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THE TRUTH ABOUT TACTICAL FOLDERS

By Lynn C. Thompson

In his recent article in Petersen's *Combat Knives* magazine, our friend Pat Casico gives a plausible explanation for the meteoric rise of the tactical folder on the knife scene. According to Pat, politically correct commanding officers in our armed forces objected to our service men carrying large, formidable looking sheath knives during the late Desert Storm operation. This lily-livered practice forced enlisted men and front-line officers alike to turn to tactical folders as emergency back-up weapons. Soon, custom knifemakers noticed the increase in demand for self-defense oriented folders. And it wasn't long after that before magazines jumped on the bandwagon and really began to hype the tactical folder.

Now, almost 5 years later, it seems like the only thing you can read about is the tactical folder. Even the gun magazines have finally caught on as just about every photo layout they print has a tactical folder in it somewhere. However, after all this time and just about a jillion articles, one thing is still missing, and that's the truth. No one has yet summoned the courage to write an article that adequately portrays the real strengths, and more importantly the weaknesses, of this type of knife. So, hang onto your hats and open your minds as we set off and explore the real truth about tactical folders.

ADVANTAGES

Innocuous. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the word *innocuous* means "Having no ill effect. Harmless: Lacking distinction: Insipid."

In my opinion the greatest single advantage the tactical folder possesses over the more effective fixed blade sheath knife is its innocuous appearance. You see, a tactical folder, when clipped to the waistband or pocket, is just about invisible to the average person. People just don't look that closely, and even if they did all they would probably notice is the plastic or steel clip of the knife. These days, with just about everyone carrying some type of beeper, buzzer or cellular phone on their belt, a plastic or steel clip just doesn't shout the word *knife* like a leather sheath would.

But, what if someone does notice your tactical folder and makes an inquiry such as, "Is that thing legal?" No problem! It is easy to explain your knife away as merely a handy utility knife you use at work to open boxes and packages. If the person asking is wearing a badge, the same explanation will usually wash since most lockbacks with 4" blades or less are legal to carry in most jurisdictions (check local laws). In California, for example, all folding knives regardless of blade length are legal to carry concealed as long as they are carried in the folded or shut position. The following are several more compelling reasons to carry a tactical folder.

Lightweight

Many people today recognize the need to carry a weapon for self defense on a daily basis but just won't commit to the discomfort and hassle of carrying a heavy caliber pistol, revolver or Bowie knife. Even a 2", air weight .38 spl revolver at 15 ounces or a double-edged Tai Pan dagger at 10 ounces is just too much of a burden to pack all day long. Enter the tactical folder. Tipping the scales at only 3 to 5 ounces, these knives are truly light as a feather and

can be carried virtually every waking moment without the slightest hint of discomfort.

Compact

Another endearing trait of the tactical folder is that it is, without a doubt, one of the most compact weapons money can buy. For example, a typical 5" Tanto point blade will fold up into a package only 5" long by 1 1/2" wide by 1/2" thick. When you think about it, an object this short, thin and flat is a cinch to conceal and will easily fit in just about any pocket, pouch or pack.

Pocket Clip

I doubt that the tactical folding knife would have ever become a big hit with the military or civilian population if it weren't for the invention of the pocket clip. Made of steel or plastic, these ingenious clips were invented by Sal Glesser of Spyderco fame in the early 1980s. Now, just about every tactical folder on the market sports a Glesser-inspired clip of some sort. Why? Well, Sal's pocket clip allows a folding knife to be easily and strongly attached to just about any article of clothing you can think of, from pajamas to bikinis. In fact, the only limit on where you can attach your pocket clip is your imagination, since all it requires is a relatively thin, flat surface for the clip to get a "bite" on. An added benefit of the clip is that it dramatically increases the speed in which one can deploy his tactical folder by offering immediate accessibility without the hassle of fishing into the pocket or unsnapping the flap on a sheath.

One-Handed Opening

The ability to quickly open your tactical folder with one hand via a hole in the blade or thumb stud cannot be overrated. Here's some food for thought. In an emergency you may not have the use of both hands to open your knife. Can you imagine hanging onto a ladder with one hand and trying to open a Swiss Army Knife or Leatherman tool with the other? I'll bet somehow you would end up using your teeth!

How about a self-defense situation? Can you see the psychological advantage of reaching for your tactical folder and snapping its blade open just like a switchblade? Take it from me. This sight can be very intimidating, especially with our 5" blade Gunsite knife. In fact, some people liken it to pulling out a 12-gauge shotgun and racking the slide. Everyone knows you mean business then!

