

Illustrated History of BSA Square Knot Evolution

George Crowl



Eagle Scout '34-40



Silver Beaver



Quartermaster



Eagle Scout '40-46

Starting in 1934, the Boy Scouts issued ribbon bars to represent medals, so that adults and boys would not have to wear their medal(s) to all functions. In 1946, after World War II, these ribbons were discontinued in favor of embroidered square knots. The awards which had ribbons were: **Honor Medal, Silver Buffalo, Silver Antelope (1943-46), Silver Beaver, Eagle Scout, Quartermaster, Scoutmaster's Key, and Scouter's Training Award.** These came in different sizes over the time period.

In 1946, square knots were introduced and ribbons phased out. All the awards above had square knots, illustrated in order below. Apparently the March 1946 announcement left out the Eagle and Quartermaster knots, but they were available shortly.



Honor Medal, Silver Buffalo
Silver Antelope, Silver Beaver, Eagle Scout
Quartermaster, Scouter's Key, Scouter's Training Award

See Len Michaud's excellent pamphlet, *BSA Fruit Salad* for some historical information. Also, see Mitch Reis, *A Guide to Dating and Identifying Boy Scouts of America Badges, Uniforms & Insignia*, 3rd ed. I depend on them for a lot of the early information. However, some of Reis' square knot information is incorrect based on the catalogs listed below, which I consulted.

My other sources are:

Uniforms, Badges and Insignia 1933

Official Uniforms and Equipment catalogs, 1934, 1937, 1939, 1941, January 1945, January 1947, September 1947, June 1951, June 1954, January 1956, January 1962, September 1962, March 1970, March 1973, March 1975, 1978

Official Uniforms and Insignia 4/53 (BS), 4/53 (Exp), 11/57 (BS), 12/62 (CS), 8/66, 9/67, 1/69, 5/73

Insignia Control Guide 1/78, 1979, 10/80, 2/82, 10/83, 1986

Insignia Guide 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002

Scouting magazine, October 1982; September 1983; September 1987; Nov-Dec 1987; Nov-Dec 1989; October 1992; September 2000.

Trading Tent magazine, August/September 1981

These are not comprehensive, and additional years are needed to fill in gaps.



Skipper's Key



Ranger (green)



Ace



Silver Award I



Silver Beaver
(on blue)



Quartermaster
(blue on blue)



Medal of Merit



Silver Award II

Some knots had a limited lifetime. According to Michaud, the **Skipper's Key** (dark blue and white) was only issued for one year, 1947. It came out with a khaki background and a blue background. The **Ranger Award** (green and tan) was only issued in 1950 and 1951, as the Ranger program (1946-50+) was winding down. It has khaki and green backgrounds.

The **Air Scout Ace Award** knot (blue and red) came out in 1950 and was phased out December 31, 1954, as was the **Type I Silver Award** (red and yellow knot and ribbon colors).

While Michaud says there is a **Silver Fawn** knot, my sources indicate that Fawns were supposed to use the Silver Beaver knot on blue background. It is reasonable that they might choose the Silver Beaver knot on blue, since at that time most were in Cub Scouting. He lists Silver Fawn knot for 1971-74, the years the Silver Fawn was issued.

A companion to this article is an Excel chart showing the various catalog or insignia guide dates and associated catalog numbers for square knots and devices as listed in the catalog or insignia guide.

In 1947 all the cataloged knots were in khaki. The catalog listed **Silver Buffalo, Silver Antelope, and Silver Beaver, Honor Medal, Eagle Scout, Quartermaster, Scouter's Key, and Scouter's Training Award**. These knots remained until the color was changed to tan. The **Skipper's Key** in khaki is listed in the 1947 catalog, but not in blue. Those are all the knots listed in the catalog.

By 1951, the **Silver Beaver** had a blue felt background knot. The **Quartermaster** had a blue knot on a blue felt background.

By 1953, the **Medal of Merit** on khaki existed, and exists today in tan.

In 1954, the **Eagle** knot in khaki is the only one listed. The **Quartermaster** knot had khaki, blue and now white backgrounds. The knot on the blue background was changed from blue to white.

1954 saw the ending of the **Ace** and **Silver Award I** knots on December 31st, and the inauguration of the **Silver Award II** knot by June 1954. While this knot is not mentioned from 1966-1975, it was available throughout the period as a knot for either Silver Award. It was later specifically authorized for the Ranger and Ace. I tried to buy some Silver Award I knots in 1962 or 1963, and only got some by accident, nine years after they were discontinued. Silver Award II knots were readily available, since Air Explorers earned them through 1966.

