



Konrad Knirim

BRITISH MILITARY TIMEPIECES

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Yet again, the Book Gods have smiled on us. Or on me, at least, given my obsession with British military watches. Konrad Knirim, who produced the astonishing *Military Timepieces Vol I: 150 Years Watches and Clocks of German Forces*, has followed it with an even more impressive tome. To give it its full title, the second in the series is called *Military Timepieces Vol II: British Military Timepieces - Watches and Clocks of Their Majesties Forces*. And, yes, the author acknowledges the incongruity of a German enthusiast authoring a book that should have been produced by a British historian. Then again, it took the Germans to save the Mini, Bentley and Rolls-Royce, so why should we be surprised?



manufacturers and suppliers - Jaeger-LeCoultre, Omega and many others - ensuring that Knirim left no source untapped. The list of acknowledgements is impressive, including our own Tim Treffry, vintage watch dealer Justin Koullapis and Ziggy Wesolowski, author of a seminal book on military watches in general.

Knirim also admits that his task was made easier by the research opportunities of the internet, but he's being modest: like its predecessor, this book is one of the most extensively researched I've seen relating to any watch history. Indeed, the first impression upon thumbing through the book is one of being overwhelmed by a surfeit of information.

How to account for so much material? It should be pointed out that in the hierarchy of military watches, the British and the Germans are neck-and-neck for the sheer variety of timepieces, but one could cautiously attribute to the UK the greater number. As a result, this volume is over 150 pages longer than its predecessor, but it's not simply because there were more British watches and clocks.

Instead, the extra pages involve a liberty taken by Knirim: he included a section that deals with the watches of the Colonies, Great Britain's non-colonial Allies and - oddly - the Japanese forces. I do not wish to attempt to read Knirim's mind, but I would posit, because no other countries can match Great Britain's or Germany's horological prolificacy when it comes to military watches, that this was a convenient way of dealing with the rest of the world. Thus I also imagine





that Knirim could do a third volume, which would add Italian, South American, Middle Eastern and other forces' watches.

Keeping it uniform with the previous volume, Knirim mixes archival photography with newly generated images, cramming in as much as a page can hold. The layouts range from a single chronometer and its movement enjoying an entire page, to group shots of watches of a specific type. The four 1970s RAF chronographs, for example, are shown dial side, arranged vertically, and next to them are their corresponding watch backs, with a third column showing the inner cases and a fourth revealing the movements. Official documents appear, as do advertisements, where appropriate to impart the feel of the era.

Peppered throughout are period photographs adding context to the models, something exploited perfectly for the section on modern military watches. There are groups of photos, for example, of the wrists and hands of soldiers on duty in Iraq, showing precisely what timepieces they use, almost with the suggestion that Knirim found some way to have them posed for his book.

These contrast wonderfully with images of soldiers from past wars, including great photos of submarine and aircraft crews, in which the photos were clear enough, or the sub- j e c t s positioned in such a way that the watches can be identified. One can only marvel at the levels of detective work Knirim had to undertake to find such images. For me, the most poignant photographs of all were formed by quartets of soldiers from WWI, sporting some of the world's first wristwatches. Suffice it to say that, on visual terms alone, amongst other military watch titles, this book has no peers. Except for its companion volume.

After the preface, Knirim winds the clock way back to the very earliest timekeepers, beginning with John Harrison and the requirements of the first marine navigators. This is followed by a chapter on chronometers and clocks, and

one on deck and pocket watches. We don't reach wristwatches until page 4901 This section takes up over 200 pages, itself broken down into headings covering every type of wristwatch and each brand of the services, and Knirim knows just how to portion out the text: individual watches are covered with an amount of prose indicative of their importance.

Because his appreciation for the bigger picture is so complete, Knirim knows how to handle the specifics. Thus we find in-depth coverage of IWC's Mk X and Mk 11, Lemania watches, the Rolex Submariners commissioned for the Royal Navy, a section about the Bonklip bracelet, explanations of the Broad Arrow symbol, separate chapters for 'WWW' and 'ATP' watches, and separate descriptions of each of the suppliers, from the obvious ones such as Omega, to the obscurities like Grana. As is now expected of Knirim, who raised the bar impossibly high, there are tables of documentation, which will help collectors identify their finds. So comprehensive is this book that they'll probably locate photographs of the exact model, including ultra-rarities like the 1953 and 1956 Omegas, and the highly desirable Jaeger- LeCoultre variants.

If the watch industry has any sense of its own worth, some horological foundation will create an annual award for the best watch titles of the year, with an eye toward recognising true scholarship. With no end in sight for the flood of watch-related books, such an honour would help to highlight the worthy titles, while ignoring the puffery and self-promotion of what are glorified catalogues. Knirim's book would easily walk away with the honour for 2009. This isn't just a great book: it's an important book.

A reviewer can praise a book no more highly than with this closer: I wish I'd written it.

