

*“In my articles, both for France and for Russia, I try as often as possible to quote the knifemakers I am writing about on points that obviously are important for them. Sometimes it is more, sometimes it is less, which is normal: after all I am asking them information related to their knives and for a knife magazine, but not all of them are able to answer in a clear and structured form. But once in a while the biography I receive is so complete and well organized that, for a good part, I only have to translate it in French (for Russia I write in English) and put some structure in it with paragraphs and punctuation. This was obviously the case with T.R. (Tom) Overeynder’s biography and this time I felt like leaving it as it was, with only a little chronology reorganizing for readers not always familiar with USA dates and facts. And so, here it is, in Tom’s own words.”*

*Francis E. ANGLADE.*

### American Knifemaker T.R. OVEREYNDER... by himself.

#### Family’s history.

Turning the clock back a few years, well a lot of years: I was born in 1945, some 66 years ago. My Dad had been a Pilot in the Army Air Corps: his job was to fly fighters from the aircraft manufactures or other bases to locations where the planes were needed. Some of the planes were going to Russia: the P-39, P-63 and some P-47's, these planes he flew to Alaska and the Russians took them from there. A few years after the Second World War ended, my Dad moved the family to the Texas Rio Grande Valley and he became an agricultural pilot. We lived in a small town, our house was on the city limit border, which gave me the opportunity to be outside a lot, and as a kid I would visit the local hardware store, which had a great selection of knives. However, not having much money, a friend and I would buy a few very large nails and we would build a fire and heat the spikes up red-hot and “forge” our own very crude knives. Of course they were not very good, but they were knives nonetheless. We would wrap friction tape around wood handles for grips. So I guess it would be fair to say that it was my very first experience as a Knifemaker. Later on I had a pocketknife, which was always with me wherever I went, even at school where we played mumble peg with our knives, no one ever got hurt or threatened anyone else, and no one ever got into trouble for bringing a “weapon” to school. Boy, you would go to jail today! The rules are such that a kid can’t even bring a pairing knife to school to peel an apple. What a world, what a world...

Around 1964 my Dad was flying at Mercedes Flying Service where I met R.D. (Doyal) Nolen, one of the owners of the flying service. I would hang out at the airport and watch Doyal making knives. He was one of the first modern day era knifemakers, and a few years after that (in the 70’s) he was one of the first members of the Knifemakers Guild. I did not know that until I visited in 1980 my first Guild show, which was then in Kansas City, Missouri. I was very surprised to see him there, as it had been about 16 years since I had seen him. I don’t know what, if any, my exposure to his knifemaking influenced me.

#### Professional career and into knifemaking.

My skills came easy for me because I've always been interested in mechanical things and how they work. In 1965 I applied for a job with L.T. Vought, then a major aircraft manufacturer in Dallas, Texas, as an aircraft assembler. Uncle Sam, who sent me a "greeting letter", soon interrupted this. For those who don't know, that is a draft notice. I was to be drafted into the Army. Not wanting to be a "ground pounder", I enlisted to get into Army aviation. I had learned to fly at the local airport and wanted to fly helicopters. I passed all the requirements and aptitude test and was told that there were no class dates currently available and that I would be sent to aircraft Maintenance School where I became a helicopter repair mechanic. This was a guarantee to go to Vietnam. So, in June of 1967 I went to Vietnam as a helicopter crew chief/flight engineer. I made my way to the Mekong Delta town of Vinh Long, where I flew with the 175<sup>th</sup> Air Assault Co for three months, then on to Canto for the remainder of my one-year tour of duty as the crew chief for the group command of the 164<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group. I was recognized for my service there earning 37 air medals of which one was with the V device for Valor, the Distinguished Flying Cross, Army Commendation Medal, and Vietnam Service Medal. At the end of my tour orders were cut for me to go to Warrant Officer's candidate school and primary helicopter flight school. Well, by this time I had a LOT of exposure to getting killed, so I resigned from the flight program knowing that in 11 months I would be returning to Vietnam as a helicopter pilot. Things were not going well with the war and I felt it best to not press my luck. So, I finished my remaining time state side and got out of the Army after my three-year enlistment was up. I went back to work for LTV, which was a great place to work. While there, I changed career paths, becoming a general machinist in 1978, which by the way has certainly helped having that back ground to start my knife making career. I retired from Vought Aircraft in December of 2001 and became a full time Knifemaker.