The Den Mother Training Award did not exist (is not listed) in the 1953 guide, and the "Scouter's Award" is specifically mentioned for Den Mothers. I do know that a friend of mine earned the Scouter's Training Award under the old Five Year Training Program (solid ribbon, FDL on V) as a Den Mother, but she started in the late 30s.

In 1956 the Scouter's Key (SK) knot in green and white and the Scouter's Training Award (STA) knot in solid green still exist on khaki backgrounds. In 1957, only the green and white knot is available, for the Scouter's Key and Training Award. The *Boy Scout Uniforms and Insignia Guide* for 1957 excepts the Training Award for Den Mothers, so the DMTA was probably established by then, using the green and white knot. The DMTA is listed in 1962, but no separate knot.

Cub device



Scout device



CAW device



Commissioner



Circle V



Sea Explorer



In 1957 miniature devices were introduced to put on the Scouter's Key ribbon and the green and white knot. Devices were apparently introduced to identify the programs in which the Scouter's Key was earned, and to distinguish on the now single training award knot those who earned the Key from those who earned the Training Award or Den Mother's Training Award. The first four devices were a diamond-shaped **Cub Scout** emblem, the Tenderfoot badge **Scout** emblem, the universal **Explorer CAW** (Compass, Anchor, Wings) emblem, and the **commissioner** emblem (first class badge within a wreath, similar to the commissioner badge of the time). These devices were produced with a short post on the back and a small frog to clutch the post.

In 1958 the CAW device for Exploring was changed to the **Circle V** device, to follow the change in the Exploring universal symbol.

By 1962 two additional devices were added, the **Air Explorer** wings and **Sea Explorer** device (anchor and First Class badge).

By 1966 the Den Mother's Training Award had become the Den Leader's Training Award and the Den Leader Coach's Training Award was introduced. The 1966 *Official Uniforms and Insignia* directs using the green and white knot for SK, STA, the Den Leader's Training Award, and the Den Leader Coach's Training Award. The only way to distinguish the Scouter's Key was to wear the miniature device on the knot. The miniature device was not worn on the STA ribbon at that time. Since the requirements were written broadly, you only earned the STA once. No distinction was made which program you earned it in. I earned mine as an Explorer Associate Advisor and Committee Chairman.



Four Background Colors

In 1966 green background knots were introduced for the Exploring uniform, blue background knots for Sea Scouting and Cub Scouts, and white background knots for Sea Scouts. The color of the background did not mean anything, it just matched the uniform shirts. Thus, there were **four colors** available for the Silver Beaver, Eagle Scout, and Scouter's Key (including STA/DLTA/DLCTA). The 1966 *Guide* said Eagle came in green for Sea Explorers! Quartermaster came in only blue and white, and in 1970 in khaki. The 1966 and 1967 *Guide* actually lists the Scouter's Key knot only in khaki.

In 1969 I observed that many people who had Scouter's Keys were not wearing their devices, and found out that they had trouble keeping their devices because the shank was too short. I made a suggestion to National that they lengthen the shank as the knot is the primary place the device is used. They adopted the suggestion, and sent me one of the new lengthened commissioner devices, which I still have and wear.

In 1970, the solid green **Scouter's Training Award** knot was reinstated, with all four background colors. Now, Scouters wore two knots if they had earned the SK and STA. The STA knot now represented the DLTA and DLCTA, in whichever background color the person chose.



District Award of Merit

In 1970 the **District Award of Merit** overhand knot was introduced. It is unusual in that it represents a plaque, not a medal or badge. It is the only badge for the uniform.

On January 1, 1971, the **Silver Fawn** was introduced. My 1973 catalog does not list a separate Silver Fawn knot. It does say, "Embroidered square knot in blue and white, No. 5010B" (the blue SB knot on page 2). The award was discontinued June 30, 1974, and later instructions directed the use of the Silver Beaver knot.



Youth and Adult Religious Awards



Circle V and Big E



Den Leader Training Award



Den Leader Coach Training Award



Silver World



OA Distinguished Service



Distinguished Eagle



Arrow of Light

By 1973, the **youth and adult religious award** knots were introduced. These knots represented all religious awards from many different denominations. Initially, they were plain mylar knots. Only Scouts and Explorers wore the youth knot, initially. Former Cub Scouts wore the bar of their badge on their Scout uniform until 1983.

About 1971 the Explorer universal emblem changed again, from Circle V to **Big E**. The Explorer device was also changed to a very small Big E.

