

Historic Personalized Wristwatches

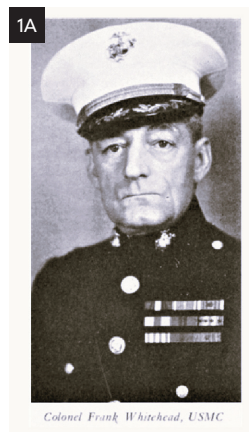
Returning Military Heroes' Watches to Their Families

By Bob Stokes (CA)

INTRODUCTION

I have been impressed with the fascinating technical research presented in every issue of the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. For the past 15 years, I have focused on a different aspect of horology—not on the timepiece itself but on the person who originally owned it. I have acquired, researched, and returned a dozen personalized wristwatches to the families of the original owners, including eight to the families of World War II veterans. A dozen watches are waiting to be reunited: I still need to complete my research on the owners and identify their descendants. The stories of these men and women are presented on my website, www.TimeCapsule-Watch.com.¹

This article features the story of a true World War I hero, Frank Whitehead, US Marine Corps (USMC). He was given a Hamilton Wilshire watch in 1941 in recognition of his service as commandant of the Army Industrial College (AIC). After years of being lost, the watch was returned to Whitehead's cousin and biographer, Gale Heslop (Figure 1).



Colonel Frank Whitehead, USMC



Figure 1A. Col. Frank Whitehead, USMC. COURTESY OF GALE M. HESLOP; **B.** and **C.** Whitehead's 1941 Hamilton Wilshire watch presented to him on December 23, 1941. AUTHOR'S PHOTOS.

Figure 2A. Pvt. Paul R. Thomer, USMC. Thomer fought in the battle for Guadalcanal (August–December 1942) with the Marines’ famed 1st Division. In January 1943, they were sent to Melbourne, Australia, to recuperate. COURTESY OF DEBORAH THOMER SLAUZIS. **B. and C.** Thomer bought his watch in Melbourne, and it was engraved “Paul R. Thomer U.S.M.C. 343824 Australia 2.10.43”. **D.** Thomer’s daughter, Deborah Slauzis, proudly wears her father’s World War II watch. AUTHOR’S PHOTOS.



WHAT ARE TIME CAPSULE WATCHES?

Time Capsule wristwatches are vintage personalized timepieces engraved with the original owner’s name and other information enabling me to identify them, prepare a detailed biography, and return them to the owner’s family. My collection currently comprises about 60 vintage mechanical wristwatches from 1914 through 1967. They belonged to men and women who left a historical trail searchable on sites such as Newspapers.com and Ancestry.com. Most belonged to servicemen (Figure 2) or athletes, but I also have watches owned by one of the child actors from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, a pioneering aviatrix friend of Amelia Earhart, as well as one that belonged to a notorious 1930s gangster.

What makes these watches so fascinating? First, their provenances. Each has a detailed, thoroughly researched story. I compile between 20 and 70 pages of information about each former owner, including details from genealogies, newspaper articles, yearbooks, photos, and videos. Many of the watches’ original owners have been cited in books or are authors themselves. Second, the personalized watch is unique. Third, inscribed watches are hard to find. I acquire almost all of my wristwatches from eBay, which has over 1 million watches without inscriptions for sale on any given day. Very few of them

have searchable inscriptions, and of those, only about five a year may yield enough information to track down the original owners’ families.

Time Capsule watches represent a broad range of popular brands, including Waltham, Bulova, Elgin, Gruen, Illinois, Movado, and Longines. There are also numerous Hamilton models, including Wilshire, Raleigh, Martin, Dwight, Cadet, Dennis, Sherman, Ryan, and Townsend.

RETURNING A WATCH TO ITS OWNER’S FAMILY

Patek Philippe is famous for its Generations campaign tagline: “You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation.” This sentiment is the inspiration for my efforts to return watches to the families of the original owners.

Returning an old watch is more difficult than it might seem. I complete my online research by searching for current contacts or descendant information and then writing or emailing them. The only watch I returned to the original owner was a 1946 Benrus owned by Navy veteran Louis Cinfici, who was 91 when his watch was returned to him. It was engraved with his name and Navy service number: “Louis Cinfici U.S. Navy 248-44-82” (Figure 3).