I became seriously interested in making knives as a result of seeing a knife my father-in-law had made in 1977. It was quite a well-made copy of a Buck Ranger folding knife. Bud, my father-in-law, was a first class tool and die maker who could make anything. The knife captured my interest enough to get a pattern from Bud and I set out to make my first folding knife which had a titanium frame with ebony scales and 440-C blade which I heat treated with a torch and oil quenched it. I had always been interested in anything mechanical, so it seemed to be natural that my interest grew in knives, pocketknives in particular. I began to do some research to see what I could find about handmade knives and was surprised to learn that interest in handmade knives was gaining recognition from "Gun World Magazine" and that there were about 300 makers in the U.S. at that time. This newfound information prompted me to make 6 knives to be used as Christmas gifts to my Dad, brothers, and a couple other family members. By then I was really hooked and the knives were well received.

### Equipment and materials.

I ordered more materials from one of the only suppliers at that time, Bob Skirmisher. Bob helped a lot of Knifemakers and was always advancing materials to many makers, and

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some of them probably still owe his estate money. I bought my first grinder from Bob, a Square Wheel 2" X 72" belt grinder made by Olympic, now Wilton Co. I think I paid \$ 650 [bucks] for that machine and I thought I would never get my moneys worth out of it. That was thirty-three years ago and it's still

going strong, however it has had a few upgrades, one of the best improvements was changing the single speed motor to a DC variable speed. Now, that was a great improvement and I would not have a machine without a speed controller. I have two Square Wheel grinders and a horizontal grinder that I built from scratch. The horizontal grinder is very handy and has a variety of small contact wheels and a flat platen. Other machines I use are a Mitsui surface grinder, a Bridgeport milling machine, three floor model drill presses, a small bench model that I keep with a tapping head in for doing tooling work, a high speed Servo sensitive drill press which is very handy for drilling holes through many handle materials. The high speed is a great asset when drilling mother of pearl to help prevent chipping. I have a Gorton P2-3 pantograph, which is used to do inlay work and two-dimensional milling. This machine is completely hand guided and I use it at a reduced ratio of 2:1 meaning that the copy templates are two times as large as the final part. This requires a lot of time to hand make all the templates and associated tooling. I do all my own heat-treating and have three heat-treat furnaces that are digitally controlled. I also test every part for Rockwell hardness for outstanding quality control. Heat-treating is probably the most important process in making a good knife. If the hardness is too hard the blade will be brittle and can break, if too soft the knife will not hold an optimal edge.

I also have two metal cutting band saws and a diamond band saw, which is used to cut stone, I cut inlays oversize to allow final sizing on the pantograph. It is also used to saw mother of pearl and carbon fiber as these materials produce dust that is harmful to breath. For that matter nearly everything we do in the knife shop is hazardous in many ways, things are sharp, hot or dusty or all of the above.

Steels: I have used most of the top of the line steels that are popular in the knife industry. My favorite at this time is CTS-XHP, which is made by Carpenter Steel Company, which is one of the leading steel companies in the U.S. I also like Crucible CPM-D2, it's not 100% stainless, but it's a very good material and has very good corrosion resistance. I like to run the hardness on both up to 61 – 62 RC. I like 154-CM and ATS-34 for springs at a hardness of 43 to 48 RC. I also use some Damascus, but have my reservations about how it would actually perform as a good cutting tool: mostly people like Damascus for the aesthetic value. I also like BG-42 as blade steel.

Frame materials: I use 416 stainless and heat-treat it to a hardness of 24 – 26 RC. This enhances the machineability of this material and it cuts cleaner, as well, also, engravers love it at this hardness. I have made a few knives with 18K gold frames and bolsters, this is quite expensive in today's gold market, however, it will only go up and I think there will always be collectors that will invest in very high end work. I do use a lot of 18k gold for shield inlays and for handle pins, this really dresses up a traditional knife.

