Watch types, specific brands, promotional pieces, limited editions - there’s no shortage of themes for watch collectors. But choosing a theme is advisable, because the sheer profusion of timepieces, coupled with the “collector’s bug” can overwhelm you. It’s like anything we might collect: specialise or go crazy.

Ken Kessler

Probably the most obvious and most popular theme of all is collecting watches from a single manufacturer. It’s safe to say that Rolexes are the most feverishly amassed, while those of even deeper pockets covet Patek Philippes. Study auction results over the past 20 years, and you’ll find that those two houses set the highest records and are the subjects of the greatest number of single-make auctions. They’ve also generated the greatest number of books dedicated to their minutiae. But we’ll deal with Rolex and ‘PP’ later in the series. To launch QP’s guide to watch collecting, we’re looking at military watches, which run a close second to concentrating on a single make.

It should be pointed out that, for many collectors of military watches, an obsession with war, militaria, combat, et al, might play little or no part in the passion. If I am even remotely typical of military watch collectors, I focus on them because they are intrinsically superior timepieces, and that’s because they have to be. Of all the watches with life-or-death functionality, probably the only civilian types that share the same gravity of purpose are diving watches.

As a rule, the most interesting military watches tend to contain superior movements, housed in extra-rugged cases. With the exception of ceremonial or presentation pieces and certain officers’ watches, they tend not to feature cases made of precious metals; instead, they’re made mainly of stainless steel, or for older models, plated brass or other base metals. If your interests go back to WWI, you’ll also find some in silver, especially those converted from small pocket watches.

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Rolex 5513 Submariner. Made for the Royal Navy during the 1970s, the 5513 was a stainless steel, self-winding watch, with the military issue number engraved upon the back.
Collecting for wristwatches on every level, bar glamour, with only costly, modern exotica such as titanium challenging its supremacy. The second benefit is that the price of vintage military watches rarely suffers the inflation imparted by gold or platinum. So it’s safe to characterise military watch collectors, whether or not they have a passion for military history, as being attracted to the subject by sheer functionality.

Which is not to suggest that a sizable component of the military watch-collecting fraternity doesn’t consist of ex-servicemen. A friend of mine and fellow collector is ex-RAF and only collects watches issued to that branch of the services, giving him a personal reason for assembling a selection of pilots’ watches with genuine RAF provenance. For some, I’m sure, there’s an element of playing soldiers. But for many, it’s simply their purity.

This extends to both the watches’ functions and visuals, in addition to the ruggedness of the aforementioned cases and movements. There are no such things as military watches with hard-to-read dials, because accurate timekeeping, communicated to the wearer with speed, is their raison d’être. Legibility is even more crucial when conditions include underwater activity or piloting an aircraft, especially in a darkened cockpit, while precise timekeeping means many military watches feature hacking seconds for precise setting.

Even within the seemingly narrow field of military watch collecting, there are subdivisions that will help novices to focus their energies, e.g. my friend who concentrates on RAF watches and who is rarely tempted by anything else. Other subjects include nationality (Italian military watches are amongst the ‘coolest’, of course, while British are the most plentiful and interesting), type (chronographs, pocket watches, diving watches, pilot’s watches), era (WWI or WWII, Viet Nam, modern conflicts) or brand. For the latter, IWC, Lemania, Hamilton and Omega are among those offering the richest pickings.

As with all other forms of collecting, condition and provenance figure highly in determining the worth of a piece, but for once, proving the latter is rarely an issue. Aside from fakes – more of which anon – most military watches wear their provenance in the form of identification on the caseback, so it’s easy to see if a specific watch is military issue or the civilian version. In some cases, there are genuine military watches without the anticipated engravings, but they’re the exception rather than the rule.

Condition, however, is far more important, because military watches, by their very nature, are used and abused. Finding a ‘mint’ 1950s IWC military watch is not the same as acquiring a mint IWC civilian watch. And while some casework can be polished; the dials, hands and crystals present the greatest challenge, for replacement parts are hard to come by, and collectors – regardless of the topic – hate restorations, be it paintings, cars or timepieces.

