

Make it Real - Have it Forged

The ring of the anvil, the smell of the sulphur, the glitter of polished steel – no hawker could work better than Master Shadowhawk himself at drawing people into his shop. Once there he captivates them with history, technique, interaction, and the tale of a blacksmith who became king. He is a bladesmith - a blacksmith who specializes in knives and swords - and owner of Shadowhawk Blades, a company that specializes in the customer.

Most rennies have the vague idea that a knife made by hand is going to be better than something bought at Wal-Mart, but a visitor to Shadowhawk Blades comes away knowing what makes a superior blade. Using whatever project he is working on as a starting point, Shadowhawk discusses everything from proper hammer technique to molecular movement in the steel and how all of it affects the quality of the final product. “If you just want a wall hanger, go pay \$30 for a made in China sword,” he tells the crowd – and then explains why it can never be anything but pretty.

A solid foundation is necessary for anything you plan to build and a blade is no different. Starting with the right steel is a requirement to make the finished product useable. As Shadowhawk often says, “There’s no such thing as a stainless steel sword.” The only blade that is capable of holding an edge is one made of high-carbon steel. And even then, the smith must understand the differences in the steels: what is perfect for a small knife doesn’t always have the composition necessary to make a large knife. And proper materials aren’t enough. How the metal is treated determines the edge-holding ability of even the best steels. For an interested crowd, Shadowhawk could talk for half an hour on the proper treatment throughout the forging process. For most people, he simply focuses on the final step: tempering, a heat-treating process that “turns a piece of steel that looks like a knife into a knife.”

“Import merchants are not my competition,” Shadowhawk says. What he is fighting against is the “Wal-Mart mentality,” the

idea that everything should be cheap. “This is not a place where ‘lifetime warranty’ is qualified with ‘unless you use it.’”

Shadowhawk wants to sell blades to people who want blades. If you’re just looking for something big and gaudy to look at, he’ll gladly send you to someone who will sell you all the Pakistani blades you can carry. But if your interest is in a blade you can use as well as show off, you’ve come to the right place.

The company tag line is “custom blades, custom fit” and no phrase could sum up their policy better. Every blade they make is fully functional and one-of-a-kind (no patterns are ever kept) but a few questions about ordering a knife and the definition of custom becomes truly apparent. In most shops, custom merely means “hand-made” or “special design series” and you can buy any “custom” knife on the table. Though Shadowhawk Blades may have stock to buy “off the rack”, most knives here are without a doubt made-to-order. From the customer who comes with a sketch in hand to the one who just wants “something to skin with,” Shadowhawk Blades involves the customer in as much of the design process as he or she wants. Common practice is to ask about the materials for the handle, guard, and pommel; to discuss the shape of the blade in regard to its intended use; and to make notes on the size of the customer’s hand so that the blade will be balanced and fit for the strength and size of its owner. As Shadowhawk’s wife and business partner says, “You can have the blade you want, not just the one we felt like making.”

Now there are many smiths making forged blades and some that make truly custom products, but Shadowhawk Blades is perhaps the only forge that allows the patron to be involved in the smithing process. Oftentimes, as part of a demo, Shadowhawk will have a volunteer, usually an older child or young teen, make some small trinket under his supervision to show that anyone is capable of smithing. Anyone ordering any size blade at one of Shadowhawk’s shows has the option of stepping behind the forge and hammering it out. Plus, there’s no extra charge for cleaning up the mistakes of a raw amateur! For those who think a couple hours

of hammering aren't enough to invoke bragging rights, Shadowhawk offers a make-you-own-knife workshop. Anyone can make their own knife, start to finish, doing 90% of the work – one day, all day, take it home at the end of the day.

After spending some time in his forge, it was easy to see why most of the shows he works consider Shadowhawk a performer rather than a vendor. Yes, he sells blades. And a musician sells CDs. Mostly, he entertains people. From Boy Scouts earning their blacksmithing merit badges and school-day kids who tear off to the forge as soon as they leave the bus, to crowds who hang out for hours and patrons who don't consider it a proper faire season if they haven't ordered a new knife, Shadowhawk Blades - though not world famous - has a loyal following that grows with every year.

To learn more about Shadowhawk Blades, visit their website shadowhawkblades.com.