

*Konrad Knirim*

# *A Personal Watch Collectors Story*

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*KONRAD KNIRIM IS THE AUTHOR OF THE STANDARD PUBLICATION FOR:  
MILITARY TIMEPIECES*

## **150 Years Watches and Clocks of German Forces**

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# Konrad Knirim

## MILITARY WATCHES & CLOCKS (Part 3)

### A Personal Watch Collector's Story

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Editor's Note: This is the third and last in a series of articles which first appeared in the newsletter for Chapter #143 the Society of Military Horologists. Parts I and II were published in the December 1996 and August 1997 BULLETINS. Part III has been adapted from the Original.

#### *Beginnings*

As I had chronic but not serious health problems, I sold my collection of classic motorcycles which I had lovingly restored. I was, therefore, free to pursue a new interest. One of my neighbors introduced me to the world of watches, and later, I became appreciative of the quartz movement, realizing that the technology of quartz watches, even in their cheaper versions, was more precise than the mechanical ship's chronometer. So, I began my new hobby of collecting watches particularly military watches and clocks.

Pilot's watches were among the first watches I collected, because there were so many of them available. The British army got rid of their mechanical watches, although the German army still uses mechanical diver's watches and chronometers. I got them from an auction in Aachen; simple wristwatches, but soon, I

included chronographs and diver's watches.

Just before the book 'Beobachtung-Uhren' by Norbert Eder was published, I decided to look for some affordable deck watches and other navigational watches. After books of this nature are published, the watches become more expensive, another example being the booklet by Kesharu Imai. The prices of high-grade brands like JWC, Rolex, Jaeger Le Coultre, Longines, Blancpain, and Vacheron & Constantin increased in

price very much, not to mention the Kriegsmarine Vacheron & Constantin or the huge Patek pilot watch. Other examples from Great Britain and the U.S. also increased. Many 'weekend dealers' have overcrowded the market with pieces produced in large quantities, like the Timor pilot watch or the Hamilton GCT deck watch. Yet the market seems to absorb them all.

Many of the Russian military wristwatches which are overcrowding the markets are no longer those made for

*I know its not the right way to present watches. (Wehrmacht, Bundeswehr, NVA)*





Longines wrist watch of the Royal Forces of the 40s: steel case with screwed back, mvt. no.6995874, WWW ^F7496.



Elgin deck watch of the Royal Navy: chromed case, screwed back, second hand stop device, 21 jewels, adjusted in 5 positions and temperatur, Cal. 581 B.W.Raymond, no. 41752745, stock order no.: ^ Ser. No. 51389.



Auricoste pilots chronograph of the French Airforce: chromed case screwed back, 30 min-counter, rotating bezel, cal. Lemania 2040, no. 802805, 'Type 20' and revision date on the back.

the military but are those made for the Western markets.

### *The Collector's Eagerness*

The problem of the collector (whose eagerness is expressed not as 'cogito ergo sum but' as 'to have, have, have') is to limit his or her area of interest. I have limited my area to military timepieces and only have some real nice civil items. But should I collect fewer wristwatches? Should I collect only Zenith or Longines? And, of course, there are always pieces that one cannot afford.

When I needed cash for buying my home, I sold some watches, but now, years after, I regret it, because some of those pieces I have never seen

available again. At first, I preferred Zenith and then I sold the ancre chronometers. Now, I would be happy to get them again. But that is the life of the collector! Now it is my goal to have pieces of every type, even if they are inexpensive examples. I'm not wealthy enough to have a com-

plete collection of ship's chronometers, but the old chromed pilot watches coming from Eastern Europe I can afford.

I have only a few French and Italian watches because they are rare. British, American, Russian and



Hamilton, Elgin, Waltham, Longines Breitling, Le Coultre, Aerosonic, Omega.. Die Uhren hatten z.T. Chronograph und Flugzeitmessung, einige auch 'Civil Date'.



- Pilot's watches of the 30s: These watches were first used unmarked by the Luftwaffe 1934, Natalis, Mimo, Breitling Chronograph, Titus, Zenith, Omega, Helvetia. Many other manufacturers, such as Longines, Roamer, Lanco etc. made this type of watch. The cases are nickel or chrome and all have fixed mounts. The back cover is screwed or snapped on.

