FREEMAN

Model 451

A survival blade every bit as tough as the wildland firefighters who inspired it.

BY REUBEN BOLIEU

There is a sense of something familiar when holding the new Freeman Model 451. Maybe it was the 15 years that Jeff Freeman designed for Gerber Legendary Blades that has carried over to his own line of high-quality knives. You would think being lead designer for the last 11 years with Gerber, in addition to growing up fishing and hunting, would be enough to make him a knowledgeable person when it comes to knives, but there is much more. After working five summers as a wildland firefighter chasing fires across the western United States, and serving three years in the U.S. Army as a machinist assigned to an aviation unit in the Republic of Panama, I'd say Jeff Freeman knows what goes into making a good knife!

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451 Origin

Before joining the U.S. Army, Jeff worked fighting fires based out of Sweet Home, Oregon. His crew's call sign was "451." This knife was named in honor of those crewmates, past and present, who put their lives on the line protecting our timber lands.

With an overall length of 8.9 inches and 3.8 inches in blade length, the Model 451 weighs about 8 ounces. The Cerakote-coated, CPM-S35VN stainless-steel, drop-point blade features a main flat grind with a thick secondary swedge on each side for maximum toughness and piercing ability. The robust 3/16-inch thickness gives the knife some heft and durability. The exposed pommel acts as a flat hammering surface and includes a lanyard attachment hole sized for the included 550-cord lanyard and a secondary retention method. Additional milled grooves on the thumb rise of the blade provide a secondary gripping surface for extra control.

According to Jeff, the blade is cryogenically treated with a hardness of 59-61 RC and the cutting edge is ground razor-sharp at a 30-degree included angle (15 degrees per side). CPM S35VN is a stainless steel designed to offer improved toughness over CPM S30V. It is said to be easier to both polish and machine than CPM S30V. CPM S35VN has less carbon and vanadium, but does con-

While this photo doesn't show it well, the 451's come in a wide variety of color coatings. All are highly practical all-purpose outdoor knives.

STEVE WOODS PHOT

tain 0.50-percent niobium. Substituting niobium carbides for some of the vanadium carbides makes CPM S35VN about 15-20 percent tougher than CPM S30V.

Running The Gamut

About a week and a half before a major knife show in Georgia, I arrived to meet up with friends for an off-trail backpacking adventure in the Sipsey Wilderness in Alabama. The Sipsey Wilderness is probably the most popular hiking and backpacking area in Alabama, and for good reason. Walking around the forest gave me a feeling of being in a fairytale. This place is called the "land of 1,000 waterfalls. For anyone who loves waterfalls, sandstone canyons and beautiful flowers, this is the place to see.

The author tested the overall strength of the Model 451 by pounding it through an old Ford Bronco door with the help of a stout piece of oak and a pair of heavy-duty leather gloves. The blade performed well and there was no damage to the steel, just a little beauty mark on the coating, which made it look manlier in my book.

The type of camping we were after was not the kind you find out of a modern "go ultra-light" backpacking magazine, but rather the pages of *Camp-Lore and Woodcraft* from 1920 by Daniel Beard. When the weather is fair and rain unlikely, the camp fire was our main focus. Getting it going for cooking (and then for the radiant heat it provided throughout the night) was of the essence. Leaving the big wood harvesting chores for the axe and saw, the Model 451 was left with the delicate task of cutting up meat and cheese for the evening's dinner.

After driving the Model 451 into the pick-up truck door a few times, it proceeded to cut lengths of general-purpose, 50mm polyester toe strap webbing and rope. It cut through with little drag despite the rigorous testing.

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Don't let the task of food preparation steer you wrong, this also entailed making a set of tongs, a few roasting sticks, pot hangers and a little thing called a campfire.

Fatwood is prevalent in the south, so it was the obvious choice for tinder. Once the pieces were split with the Model 451, they were scraped at a 90-degree angle for fine shavings and whittled down for thin, curly fuzz sticks as kindling. Once the fire was arranged, the ignition was next. We used a firesteel, and since the Model 451 had a pointed spine and was coated, we used the best striker available, which was the 3.8-inch-long cutting surface of the knife blade. It sent a shower of sparks down on the pile, and five weary hikers were never fed so well—yet not before I made what I call the "Captain Caveman" roasting spear.