In the errata sheet (3065A) to the 1973 Official Uniforms and Insignia guide, the background color of the Scouter's Training Award is associated with a specific program. "**Add the following at the end of the paragraph:** Background colors: khaki—Scout program, blue—Cub Scout program, white—Sea Explorer program, green—Explorer program" This was not previously specified. In 1973, you only earned the STA once. By 1975, see paragraph below, there were separate requirements for the STA in each program, and you could earn it more than once.

In a letter dated March 10, 1975, written by Walter Wenzel, Secretary of the Insignia and Uniform Committee, authorized the wear of the miniature devices (Cub, Scout, Explorer) on the STA knot. The DLTA and DLCTA were still represented by the green STA knot.

By 1978, the **Den Leader Training Award** had a yellow knot on blue, and the **Den Leader Coach Training Award** had a blue and yellow knot on blue. (The old DLCTA and new Cub Scouter Award have sometimes caused some confusion because the Medal of Merit is also blue and yellow, on khaki. The blue is darker for the Medal of Merit. In this case, background is significant.)

Also by 1978, the **Silver World** and **OA Distinguished Service Award** knots were introduced. Also, the **Silver Award II** knot was back in the insignia book, with instructions that it could be used for the older awards.

Also by 1978, a small golden eagle device was introduced to identify the recipients of the **Distinguished Eagle Scout Award**.

In 1979 the white, blue, and green backgrounds for the Silver Beaver, Eagle, Scouter's Key and Scouter's Training Awards were discontinued, though current stocks were sold. Some were still available several years later. Quartermaster was reduced to a white background only.

In 1979 the **Arrow of Light** knot for adult wear was introduced, in khaki.

In 1980 the uniform changed from khaki to a tan shirt, and the backgrounds for the knots started to change from khaki to tan as well. The fabric changed from fine twill to plain weave cloth. The borders initially remained brown, but have also migrated from brown to tan to almost silver-tan, so there are many varieties.

Until May 1980, there was a specific order of precedence for knots and awards, similar to that used by the military services to control the wearing of ribbons. When the Arrow of Light knot was introduced, it was to be worn ahead of the Eagle knot. The idea probably was that it was earned first. However, that raised a big reaction from the rank and file, who thought it definitely ought to come after the Eagle and other older boy ranks. The Uniforms and Insignia Committee neatly finessed this problem by deciding that they would no longer publish an order of precedence. The individual Scouter now decides the order he/she wishes to wear his/her knots in.



Professional Training Award

In 1980 the **Professional Training Award** knot was introduced.



Heroism Award

In 1981, the **Heroism Award** knot was approved. It uses the solid red ropes of the Honor Medal against a white background, thus making the background color significant in discriminating between these awards.

In 1983, Scouts wore a Cub device if they had earned the religious award in Cubs and a Scout device if earned in Scouting (but no device if only earned in Scouting). Explorers did not yet have the device authorized for the knot, but in at least one case it was used on the ribbon of the award! Complex, but this how these things evolve, rationalization takes some time.

By 1986, the Silver Award II knot was redesignated for the **Explorer Achievement Award** and the Silver Award was now part of the “catch-all” function of this knot.

By 1986, the **Varsity Scout** device, a VS in a circle, was introduced.

Varsity Scout



In the fall of 1987, two new knots were introduced. The **George Meany Award** had been in existence, and had a temporary patch since 1982. The knot was added in 1987. The **Scoutmaster’s Award of Merit** was initiated that same fall. The Scoutmaster’s Award of Merit with a white knot on tan, is again a knot where the background color determines the meaning. Twelve years later, this knot also came to represent the **Venturing Advisor Award of Merit**.



George Meany

On December 31st, 1988 the **Scouter’s Key as Cubmaster, the Scouter’s Training Award in Cubbing, the Den Leader’s Training Award and the Den Leader Coach’s Training Award** were phased out. If earned, you may continue to wear the Key or STA with the Cub device.



Scoutmaster Award of Merit

In their place were instituted the **Cubmaster Award, Den Leader Award, Webelos Den Leader Award, Den Leader Coach Award, and Cub Scouter Award**. New neck ribbon awards were instituted, which lasted until 2001 when they were phased out for lack of interest. The DLTA knot was retained for the DLA. The DLCTA knot was used for the CSA, causing some confusion and hurt feeling on the part of experienced DLCs. New square knots on blue or yellow background were instituted for the other awards.



Cubmaster Award, Den Leader Award, Webelos Leader Awd
Den Leader Coach Awd, Cub Scouter Awd, Tiger Cub Awd

Also by 1989, several new awards had knots associated with them. These included the **Spurgeon Award, the Whitney Young Award, the Distinguished Commissioner Award, and Seabadge**. One of the few non-square knot badges, the Seabadge “knot” is a trident.



