

Sailor's Knives: 14 High-End Blades Tested

The Boye Dendritic Cobalt 'Prophet' tops the scoring, followed by three excellent models from Benchmade

We last tested knives for the sailor in the August 15, 1993 issue. Most of the knives tested then are still on the market—not surprising in view of their largely traditional nature. What has changed, however, is a broadening of the scope of what's considered appropriate to the mariner's use. In addition, some newer materials promise to resist, and in one case to provide, absolute immunity from corrosion.

In his 1953 book, *The Arts of the Sailor*, Hervey Garrett Smith describes an incident on a 33-foot ketch which shaped his thoughts about nautical knives:

"After a long beat to windward in a light northeasterly I came about and headed for home, the booms broad off and running dead before it. Suddenly, with hardly five seconds' warning, we were struck by the most vicious line squall—caught in the worst possible position—dead before the wind and in total darkness. In an instant the boat rounded to and broached—with the boom ends in the water, the sails flogging wildly and every sheet, halyard and line hopelessly fouled or washed overboard. I knew that the canvas had to come off in a hurry. I clawed my way forward, yanked out my sheath knife and cut the main and jib halyards just above the belaying pins. After what seemed like an hour I got the sails nearly all the way down, and slowly the boat righted to a less critical angle of heel. I gave silent thanks for the friend who but recently had given me that sheath knife, for without it I doubt if I could have got the sails off in time to prevent capsizing. I learned many things that night,

not the least of which was the importance of a proper knife."

Were he to prepare for that squall today, Smith would no doubt delight in the current market's rich offerings. He would be impressed with how well some folding knives can do what he did with his sheath knife, and how current blades can outperform his plain-edge sheepfoot blade. Yes, you can afford to be choosy in selecting the tool on which your life may well depend.

The Ideal Mariner's Knife

Based on criteria explained below, an ideal knife will cut keenly "out of the box" (and keep on cutting), and its edge will be restorable without great effort. It will be light, easy to get to, and quick to bring to a task. It will either be reasonably priced, or so delightful and durable that you'll consider its high cost worthwhile. You won't have to worry how close it comes to your compass. It will resist rust and pitting despite exposure to salt and humidity. Some of the knives are available with an optional coating, but they are dark and make the blade harder to see at night.

Evaluation Criteria

Cutting ability, portability and deployability are strongly interrelated



Above: A sharp knife is essential in an emergency.

and were all assigned the highest value in our weighted rating system (see chart on page 26).

Cutting. The purpose of a knife is to cut, or as David Boye, maker of one of the knives tested, puts it, "Cutting occurs because the point-of-contact pressure breaks the bonds of cohesion, and parts the heretofore unitary element in the workpiece."

For our cutting tests we started with 3/8" braided Sta-Set X Lite Spectra line (4,400-lb. test). We then cut braided cotton line. We concentrated on rope not just for tradition's sake but because you may have to cut someone out of a tangle in an emergency.

If properly executed, serrated edges clearly outperform plain edges; the point-of-contact pressure is constantly changing, as is the angle of cut. Even the exotic ceramic blade