German watches are more common. Some watches that are priced too high are: British Longines pilot watch with central second hand; the Breguet pilot chronograph from the French Air Force; the Vacheron of

the Kriegsmarine with up/down movement; the Lange torpedo boat chronometer made for the Austrian Kriegsmarine. (There are only a few watches from the Federal German Navy on the market because they



IWC: Luftwaffe navigation watch 55 mm, movement IWC cal 52. The case is different to those of the other producers: The case has an inner extra antimagnetic case, lugs 25,5 mm with spring mount. There were only 1000 pieces produced. - bottom: early version with cylindrical winding knob.

continue repairing the diver and navigational watches and ship clocks until they are unusable.) Many of the best British navigational watches are so plentiful, I am happy to have just representative examples of them.

Bomber stopwatches with the ritorno mechanism were used as part of specialized equipment by many European airforces in the 1920's and '30s. Producers include: Breitling, Minerva, Leonidas, Universal, Zenith, Lip and Geismar. The movements are different beside their similar look and use.



### *Vietnam*

It was a touristic dream come true, when I got to visit Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). But don't get excited about Vietnam as a collector's paradise. Although it is a beautiful country, it is not worth the visit for watches. You will find some defective deck watches, a few aircraft clocks and some not-so-good wristwatches. You will find the Rolex dial on about any wristwatch, and even on the Bulova AK10, you will find the obligatory 'Oyster Perpetual Dial'. Most movements do not do well in the wet climate. The Vietnam War era holds my historic interests,

but I'm glad my interest now is the more innocent mechanism of the watch. A watch does not shoot!

### Switzerland

I remember the valleys of the Swiss Jura, the empty factory in Cortebert, the Longines Museum in St. Imier. I have spoken with Mr. Frey, the owner of Minerva in Villeret, and I have met many real watchmakers in La Chaud de Fonds. (Many 'watchmakers' today only do repairs or change batteries.) I almost did not find military watches in Switzerland because the Swiss do not use such watches and imports are too expensive.

The old factory of Blancpain in Villeret is gone. They mainly produced combat swimmer watches for the German Army and French and American Navies. The factory that Mr. Biver built with Piguet in Le Brassus and the watches they sell now under the name of SMH have only the trade name left. In my collection, I have watches from manufacturers which are no longer in business, or which have changed, like Minerva from Villeret, Record from Tramelon, and Buren from Bueren. Cortebert still 'lives' at SMH, under CWC, the brand for military watches. Others are Cyma from Le Locle and Tavannes, Gallet with his brands Precista, ADANAC



Decoration watches of the GDR: - '20 Years NVA' (with tank, vessel and air craft on the dial). - 'For 30-years of service in the organs of the ministry of internal affairs', 'Navimatic'. - 'For excellent performance, Ministry of Defense'. - 'Honourly given by the Central Committee of the SED'. All watches of Glashütte automatic movement cal. 75 'Spezimatic'.

(Canada spelled backwards), and Marathon. Lemania in L'Orient has separated again from SMH, and Helvetia in Reconviellier.

I have many thoughts about these old watch brands, not all without emotion. Their names still resonate in my ears. I only know a very few, who have survived with self-respect when the industry was switching to quartz. We will have to wait and see if the people taking over the old brands will do as well as their predecessors; e.g., the oil tycoon Ahmed Zaki el-Jamani

who took over Vacheron & Constantin, or Mannesmann who took over IWC and Jaeger Le Coultre (via VDO), as well as Lange & Soehne. What will happen after the exit of France-Ebauches from the Glashutte Uhrenbetrieben? I enjoy it when the new companies reintroduce old movement constructions, for example, the Polerouter with microrotor of Universal.

### The GDR

I went to the little town of Glashutte

Pocket watches of the NVA of Russian origin: - artillery chronographs by Molnia, left with the movement of the pilot's wrist chronograph. - stopwatches Achat, e. g. out of a brief case of the NVA artillery officer. - pocket watches by the Slatousk Watch Factory. The movement is based on an American Import of Hampden in the 20s. - right: a modern Russian aircraft clock.





Pocket watches and stop watches of the navy of WWII: - Cortébert (Cal 562) - Solvil (Cal 4292) Paul Ditisheim. These watches are marked like the wristwatches with 'KM' on the dial. - Alpina stopwatch of the navy artillery for distance metering by sound. - Junghans stop watch for submarine hunting by water bombs

near Dresden in the Erzgebirge, a center for very fine watchmaking for about 100 years until the end of the war. I sought an older chronometer maker, who overhauled my pilot's navigational wristwatch. I found a ship's wall clock and a rare aircraft clock GUB. In Ruhla in Thuringia, I found some examples of the big diver watches and navigational pocket

watches in their wooden cases with quartz movements and signed by the NVA (Nationale Volks-Armee - the National Peoples' Army). The relics of the GDR are sad, one can find a GUB ship's chronometer in what was West Germany easily enough, but not in Saxonia-the origin of these pieces.