Spurgeon Award



Whitney Young Award, Distinguished Commissioner, Seabadge

Webelos



By 1989, a **Webelos** device was introduced for the sole purpose of wearing on the youth religious award when earned by a Webelos Cub Scout. Also, by now, the use of devices on the youth religious knot had been rationalized, with four possible devices (Cub, Webelos, Scout and Explorer).



Hornaday Badge

Until 1991, the **Hornaday Award** did not have a square knot. You wore the Hornaday Badge in place of a square knot. The badge, illustrated left, has a beaver, a duck and a fish set against a forest background. The Hornaday knot, created in 1991, is only for the higher levels of the Hornaday Award. So even today, some wear a Hornaday Badge because they did not earn a high enough Award to warrant the knot.



Hornaday Award

In October 1992 the **Tiger Cub Group Coach Award** and knot was instituted. This morphed to **Tiger Cub Coach Award** and has since become the **Tiger Cub Den Leader Award**, in 2001. The knot has remained the same, and is illustrated on the preceding page.



James E. West

All these knots and devices have had catalog numbers since they were created. Sometimes, but seldom, the catalog number would change. The Scouter’s Training Award and the Silver Award II were examples of this. By 1993, with the introduction of electronic scanning devices for pricing, it became necessary to re-number all the square knots and devices. Almost all of the catalog numbers changed. They were now usually individually packaged with the UPC code printed on the package.

The **James E. West Award** knot was issued in 1993 when the award was introduced



District Committee

By 1993, the **district committee** device, a tenderfoot badge in a plain circle, was introduced for the Scouter’s Key as district committee. This device is not worn with the STA, since there is no way to earn the STA on the district committee.



Scout Devices

In 1995 the **Young American Award** is mentioned as one of the awards for the “catch-all” Silver Award knot. This knot has been officially identified to represent at least seven different awards, and seems to be used for several more by many Scouters. These include Ranger, Ace, Silver Award I, Silver Award II, Explorer Achievement Award, Young American Award and **G.O.L.D. (Growth Opportunity in Leadership Development)**. Unofficially, Scouters have used it for the Exploring Leadership Award. In 1996 Ranger, Ace and Young American were dropped from the list of awards it represents. (However, once listed, I would use it since uniforms do not go obsolete.)



Commissioner Devices

Devices have undergone a gradual decline in detail and “quality.” For instance, I have three Scout devices, bought in 1975, then perhaps five years later, and again about 1990. In the first, the device is fully modeled and completely cut out, with no fill between the upper and lower branches of the FDL. The second starts to fill that in, and the third makes the device look like a pentagon. My original national sample long post

commissioner device has much more detail than the more recent ones, which are also flat. One interesting change, which took a while, is that the commissioner device was changed from a first class badge to a tenderfoot badge (surrounded by a wreath). The change was made on the embroidered badge in 1973, but not on the device until about 1995.



Venturing Device



1910/Founder's



Silver Award III



Community Organization Award

In 1999 the **Venturing** device was introduced to support the Venturing program. The Exploring device was no longer part of the Scouting program, having been moved to Learning for Life. The device is used on youth religious knots, Scouter's Keys, Scouter's Training Awards, and the Venturing Advisor's Award of Merit.

Before September 2000, new devices were introduced for the James E. West knot, identifying the type of higher giving. Those types are: Direct gifts (**1910 Society**, \$25,000; up to Waite Phillips, \$1,000,000) and deferred gifts (**Founder's Circle** \$100,000 or more of deferred giving). The devices are the old (20s-60s) national executive insignia and the new Character Counts logo (based on the 40s Explorer Scout logo).

By 1999, the "catch-all" knot is no longer mentioned in the *Insignia Guide*, but is replaced by the **Venturing Silver Award III** knot, instituted in 1999. Though not a knot, there is also a metal bar for the **Ranger Award**, worn centered on the flap of the pocket rather than above the seam. Venturers also wear ribbons for their Bronze Awards and Gold Award, patterned after military ribbons. Oh, how the wheel turns!

By 2002, the Den Leader Coach position was replaced with the Pack Trainer, and the Den Leader Coach Award (and knot) disappeared. Also, the **Community Organization Award** square knot came in, to recognize Scouters' awards from organizations such as Elks and Masons. It is a gold/gold knot and border with a purple background.