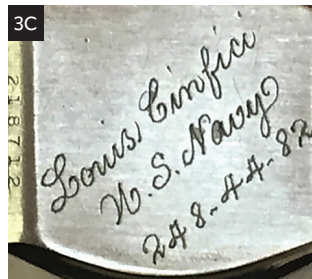


Figure 3A. US Navy Petty Officer Louis Cinfici. **COURTESY OF LOUIS CINFICI. B.** and **C.** The personalized 1946 Benrus watch. **AUTHOR'S PHOTOS. D.** Cinfici and his 1947 Benrus were reunited in 2019. **COURTESY OF LOUIS CINFICI.**

Petty Officer Louis Cinfici was one of six brothers who served in World War II. He was too young to join the Navy, so he enlisted in the Merchant Marine during the war. In 1946, Cinfici joined the Navy; his girlfriend gave him an inscribed gold Benrus watch as a parting gift. He wore this watch through his service in Korea and Vietnam.

When I discovered that Cinfici was living in a retirement home in Pennsylvania, I called him and introduced myself. After reading him the inscription with his name and Navy serial number, Cinfici was both stunned and thrilled! His watch and a suitcase of his personal Navy documents were stolen from his apartment in the mid-1960s, and the documents have never been found.

I have had many conversations with Cinfici, and he remains grateful that his Benrus was returned to him after 60 years. He is now 94, and I still get a Christmas card from him every year.

WORLD WAR I HERO BRIG. GEN. FRANK WHITEHEAD, USMC

A career Marine, Frank Whitehead (1889–1950) rose through the ranks from a private to retire as a brigadier general. As a second lieutenant in World War I, he led his men through several major battles in 1918: from the Battle at Belleau Wood to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on the eve of the armistice. For his leadership and bravery, Captain Whitehead was awarded the Navy Cross, Army Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, a Purple Heart, and the French Croix de Guerre with gold star (Figure 5).

BENRUS WATCHES

In 1921 Benjamin Lazrus and his two brothers, Oscar and Ralph, founded Benrus: the name combines parts of Benjamin's first and last names (Figure 4). The brothers imported Swiss watch movements and cased them in New York City. From marketing campaigns with Charles Lindbergh and Babe Ruth to its Sky Chief model being known as the "Official Watch of Famous Airlines" to appearing on Steve McQueen's wrist in *Bullitt*, Benrus watches were very popular until the quartz crisis in the 1970s. The company went bankrupt, but after several failed revivals the company returned in 2020. Benrus now operates from its original headquarters in the iconic Hippodrome building in midtown Manhattan.



Figure 4. A Benrus ad featuring Babe Ruth in the May 4, 1929, issue of *Liberty* magazine.

COMMANDANT OF THE ARMY INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE

The AIC was established in 1924 in the aftermath of the United States' inadequate military and industrial mobilization experience in World War I. Its purpose was to train Army officers to supervise and coordinate industrial mobilization and logistics during wartime.

On February 1, 1941, then-Col. Whitehead was the first Marine to be appointed commandant of the AIC. Under Whitehead's leadership, the AIC graduated the largest number of officers and achieved its best results ever. After graduation ceremonies on December 23, 1941—two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor—the AIC staff presented Col. Whitehead with a 14-kt. gold-filled Hamilton Wilshire watch that was engraved "Col. Frank Whitehead USMC Staff A.I.C. 12. 23. '41" (Figure 6).

6A



Figure 5: A 1919 newspaper photo of Capt. Frank Whitehead, USMC, and three of his actual medals shown on the cover of *Decorated Marines of the Fourth Brigade in World War I* by George B. Clark (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007). IMAGES COURTESY OF GALE M. HESLOP.

6B



Figure 6A and B. Col. Whitehead's 1941 Hamilton Wilshire. AUTHOR'S PHOTOS.

Whitehead served in the office of the commander in chief of the US Fleet from 1942–44, and retired from the Corps on January 1, 1946. He died on July 22, 1950, and was buried with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

ACQUIRING WHITEHEAD'S HAMILTON WATCH

When I saw this watch for sale on eBay, I knew it would be one of the most important ones in my collection. The listing was from a Marine, Jeff Stephan, and read, "This watch was given to me 20 years ago by an acting teacher who was a corpsman. He gave it to me because I served in the Marines from 1973–1978. He was associated with Col. Frank Whitehead while in the hospital. The Colonel passed away, and his wife gave this watch to Russ McCaig, who was his nurse."

Quick research confirmed Stephan's story. In 1950, Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Frank Whitehead entered Bethesda Naval Hospital, terminally ill from cancer. Marine corpsman Russell McCaig was Whitehead's primary nurse. After Frank's death, his widow, Eleanor, was so grateful for McCaig's compassionate care that she gave him this Hamilton watch as a token of her appreciation.