Limited Effectiveness

As Ross Seyfried once said in *Guns and Ammo* magazine, "Anything is better than fingernails." This quote expresses my sentiments exactly. Sure, I'd rather be armed with a Trail Master Bowie or Gorkha Kukri, since I know these big, heavy knives can easily lop off an arm or leg with a single blow. However, if all I have available is a tactical folder, I'm still a heck of a lot better off than if I were totally unarmed. So, let's take a quick look at what the tactical folder has to offer when the chips are down and there is no time or opportunity to employ a larger weapon or heavy caliber firearm.

Slashing Power

First off, let's assume we will be armed with a high quality tactical folder with a strong lock and a 4" blade equipped with a serrated edge. Cold Steel has proven on videotape that a knife like this can, when wielded with skill, sever as much as 1 3/4" of manila



There is no denying the cutting power of a Cold Steel tactical folder. Here Robert Vaughn severs 2" of hemp rope in a single stroke with our 3.4oz Land and Sea Rescue Knife. Besides its obvious rescue potential, this knife makes a terrific low key, politically correct, tactical knife as well. We think every fireman, ambulance driver, EMT, etc., in the world should carry one. It is a life saver.

rope. This graphic illustration of cutting power verifies that a tactical folder can, with a single blow, sever all the major muscle groups of the human body and take a hand off at the wrist.

Stabbing Power

When used to attack soft targets, the stabbing power of a tactical folder is equal, if not greater than, that of a conventional boot knife. How can you say that, you ask? After all, we are talking about a folding knife here. The answer is simple. Most tactical folders utilize a relatively thin blade that seldom measures more than 1/8" thick or 1" wide. A blade like this, when equipped with my original tanto point, is a stabbing machine. The reason is that it's only half as thick as most boot knives so there just isn't much resistance to slow the progress of its point. What is more, this lack of resistance means less physical effort is required to insert and withdraw the blade as well.

DISADVANTAGES

While a folder with a short, thin blade can admittedly deliver effective slashes and thrusts, it still leaves a lot to be desired when used to confront an opponent of equal stature and skill who is armed with a longer, heavier fixed blade knife. Here's why.

Lock Letdown

As I have said before, the only thing between your irreplaceable fingers and the razor sharp blade of your tactical folder is the strength of your locking mechanism. If the lock on your knife fails for any reason, you may suffer a wound so serious it will cause you to drop your knife. If this happens when you are engaged in a knife fight, you will in all likelihood lose your life as well. But, you say, what in the world could cause my lock to fail. After all, I bought it from S....., B....., G..... The answer is plenty. But, due to space considerations, let's look at the three most common causes of lock failure.

Abuse

Using your tactical folder for chores not suited for even fixed blade sheath knives is one of the best ways to cause your lock to fail. There isn't a lock made that will stand up to the abuse of using your knife blade as a chisel, ax, wedge, pry bar or screwdriver.

Sudden shock to the back of the blade

All it takes to defeat the lock of some of the world's most expensive tactical folders is to give the backs of their blades a few hard raps on the edge of a sturdy table. Eventually the shock of the blows will jar the locking mechanism open, causing the blade to fall.



If I can smash a concrete block to pieces with the back of my Trail Master blade, what do you think will happen to your 3-5oz. folder when I hit it with my Bowie. Do you think your knife will fly out of your hand or will you be able to hang on and see your lock collapse.

While I freely admit that this is a pretty severe test, similar situations may occur in combat. For example, you may find yourself fighting an opponent armed with a long, heavy knife like the Cold Steel Trail Master Bowie. If this is the case, he may choose to ignore you for the moment and attack your puny tactical folder with a hard "beat" to its blade. His goal, of course, is to knock your knife right out of your hand. But, what if he doesn't succeed and his heavy blade merely smashes down on top of yours, causing the lock to fail and....cutting off 3 of your fingers!

Impact with hard, unyielding surface

As I have said before, people do not stand still when you try to stab them. Instead, I have found that they are highly motivated to move out of the way. This means you may end up slamming the point of your knife right into a post, concrete block wall, steel door or even a car. Now, if you are armed with a stout fixed blade knife like a Cold Steel Tanto this unexpected impact is unlikely to cost you the fight. However, if all you have in your hand is a puny tactical folder you could be in serious trouble.

The problem is that the locking mechanism on many tactical folders can be defeated if the points of their blades make hard contact with an unyielding surface like a brick wall. Now, this problem doesn't occur every time. But if the angle of contact is just right, the force of the stab can break the lock outright or stress it to the point that it disengages and allows the blade to close...you guessed it, cutting off 3 of your fingers!

Taken Lightly

Anyone who has done a lot of knife sparring will tell you there are times when your opponent is just too alert and wary to attack. In moments like this it often makes sense to attack his knife blade instead, since it can be reached with a greater margin of safety and "beaten" out of his hand by using the back or flat of your blade. If you are armed with a tactical folder, this valuable attack is lost to you. Why? Because a 3-5 ounce folder with a 4" blade just doesn't have the weight or leverage to smash a full sized fighting knife out of a man's hand.

