

THE HISTORY OF THE FIFTY FATHOMS

BY JEFFREY S. KINGSTON

How did Blancpain come to create the Fifty Fathoms, which almost at once achieved the status of an icon and which has defined the qualities of fine diving watches for the entire industry ever since? Like most great achievements, the Fifty Fathoms was the product of passion. In this case the passion of Jean-Jacques Fiechter, Blancpain's CEO from 1950 to 1980. Fiechter was a diver, and for him the creation of a great diving watch was more than a routine new product introduction – it was the opportunity to bring together two of the driving pursuits of his life, watches and the sea. Thus, when approached by the French military, it was the project for which he had been waiting.

Although today, the popularity of diving watches extends far beyond the sea – being *de rigueur* in 50th floor conference rooms for business meetings in suit and tie – the roots of diving timepieces spring from serious mil-

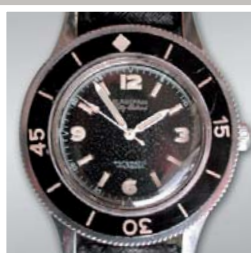




itary applications. In the aftermath of World War II, at the initiative of two heroes of the Free French Forces, Captain Robert "Bob" Maloubier and Lieutenant Claude Riffaud, the French military created what many considered to be its most select and closed group, the combat divers. The mission of this elite group of frogmen was undersea intelligence gathering and acts of sabotage such as attacks in sea ports or destruction of ships, all accomplished by teams of divers often working at night.

Beyond their diving tanks, scuba regulators, masks, flippers and suits, Maloubier and Riffaud understood the importance of robust and reliable diving instruments, of which there were three: a compass, a depth metre and a diving watch. The watch was central to many of the key tasks confronting the divers. Of course the timing of the dive was an essential (it would not do to over-

stay the supply of oxygen). A second, and perhaps somewhat less obvious need was timing for navigation purposes. After running tests of the watches then available on the market, Maloubier concluded that none were up to the task. Thus, he decided to undertake the conception of a timing instrument that would target the needs of military combat diving. Maloubier drew up detailed specifications for his diving watch and farmed them out for bidding. Unfortunately, the reception from industry was decidedly cool, with one of the commercial directors of the firm LIP even commenting that such a timepiece "would have no future".

It seems at the time the watch industry was focused elsewhere, in particular on watches for aviation. Diving watches were too far removed from this realm.

Finally, however, the two French naval officers came into contact with Mr. Fiechter of

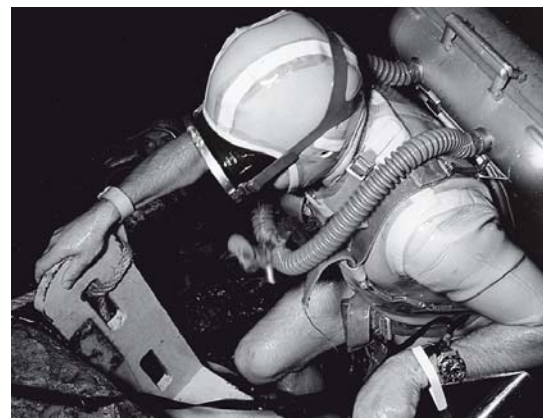
<p>1953</p> <p>First model of the Fifty Fathoms. Diameter 42mm.</p>	<p>1953</p> <p>LIP model Fifty Fathoms, released in 1953.</p>	<p>1953</p> <p>Another LIP Fifty Fathoms model. Diameter 41mm.</p>	<p>1953/55</p> <p>LIP Fifty Fathoms with humidity indicator on the dial.</p>	<p>1953/55</p> <p>Very rare French military diving school model.</p>
				



President John F. Kennedy meets US Navy Seals, wearing Fifty Fathoms Rayville Tornek diving watches.



Bob Maloubier, circa 1955, wearing his Fifty Fathoms.

