

Fun'n Games with Short Snorters

DR KERRY RODGERS HAS BEEN FINDING THE MEMENTOS OF OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

While back young Tony James introduced CAB readers to the joy of short snorters: bank notes emanating from a war zone, which carry numerous, usually illegible signatures. On most days eBay offers at least one such item purporting to carry the signature of someone famous such as Bob Hope or Field Marshall Montgomery.

A quick Google search will provide a variety of explanations of the intended purpose and origins of genuine versions of these signed notes. Most agree that the majority were signed by a group of comrades-in-arms about to enter into, or reuniting after battle and that a short snort of booze was involved at some stage.

Readers are also undoubtedly aware that these days I am single-minded in my collecting interests. If it ain't Fijian I don't want to know - despite the efforts of numerous Aussie dealers to palm-off some overpriced New Zealand alleged rarity or other. Today short snorters inscribed on Fiji notes during World War II feature prominently in my collection. Several wet weekends this past winter have found me poring over these tattered relics trying to interpret the scribbled and/or inebriated signatures. A few hours on the World Wide Web is usually then necessary to confirm or not, my best guess as to their identity of a signatory among the servicemen men and women of WWII. Most but not all turn out to be US military personnel. As a person born six weeks after Pearl Harbour, I find it particularly gratifying when I manage to pin down one of the signatories who contributed to the world I live in today.

The web provides a rich source of info for my searches. Sites like that of The Library of Congress prove essential in figuring out the movements of US troops in the Pacific during WWII. For the American forces staging their early strikes against the Japanese throughout '42 and '43, Fiji provided a safe and stable staging post.

Having satisfied myself that a snorter is probably genuine, I then try and ensure that any likely suspect was part of a unit that passed through or was based in Fiji at the appropriate time when they could have signed the snorter of interest. The fact that all Fiji notes were dated certainly helps. There is no point in fingering Sergeant Abe Simpson as the guilty party on a snorter dated 1943 if his unit passed through in '42 never to return. Admittedly, in the highly



Face and back of World War II short snorter signed by officers of US armed forces on way to Guadalcanal. Image © K.A. Rodgers 2007

mobile circumstances of the war it is not impossible that Sgt Simpson could have popped his moniker on a 1943-dated Fiji note at a much later time and in a place other than down-town Suva, but the date on a note does help narrow the possibilities.

Most of the Fiji short snorters I have obtained to date – and which appear genuine – are five shilling issues of King George VI, P#37. The most recent addition to my collection came from Canada and was advertised as, "Signed by American officers of the American Command at Fiji." I decided to pay whatever the price necessary to check it out. It has proved very worthwhile. It was dated 1 January 1942.

Brigadier General Barnett

The signatures were all in fountain pen ink which was a great start. Ball point and felt-pen signatures on alleged WWII items don't do much for me. Unusually, most of the signatories gave their rank. There was a Brigadier General, two Colonels, a Lieutenant Colonel and

a Captain. These ranks helped reduce the possibilities in identifying the normal indecipherable scrawl.

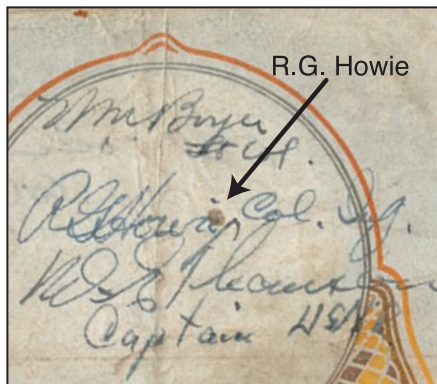
The Brigadier General's John Hancock seemed particularly promising. It was almost entirely legible. I commenced a number of Boolean web searches using different interpretations of the signature: Barrett, Bannett, Barreft, Barnitt, Barnift, etc etc. My Beloved One is particularly good at suggesting possible names that have eluded me.

After a couple of hours, two or three possibilities seemed promising but nothing proved conclusive. However, I was convinced the guy had never been one of the resident base commanders in Fiji itself. The word following "Brig Gen" on the note was "Usa" but I had no real fix on that last scribble following the actual signature.

