blades. Once committed, it is tough to wean these people away from their one-hand knives. No matter what the price, these people have to have a switchblade.

Additionally, switchblade junkies are not reluctant to purchase the very best, most costly models. They know their lives, limbs, and fingers could easily be at stake.

Perhaps the best place to carry a switchblade is in a loose, open rear pants pocket where it can be reached with reasonable speed and ease with either hand. Another excellent location is in a jacket or shirt breast pocket or in a small, specially made belt pouch. Depending on the circumstances, I have carried a switchblade under a jacket pinned to my suspenders, in a right, front overall pocket or, more commonly, opposite my wallet on top of a handkerchief in a rear pants pocket. It is vitally important that a confirmed user carry his knife in the same place for extended periods of time. Effective day-to-day use of a switchblade must become more than habit, it must be instinct. Those in high-risk action careers who genuinely need switchblades as tools should start developing life-saving habits related to the

method and place in which they carry their knives.

Axiom Two is especially significant for those who intend to use their blades for self-defense. This class of owner must absolutely and unequivocally accept the truth that, at a minimum, 96 percent of a switchblade's effectiveness is lost if one's antagonist is even remotely aware that an instant knife is involved. This rule relates back to the old street philosophy that the proper defensive action when threatened is to run *from* a man with a knife and *toward* a man with a gun.

Switchblades are universally effective against an antagonist by virtue of the fact that they appear on the scene as if by magic. One instant a person appears to be completely defenseless, the next there is a wicked, shiny steel blade at hand, obviously capable of doing incredible damage. Users in these circumstances must carry their knives in a handy, easy-to-access pocket or pouch. But this is not all it takes.

Effective users must be sure that their opponents have no idea that they are armed until the very instant the blow is delivered. The bullshit about snapping the knife in a person's face to intimidate them is nothing but bullshit.

The best example of this truth was dramatized in the extremely popular movie, *Crocodile Dundee*, when the hood opened his switchblade in the faces of the hero and heroine. "Give him your wallet," she screamed, "he has a knife!"

"That ain't no knife," he responded. "*This* is a knife."

Using literary license, Old Crocodile instantaneously had his short sword in hand, putting the hood on the defense.

Anybody who flips a switchblade simply to try to impress the opposition deserves everything he will get,

ranging from instant death to a long stay in the hospital. Up until the instant the knife is used, it should be held in one's hand, concealed by the fingers that grip it.

Switchblade users should condition themselves to stand calmly and confidently in the face of an antagonist, lashing out only when absolutely necessary at the very last instant. The knife or one's intentions should never be exposed until it is too late for one's opponent to do anything but suffer the consequences.

Practice opening the knife on the down stroke. Plan to do as much damage as possible cutting as deeply and as quickly as physically possible. Keep the old Roman gladiator theory constantly in mind: Any wound on an opponent, leaving you unscathed, presents one with an impossible-to-overcome advantage. All that is then needed is to wait, wearing down one's opponent until the final coup-de-grace can be administered.



A hyper punk, late for a date by reason of his own sloth, runs a stoplight and crashes into the corner of your new car. He jumps out, tire iron in hand, ready to make you pay for the impertinence of being in his way when he was in a hurry.

You select your switchblade rather than a tire iron, holding it tightly in your hand while you stand with arms crossed, hiding the knife from the punk's view. The punk fumes and curses, working himself into a frenzy. As he lurches, you open your knife, instantly inflicting a deep cut through the guy's upper arm. In return, you suffer a deflected blow off your shoulder.

Knife (and even most pistol) wounds are seldom immediately debilitating. Experience shows that the

advent of copious blood unsettles most antagonists remarkably well.

You wait, and the guy's shirt is drenched with blood. Spectators start to gather. You get in your car and, finding it drivable, simply back it to the curb where you trade the switchblade for a conventional clasp knife with a three-inch blade.

When the police come, the punk is still standing there with tire iron in hand. They cart him off to the hospital and you convince the officers of the legitimacy of your situation.

In the event that there are two or more opponents, it may be possible to inflict multiple wounds before the other side gets organized. Many knife wounds are not incapacitating. Outnumbered smart users may elect to combine the knife and gun street logic with a gladiator mentality. Make what cuts you can and then run like hell.

After things have settled down again and the switchblade user has time to reflect, he can decide with what seriousness the law will hold his recent use of a one-handed knife. If he wants to indulge in the Bernard Goetz syndrome, he may turn himself in to the authorities. If one does, the next question is, "Do I admit to using a switchblade, or do I bring along a conventional knife and claim it was the weapon?"

Many switchblades are small enough to be hidden in a person's hand. If not by this method, it may be expedient to deploy from an accessible pocket, always waiting until the most opportune time to strike.

Always keep in mind that owners who carelessly

open and close or otherwise display their knives in front of others are fools. Should the knife ever be needed to settle a dicey situation, one's attackers may very well be forewarned, even if they haven't seen their opponent in months. I hope that readers will reflect on this simple logic, holding it to be gospel until the moment of desperate need arises. Then, superior logic, training, equipment, and skill will carry the day.

Survivalists and hunters will find that their needs are satisfied by having a switchblade always close at hand. Situations absolutely demanding the use of a quick, one-hand knife are often few and far between. If one is in an action job and a situation does arise shortly after acquiring a switchblade, it is a certain guarantee that the owner will never, ever be without one again.

Conclusion

It is obvious that I am much taken with switchblade knives. I started using them before their status became clouded and was fortunate enough to be able to continue to purchase them during extensive overseas travel. There have been numerous times when they certainly saved limbs and probably lives, and there are times when carrying and using one caused a fair degree of embarrassment.

Securing switchblades for permanent residents of this country is a problem. However, the situation has improved recently. Many dealers offer kits, and the occasional seller has fully assembled examples if one searches vigilantly. About all that can be said is that planning ahead is necessary for those who want to carry switchblades and wish to buy them.

Admittedly, the knives are often lost by dedicated users. In that regard, ownership is expensive. All dedicated users I know feel that any price they have been asked to pay is reasonable.

The other problem is maintenance. Our pockets, if my experience is any indication, must always be full of crud, since so much of it accumulates and must be removed from a switchblade at regular intervals.

The design of these knives is fascinating and could make a study in itself. I still run into models that I can-

not open or close because the design is so obscure. Not all are listed here, but users will find that most of them are.

Switchblade laws are a jungle or, as one noted barrister remarked, "the law is an ass." There is no set advice that one can give, except that you should know what is happening in your own region and then adjust your conduct to accommodate the law.

Don't flash your blade and do learn to use it effectively in an emergency situation.

Other than those obvious nerds who want to berate me for liking switchblades, I would like to hear from readers who have located a unique design or some new source of supply.