

The Australian Army Stiletto

– A short synopsis –

The Australian Army Stiletto (AAS) is a fascinating piece of Australian military history. These knives were produced in comparatively small numbers to other Commonwealth fighting knives for Australian troops designated as 'special units' during World War II. It is believed the knife takes its origins from the iconic Fairbairn–Sykes fighting knife and was inspired by members of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), which assisted in raising Z Special Unit and the Independent Commando Companies during the war.

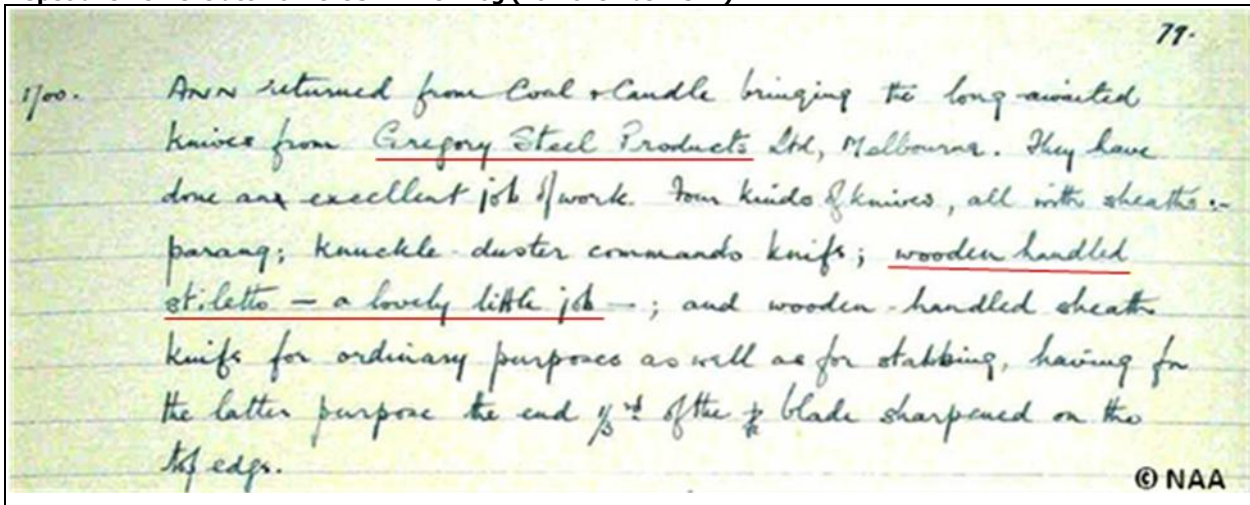
The AAS was produced in three distinct versions: a wooden-handled stiletto and two Mazak handled versions by two separate manufacturers, Gregory Steel Products (Gregsteel) and Whittingslowe Engineering (WE).

Gregsteel AAS with wooden handle

This knife was produced by Gregsteel, of Melbourne. Much conjecture surrounds this knife, largely revolving around several divergent but plausible stories.

Firstly, it is believed it was not issued but produced for private purchase. Secondly, that it was part of a bespoke order for Z Special Unit (Z-SU). This notion is drawn from a diary entry made by Lieutenant Donald Davidson whilst preparing for Operation JAYWICK at Camp X.

Z Special Unit – extract from the JAYWICK Log (26 November 1942):



Thirdly, that it was intended for use by paratroopers serving in the 1st Parachute Battalion, which was raised in early 1943 but did not see active service in the war. What is acknowledged, however, is that the square ended 'Paratrooper' style sheath has a government mark, and that this sheath does not fit the Mazak variants of the AAS due to their greater blade length. Regardless of the burgeoning truth, one thing remains clear: this knife is intrinsically linked by maker and design to the Mazak versions of the AAS.

These knives were marked with the maker's name "Gregory Steel Products" applied to the ricasso in small print with no government acceptance mark observed. The knife's blade length is 184mm and the steel is blued. The total length of the knife is 309mm, and the turned-wooden handle has 21 concentric rings.

The thin leather square ended 'Paratrooper' style sheath is purported to have been made by a firm on Wellington Street in Collingwood, Melbourne, Victoria. This sheath has no maker's marks but is commonly marked on the reverse side with a government acceptance/inspector's mark generally in blue ink. Marks noted to this date include /\ over L or J.H.