Another disadvantage of using a tactical folder in a knife fight is that you may not have the time or physical space to employ evasive footwork and counter slashing techniques to compensate for your smaller, lighter blade. For example, suppose you find yourself backed into a corner and facing an incoming chopping attack from a Bowie knife. With no room to move, do you think you could reliably stop this attack in mid-air with your 3-5 ounce tactical folder and avoid being cut? I wouldn't bet on it.

On Guard

One of the dangers of most tactical folders is that they have no guard to protect the fingers. This means that if you make a hard, stabbing attack and your point meets stiff resistance from an AK-47 magazine, your hand could slip forward onto the edge and be injured. Some companies have tried to compensate for the lack of a guard by building a thumb shelf on the top of their blades. The idea is that the thumb can be braced against this shelf to prevent the forward movement of the hand under hard impact. The problem is that few people's thumbs are strong enough for this idea to work, and the hand slides forward anyway. The only safe way to make a hard thrust with any guardless knife is to employ a palm-reinforced grip.

Get Shorty

A 4" blade is too short to reliably reach some vital targets buried deep in the human body. We know from FBI reports on stopping power that the agency requires a handgun bullet to pierce 14" of human tissue before it is pronounced acceptable. Do you honestly think you can drive the 4" blade of your super

Continued on next page.

If you can grow new fingers skip looking at this photo. But if you can't, then pay attention. Our Gunsite folder offers the maximum insurance against lock failure available. It is the only Tactical folder we know of that can hold 130 lbs. 4 1/2" from its pivot point and not collapse.





A full size fighter like our Tai Pan keeps your hand at a reasonably safe distance when counter slashing a Trail Master Bowie.



Using a 4" Tanto Point Voyager to try and counter slash a Trail Master is very risky. Just look at how close you must get to that big blade to touch the hand holding it with even 1" of your Voyager blade!



Facing a man armed with a 9 1/2" Trail Master is almost suicide when all you have to bring to the ball is a puny 4" Tactical folder. Your going to have to be a superb fighter to survive an encounter like this!

duper tactical folder through your enemy's clothing, pectoral muscle and ribcage and still have enough blade length to pierce and destroy his heart?

As I mentioned in my article on the reverse grip, REACH is everything in a knife fight. If you find yourself pitting the 4" blade of your tactical folder against an enemy armed with a 7 1/2" blade, you could be in a whole lot of trouble. The first thing you will notice is that it's very hard to "lead" or initiate an attack when your blade is 3 1/2" shorter than the other guy's. Every time you think you've found a good opportunity to strike, you realize you could be cut or stabbed first since your opponent, with his longer blade, can stop-hit you from comparative safety. This shortcoming means you'll have to bring superior speed, timing, rhythm and footwork to the fight if you are to prevail.

Another big problem in facing a longer blade with a tactical folder is that you must get dangerously close to your opponent's blade whenever you attack or counterattack his knife hand. For instance, if your opponent launches a left to right cut at your abdomen, you may want to counter by dropping your knife under the plane of his incoming knife hand and slash his fingers. To pull this off and disarm him you must have excellent eye/hand coordination and perfect timing. You see, when the first 2 inches of your blade meet his fingers, your hand will be only 2 inches away! This is cutting it very close indeed.

A Mouse That Roars

The finest examples of tactical folding knives can be compared to high-quality, small caliber handguns like the .25 caliber Berreta. Gun magazines refer to small caliber pistols as "mouse guns", implying that stopping mice is all they are suited for. The mouse gun is small, handy, lightweight, easy to carry and conceal, and will get the job done in a self-defense situation. However, they are no substitute for the knockdown power of the .357 magnum revolver or the .45 caliber automatic. Similarly, the tactical folder is the mouse knife of the combat knife world. It is lightweight, easy to carry and conceal, and (okay, okay, okay) may be more politically correct.

A word of caution — the best of the mouse knives are no match for a full-sized fighting knife, not to mention a Bowie or Kukri. The tactical folder is still underpowered when compared to a boot knife with a 5" blade. Yes, it will perform well against unarmed attackers and serve better than fingernails, but it is way behind the curve when facing enemies armed with larger weapons.

If you are going to carry a tactical folder (and I suggest you do), it pays to be aware of a few things. Ignore the hype from the magazines and the empty, hot air from my competitors. None of these people have ever done an article on or shown examples of these knives being tested. Instead, pick a truly razor sharp knife with a lock that has been proven strong and a blade with proven cutting power. This accomplished, you will have the best and most effective tactical folder money can buy.