

My KaBar

This came from John Odom .. via Facebook. John.. thanks for sharing this story --Jim

This is the story of a knife. Why tell this story? Because this particular knife had a very interesting history. My family moved to the Philippines in 1947. My folks were to be missionaries there. We arrived on October 8, at pier 7 Manila. (Before the war, that was one of the longest and most magnificent passenger ship piers in the world.)

Within a few days we were taken into Manila and shown the Quiapo market, and Philippine Cold Stores, where the missionary wives did their grocery shopping. On one of the first trips, but not the first, I asked Mother if I could do some shopping. I found a stall where military surplus equipment was sold, and I bought a USMC Ka-Bar fighting knife and a canteen and pistol belt. Mother was not happy about the knife. I explained that a knife is good or bad depending on what it is used for. The USMC Ka-Bar was an ugly knife with a gray-green dull finish, called Parkerizing that was intended to not reflect light in the jungle. It is a big knife with a 6 7/8" blade and an overall length of eleven and three-quarter inches. The handle is 5". The photo below is from their 2009 catalog, and is of a better looking knife, without the rough grey-green Parkerizing.

I wore the knife on the pistol belt when traveling in the backcountry, but that was not suitable in civilization. The knife came with a reinforced plastic sheath with clips for the pistol belt. It was not suitable for carrying the knife any other way. When we went to a shoe factory to get shoes, I asked the manager for some leather, and made a sheath with a metal clip for my pants and belt. Then most of the time I kept it in the small of my back, inside my pants, and covered by my shirttail. I kept my promise to Mother, and never used it as a weapon.

We soon went to Baguio for vacation. I had great fun with the knife digging into caves the Japanese had used during the war. I dug up a lot of burned Japanese knives with my Ka-Bar.

Another time we went to a small regional meeting at a church located inside the crater of Taal volcano. This volcano has a large crater with a lake in it. In the lake is an island with a crater with a lake, and in it is the active vent. There are many hot springs in the area. The soil in the crater is very rich, and there are several villages surrounding Lake Taal. Daddy was to preach Friday night and Sabbath morning and afternoon. The "hotel" was very primitive with no bathing facilities. We

went swimming in the lake to bathe for Sabbath. There was a raft anchored a little way out from the beach, which was very black volcanic sand. Even though the water was clear one could not see the black bottom. At the raft location the water was about 10 feet deep. Daddy was sitting on the raft, talking with one of the other ministers, and the sun was getting lower and lower.

The local brethren became concerned that the visiting ministers would soon be swimming on Sabbath, and not ready for the evening meeting. They asked a little boy who was swimming there to swim out, pull the anchor of the raft and tow the raft in, hoping that would get the attention of the ministers. He did. Mother and I were dressed for Sabbath, and standing on the beach. When the raft bumped the beach Daddy looked up and saw the sun almost down. He said "Look, Banaag, the sun is almost down! I'll take one more dive. And he dove into the shallow water about 3 feet deep. When he came up he cried "Help, I'm paralyzed!" Elder Banaag held him floating there. Some wanted to carry him out but mother said NO! Don't bend his back! I saw a barbershop facing the beach with the door standing open I ran there, pulling out the Ka-Bar which I used to remove the barbershop door. I will never forget the barber's totally astonished look, standing there over a man's half-shaved soapy face with his razor and towel in hand! I carried the door out to Daddy and the men floated him onto it and we then transported Daddy to the hotel, and the next day to the Sanitarium in Manila. There were many miracles involved, but although Daddy made a pretty good recovery, he was unable to carry a full pack after he broke his back. I carried double whenever we traveled.

The next year when we went to Baguio, Daddy volunteered to go to a remote village in the mountains and baptize some people who had been listening to the Voice of Prophecy and studying the correspondence lessons. The trip was supposed to last three days, maybe four. It was December and the typhoon season was past. In those days the roads in the mountain Province were mostly one-lane tracks along the steep mountainsides, with control gates every few kilometers where one vehicle would wait for those coming the other way. We stayed the first at Bontoc. While at Bontoc, a typhoon came in and it began to rain, and rain and rain! We left the next day and soon came to a place where the road was washed out, and when the bus backed up, we found the road was washed out behind us as well. It was about a thousand feet down the mountainside to the bottom. Daddy decided that we had come this far; he would not disappoint the people who wanted to be baptized. We would walk on out on the downhill side, rather than walking back up to Bontoc. We were gone three weeks, not three days. What an adventure! The Ka-Bar was with me all the way! I used it to open cans, cut food, cut walking sticks and for every other imaginable thing. There was a large group of about thirty travelers walking our way.

I won't tell of all the adventures, of the lovely Igorot maiden, or the Ifugao headhunters just arrested by the constabulary for killing an American, I'll stick to the knife.

After days of walking, fording 26 small streams knee deep or deeper, and exhausting most of our food, we finally reached the river, and the rain stopped. The ferry had washed away. The rain-swollen river was like a great torrent of debris filled brown water with boiling waves. We found that sanitation in the "hotel" there was very poor. (That is another story.) We stayed one night and decided to eat breakfast and pray on the riverbank. While we watched the sun rise we ate our last food, a can of

sardines, and were wondering what we could do.