Handle materials: I like very stable materials such as pearl and rock for high-grade interframe knives. For traditional style knives I still like pearl, jigged bone, and Sambar stag. I do jig and dye some of my own bone. I love antique Remington bone, but I'm

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about out of it and the supply has been used up from the few material suppliers that had any for sale. No one has ever been able to match the dye color of Remington bone.

Stone inlays: doing lapidary work requires a little knowledge about different minerals and how to work them. I use a Raytech diamond-slabbing saw that is used to saw rough rocks into usable slabs. I think knife makers that work with stone have a large rock garden as many of the specimens we cut have cracks and faults that render them unusable. The intriguing things about stone inlays are the near infinite colors and patterns that occur in rocks as nature formed them millions of years ago. Working

with rock is very labor intensive and requires a lot of patience, but the end result is quite pleasing.

### Various information and achievements.

I made a variety of knives mostly folding knives, both traditional multi-bladed knives and lock-back folders of my own design. I also have made collector grade Bowie knives and a good many hunting knives.

In 1981 I decided to join the Knifemaker's Guild and I have not ever missed a show. During those early years it was very important to be a member of the Guild, and becoming a member of the most elite group of knifemakers in the world was quite an ego trip. The knifemakers Guild is still [*one of*] the finest groups of craftsmen the world has ever known, and the level of work being produced has never been better anywhere anytime. Nor, has there ever been a time when information and supplies were as available as today. This has made it possible for new makers to advance at a very rapid rate.

My philosophy as a Knifemaker: I have always worked to achieve the very best product that my skills can muster. As a maker with many years experience my skills have advanced over the years to a level that my work is recognized by both collectors and my peers throughout the U.S. and many other countries. This is very gratifying and is a great incentive to always improve and raise the bar to the next level.

Knife making has been good to me allowing me to enjoy some of the fruits of life and has been a good supplement to my retirement. I do three or four shows a year and always enjoy meeting and visiting with friends and customers from all over the world. I've sold knives in the following countries: Argentina, United States, Canada, England, France, Germany, Holland, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and Russia.

I have been recognized with the following awards: The Beretta Award in 1986 for outstanding achievements in handcrafted cutlery, Best Folder at the 2002 Spirit of Steel Show, Best Collaboration at the Knifemaker's Guild Show on an engraved piece with Joe Mason in 2006, Best of Show and Best Art Knife in 2008 at the Knifemaker's guild Show, Best Folder at the 2009 Knifemaker's Guild Show, also Best Collaboration at the 2010 Blade Show on a pair of daggers engraved by Brian Hochstrat.

### Some personal little notes.

Hobbies: I have had many other interests over the past years. I had learned to fly as a very young schoolboy at the age of 16. After my return to the States from Vietnam I used

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my G.I. educational benefits to get my private and commercial flying licenses, along with instrument and multi-engine rating. I never have made a nickel as a pilot but I did own and fly a very nice Pitts Special aerobatic full-scale biplane for 5 years in the early 90's. I had also built and flew Radio Controlled models in the mid 70's. I got out of RC and started knife making.

In the 80's I did a lot of skeet shooting which I really enjoyed. About 6 years ago I was at one of the

local airports and they were having an air show and there were a few large-scale Radio Controlled airplanes that really impressed me. These things were 40% size of the full-scale airplanes they were models of. I got back into RC. I had to have the big ones. I'm currently flying a model of a Russian Yak 55sp, which was developed by the Russians to compete in world-class aerobatic competition. Did I say big? Well, it has a wingspan of 3,30 m and also a length of 3 meters, and an Italian 4 cylinder 220cc engine made by Mintor. I fly it when I have free time out of the shop. I also enjoy fishing and shooting guns and traditional longbow target shooting.

In closing I would like to extend my appreciation to all my loyal customers and supporters who have enjoyed my work the world over. Thank you.

T. R. OVEREYNDER.