

Willis Henry Auctions, Rockland, MA

No Provenance, No Problem

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

All 53 lots of military watches and instruments sold strongly, without reserves, at Willis Henry Auctions on March 18, 2017. The Commander William R. Bricker single-owner collection was offered live at the Double-Tree by Hilton in Rockland, MA, but sold mostly to Internet, absentee, and phone bidders.

Commander Bricker (1923–2001) continued his father's passion for military timepieces. For several years he led the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors' Society of Military Horologists. He unexpectedly died at age 78 from heart failure just after leaving the July 2001 NAWCC Convention in New Orleans. I attended that meeting and recall seeing him there.



Figure 1. A small number of lots were not part of the 2001 exhibit and were more common and unattributed military timepieces. This ca. 1941 Hamilton Model 21 boxed marine chronometer represents that company's feat of American wartime development and mass production of instruments formerly hand fabricated by European makers. In this instance, the estimate reflected higher values of past years. Estimate \$1800/2200; sold for \$1440. COURTESY OF WILLIS HENRY AUCTIONS.

Figure 2. Titled in the auction catalog as an explorer's watch, this Swiss Longines model is much more fully described, as an aviation timepiece, in the classic 1992 book *Military Timepieces* by Marvin E. Whitney (my first clock-repair instructor). Whitney wrote that it would help calculate gasoline consumption during flights and that Admiral Byrd used several of these on his polar trips. The Bricker example's case engraving reads "Byrd Antarctic Expedition - 1933." Estimate \$500/700; sold for \$2400. COURTESY OF WILLIS HENRY AUCTIONS.





Figures 3, left, and 4, right. Two wristwatches were sold, and the history of military wristwatches was detailed on four pages of the exhibit booklet. The 1917 American example (Figure 3), in a later wooden display box, features a metal grill protecting the glass crystal. The large ca. 1920 steel German watch by Geismar (Figure 4) was described as an "Aircraft Returns Chronograph" and could be worn strapped to the aviator's leg. Estimates \$200/300 and \$75/125; sold for \$720 and \$570. COURTESY OF WILLIS HENRY AUCTIONS.

Horology was his hobby. Director of the Boys Clubs of America from 1972 to 1989, he was a nationally recognized figure who for more than 40 years worked as a champion of children. Earlier in life, he served as a naval aviator during World War II and then continued his military activities in the Naval Reserve, ending as a Naval Air group commander. His interest in military timekeeping originated during those years of service.

My article title may be a bit misleading, but it echoes the oft-repeated statements by Willis Henry and his horological advisor for this sale, Dan Haff. They made it clear that the *only* guaranteed provenance was that the pieces were from the Bricker collection. This can be verified not only because the collection came from Bricker family members but also because most of the timepieces appear in the printed 2001 catalog accompanying a special exhibit at the National Watch and Clock Museum in Columbia, PA. In that booklet 67 timepieces are listed and described, but Henry explained that some were retained by the family.

The exhibit booklet obviously eased the cataloging chore for Henry and Haff. Most of the information for each piece in the booklet and in the Henry auction catalog directly corresponds; however, the booklet

contains substantially more information about the subject background and about the celebrity attributions made by Bricker. This is where, for some collectors and horology experts, some questions arose.

Although the auctioneer emphatically urged bidders to pay just for the watch, not for attributions engraved on cases and accompanying brass plates, it became clear that bidders could not resist names, such as Sir Ernest Shackleton, Admiral David G. Farragut, Admiral R.E. Peary, Admiral Richard Byrd, James Doolittle, W.F. "Bull" Halsey Jr., and E. Rommel. Lesser-known historical figures also appeared, such as C. V. Gridley, commander of the U.S.S. *Olympia* at the 1898 battle of Manila Bay, W. T. Sampson, commander of the North Atlantic Squadron during the Spanish-American War, and ace pilot Roscoe Turner.

No lot carried a receipt or documentation from Bricker supporting these attributions. To some experienced eyes, certain case engravings looked in an inappropriate style, appeared as if they might have been done by the same hand, showed no signs of wear, were unusually located on the case edges, and had questionable attributions and dating. Other experts questioned whether some watches were of sufficient quality for their associated users. Nonetheless, for most lots, the

high bids seemed well above what unattributed and unengraved timepieces would bring at auction these days, so the market had the final say.

This is not to deny that many of the lots were timepieces important in their own right. There were examples by English makers Arnold, Pennington, and Blockley. There were several good American watches by Waltham, Hamilton, Elgin, and Howard. French watches included one by Pierre LeRoy. There were good pieces by Swiss makers Ulysse Nardin, Huguenin, Tissot, Longines, Lemania, Agassiz, Rolex, and Omega. Japanese, German, and Russian makers also were represented. Specialized chronographs, chronometers, compasses, and timers added to the selection. For several lots, the high bids fairly represented the market value even without celebrity associations.

Overall, the sale could be considered a tribute to Commander Bricker. His avid collecting and promotion of

military timepieces, his long military service, and his professional career in child advocacy have previously been acknowledged and honored. The new owners of his collection now have added to that deserved recognition. For further information, see Willis Henry Auctions' website (www.willishenauctions.com). Sold prices reflect a 20 percent buyer's premium.

About the Author

Bob Frishman has repaired, restored, collected, sold, and researched antique timekeepers since 1980. His business, Bell-Time Clocks, is based in Andover, MA. Bob lectures regularly about the history, science, and culture of mechanical timekeeping; he has authored many articles for the *NAWCC Bulletin* and *Watch & Clock Bulletin*; and he can be reached via www.bell-time.com. He is an NAWCC Fellow, Chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee, and a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.



Figure 5. There was more than one sidereal pocket watch in the sale. Rare and useful in navigation, these timepieces reference stars rather than the sun for timing the earth's rotation, resulting in a day roughly four minutes shorter than regular 24-hour timekeeping. This ca. 1913 high-grade Model 92 by Waltham Watch Co., with 24-hour dial, has "R.E. Byrd" engraved on its edge. Even without Admiral Byrd's name, its selling price was justified and, unusually, below expectations. Estimate \$3000/3500; sold for \$2400. COURTESY OF WILLIS HENRY AUCTIONS.



Figure 6. Seikoshia made this ca. 1940 phototelemeter for the Japanese navy. It timed the distance of artillery shell firings, comparing the flash and boom. An original fitted wood case with appropriate Japanese script was included. Estimate \$300/400; sold for \$600. COURTESY OF WILLIS HENRY AUCTIONS.

Reviews of auctions and their items may be directed to the Editor, Christiane Odyniec, at codyniec@nawcc.org or mailed to the Publications Department at the address on the inside front cover.