Gregsteel wooden handle AAS with correct square ended 'Paratrooper' style leather sheath:



Gregsteel AAS with Mazak handle

This knife was developed because service knives at the time were deemed to be not suitable for commandos. The commanding officer of the 2/6th Independent Company made arrangements for the AAS to be produced for his unit in June 1942, as highlighted below:

2/6th Independent Company – extract from unit war diary (17 and 24 June 1942):

WAR DIARY or INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY			
Unit 2/6 Aust. Ind. Coy.		Date and time - from 0600 hours 9. Jun. 42 to 2359 hours 18. Jun. 42.	
Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events and Information
	17 Jun. 42.		Weather set.. Syllabus "B" commences. Maj. Harcourt to Melbourne, to follow up deficiencies in war equipment.

WAR DIARY or INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY			
Unit 2/6 Aust. Ind. Coy.		Date and time - from 0600 hours 18. Jun. 42 to 2359 hours 24. Jun. 42.	
Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events.
	24 Jun. 42.		<p>weather fine.. zeroing continued.. issue of personal equipment also continued.. Messing.. complaints re messing received. Due to</p> <p>(a) inexperienced and insufficiently trained Cooks.</p> <p>(b) Quantity of normal ration not sufficient for men doing intensive active training in cold hilly country.</p> <p>Maj. Harcourt returned from Melbourne. During visit had interviewed General Staff and all Ordnance Depts. re unsatisfactory position of Training Gear and slow supply of W.S. Quantities of essential stores not to hand at Unit Advanced Depot Park Street and supply not assured. Arrangements made to manufacture Sleeping Bags. A few Signal Buzzers obtained for training.</p> <p>Production arranged for knives to replace unsatisfactory articles supplied and returned as useless. Increased supply of Camouflaged nets and Tarpaulins K.F.D. A.F.V. made available. Consignment of 227 No. 4 Rifles made available by Ordnance. unsuitable 3 ton Truck changed for conventional type. 2nd hand Motor Cycles replaced by new ones. Visit resulted in some improvements but with considerable expenditure of valuable time which should not have been necessary.</p>

Reference to operational use of this knife can be found in a letter provided by #NX93552 Private Alex M Mackay, who served with the 2/6th Independent Company (The Purple Devils) in New Guinea. On donating his stiletto to a military museum Private Mackay stated in an accompanying letter that they were issued to commando units in 1942. He said that the AAS were affectionately known as "Harcourt Hackers" after his Commanding Officer, Major Harry Harcourt. Of note the 2/6th disembarked for New Guinea on 6 August 1942, several well documented photos exist of their use by the 2/6th (as seen below).

2/6th Independent Company – Pongani, New Guinea on 25 October 1942:



This knife is marked with the manufacturer's name "Gregory Steel Products" applied to the ricasso in large print with no government acceptance mark observed, although many knives were unmarked. The knife's blade length is 192mm, with the steel being of a bright finish. The total length of the knife is 320mm, with the Mazak handle having 26 concentric rings. The Gregsteel knife was used with a canvas sheath. These sheaths were designed for tropical use in the Pacific campaign. It has been noted that they were susceptible to rot and, as a result, surviving examples are very rare. No acceptance/inspector's or maker's mark is known for this sheath.

Gregsteel Mazak handle AAS with correct 'Tropical' style canvas sheath:



WE AAS with Mazak handle

Whittingslowe Engineering Ltd of Adelaide produced this knife. The knife is marked with the maker's name on the ricasso in the form of a stylised "WE" applied to the ricasso over the government acceptance mark D/ND. On the obverse side of the ricasso an acceptance mark can be found /N over I. The knife's blade length is 192mm, and the blade is blued. The total length of the knife is 320mm with a darkened Mazak handle containing 26 concentric rings. The WE and also the Gregsteel AAS are found with a tapered leather sheath. These sheaths were made by R.G. Brown, who had a store in Little Collins Street in Melbourne. These sheaths are marked with the maker's mark of R.G. BROWN over 1943. These sheaths also have a government acceptance mark D/ND stamped on the front and acceptance/inspectors marks on the obverse. Marks noted to date stamped into the leather include /N over J.B or J.H.

