

Dark Operations StratoFighter Review

I received the 10th StratoFighter from the first production run a week ago. It has the serial number of RB0486 on the spine of the glass breaker, which I requested. The knife came with a letter of authenticity from the owner, Frank Miller, stating that knife was assigned to me in their records.

The StratoFighter is a BIG KNIFE open or closed. It made my Chinook2 [which I have carried for over a year] look small in a side-by-side comparison.





The edge was sharp but not as sharp as I like to keep them. This is normal for me as very few knives have been as sharp from the factory as I want them. I put the edge to the Spyderco sharpmaker course stones. 4 light passes on each side brought it to what I call a "working" edge that was as sharp as I like them for the purpose of hard use.

I've sharpened over 500 knives for various people over the last decade. Experience in doing so with a multitude of various makers knives show that the CTV2 steel used on the blade of this knife will take an aggressive edge fairly quickly once it has been used to the point of needing to be re-sharpened. That's a good thing if one finds themselves in the field and needs to put an edge back on the blade quickly.

The blade is 1/4" thick. This knife is not designed to slice tomatoes. It looks like it has something of a Moran convex edge that I've always liked as well. If it had an acute angled grind that led to a fine edge, it would defeat the purpose of the design for hard use. It would be the weak link in the knife and I think has been well thought out for this knives intended use.

The quartz impregnated inserts in the handle are more than adequate at keeping sweaty, wet, or even bloody hands from slipping while working.

The pocket clip was tight as hell when I received the StratoFighter. I could not get it onto my dungaree pocket after much effort. I have had to bend pocket clips on other knives before to loosen them some to give me the retention I want on the pocket.

I tried to bend the pocket clip by hand and it was nearly impossible to do. I went to the garage and got a length of twine that I slipped under the clip and then pulled outbound from the frame. This worked better and I had some minor success at loosening it enough to get it onto the pocket. This clip is STRONG [a good thing to have for this knives intended use as well].

The inserts destroyed the inside of my pockets edge after inserting and withdrawing the knife 20-30 times over the course of the next half hour. I talked with Frank Miller about this over the phone and he told me to remove the clip, remove the insert under the clip and re-attach the clip. He stated that the clip is intentionally that tight so that when the knife is attached to a vest or pack in combat it will not be lost. I certainly agree that the knife would not be lost under hard use with the way the clip came on mine. I removed the quartz insert under the clip as suggested, not that hard to do actually, and it then was much easier to insert and retract from the pants pocket and did not further destroy the pocket it was clipped into.

While speaking with him, he also mentioned to make sure I loctited the pivot to the desired tension. When I checked the pivot, it was finger tight only. Good thing he told me to loctite it to the tension I desired when we spoke.

I tightened the pivot with an allen wrench. Then it was too tight and the blade would not open at all. Thing is, I tightened it with very little tension. I backed it off and tightened it a few times to get the desired tension I wanted after putting blue loctite on the pivot threads, let it sit overnight and it has not loosened nor been an issue since.

While on the subject of the blade pivot, it appears to be of adequate size and not be a weak link in strength while locked open and potentially used for prying laterally or from edge to spine. The pivot also protrudes from the sides of the knife. A designed feature in the knife that increase it's lateral strength proportionally IMO.

While loctiting the pivot tension, I also loctited the cross bolt secondary safety/locking bar in position so it could not be accidentally engaged.

The Crisis Cross secondary locking system is a very secure cross bolt safety that is just like a normal shotgun safety. When engaged is physically prohibits the blade from accidentally closing which in effect makes it a fixed blade.

The StratoFighter will go on search and rescues into the Superstition Mountains of Arizona with me. I feel confident that should I have to make an extended stay in the mountains overnight while searching for lost or downed/injured people, it is all the knife I'll need for any purpose that one might need a knife/pry bar/hatchet/digging instrument for.

I'm so confident that the StratoFighter will survive anything I'll likely put it through/need it for in a real world environment [the harsh Sonoran desert in this case] I have taken the sheathed straight blade off my rescue pack where it was strapped externally so I could access it without removing the pack off my back.

I no longer feel I need to carry a straight blade along with a folder, and feel comfortable in not doing so, which was not the case while carrying the Chinook [which is still one hell of a strong knife].

We carry 40-45 pound packs [minimum] into rescue operations of up to 10 miles on foot over mountains in excess of 6000 feet in heat that can exceed 115 degrees F. in the summer and every ounce of weight saved not carrying redundant or unnecessary equipment is that much more water I can carry for myself and those who are in trouble when we find them.

At times we may be inserted by DPS choppers to an area that is remote enough that we can't access by foot because of the terrain. When one is that far "in" without any support but the gear one takes with them until extraction, which could be 2-3 days, one needs to be able to rely on the equipment on them explicitly. The StratoFighter brings my confidence level, where a blade or worst-case pry bar may be necessary, to new heights.