While eating, a Kalinga warrior approached us, and in quite good English, he asked if we wanted to cross the river. Daddy said, Yes, of course, that is why we are here, but there is no way, with the ferry washed away. The Kalinga said he knew how to cross the river, but couldn't do it alone. The other travelers were not willing to help him. Daddy said: "What do we need to do?"

He proposed building a bamboo raft and braiding a rope of vines, which secured to a tree and the raft would take it across the river and keep it from being swept away. He assured us he knew how. We started to cut bamboo and vines. He used his Hinalung and I used my Ka-Bar. The Hinalung is a very interesting tool/weapon. It is a leaf-shaped double-edged blade with a forged socket handle covered with braided rattan. It can be used as a knife, or put on a shaft and used as a spear. He carried his as a spear, and pulled it off to use it as a knife. The Kalinga men wore only a G-string and a little hat. They carried their spear and a little over the shoulder pouch.

We peeled strips from the outside of the bamboo, and he showed Daddy how to lash the bamboo together with the strips. I cut and split vines with the Ka-Bar and he braided them together. We worked all day, with only a few wild guavas for food. We visited and we found he had been a scout for the American forces during the war and had learned English while so employed.

We stayed on the riverbank overnight and at first light. Just before we executed the river-crossing plan, Daddy had prayer, and the Kalinga warrior pulled a bottle of gin from his little pouch and took a big drink. He said The GIs also taught me to drink gin straight! We stripped and put our clothes in the waterproof duffel bag, which we lashed to the middle of the raft. They tied the braided rope around me, and held me against the current by wrapping their end around a tree while I swam across. When I got to the opposite landing I walked upstream and secured the rope to a tree. They secured their end to the raft, climbed on, and pushed off. The current swung the raft exactly to the landing. We bid the Kalinga farewell, and hiked on. For the next three days we had only a few wild guavas for food, and no clean water. Daddy and I would kneel beside a puddle in the road, covered with green scum and wiggling larvae. Daddy would pray, "Thank you Lord for this water, please kill what is in it." We would then dip our cups into the puddle and drink. We got no waterborne diseases.

We met a man with an old Dodge army ambulance, and he gave us a ride. The road was very bad, and he snagged the fuel line on a stub when he went off the road to avoid a washed-out place. I used the Ka-Bar to make little tubes of bamboo, which we connected together with vacuum hose from the windshield wipers and we were able to continue. There were many more adventures including an encounter with the Huks, the American-killing Communist rebels, before we finally reached an airport, and flew home to Mother, several weeks late.

I used the Ka-Bar for everything. Opening cans, cutting papaya, and pineapple, opening cocoanuts, you name it. Even Mother got used to using it in her cooking classes. She always gave it an extra washing, though.

In 1952 I went to Mindanao where a new college was being established. I was to work with a government surveyor and survey the boundaries and also lay out the roads and the airstrip. The survey crew consisted of the government surveyor, me as transit man and record keeper, two men to clear sightlines and two to help with the measuring tape. We also had a cook. We spent a week in the jungle. I used the Ka-Bar to help clear the sightlines and for every purpose. The non-forested sections of land were covered with cogon grass well above head height. We had to build Bamboo towers for the survey instruments to see above it.

After the survey, we cut bamboo for construction. Some of the bamboo, growing along the river was so big the Ka-Bar would fit crosswise in the inside diameter of the stalks. Some of these stalks were 200 ft long. We built "Pioneer Hall" a 24-foot square; two story building, entirely of bamboo, except for the roof, which was of Cogon grass thatch. The main bamboo cutting was done with a 24" machete, but I used the Ka-Bar to cut the branches off the bamboo shafts and to split them when required. I was amazed at what the fellows could do with bamboo. I didn't understand the process, but I followed directions.

We then learned that Mr. Bartlett, the manager, was bringing his wife and two little girls, a newborn and a three-year old, we then built a 12-foot square hut for them. I used the Ka-Bar to split the bamboo for the floor and walls of that hut, and for the split bamboo that held the cogon grass for the roof thatch.

I came back to the US for college in 1952. I no longer carried the Ka-Bar, but used it regularly. Many years later, in 1976, the Ka-Bar was on my desk where it was normally used as a letter opener. The building burned, and when I went through the debris, I found the remains of the Ka-Bar. I couldn't bear to throw it away. It had served me well, and seeing it there all rusty with the handle burned off brought a flood of memories. I could not throw it away. I took it home; wire brushed it, wrapped it in an oily shop towel and put it in my dresser.

One day, in early 2007, I told the story of the knife and the barber's door on the forgemagic.com Blacksmiths Forum. I got a message from Bladesmith Glenn Moulton of Bainbridge Georgia offering to rebuild the knife. The offer was accompanied pictures of knives he had built. He obviously had more skill in knives than I had so I took him up on the most generous offer.

While it was on the way to Glenn, I researched the original construction with the help of the original maker, KaBar in Olean, New York. I found that the blade metal was 1095 plain high carbon steel, and that the pommel was secured with a steel pin.

Glenn started work, keeping me up to date with emailed pictures, which are shown with comments below.

Right now, I feel kind of beat up and burned out. I'm looking forward to being made new by my original maker.

Photos follow.....