Whitehead's Hamilton had been the treasured possession of two fellow Marines—Russ McCaig and Jeff Stephan—for 70 years, from 1950 until I purchased it in January 2021.

RETURNING WHITEHEAD'S WATCH TO HIS COUSIN GALE M. HESLOP

After purchasing the watch, I immediately stepped up my research. I found an interesting 2019 post on the US Militaria Forum from "GaleM."² Frank Whitehead was his cousin, and Gale was "interested in any of his personal effects/artifacts." I emailed Gale and told him that I had just purchased Whitehead's watch and would be honored to return it to him.

After our initial phone conversation, Gale sent me an email expressing his gratitude. Gale's biography of Frank Whitehead includes a section documenting the return of his watch.³

Gale lived near the Whiteheads while growing up in Bethesda, MD, and when he was very young, he met his cousin Frank. After Frank's death in 1950, Gale frequently visited Eleanor, Frank's widow, but he never realized what a hero Frank was until he began researching and writing his biography.

Gale's family did not inherit any of Whitehead's medals or USMC memorabilia. After Eleanor's death in 1980, these were probably donated to the National Museum of the Marine Corps since they had no children. The Hamilton watch that I purchased, had restored, and sent to Gale is the Heslop family's only tangible artifact that belonged to Frank (Figure 8).

HAMILTON WILSHIRE

In 1939 Hamilton introduced the Wilshire model that was designed to contour to the wrist for a more comfortable fit. Featuring the 14-size, 19-jewel, no. 982 movement, the Wilshire came in a 14-kt. gold-filled case with either an applied gold numeral dial with solid 18-kt. gold numerals or a gilt dial with roman numerals. This Hamilton watch measures 22 mm from side to side (excluding the crown) and 50 mm from the top lug to the bottom lug. The watch sold for around \$50 in 1941 (or about \$1,000 in 2023 dollars) (Figure 7).

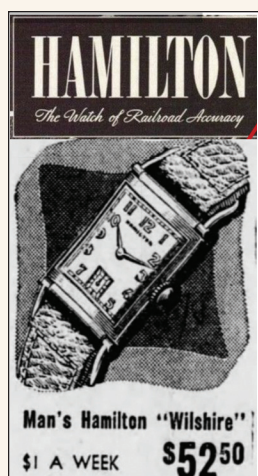


Figure 7A. Ad for the Hamilton Wilshire (1939–1941); **B.** The Wilshire's 982 movement.
AUTHOR'S PHOTO.



Figure 8. Gale Heslop proudly wears his cousin's Hamilton. COURTESY OF GALE HESLOP.

CONCLUSION

I believe that horology is not only the art and science of timekeeping and the study of its makers and mechanisms, but is also about the timepiece owner's history. Personally engraved wristwatches are uncommon, and ones with complete provenance quite rare.

Brig. Gen. Frank Whitehead treasured his Hamilton, and upon his death in 1950, it was entrusted to the care of two fellow Marines for 70 years. In 2021, Whitehead's Hamilton Wilshire became the cherished possession of his family. Successfully finding and researching an inscribed wristwatch is rewarding; returning it to the owner's family is priceless.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my fellow Ventura and Santa Barbara County Chapter 190 members for their interest in my collection; they have enthusiastically responded to two of my recent Time Capsule presentations. Gale Heslop has been a constant source of information and encouragement in the preparation of this article, as well as a huge supporter of my Time Capsule collection.

Notes and References

1. The *Time Capsule* website Home page along with menu options for four different wristwatch categories: WW1, WW2 / Cold War, Athletes, and Presentation / Personal.
2. "Cousin of Captain Frank Whitehead, 67th Co., 1/5, 4th Brigade," US Militaria Forum, April 24, 2019, www.usmilitariaforum.com/forums/index.php?/topic/326858-cousin-of-captain-frank-whitehead-67th-co-15-4th-brigade/#comment-2626723.
3. Gale M. Heslop, *Frank Whitehead, USMC: Unknown American Hero* (Self-published, 2021).

About the Author

Bob Stokes is a retired IT consultant and project manager. He joined the Ventura and Santa Barbara County (CA) Chapter 190 of the NAWCC four years ago. Bob has been collecting, researching, and returning vintage personalized wristwatches since 2015. He launched his website, www.TimeCapsule-Watch.com, three years ago; it fully documents the stories of his historic collection.