I can rely on it for getting up and over some of the rock cliffs if I had to use the StratoFighter as an emergency piton, shoving it into a crevice as far as I could, I can pull my full weight [185 pounds] up and could trust this knife not to snap and subsequently fall. I know I can rely on it thusly as the accompanying photos demonstrate the StratoFighter being tested for just such a possibility.













The StratoFighter came through the above testing with NO damage at all. The blade opens as smooth as before, the blade still sits centered in the handles when closed, and the lockup is still solid. The blades pivot suffered no ill effects from the considerable stresses applied to it during testing. The finish on the handle of the knife was not scratched at all with dirt from the desert while standing on it and only required that I wipe it off with a soft t-shirt and put it back in my pocket. The finish on the knife seems tough enough as well.

I also tested the locks strength by performing the customary spine whack test where the opened folder is hit against a hard surface to see if the lock fails under pressure. I used a telephone linesman glove for the testing in the event it failed for any reason. I lowered the tailgate of my truck, put 2 foot x 3 foot piece of 5/8" plywood on the tailgate and proceeded to slam the spine of the opened blade as hard as I could 6 times. The lock did not release in those six attempts to get it to fail and release the blade.

Gloves are mandatory for the type of missions we find ourselves tasked with. Without wearing gloves while on searches ones hands and fingers will soon be in rough shape from coming in contact with the extreme terrain and various spiny plants/catci found everywhere in the Sonoran desert. The StratoFighter is very secure in the hand due to the inserts and finger grooves either wearing gloves or without them. It could still be dropped but the chance of doing so is greatly reduced by the design features and ergonomics mentioned. That is a big plus where positive purchase is required or lose the tool you may desperately need right now.

While on the subject of gloves, I should mention that the blades ambidextrous thumb studs are of sufficient mass to open the folder with a gloved hand and I actually find the blade is easier to manipulate with gloves on. Not something I've found with others knives in the past.

The glass breaker is well designed and pointed enough to work as intended. It also has the advantage of being able to crack skulls if it used as a load fist for any reason. It could also be used to puncture heavy gauge drums due to its design. Many more uses can be found with this design where puncturing objects is concerned. A good thing to have available and makes it more versatile than any glass breaker I'm aware of on any folder, including my large MOD CQD double edged law enforcement folder as well.

The grooves where the thumb gains purchase open or closed are more than adequate if and when they are needed while working with the knife. The dimensions and circumference of the knife are such that one can really get a solid hold on the handle with average sized hands and fingers which I have even though the knife seems larger and might be an issue in that regard.

This allows for a tighter grip that probably translates to more strength of the clenched fist around the knife under hard/heavy use. These small [and some not so small] differences add up to a well designed knife that can be used for long period if necessary and are more than the sum of their individual features in the overall use of the tool for it's intended purposes. Frank Miller and the Dark Ops team seem to have spent considerable time, money, and energy to get the ergonomics of this knife just right!

I've owned and still own some very strong folders. I like a big knife, one that can be relied on to get any job done and survive to be sharpened another day. Lots of folders are called "tactical" and are not really designed or intended for use under extreme conditions where life and death may hang in the balance. The Dark Operations StratoFighter is a tactical folder in the true sense of the term.

Everything about the StratoFighter screams tough, durable, reliable, and TACTICAL. The features of the StratoFighter are made for the operator who needs to rely on his equipment day in and day out. One needs to have confidence in their equipment when the outcome in ones favor is part of the equation.

If I had a choice of any folding knife and I was heading to the big sandbox, this is the only tactical folder that would be going on my person. Owning or having owned what some consider the strongest "tactical" knives available today on the market, the StratoFighter is my choice if I can bring only one knife with me to survive and make do under the harsh conditions of the desert.

Come to think of it, I live in that type of extremely harsh environment daily here in the Sonoran Desert in the free state of Arizona. Not only do I live in the environment, I'm charged with rescuing people where their survival, as well as my own, are dependant on the choices one makes before finding themselves in trouble.

Forethought goes a long way out here to surviving. I'm happy to have the StratoFighter along at all times now. I know should the conditions get extreme and I need to rely on the equipment I have on me to survive, the StratoFighter will stand on it's own where many others "tactical" folders would give up the ghost in an

extended stay in no mans land.

The StratoFighter is THE STRONGEST "tactical" [or otherwise] folder on the market today in my opinion. I'm always looking for the strongest, most reliable folder I can get my hands on. Until I find something better than what resides on my pocket right now, I won't carry anything else for a folder.

As mentioned before, there are many folders to choose from on the market today. Many of them are strong in design and materials and will stand well on their own for the majority of people buying them. I happen to own a considerable amount of them myself.

The StratoFighter is the toughest folding knife for real world encounters of the worst kind I have had the pleasure of owning or own presently. I'll be using it in real world harsh conditions.

I don't have to just stand by this knife, I CAN STAND ON IT!!!

Robin Brown