### Japan

My connection to Japan is a more enjoyable experience. I read about and ordered a booklet about military design of watches, written by Kesaharu Imni. After I received the book, I displayed it on my table at a stand in a Cologne watch market. Tadashi Noda, the co-author of the book, was visiting the market, noticed my book and introduced himself to me. Later, he and his boss Kesaharu Imai with his staff from Japan came to Frankfurt, rented a van and came to Dusseldorf to see my collection. He also brought me a gift - a big Japanese pilot's wristwatch of Seikosha for the Zero Fighters (the Kamikaze).

### The Soviet Regime

In 1992, I observed the Russian Army leaving from the railway station of Chemnitz. I hoped to be able to get some items from the soldiers, but was unsuccessful. The material available to buy is coming from other sources, some of which are not the usual routes.

**Breitung** (Buren Switzerland and Wakman USA) - Early wrist chronograph (cal. 711 AU) of the 20s - Navitimer (cal. 12) automatic with microrotor of the Iraqui Air Force of the 'Desert Storm' - Pocket chronograph 'Navigational Stop Watch' US Navy - air craft instrument clock Bretling Wakman with 24h dial, chrono-graph and elapsed time indication: US Air Force - Bomb timer wrist stop watch of the Italian Air Force WWII 'Chronographo a Ritorno'



Japanese Forces WWII: - Seikosha pocket chronograph for the artillery for distance measuring. - Pilots wrist watch Seikosha for the 'Zero Fighter' (Kamikaze) with central second pocket watch movement.



**The Experience of Collecting**  
 Among the experiences of collecting anything is the interesting people one meets. This was also true when I collected motorcycles. To truly enjoy collecting, one must make a point of visiting everyone when attending market auctions.

Then, there are the interesting mishaps. Once, on my way to Munich to the German Museum, I wrecked my car in the rain-when I drive the 600 km to Munich and back again in the same day, I have to hurry! This accident left me with a destroyed car, alone, with my watch case. No one saw my bad luck, however, and I was lucky. Only my car and the day was ruined; I was not hurt.

It is a kind of fever I feel, wandering through watch markets in distant cities, in the early morning before the tourists appear. It is difficult for some people to understand this fever-sometimes my wife is irritated at my eagerness. But I have fond memories of conversations I have had with a variety of people in many countries.

trian and Polish countries, visiting a varied historical and cultural area - Brandenburg, Silesia, Galicia, Moravia, Bohemia, and Saxony. I spanned the area which included the blackest area of German history - the concentration and murder camps of Auschwitz.

### *A Trip to the Past*

Often when I buy an item, I think that I should be paying my debts instead. I have fun, however, going to flea markets, thrift shops, etc. When the borders to Eastern Europe opened, I had a look into the German, Aus-



Ships Wall Clocks of the US Forces: - Set Thomas boat and deck clock of 1941 US Navy - Chelsea ships wall clock 6" and 8 1/2" (cal 12E) and US Arma 'Message Center Clock' in brass case - M-Low New York 'Message Center Clock' with a second time zone indicator

In Prague, at a thrift shop, I found a Vacheron & Constantin navigational watch of the Kriegsmarine with eagle and navy number. The dealer was alert, so I could not get it cheaply. In Warsaw, at a little watchmaker's shop, I saw a British Mercer, a Lange & Soehne (wrong wooden case) and an Ulysse Nardin with German Navy markings. I paid a fair price and got a rare item, because the German Navy normally used Wempe or Lange chronometers. Again, I visited another reminder of horrible German history - the former Warsaw ghetto and the Treblinka camp.

### *Self-Examination*

I am not a watchmaker nor a former soldier or military specialist. I like to deal with history and with mechanical things. I received my knowledge from secondary literature and a bit from military museums in Dresden and Koblenz. Sometimes, I stop to observe: I am dealing with the past; I do not create anything but help to collect information. I am not blind to the purpose of the items - I collect the relics of war. The submarine captain had bigger problems to

occupy his time other than to enjoy the mechanics of the chronometer.

Maybe someday I will sell my collection, pay my debts, and survey the flowers instead of timepieces, or listen to the nightingale singing instead of the tick tock of the ancre escapement. But not just yet!

### *About the Author*

Mr. Knirim, born in Berlin and now residing in Dusseldorf (zip 40547), has been collecting military timepieces since 1985. Presently, he is collecting and documenting the complete range of timepieces of the German forces from ca. 1900. He is a mechanical engineer.



- Ulysse Nardin Ships chronometer No. 5264 of the WWII 'Kriegsmarine' with eagle and swastica and navy registration no. M 1848 gimballled in mahagoni case.