

# The P-38 Canopener

The tiny, lightweight, P-38 collapsible can opener was developed during World War II, reported to have been a rapid 30 days design project in the summer of 1942 by the U.S. Army Subsistence Research Laboratory in Chicago, IL. The origin of the name is not clear, like the jeep. Some claim it required exactly 38 punctures around a can to open it. Others say it performed with the speed of a P-38 fighter plane. Whatever the case, it is clear this little device has to be considered one of the most perfect inventions ever designed for use in combat.



Friday, August 18, 1985 PENTAGRAM 11

## The greatest Army invention ever

by Maj. Renita Foster  
Army Public Affairs

It was developed in just 30 days in the summer of 1942 by the Subsistence Research Laboratory in Chicago. And never in its 55-year-old history has it ever been known to break, rust, need sharpening or polishing, which is why many soldiers past and present have come to regard the P-38 Can-Opener as one of the greatest Army inventions ever.

C-ration cans have long been replaced with the more convenient MREs ready to eat, but the phenomenon of the P-38 continues to rise due to the 1,000 and other uses stemming from the unique blend of ingenuity and creativity all soldiers seem to have.

"The P-38 is one of those tools you keep and never want to get rid of," said Sgt. Scott Kitaly of Fort Monmouth, N.J. "I've had my P-38 since joining the Army 11 years ago and kept it because I can use it for a screwdriver, knife, anything."

Master Sgt. Steve Wilson, proponent NCOIC, Army Chief of Chaplains Office in the Pentagon, believes it's the size of the P-38 that counts.

"It's a perfect inch and a half, making it a great marking tool, said Wilson. "Because it's small, it doesn't take up a lot of space, and that's essential in Army life. The conveniently drilled hole in the top half means the P-38 can be put on a key ring or dog tags and go anywhere."

The P-38 became a strategic learning tool for West Point Cadets Rob and Ryan Kay while growing up in Gilroy, Calif. Generously supplied with military gear by their father, the brothers spent many of their adolescent years decked out in fatigues, camouflage makeup, combat gear, and P-38s attached to dog tags to play "Army."

"I think the P-38 is as natural to me as my desire to be in the service," Rob Kay said.

The most vital use of the P-38, however, is the very mission it was designed for, explains retired Army Col. Paul Baerman, now living in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"When we had C-rations it was your access to food, making it the hierarchy of needs," Baerman said. "Then soldiers discovered it was an extremely simple, lightweight, multi-purpose tool. I think in warfare, the simpler something is and the easier access it has, the more you're going to use it."

The P-38 acquired its infamous nomenclature from the 38 punctures around the C-ration can

required for opening, and the boast it performed with the speed of the World War II P-38 fighter.

"Soldiers just took to the P-38 naturally," said John Bandola, a World War II veteran from Fenwood, N.J. As a master sergeant serving in the 306th Signal Construction Battalion in North Africa, Bandola began his acquaintance with the P-38 in 1943.

"I used it to open cans for dinner on that long day," Nuehl said. Seven years later millions of these miniature can openers were distributed by the Army during the Korean War.

"You were going to eat any other way," Korean Veteran Jay Welsh recalled. And while fighting in Korea on what Ole called "Papasan Mountain" with the 24th Infantry Division, Welsh discovered another vital use of the P-38.

"A clean weapon is your immediate priority, because a dirty one is not going to work," said Welsh. "The P-38 was the ideal tool to field strip and clean the finer components of the M-1 rifle. So in a way, I believe that two-piece hinged device saved my life. It provided me with a rifle I knew would fire."

DoD police supervisor Ted Paquet was a 17-year-old seaman serving aboard the USS New Orleans amphibious assault ship during the Vietnam War. Its mission was to retrieve and transport Marines off the coast of Da Nang. Evenings, soldiers gathered near Paquet's duty position in the hull for simple pleasures like "cokes, cigarettes, conversation and C-rations." It was during one of these nightly sessions, Paquet came in contact with the P-38, or "John Wayne" as it's affectionately referred to in the Navy.