Usually, when making a spear or large roasting stick, I cut the stick to the desired length and then split the stick into four sections, splaying them out. I then sharpen the points individually. This time, with the Model 451, I sharpened the stick before I split it. Then I split it about 3 inches from the tip in an icepick grip while placing the knife in the middle of the stick and hammering it with a stout piece of wood on the flat portion of the butt. This technique gave me precision placement and split the stick evenly. All I had to do was wedge a small, thin, green stick in the split to spread the two pieces. The reason for it being so thick and long was so the weight could be used as its own anchor and easily rotated to ensure even roasting. Using an anchoring system would call for more adjustments; this way, the large roasting spear could just be laid down and propped on a log or rock while the weight and gravity kept it in place.

Days In

After a few days' stay in the Sipsey Wilderness, I spent the next three days hiking and canoe-

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The author was able to shave fuzz sticks for a small fire as a last test of edge geometry. After running the gamut of brutal cutting tasks, it still made thin, curly shavings way after the knife had lost its razor edge.

The author found the CPM S35VN cutting edge to be razor-sharp out of the sheath, and it stayed that way for a long time over the days of use in the woods of Alabama. This is a necessity in a real-world survival knife!

Besides pulling fire duty, the Model 451 was the kitchen knife for all to use. Although thick, the blade cut cheese and sausage as well as opened many packages with ease.

The task of carving a handle for a tomahawk was left to the work of Model 451 as the author slowly whittled the thick branch down to the correct size.

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Utilizing the flat end of the handle (pommel) as a striking surface, the author was able to split a sharpened stick for roasting meat over the open camp fire.

ing in Georgia. The Model 451 was the companion I called upon for various tasks. One in particular was to carve a handle for a tomahawk head that weighed about 1.5 pounds. The first attempt was to carve the handle out of chokecherry and it almost worked, but in the end it was a little too thin. Even so, there was a lot of carving to be done with the Model 451. I was resigned to using a thick piece of poplar and slowly carving it down to the right size. I could have used the tomahawk head to really remove a lot of wood, but at the cost of control and precision I'd much rather use a knife. Using the lanyard, I choked back on the knife handle and proceeded to chop chunks of wood out of the thick branch to make the job go faster. I got the better part of the heavy work done, but to say my hand didn't show any wear wouldn't be correct. The jimping on the top and bottom of the handle, combined with the heavy textured scales not only grip well, but tears up the hand when used in this fashion. This is definitely a tool best used with a glove for long periods of time working. I used the knife in a variety of positions to carve the wood thin enough for fitting the tomahawk head. The edge of the blade carved and sliced wood amazingly well through this process.

My next task was to see how well it would cut general-purpose, 50mm polyester toe strap webbing, which it did well, but there was definitely some drag from the hard work it had already been doing over the course of the week. In addition to this cutting task, I cut many lengths of static rope. I eventually resorted back to the choking-back position and chopped many pieces of rope before the extreme testing began.

For the extreme part of the testing, I used the Model 451 to pound through an old Ford Bronco door from 1980. I had to use a piece of southern red oak to pound the knife through the door. After a few times though the door, I bent the knife in a few different directions to see how the blade would hold up; to my surprise, there wasn't any significant damage to the blade!

Something I normally do at the beginning of a knife review is see how well it will shave wood for making a fire. I always have to assume the piece of wood or stick is wet, especially after a rain or being in the jungle. Naturally, a knife is the obvious tool for this task. Thick or dull edges need not apply, this task is for knives with a keen edge or good edge geometry that will shine even after the blade has lost its initial sharpness. Following the pickup truck door incident, I took a block of wood and slowly worked it into pencil-thick pieces to shave down into tinder. To my surprise, it was still sharp enough to do so; actually, it worked better than some knives fresh out of the box! I sat there in the late Georgia evening pondering how that could be while the mosquitos feasted on me. It wouldn't shave hair at that point, but the edge geometry kicked in and made that little fire possible. Just think, what if a person actually needed that in a real emergency?

The edge needed work after all of the testing; I simply used an EZE-LAP diamond sharpener with a fine and coarse side to bring back the edge. I was astonished and impressed with how easy it was to bring back the edge on the CPM S35VN steel. It was easier than sharpening CPM S30V! Without a doubt, this is a premium, 100-percent U.S.-made field knife designed to excel in multiple cutting chores under the most demanding conditions! **TK**

The completed, field-expedient tomahawk handle made entirely with the Model 451. It took some chopping with the knife to rough it out, then lots of carving without ever sharpening the knife.

MORE INFORMATION

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