A Versatile Tool for Extreme Demolition

by Mike Sloggatt

Almost ten years ago, I was contracted to do an extensive renovation on the North Shore of Long Island. The site was very difficult to access, and until the new drive was put in, we had to move everything in and out by hand. I needed some extra manpower, so I went to my next-door neighbor, who's a professional fire fighter. His schedule allowed him some time to work on the side, and we made arrangements to have a crew of his coworkers help me out on their days off. I then had access to an eager and experienced demolition crew.

One of those men showed up one day with what was to become my most valued demolition tool — the Halligan bar. NYC Fire Department First Deputy Fire Commissioner Hugh A. Halligan originally designed the tool, which was intended as a lightweight hand tool for forcible entry while fighting fires. It combines the best attributes of several tools: the firefighter's hook, a pry bar, a punch, a chisel, and a claw tool. This multifaceted steel bar makes for one extreme demolition tool. Now I don't do any remodeling without it.

Unfortunately, the tool owned by the firefighter wasn't for sale. I tried getting one at a few tool suppliers but had no luck. They had never even heard of it. I finally tried a local fire equipment supplier and was able to order one for about $150. If I hadn't seen the tool in action and used it myself, I would never have been able to justify the cost, but I decided we couldn't be without one.

How Versatile Is It?

This tool is so versatile that we use it for most of our heavy demo work. The claw end serves as a pry bar, nail puller, and bolt remover. It can be driven between planks or studs with a sledgehammer to provide some serious leverage. But the opposite end of the tool is where it gets interesting. The hook, or, as some of the crew call it, the horn, can be driven into plaster, lumber, sheathing, masonry, or anywhere you need penetration to start removing material. The head is heavy enough to be swung into the material without the aid of a sledgehammer. I find it handy for removing door and window headers. You can split the header with the hook and then break it out in pieces. The adze head is set at a 90-degree offset from the hook. This design provides better leverage when prying out boards or larger pieces of plaster or masonry. Removing old floorboards, for example, is a cinch. I place the adze head on the bottom side of a floorboard and put the hook on a joist. The hook makes a great fulcrum, and the boards pop up with little effort. The same method can be used to remove plaster or mud walls in bath remodels. It is much easier and less exhausting to use your body weight, as opposed to muscle power alone.

Opposite the adze head is a flat surface that can be used as a battering ram or lightweight bump hammer. A good swing of this end of the tool will knock out the base of most studs not secured to sheathing. Because there are so many points to get leverage from, it is great for getting heavy beams into position. The hook also works well as a drift pin for aligning the bolt holes in steel beams.

With the Halligan, door removal is a simple task. I wedge the adze head behind the hinge and pop the hinges free of the jamb. Then I can use the claw end to pry the jamb from the framing. (Just don't try this if you plan on salvaging anything — it's not that kind of tool.)

Designed by a firefighter to save lives, the Halligan bar has many leverage points that make it a great prying and lifting tool.

A Final Example

Here's an example that illustrates the power and strength of the Halligan bar: I needed to move a full stack of 1/2-inch plywood that was sitting on a concrete floor. Rather than restack the plywood on a couple of 2x4s, I drove the adze head under one corner and pried back on the bar.

Pulling down this brick facade is much easier with the author's favorite pry bar. After ten years, he doesn't do any demo without it.

I was able to lift it high enough to get a 2x4 under the corner. Repeating the process on all four corners allowed us to slide a pallet jack underneath and move the pile without restacking.

The Halligan bar is a professional-quality, versatile tool. If I were restricted to a choice of three tools for demolition, it would be my first pick. (My trusty hammer and reciprocating saw would be two and three.) Prices for a Halligan will vary somewhat, as the tool comes in several sizes, but expect to pay around $180. No remodeler or demolition contractor should be without one.

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DeWalt 14-inch Heavy-Duty Cutoff Saw

by Gary Katz

When I signed on for a life-long career in finish carpentry, I thought I'd be working with wood. I guess I'm lucky that was the case for almost 20 years because these days all I see is composite this and compressed that — and now, for crying out loud, I'm cutting steel.

Well, no matter the material, there's always a tool that's made just for the job. The DeWalt DW872 Multi-cutter saw is one of those tools, and I thank all the people on the *JLC* Finish Carpentry Forum online who told me to "go out and get one."

I had a job coming up where I would be installing Fypon balustrade railing, a polyurethane embedded around 3-inch-diameter steel pipe, and I'm not that handy with a hacksaw. We considered using our old abrasive-wheel cutoff saw — the one we've used for years to cut chrome closet pole, steel brackets, and steel jambs. But we thought there must be something better, something that wouldn't burn the polyurethane, something that wouldn't scream like a banshee and risk catching that new house on fire. I investigated portable band saws, too, but needed something I could cut angles with repetitively,

The quick-release vise clamp makes repetitive cuts go smoothly.

since all the stair balusters were formed around a piece of 3/4-inch steel pipe. The Multi-cutter has been the perfect tool for the job.

Plenty of Power

At first glance, the Multi-cutter doesn't seem much different than any cut-off saw, but a closer look reveals a hefty 15-amp 4-horse motor, a cutting capacity of 4 1/2 by 6 inches (5 3/16 inches round), and an excellent fence and quick-lock vise system. I hot-glued a piece of wood to each face of the vise, and even on 10-foot lengths of railing, we haven't nicked the surrounding soft surface of the polyurethane. The vise locks and unlocks smoothly and quickly, which has been handy for the repetitive cuts. And the fence adjusts to any angle, though it's not as angle-friendly as a chop saw — you have to check the angle with a protractor before tightening down the fence.

By hot-gluing a piece of wood to each face of the vise (left), the author is able to cut steel and polyurethane handrailing sections without marring them.

Great Blades

But the beauty of this beast is the blade. I never knew that carbide blades could cut steel, probably because I've been cutting wood for more than 30 years. But DeWalt's metal-cutting blades are the backbone of this saw. Manufactured with a mixture of high-grade carbide and 12% titanium, these blades almost make metal-cutting a pleasure. I ordered my saw equipped with a DW7747 blade, a 14-inch 70-tooth heavy-gauge ferrous metal cutting blade. That blade cuts right through the 3-inch pipe in the balustrade railing, and the cuts are just as smooth as my chop saw going through pine. It also cuts right through the 1/4x1x1-inch angled steel we use to reinforce transom door jambs. Making burr-free, burn-free cuts in chrome closet pole is no problem, either. Our crews install a lot of metal jambs on commercial buildings. Cutting down those jambs used to be a nightmare; now it's a dream.

DeWalt has several other blades manufactured just for metal cutting, including a 12-inch 60-tooth model (DW7737) like the one I've been using, a 14-inch light-gauge ferrous metal cutting blade (DW7745), and two sizes of stainless-steel cutting blades (DW7739, a 12-inch 80-tooth; and DW7749, a 14-inch 90-tooth). Expect to pay around $450 for the Multi-cutter.

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