"I think the reason I remember this incident so well is because one of the Marines and I got to talking about where we were from, and it turned out we'd gone to high school together and I'd even dated his sister," reminisced Paquet.

Paquet came home to Pennsylvania surviving 12 months of war, but not future encounters with the P-38. While driving down Route 60, also known as the Old Studenville Pike with older

brother Paul, another Vietnam veteran who served with the 7th Air Cavalry, car problems suddenly developed.

"There were no tools in the car, and almost simultaneously, both of us reached for P-38s attached to our key rings," Paquet chuckled. "We used it to adjust the flow valve. The car worked perfectly, and we went on our merry way."

Christmas of 1962 brought a breeze in Vietnam. Baerman was then a wounded first lieutenant whose only desire was to be reunited with his platoon in time for his highly coveted holiday. His wish was granted, and it remains one of the most memorable times in his military career.

"One of my soldiers received one of those tacky, evergreen foil trees," recalled Baerman. "It didn't come with anything so we mounted it on top of a 50-caliber machine gun on an armored vehicle, and decorated it with brass shells from ammunition, C-ration cans, and of course, P-38s. They were a little dull, but that hole made it a perfect hanging ornament."

"So whenever I see that little can opener, I think of being there with them in 70 to 80 degree weather, and singing carols around a P-38-decorated Christmas tree."

It's nostalgic memories like Baerman's that beat deep the sentimental attachment many soldiers came to feel for the P-38. When John Bandola attached his first and only P-38 to his key ring that particular day half a century ago, it accompanied him to Anzio, Salerno, and Northern Italy. It was with him when World War II ended, and it's with him now.

"This P-38 is a symbol of my life back then," Bandola said. "The Army, the training, my fellow soldiers, all those incredible adventures we shared during a world war." He plans to leave it to his son and grandson. It's a desire his wife, Dorothy, understands perfectly.

"Every time they look at that P-38, they'll see and remember him," she explained simply.

Vietnam veteran Jon Koehler grins broadly when he proclaims the P-38 "ranks with your first girl and your first car." Koehler proudly admits he put his first P-38 on his dog tags 25 years ago, and it's still there.

"The P-38 was part of my youth when I was learning all about discipline, accomplishment and self-worth as a soldier with the 101st Airborne Division," said Koehler. "And if someone wanted it, well, they'd have a better chance of seeing God."

"These attitudes of former veterans aren't hard to understand," said Wilson.

"When you see a P-38 you've carried since the day you enlisted, it means a whole lot," explained Wilson. "It became a part of you. You remember field problems, German REFORCERS, jumping at 5 a.m. in the morning, and moving out in a convoy. A P-38 has you reliving all the adventures that came with soldiering in the Armed Forces. Yes, the P-38 opened cans, but it did so much more. Any soldier will tell you that."

Information about the actual inventor of the P-38 has faded with the passing of years. So perhaps it's best to fantasize of Army inventions' who's creating devices empowered in war and peacetime.

There were the steel head protection, but providing shelter, and cooling the jeep, guaranteed to go any of weather, and the 1000 to storing those personal items leave behind, the P-38, Saint's finest work.

## 38 ways to use the P-38 private

- by Master Sgt. Steve Wilson
- can opener
  - seam ripper
  - screwdriver
  - clean fingernails
  - cut fishing line
  - open paint cans
  - window scraper
  - scrape around floor corners
  - digging
  - clean out groove on Tupperware lids
  - reach in and clean out small cracks
  - scrape around edge of boots
  - bottle opener
  - (in the field) gut fish
  - (in the field) scale fish
  - test for "doneness" when baking on a camp fire
  - prying items
  - strip wire
  - scrape pane in the field
  - lift key on flip top cans
  - chisel
  - barrier
  - marking tool
  - deflating tires
  - clean sole of boot/shoe
  - pick teeth
  - measurement
  - striking flint
  - striking coffee
  - puncturing plastic coating
  - knocking on doors
  - Morse code
  - box cutter
  - opening letters
  - write emergency messages
  - scratch an itch
  - save as a souvenir
  - tip of stick for on the spot promotions (from a Fort Monmouth PAO news release.)



There have been many variations of the P-38

