

Panerai's
ex-CEO
proves the
perfect
candidate
to recount
the unique
history of this
most iconic
of brands

Ken Kessler

Chronicled



(Top) Author Dino Zei in 1970.

(Bottom) A one-off prototype for a diving watch that never reached production, from the 1980s.



**La Panerai di Firenze -
150 Anni di Storia**
By Dino Zei
Hardback, 280 pages.
Price: €129
CLD Libri, 2004.

If you consider yourself a Paneristo, then it does not get much better than this. Author Dino Zei was the CEO of Officine Panerai from 1973 to 1997, making him the ideal person to chronicle the company's 150-year history. He personally guided the brand from its status as an obscure supplier of military paraphernalia to its status as the cult watch of the 1990s. What he has assembled here is inarguably the definitive story of the brand, prior to its takeover by the Richemont Group in 1997. Beyond that, it is the best watch book I have seen since that massive tome on German military watches, reviewed in Issue 5.

The man for the job

His credentials were impeccable: Zei was an officer in the Italian Navy, having entered the Naval Academy in 1950. By 1958, he was a Naval Weapons Officer and graduated from the University of Pisa with a degree in Industrial Engineering. Finishing his stint in the Navy as Head of the Weapons and Explosives Section of the Centre of Studies of the

Navy Commandos and Divers Headquarters, and (deep breath) Head of the Ammunition and Missiles of the Standing Committee for the Experimentation on War Materials, Zei was also appointed Director of the Centre of Studies of the Navy Commandos and Divers Headquarters in 1969. Clearly a busy and talented man, perfectly suited to what would follow.

Zei left the Navy in 1972, to become the manager of Guido Panerai e Figlio in Florence, after the death of Giuseppe Panerai. Back then, the company manufactured all manner of devices for the Special Units of the Italian Navy – not just the timekeepers we know and love. That same year, he established and became Sole Director of Officine Panerai Srl, then Chairman of Officine Panerai Spa. After the watch division and trademark were sold to Cartier (part of the Richemont Group), he ran Panerai Sistemi Spa until 1999 – a separate business then transferred to a Bologna-based company Calzoni.

Definitive

Zeï has gathered together so much information that it is hard to know how to categorise the book. Obviously, *QP* readers will covet it for the watch content. For collectors in the increasingly high-stakes game of pre-

Richemont Panerai acquisition, the book is worth buying just to find out – definitively – the serial and production numbers of the watches made before 1997, including the near-mythical Slytech models created for Sylvester Stallone. But Panerai was so much

more. Its talents included advanced research in numerous fields, as well as the production of fabulous devices for the military, ranging from the banal to the exotic. If you have any interest in militaria, electronics or marine hardware, this book will dazzle you.

Zeï's history unveils much information previously withheld from the public eye – no doubt in keeping with the Italian equivalent of the Official Secrets Act. Detailed descriptions, reprints of important and obscure documents, numerous pages of raw data and information on Officine Panerai's numerous patents, abandoned projects and numerous products developed for the Italian Navy as far back as World War I. While many Paneristi knew about the compasses, the depth gauges, the knives and waterproof torches, the list also includes gun-mounting hardware, signalling devices, lighting apparatus, assorted meteorological devices...the list goes on. Panerai could even supply you with windsocks for your landing strip. Trust me: you will put this book down with an entirely altered understanding of Panerai.

Heavy-duty cable reels from Panerai that audiophiles would kill for!

Obligatory resource

The moment I saw a review in an Italian watch magazine, I ordered my copy for €129 plus postage from libri gg in Imperia (email them at books@librigg.com). Luckily, my Italian is good enough to allow me to glean the salient points, if not the poetry of Zeï's writing. It was a struggle, but I now know precisely how many watches Stallone commissioned, and how many types, as mentioned above. However, for those of deeper pockets, there is now a special edition of 500 sets containing the Italian-language first edition, plus two more books: an English translation and a third volume with original photos of Panerai's first 15 watches, technical specifications and drawings. Oh, and a certificate for each limited edition, numbered and signed by Dino Zeï, all in a nice slipcase. Check www.connectingwatches.com for details, and brace yourself for the price: a princely €369/US\$410/£240.

If anyone from Richemont is reading this, here is a tip: contact Dino Zeï and CLD Libri. Negotiate with them to produce a new, unlimited, 'global' edition, with an added chapter that gathers up images and data for all of the post-1997 models. Richemont already has this material laid out beautifully on the website, with details of all those limited editions and variants that drive collectors crazy. Charge €150 per copy, sell it strictly through Panerai dealers, and Richemont, Zeï and CLD Libri will all make a bundle, while tens of thousands of Paneristi will love you for it: a one-stop cache of total Panerai lore. Go on, just do it. You know it makes sense. ◉

Further information: CLD Libri srl, via Torino, 6, 56025 Pontedera (Pisa), Tel: +39 0587 52603, Email: cldlibri@cldlibri.it ...or LIBRI GG, Email: books@librigg.com.

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