Making the Trench Knife (Redux)

My wife and I enjoy going to antique stores and shows. On the way to one such show we stopped at a small antique store in Kalama, WA. The town is represented by a single exit off the freeway and seems to be a throwback to earlier times. While looking for other things I collect I happened upon a damaged handle from an original 1918 trench knife.

When I bought the handle, I had only the vaguest notion of trying to restore it, knowing that it had already been damaged to the point where real restoration was not possible. Still, I just couldn't pass it up. The original wear and patina overcame my concerns about the missing guard, blade and pommel.

Before attempting to design the knife I felt I had to clean up the rough edges where the previous owner had removed the guard. I sanded how the remainder of the guard and cleaned up the sides as well, to give the brass a more even look.

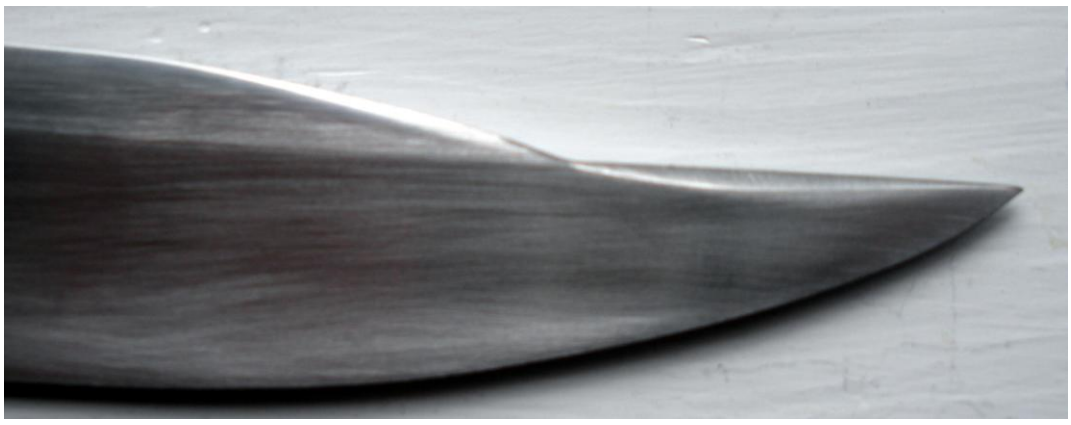
At first I had a whimsical notion of making a "pin up" knife, in which the blade would have a pin-up girl reclined on the spine. The idea came from the nose art on the airplanes of WWII.

It didn't take long before I realized this design had some serious problems, not the least of which being that the bottom part of the pin-up form would intrude on the bevels, making it all but impossible for the blade to have anything resembling a consistent shape. So I decided to reshape the blade to a more traditional Bowie style shape, but still unusual for a trench knife.

Using only the Harbor Freight 1x30 belt sander, I then cut in the rough hollow grinds on both sides. The blade itself is made from quarter-inch thick 1095, so grinding out the bevels was a real chore. Because there is no contact wheel on the 1x30, I used the top wheel for the purpose. Its rounded face made it less than ideal for the purpose, but I had no better choice.

Once I had the primary bevels ground, I spent a lot of time with a curved sanding block getting the bevels as smooth and straight as possible. I also made an effort to flatten the ricasso and the spine for maximum definition of the bevels.

Next I turned my attention to the flat part of the blade beyond the point where the spine disappears. I wanted to make the transition more "fluid", so I decided to put a curved pseudo-swedge that created a small sine wave effect on the front end.



The blade was then sent to Peter's Heat Treating and was returned a month later. It was then cleaned of its scale and was now ready.

With the blade essentially done, I turned my attention to the pommel. I found some premade pommels in the Jantz catalogue and ordered one, but was not happy with the shape. Originally, it had a bulbous conical shape with a flat base that looked more like a finial for a curtain rod than it did a pommel for a fighting knife. So the first thing I did was to remove the flattened base, which extended well beyond the edge of the handle anyway.

Still unsatisfied with the appearance, I decided to take it a step farther and reshape the pommel entirely, so as to give it a shaper point, such as one that might be used for penetrating a helmet, thus achieving the final form.

Next came assembly. Because the piece was to be held together with epoxy, I had to close up the butt end. To accomplish this, I dropped a quarter-inch nut into the handle and let it settle to the bottom. I carefully screwed a small piece of threaded rod into the nut, screwing it in far enough that when I attached the pommel to the threaded rod it could screw in tightly, covering the hole.

The epoxy was mixed and poured into the hole, and the blade was installed.

Having completed the assembly, I sharpened the blade and began working on the sheath. As with most of my sheaths, this one began by cutting a piece of thick stiff leather to act as the inner sheath, preventing the blade from coming into contact with the threads. On that I layered more leather that I dyed by hand and unstained cobra skin, then drilled a series of holes and stitched the sheath together. Finally, I coated the edges with Edge Kote and polished the facing surfaces.

This is the result.