WE Mazak handle AAS with correct tapered R.G. Brown leather sheath:



Identifiable differences in design

Besides the obvious differences in the Mazak versions of the AAS being markings and blueing, some slight variations in the design and manufacturing techniques can be identified on unmarked knives, allowing them to be attributed to a maker with some certainty. This is done by examining the length of the flat surface on the hilt above the last ridge. This flat surface is of a different length: WE AAS are shorter than Gregsteel AAS. In addition to this the grind applied to the ricasso is different: Gregsteel is horizontal and WE is angled slightly downwards.

WE and Gregsteel Mazak handle AAS distinguishing features:



WE AAS (short)

Gregsteel AAS (long)

WE AAS (angled grind)

Gregsteel AAS (straight grind)

Operational use

The weight of evidence (e.g. documentation, personal accounts, imagery etc.) indicates the Mazak AAS was only issued in bulk to the 2/6th Independent Company for the Kokoda Campaign in New Guinea. However, there are examples of the AAS being used by other units in other theatres. Such as the AAS from the MV *Krait* exhibited in the Changi museum in Singapore, which belonged to a member of Z-SU. Another AAS in the Australian War Memorial was owned by a member of 1st Independent Cavalry (Commando) Squadron who later served with the 2/7th Australian Cavalry Commando Regiment. Another AAS is in the RSL at Port Augusta and belonged to John Ward of the 2/2nd Independent Company.

Reason for low production numbers

Z-SU and the 2/6th Independent Company were both small-scale organisations and this, in part, accounts for the AAS's low production numbers. However, extracts of wartime documents from the Army Inventions Directorate (AID) shows formal communication in April 1943 from the Commanding Officer of the 2/6th, Major Harcourt, requesting the AAS be withdrawn from the area of operations and a more suitable knife be sought. The AID then goes on to describe its replacement in a further communiqué from May 1943. As a result of this evidence it appears that production numbers were low due to the stiletto being superseded in theatre during the closing stages of the war in the Pacific campaign. In total the Mazak AAS was in-service in the Pacific theatre for a period of no greater than nine months from post the 2/6th's deployment in early-August 1942 through to it being replaced by May 1943.

Major H.G. Harcourt requests the AAS be replaced and the memo confirming replacement in New Guinea:

Name HARCOURT, H.G. Major		File No. Syd. No. 2615	© NAA
Title of invention Commando knife.			
Date submitted 7th April, 1943.			
Submissions: Commando knife of the hunting type, having a curved tip and provided with a central channel for gripping between the teeth.		<i>K.P. 104.43</i>	
Examinations: The submitter, who commands an independent company, states that the stiletto type commando knife has not been found satisfactory under N.G. conditions and that a commando knife of the hunting type would be of much greater use, particularly as such a knife could be used generally for cutting vines, skinning and other general purpose operations.		<i>K.P. 104.43</i>	

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Ext. from M.G.O memo rec'd 10/5/43.

COMMANDO KNIFE.

The Stiletto type of Commando knife has already been replaced by the hunting type and in addition Sub-Machine Guns will be fitted with an all-purpose Bayonet suitable for use as a dagger, cutting knife, eating knife, crown seal opener etc., the question of the central channel for gripping between the teeth will be investigated.

Conclusion

Many of the facts known today are due to the hard work and diligence of those who have a passion for this knife. Many of these important breakthroughs happened within a short time of this synopsis being written. It is the firm belief of those who continue researching this topic that many new interesting facets of the AAS are yet to be discovered. With these discoveries will come a greater understanding and appreciation of the knife along with the men who made it and the men who fought with it.

Compiled by:

Michael Lobb and Trevor Ball, Feb 2013.

Acknowledgments

Publications:

British and Commonwealth Military Knives, by Ron Flook (1999)

Online resources:

www.australianmilitaryknives.com

www.australianbladeforums.com

www.wilkinsonfscollection.com

Imagery:

Bob Stone, John Gibson, John S. Fischer and the Australian War Memorial (AWM)

Documents:

Trevor Ball, Bob Stone, AWM and The National Archives of Australia (NAA)

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