



The QP Bookshelf Part 3:

Militaria

QP picks out the highlights
in the annals of military
watch books

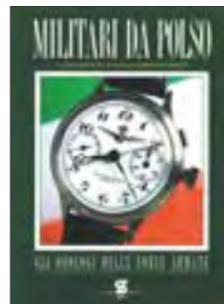
Ken Kessler



After Rolexes and chronographs, the most feverish collecting appears to involve military watches. I say "appears to" because it is a judgement based mainly on my personal observations as a collector of 25 years standing and, for some 15 years, a seller of vintage watches. One can only image what excitement would be caused by a Rolex Cosmograph or Daytona with genuine military markings, if such a watch existed. (And I think it does...)

Military watches are coveted for a number of reasons, not least the high quality of their movements and the fact that they are usually housed in steel rather than gold. Thus, military watches were once bargains. The demand has generally grown for militaria, causing prices to escalate and remain high over the past decade. Not long ago, you could find British military watches – say, a Record, Timor or a CWC – with full markings and in fine condition for under £100. Now you are lucky to find a military ticker for under £250. And for swastika-engraved watches, especially WWII Luftwaffe pieces, the sky is the limit.

Surprisingly, the lust for military watches has not been accompanied by a growth in the military watch book industry. Those few that are available all have something to offer, so the upside is that there have been no low-rent, cash-in, cut-and-paste volumes nor dubious price guides. But if military watches are your poison, you would do well to invest in the relevant books because military watches have been faked, butchered and bastardised, and you need all the help you can to ensure that the IWC Mk XI or 1953 Omega you are coveting is the real deal. With the former changing hands for £1,500–£4,000 and the rough examples of the latter beginning at £800, the mistakes are far more costly than those £25 Smiths of 15 years back.



Militari Da Polso

By Leopoldo Canetoli, with Francesco Ferretti

Hardback, 181 pages. Price: 140,000 Lire (originally).
Published by Studio Zeta, 1997. ISBN 88-86381-03-4

This hard-to-find gem from 1997 is so good that I have seen grown men fight over copies. The mystery surrounding it? A definite silence no matter how many times you try to contact the Italian publisher. Which is a pity: an English translation would sell like hotcakes, and deservedly so. The author, aided by Panerai expert Francesco Ferretti (also owner of the most frighteningly seductive watch store I have ever visited), has created an unbelievably satisfying and accessible picture study of the most important military watches from around the world – around 200 or so from WWI to the present – using stunning colour photographs supplemented by both prose descriptions and technical specs. The book includes a comprehensive guide to the markings of 16 countries and potted histories of the brands (including studies of the lesser-known makes such as Mimo and Minerva, Latora and Vixa), and you will benefit from the wealth of information even if you do not speak a word of Italian. Now, the good news: there are known to be copies available from a US military surplus-type company called Deutsche Optik (I know... do not ask). They sell it for \$120, but it is still worth every penny.



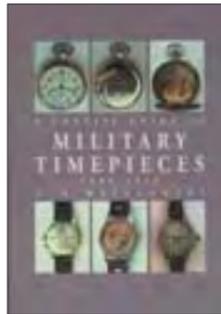
Militär Uhren – Military Timepieces

By Konrad Knirim

Hardback, 636 pages. Price: €150.
Published by Pomp, 2002. ISBN 3-89355-232-4

Subtitled “150 Years – Watches and Clocks of German Forces”, this bilingual (German and English) masterpiece raises the bar so high that you can only pray that some UK expert will produce a matching equivalent on the watches of the British forces. Knirim, who has been collecting military watches since 1985, seems to have catalogued every single timing device ever issued by the German military, a tough task given that so many records were lost or destroyed during WWII. The photography is absolutely perfect, and no collector of military watches will fail to be tormented by the gorgeous Blancpain Fifty Fathoms issued to the technical diving services, or the genuine, military-issue Rolex Explorer on page 583, used “for navigation purposes on long-distance flights”, or the various Heuers and IWCs and Langes... This book is bursting at the seams with highly desirable timepieces. And for those interested in militaria but not necessarily watches, the book covers every type of clock and instrument, including aircraft panel and instrument clocks, submarine timepieces, the various Panerai issued to the Kampfschwimmers – there is even a shot of the back of the watch issued to the Red Baron’s squadron. Production tables galore, technical specs, details of variations – no collector could ask for more. Yes, it gets a bit grim when you see Waffen SS markings, or the pocket watches Hitler gave to various generals, or laughing Nazis and posters of Aryan stereotypes, but sadly it is all part of the complete saga. Knirim’s achievement is utterly without precedent, and one can only wish, as I said earlier, that the source of *the* most desirable military timepieces of all – HM Forces – gets the same treatment. If you are at all serious about military watches, you *must* buy this book, even if, like me, you would rather cut off your arm than wear a watch once possibly worn by a concentration-camp guard.

Try www.deutscheoptik.com, fax them at 001 619 287 9869, e-mail them at info@deutscheoptik.com or call 001 619 287 9860 (California time). Yes, it is *that* good.



A Concise Guide to Military Timepieces 1880–1990

By ZM Wesolowski

Hardback, 192 pages. Price: £25.
Published by Windrow & Greene, 1996. ISBN 1-8591-5013-6

This title, which appeared in our first instalment of the QP Bookshelf, remains number 1 in a field of one, that field being general military watch books in English. This admirable work tries to cover more than a century of military watches, but the field is too large and this book suffers some curious omissions, not least being an index – a scandalous oversight in a reference work. Then again, it is titled a “concise guide”, so one must not carp. However, the lack of colour photos is another let-down, especially for collectors hoping to authenticate a watch with other than a monotone dial. But this book will give you a fine grounding in the single most volatile and competitive area of collecting, canny watch enthusiasts having long ago realised that the timepieces made for the military are built to the highest standards and represent superb value for money. Minor gripes aside, this book represents exceptional value for money, and it features a superb section at the front, as with *Militari Da Polso*, that will help you to decipher the cryptic markings on the backs of genuine military watches.



Military Timepieces

By Marvin E Whitney

Hardback, 668 pages. Price: \$75.
Published by AWI Press, 1992. ISBN 0-918845-14-9

This scholarly work dates from 1992 and is so intensely thorough and specialised that it even deals with servicing and repair. The area it covers, despite its massive size, is a reflection on the author’s career: he worked as a chronometer maker at the United States Naval Observatory in Washington, DC. Whitney concentrates on US military timepieces, but this extends to clocks and instruments including boat and deck clocks, instrument watches, pocket watches, ships’ chronometers, assorted timers, diving watches and more. Regarded now as a standard work – an essential purchase if your interest extends to deep technical matters – *Military Timepieces* also features separate chapters or detailed sections on Elgin, Hamilton, Waltham, Longines–Wittnauer, Seth Thomas and other American manufacturers, foreign aircraft clocks, tank clocks, pocket watches and even bomb timers. Expanded drawings, parts lists, glossaries – it is a near-perfect if less lavish and colourful Yankee companion to Knirim’s book on German watches. If there are any criticisms, they can only be levelled at the use of stock, black and white photography, but this is, after all, a technical book rather than a collector’s guide. So it is still 10 out of 10, despite the dry atmosphere. ◉

Next issue:

Single-brand histories

Further information:

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