Then there are the movements. Unless you have the skills to open cases and assess the condition of what’s inside, you are at the mercy...
of the vendor and your own judgment. Is the watch working, and if so, is it keeping reasonable time? If it’s not working, is the price low enough to allow you to pay for a repair without exceeding the watch’s ‘working order’ value? However tempting it might be to pick up a battered Viet Nam-era Hamilton for £200, if it needs £300 worth of servicing, you’ve exceeded the cost of buying one in better condition.

Military watches, alas, stopped being bargains nearly 20 years ago, when the Gulf War, for some reason, made the military look ‘chic’. This military-cool coincided with the boom in watch collecting and so WWWs (‘Watch, Wrist, Waterproof’), seemingly overnight, went from £25 to £200. Gone are the days of IWC Mk 11s for £350, let alone £35.

GOOD OL’ DAYS

Up until the 1990s, military watches of all varieties were plentiful, with only the merest handful showing anything in the way of values above the £25-£200 mark: the Breguet Type XX chronograph, the oft-cited IWCs, oversized pilot watches worn by Nazis. This author even recalls original Panerais for under £500, at a time when those were only coveted by Rolex collectors who knew that the original Radiomir had a Rolex-labelled movement. So, I fear, there is no good news for those on a budget, just starting out with military watches.

Probably the most plentiful and least expensive are the WWW watches, manual-wind models with small seconds, which were sourced from a dozen or more brands - Timor, Vertex, Longines, Record, Eterna, Smiths, Omega - there are plenty to choose from, all virtually identical on the outside, except for the name on the dial. It must be remembered that the specification was set by the military, and that the watch manufacturers were subcontracted to produce watches to those specifications. What makes one differ from another is the quality of the movement and the prestige of the brand, so WWWs and the similar, primarily white-dialled ATPs (‘Army Trade Pattern’) can range from under £50 for beaten examples, primarily of value for scavenging for spares, to the auction-only price levels of the rarest IWC Mk Xs.

So, why is IWC’s Mk X worth ten times what you’d pay for a seemingly identical Timor? IWC’s manual movements of the 1940s and 1950s are regarded as some of the finest ever to grace a wristwatch. The more pedestrian of working WWW models cost anywhere between £100 and £400. An IWC Mk X will probably start at £1,500 in rough shape and top out at £3,000-£4,000 for a fine quality example, depending on whether or not it’s one of the rare variants.

When sweep seconds replaced small seconds in the late-1940s and early 1950s, two classics emerged that now remain permanently in the Top 10 of ‘Must-Have’ military collectibles: the IWC Mk 11 and the 1953 Omega. The former, though in production from 1948 until the early 1980s, and produced in reasonably high numbers, enjoys limitless desirability because its dial is the epitome of the lucid military watch face, with its ‘Broad Arrow’ marking, triangle at 12 o’clock and other details that render it nearly Bauhaus. Add to it one of the finest manual-wind movements ever made, and you have a piece that today fetches anything from £2000-£5000, depending on variations, e.g. a ‘hooked 7’ dial or issuance to one of the smaller services.

Omega’s offering for 1953, made only during that year, is another model of supreme legibility, with a superb movement, though not quite up to IWC’s standards. In this case, it’s the low numbers that add to its desirability. A determined collector should be able to find one for £1,000 or less. The specialist dealers, whose pricing structure works in the manner of London restaurants’ formula for pricing a bottle of wine, will charge you £2,500 or more.

If you don’t wish to look at watches costing four figures, the market still yields large quantities of Hamiltons, Smiths, Vertexes, CWs and Timors for reasonable sums. Because the most common watches are WWII issue and are, as far as I can tell, nearly all manual wind, any good watchmaker can get them up and running. The fun starts when your collecting tastes move on to chronographs, diving watches and models with dedicated parts beyond the cosmetic.
There’s a reason why military watch collectors love the Lemanias, and not just their handsome, near-perfect dials. Lemania manual-wind chronograph movements are among the most respected in wristwatch history, they’re plentiful, and they’re reliable. After all, they didn’t end up being NASA-approved by accident. Despite their popularity, Lemanias, such as the classic Air Ministry 6B from the 1950s through to the 1970s, can be found for £1,000-£1,500 in fine condition. Conversely, the highly desirable Breguet Type XX of the 1950s, with Valjoux 22 movement, commands at least three times as much.