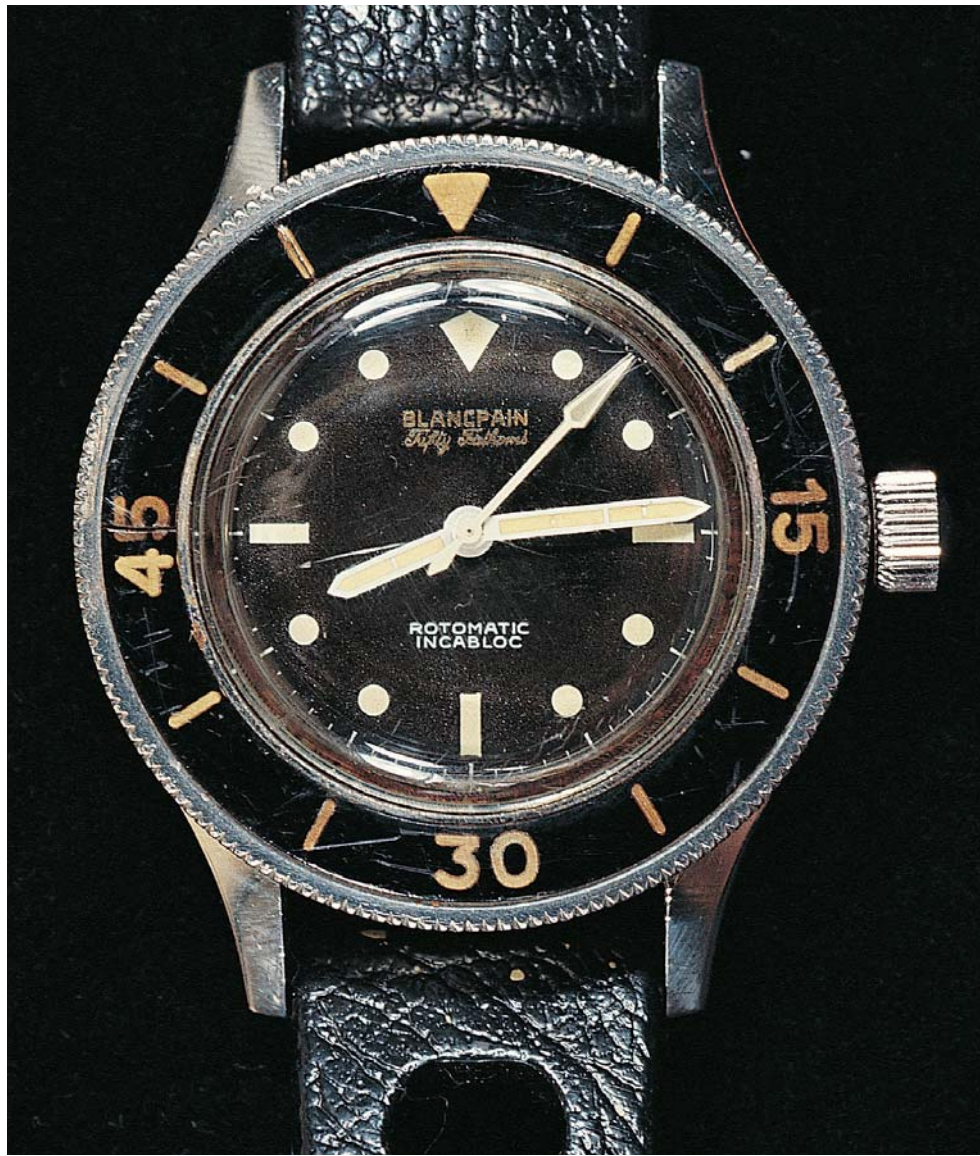


Blancpain. With Fiechter's personal passion for and fascination with diving, he needed little convincing. Blancpain quickly agreed to develop the timepiece for the Ecole des nageurs de combat (Combat Diving School) which Maloubier and Riffaud commanded.

Maloubier describes his first meeting with Blancpain:

"Finally a small watch company, Blancpain, agreed to develop our project which envisioned a watch with a black dial, bold large numerals and clear markings: triangles, circles, squares; a rotatable exterior bezel which repeated the markings of the dial. We wanted at the start of a dive to be able to set the bezel opposite the large minute hand in order to mark the time. We wanted each of the markings to shine like a star for a shepherd."

Fiechter, an experienced diver, had his own ideas. First, he decided that the rotating bezel which the specifications called for, should be refined so that it would rotate in only one direction. Thus, at no time could a diver inadvertently turn the bezel so as give an indication that the dive started later than it had; any mistakes would shorten a dive rather than lengthen it beyond the air supply. Of course he knew that the watch had to be water-resistant. To ensure that the case itself would be highly water-resistant, Fiechter elected to incorporate a screw-on case back. To avoid a patent on screw-down crowns he conceived a double "O-ring" system. Further he realised that manual winding risked wear on the waterproofing system for the crown, so he decided that the movement would have



First model of the Fifty Fathoms.

LIKE MOST GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS, THE FIFTY FATHOMS WAS THE PRODUCT OF PASSION, IN THIS CASE THAT OF JEAN-JACQUES FIECHTER, BLANCPAIN'S CEO FROM 1950 TO 1980.