There are some general observations about BSA square knots. The design has remained remarkably stable over about 55 years. There are two major varieties of knots, what I call normal and symmetrical. Normal knots are slightly different at the two ends, with the left end (as observed) tilting up and the right end slanting slightly down. Symmetrical knots are symmetrical from the center up and down, with the inner side of the rope longer than the outer side of the rope. The Silver Award II was the first symmetrical knot, and for many years the only one. Additional symmetrical knots are the Tiger Coach/DL Award, the Professional Training Award, and Silver Award III. All except the Professional Training Award have also been produced in normal style, usually recently. I have been unable to ascertain a pattern of use for these two varieties. In addition, some knots have a very flattened, run together look, often with a wide border of fabric around the edges. I call these computer-produced.



Normal,

Symmetrical,

Computer

Fabric has gone through three primary varieties. First, beginning in 1946, is rough twill, which matches the rough cotton twill of the shirts of the time. These lasted until 1965, when the wash and wear uniform was introduced. Then fabric changed to fine twill. Rough twill has about 22 lines per inch, fine twill has about 40 lines per inch. An examination of the green, white and blue knots produced beginning in 1966 shows fine twill. When the shirt was changed to tan, the fabric color was changed, and so was the fabric itself, to a plain weave, square with the knot.



Rough Twill



Fine Twill

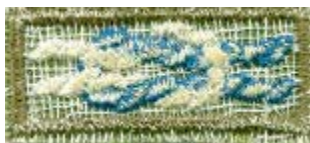
Plain Dark Border

Plain Light Border

There are at least five different kinds of backs, and some varieties of backs are harder to find than others. Some of my oldest knots have no backing of any kind, just thread sewn into cloth. The first stiffener was gauze backing, threads perhaps a millimeter apart. According to Reis, this occurred about 1950. Then knots were backed with plastic, which helped them keep their shape. Some of the plastic was designed to iron on, but that seldom worked satisfactorily. It appears that several clear and white plastics were used at various times. Sometimes the coating was thin, sometimes thick enough to fill in and make a flat back. There is also a variety that has both gauze and plastic backing. Finally, new in 2002, is a plastic backing including the BSA logo, probably to prevent counterfeiting.



Plain (no) Backing



Gauze Backing



Plastic Backing, Gauze-Plastic Backing, BSA Plastic Backing

From 1966 to 1979 several knots were produced in four background colors: khaki, green, blue and white. The knots were Silver Beaver, Eagle, Quartermaster (except green), Scouter's Key, and Scouter's Training Award. The background on these knots did not normally have meaning. However, there are seven situations where the background color does have meaning. They are:

1) Red knot—khaki/tan background is the Honor Medal, white background is the Heroism Award.



2) Blue and yellow knot—dark blue on khaki/tan is the Medal of Merit, lighter blue on blue is the Cub Scouter Award (old Den Leader Coach Training Award).



3) White knot—on red is the OA Distinguished Service Award, on tan is the Scoutmaster/Advisor Award of Merit, on navy blue is Quartermaster.



4) Silver knot—on red/white/blue is Silver Award II, on green/ white is Silver Award III, on red is Distinguished Commissioner.



5) Gold knot—on dark green or black background with gold border is Spurgeon Award, on blue background with blue border is Den Leader Award, on yellow background with yellow border is Webelos Den Leader Award, on purple with gold border is Community Organization Award.



6) Dark blue knot—on white or khaki is Quartermaster, on red and white is George Meany Award.



7) Light blue knot—on yellow is Cubmaster Award, on blue was Den Leader Coach Award.



In any organization as large and complex as the Boy Scouts of America, there are occasional errors or deviations from the standards. We know of three “error knots.” The knots below (Silver Beaver, Arrow of Light, George Meany) show where colors are reversed. Shay Lelegren dates the Silver Beaver error prior to 1954 because it has no backing.



In addition, there are two knots where the initial design was changed or did not work out. The Quartermaster blue-on-blue (“Blue Square Knot on dark blue,” catalog number 5021) was replaced in 1954 with 5016B, the white knot on blue. The first Spurgeon knot did not fit the standard design. You can tell by comparing the Quartermaster next to it.



The topics of experimental knots, authorized local knots and of “private issue” or “fake” knots are covered in a different paper, *Experimental, Locally Authorized, “Private Issue,” Fake and Spoof Scouting Square Knots*.

I am indebted for help with sources to Nancy Cramer of Las Vegas, who took peer review to new heights. She provided me many additional references after she looked at an earlier version of this monograph. I hope this exposition has been of interest. As you can see, there are still some gaps to fill in. If you have information that would help, please contact me at George@Crowl.org or 832-467-1998 or 16213 Congo Ln, Jersey Village, TX 77040-2011.

©2002 V. 2.03 9/2/02