**UNLIKELY ORIGINS**

Military watches come from surprising sources: a superb flyback chronograph was made by Heuer for the German Bundeswehr in the late 1960s, a handsome beast, which you should be able to locate for under £1,500. In addition to the magical Breguet XX, other companies, such as Dodane, produced models to identical specification, but they sell for much less. Jaeger-LeCoultre, over the years, has created some of the most sought-after military watches, their version of the Mk 11 is considered by some to be the equal of the mythic IWC. Seiko, as Seikosha, manufactured watches for the Japanese forces, while the lowering of the Iron Curtain meant a flood of Russian and Eastern European watches in the 1990s, including diving watches up to 70 mm across! And Longines has issued so many classic military pieces that they’ve been inspired to reissue a commemorative version of their WWV for release in late 2009.

Because of the profusion of models, the field of military watch collecting is broad and full of opportunities for collectors, so you can start small and work your way up to the dearer rarities. In addition to those cited, other sensational and desirable models for the wealthier collectors include: Omega and Blancpain diving watches, anything with low survival rates or production figures, such as Panerais and Luftwaffe fliegeruhren, watches connected to famous military figures, and possibly the most valuable of all: the Rolex Submariner commissioned for the Royal Navy.

Easily identified by its dagger hands, rather than the standard ‘Mercedes’ hand, and a strap rather than a bracelet, the Rolex Submariners 5513 and 5517 from the 1970s are among those items that cause pandemonium at auctions. Total production of all the variants is believed to be around 1,200 pieces, but those numbers are irrelevant: when one does turn up at auction, in fine condition and with proof of authenticity, the number that matters is the price, which can reach somewhere in the region of £70,000. Why? Because Rolex collectors are the oddest of beasts, the sort of people who...
will pay an extra £2,000 because a Submariner has red print rather than white on the dial. As genuine military-issue Rolexes are so rare, you have both the general Rolex enthusiasts and the military watch hounds vying for the same pieces. And to find any 5513 or 5517 for under £30,000 nowadays is to snag a bargain.

Faking is topic that is called to mind when dealing with Rolex, for it is one of the most counterfeited of all military watches. You can now find scarily authentic ‘replicas’ - the favoured euphemism for fakes - with ETA or Asian movements, for under £300, complete with the correct Royal Navy strap. They look exactly like the genuine article, with only their as-new condition providing a clue to their ‘fakeness’. I’ve seen counterfeit dials for IWC Mk 11s from Italy that are so close to perfect that they’ll fool most experts. Conversely, I have seen a bogus IWC MK X and an Omega ‘53 from South America, which wouldn’t have fooled even the most dupable. So be careful, especially when you’re looking at the most coveted pieces. If you’re a remotely savvy collector, you already know that you’ll need to call on those eBay/flea market/boot fair street-smart skills of assessing the vendor as well as the goods. Fortunately, we’re now blessed with at least a half-dozen sublime books on military watches that will help you to identify what you’re considering. Invest in at least two of them: British Military Timepieces by Konrad Knirim (see page 86) and Military Wristwatches: Sky Land Sea by Michele Galizia which was reviewed in QP33.

A final word of warning, to close this installment: 30 years ago, when I found my first military watch - a Vertex WWW - which I wore proudly, a friend who happened to be an officer in the British Army and who served in Northern Ireland, put a damper on my enthusiasm. He pointed out that a number of servicemen do not wear their military-issue watches when they’re in civilian clothing. ‘Certain elements might use it as a clue to one’s status as an enlisted man. And there are times when that is not advisable.’

Although we lived as far away from Northern Ireland as one can get while still in the British Isles, and I looked nothing like a ‘soldier on leave’, thanks to my paunch, bearing and carriage, I took note of his warning. Given the current state of the planet, I, too, would advise wearing civilian timepieces when travelling through Belfast, the Middle East...