1960

US Navy model.



1960

US MIL-SPEC Navy model. Large size: 41mm.



1960

Small-size civilian model. 35mm.



1960

Civilian model sold by LIP.



1965-70

Large-size civilian model. 41mm.





Anniversary Edition Fifty Fathoms from 2003, a highly sought-after collectors' piece.



to feature automatic winding, minimising the number of times that the crown would need to be pulled out. Finally, he felt that protection from magnetic fields was required for a timepiece which would be used in the harsh conditions of combat. Combining his specifications with those of Maloubier/Riffaud, Fiechter had his design goals.

It is remarkable that the set of characteristics which Blancpain and the French Navy jointly developed in 1953 have ever since defined the finest diving watches: high water resistance, robust protected crown systems, automatic winding, black dials with clear luminescent markings, uni-directional rotating bezels with timing markings, anti-magnetic protection.

There was one last touch which Blancpain added to the design. At the six o'clock position on the dial, a humidity indicator was added. In the form of a small circle, the indicator showed blue if the air in the case was dry. If water had penetrated, the colour would change to pink, as a warning.

Blancpain's pioneering effort was named the "Fifty Fathoms" after the British measurement of 50 fathoms, or approximately 91.45 metres, which was at the time considered the maximum depth which a diver could achieve with the oxygen mixture then in use.

For both commercial and administrative reasons, the French Navy elected to purchase all of its diving equipment, including the Blancpain diving watches, through a single source, Spirotechnique, located on the left bank in central Paris. This same business

at the time enjoyed a relationship with Jacques Cousteau, selling his inventions including his famed diving regulator valve. Through this connection Cousteau learned of the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms watch, selecting it for use in the historic dives chronicled in the film "Silent World", both an Oscar winner and winner of the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956.

Meanwhile other navies followed the lead of the French in selecting the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms for their divers. The Israeli, Spanish, German and US navies were all key Blancpain customers.

It was not always easy to achieve this wide military acceptance. For example the US military placed a variety of obstacles in the way of any non-US watch producer. Under the then existing "Buy American Act" American producers were given a 25% price advantage over foreign competitors. The jewels used in the watch had to be sourced from a supplier in Missouri. Fortunately for Blancpain, there was an advocate for the Fifty Fathoms who believed in the watch, Allen Tornek. Tornek had become an acquaintance of Jean-Jacques Fiechter through their common passion for diving. When he learned of the US military's bid for tenders, Tornek immediately thought of Blancpain. However, to meet the requirements of the bidding process, he had to deal with the labyrinth of laws standing in his way, such as the Missouri source for jewels. Tornek's solution was straightforward; he simply bought the Missouri jewels and, finding them inferior, threw them away. Tornek won the bidding

1965-70

Civilian model with anti-radiation symbol on the dial.



1965

German military model.



1968

Large-size civilian model, with date.



1970

Civilian model, 37mm.



1965-70

Large-size civilian model. Outfitted with internal shield case.



process, and delivered the watches to the US military under two names, "Blancpain Tornek" and "Rayville Tornek" (Rayville was a name used by Jean-Jacques Fiechter for some of the Blancpain production).

Like many of the military watches, the Tornek series complied with particular military specifications. Indeed, the Tornek series watches bear the label "MIL-SPEC 1" on the dial. One element commonly found in the military specifications dealt with the luminosity of the dial and bezel markings. In the US case, as in the case of many other military units, it was required that the Fifty Fathoms use radioactive material, such as Promethium 147, so that the indications would "glow" in the night conditions envisioned for many dives. These MIL-SPEC materials were fearsome, even by the rather casual standards of the day that applied to radioactive elements. The cases bore an inscription reading "DANGER. IF FOUND RETURN TO NEAREST MILITARY FACILITY".

Blancpain recognised that it needed a way to distinguish its military Fifty Fathom production from its civilian production, and the particular problem it had in mind was the use of radioactive coatings. To demark civilian watches, that of course used no radioactive products of any kind, Blancpain seized on the idea of a special dial legend. Using the universal symbol for radioactivity, the three semi-triangles arrayed around a circle, Blancpain indicated the absence of such products by using the red strike through the symbol and placed this legend in a prominent place, above 6 o'clock, on the dial.

As the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms established itself as the worldwide standard for military

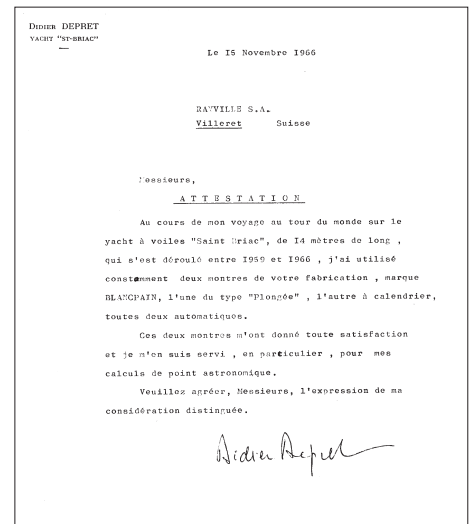
diving watches, it achieved similar success in the civilian arena. At the time, mechanical diving watches were not considered an horological luxury. They were serious instruments and part of the required kit for any diver. Logically, then, diving watches were principally not sold in fancy jewellery stores, but instead in the same shops where a diver would source his tanks, scuba regulator, suit, face mask and other diving equipment. Accordingly a substantial percentage of Blancpain's historic production of the Fifty Fathoms was sold under the name of the diving shop supplying the rest of the diving equipment. Perhaps the most famous of these shops sold products under the name "Aqualung". "Aqualung" was the name Jacques Cousteau bestowed upon his line of diving equipment, centred on his pioneering development of the first truly useable scuba air regulator. Cousteau's Aqualung regulator can rightly be credited with giving birth to modern scuba diving. And the diving watches sold in his stores were Blancpain's bearing the label "Aqualung".

Not only were the Blancpain Fifty Fathom watches the inspiration for all of the diving watches that have copied its list of features, in some ways they can be seen as trend setters for the large-size watches that are so fashionable generally today. The style of the 50s dictated that wrist watches had to be small. It was the norm that men's watches were but 32 – 34mm in diameter. This size, appropriate for a dress watch, did not suit the mission for a serious dive watch. Where legibility was critical, as the saying goes, size matters. So the Fifty Fathoms broke with the

French military diver, circa mid-1960s.



A "thank you" letter written by the Captain of the sailing vessel "Saint Briac", who used Fifty Fathoms timepieces for navigation on a round-the-world sail.



1975

Large-size 1975 model with calibre AS 2063 movement.



1975

Model with calibre R 586 movement.



1975

Large-size model with monobloc case back. 42mm.



1975

Model with calibre AS 1902/03 movement.



1975

Rayville large size with CD 2873 calibre. Crown at 4 o'clock.



Version of the Fifty Fathoms presented at the 1968 *Salon Nautique* (Diving Show). Note the anti-radiation dial marking.



fashion of its time and offered large diameters to improve legibility.

Over the years, Blancpain offered a host of styling variants of the Fifty Fathoms. Some had cushion style cases, others stick markers in place of triangular ones, some with more pointed hands than others. However, in all instances they shared the same DNA adhering to the general specifications laid out by Maloubier and Fiechter in 1953.

More recently, the Basel fair of 2003 saw the debut of the 50th Anniversary version of the Fifty Fathoms. Offered in three limited series of 50 pieces, these highly sought-after special edition timepieces brought touches of luxury to the classic recipe that had so endured for 50 years. The bezel for the first time was fashioned out of sapphire. Not only did this bring a sheen which no other material could match, it was practical as well because of its scratch resistance. The movement was updated as well with the use of the calibre 1150 offering a 100-hour power reserve. Finally, Blancpain offered an ingenious strap attachment system, so easy and fool proof, that Blancpain's CEO Marc A. Hayek during a dive with Robert Maloubier launching the watch in Thailand, demonstrated a strap change under water. All the Anniversary pieces sold out in an instant and today they command a hefty premium on the used market.

So the Fifty Fathoms of 2007 traces a rich lineage over more than half a century. And the passion that gave birth to the line and its uncompromising adherence to the needs of the world's most demanding divers endures. ■

OVER THE YEARS, BLANCPAIN OFFERED A HOST OF STYLING VARIANTS OF THE FIFTY FATHOMS.

1999

The Fifty Fathoms Trilogy Edition on bracelet. Strap and gold versions were available.



2000

The Concept 2000 Fifty Fathoms.



2007

The Fifty Fathoms Automatique houses the new sturdy self-winding Calibre 1315.



2007

The Fifty Fathoms Tourbillon crafted in gold is equipped with the automatic Calibre 25A with 8-day power reserve.



2007

The Fifty Fathoms Chronographe Flyback has water-resistant push buttons.