My suffering was shortened by accessing a Danish web site that lists all the generals from both sides of World War II: www.generals.dk. It didn't take long to scan down the lengthy list of those who served under the Stars and Stripes and



Signature of Brigadier General James Washington Barnett Comgenguadal. Image © K.A. Rodgers



Signature of Colonel Robert George Howie, Base Commander at Guadalcanal, 1943 to 1946. Image © K.A. Rodgers 2007

come up with the name James Washington Barnett as the best probable fit.

The bare service details provided confirmed he had been a Brigadier General. At the outbreak of the Pacific War he had been Deputy Chief of Staff Western Defence Command - the unit charged with defending the West Coast of the USA. He rose to become that command's Chief of Staff before being appointed in 1943 to the position of Assistant Commanding General of the 93rd Division. He served in that position for the remainder of the war when he took over as Commanding General US Army Forces New Caledonia in 1945. He retired in 1949.

His total record served to make him

a most likely candidate. Intriguingly the 93rd Division was one of the US Army's black (segregated) divisions. Like the Kiwi Navy that had for years required British Officers to command its ships, the black regiments and divisions in the US forces were obliged to have white officers.

Many a slip

There was however, one small hiccup to this superb feat of deduction. In my searches on the web I had come across the short snorter web site: www.shortsnorter.org that had opened for business on 4 July 2007. This site is intended to post scans of short snorters with a view to linking signatories where possible back to families and units or in identifying those WIA and KIA.

I touched base with web-master Tom Sparks. He had a squizz at scans of my note that he has now posted on his site. He pointed out that there could be some glitches in the information given on the Generals' web site. The next name listed after James Washington is Allison Joseph Barnett. Both are given as Assistant Commanding General of the 93rd Division. An extended bio and photo of Allison Joseph appears on the website of US Army Officers 1939-1945: www.unit histories.com This site, however, posts even fewer biographical details for James



Colonel Robert George Howie.

Washington than does the Generals' site. It does however raise questions about James' connection with the 93rd.

Tom identified that last word following Barnett's signature as "ComGenGuadal", presumably standing for Commanding

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October 2007



Sgt. John C. Clark and S/Sgt. Ford M. Chaw, members of 25th Combat Team, 93rd Division, clean their rifles alongside the East West Trail, Bougainville. Image courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

General Guadalcanal. A Google search turns up COMGENGUADALCANAL as a valid command group. However, to date neither of us has been successful at tracking any more info on either of the Barnetts and their possible association

or otherwise with Guadalcanal or action elsewhere in the Pacific theatre.

Colonel Howie

A likely ID on the colonel's signature on the snorter's back proved a little

easier. My initial interpretation came up trumps.

Colonel Robert George Howie served as Base Commander at Guadalcanal from 1943 to 1946. Like General James Washington Barnett he had battlefield experience from World War I where he had been wounded in action and awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart. Although he had held a battlefield rank of Captain, he had reverted to First Lieutenant on demobilization.

During peacetime he was a trainer at Fort Benning in Georgia where he was involved in developing a low, motorised, two-man, mobile machine gun platform called "the belly buster."

Both Howie and Barnett moved into and through the Pacific theatre of the war in 1943. Both were of a similar age and military background. It is conceivable that two such men of senior rank met up in Fiji before heading west to the front, or maybe they met at Guadalcanal where one produced a Fijian note they had picked-up on their way though. Whatever the case, I have few reservations in confirming the identity of both signatories, despite the inadequacy of details on Barnett's precise role in the Pacific campaign.

Identifying the remaining signatures on this one snorter is a work in progress. Their illegibility is not helping, but that is all part of the chase. And the web renders the job just that much easier than in the bad old days when all we had to use were books! Any and all contributions and suggestions will be gratefully received.

But there's more!

Chasing down short snorter signatures has also become mainstream media entertainment. For those who want to see how it is done by the professionals with unlimited resources as well as some of the pitfalls involved, try the History Detectives web site: http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/investigations/502_shortsnorter.html There you will find the mother-of-all-short-snorters, the Harry Hopkins British ten shilling note dated 25 July 1942.

This snorter has been confirmed as the real McCoy and is signed by almost every major player on the Allied side of World War II - with the possible exception of Joe Stalin - from Patton and Eisenhower to Churchill and Roosevelt. And unusually this snorter features the sigs of several WAACs.

Hopkins was FDR's personal envoy throughout much of the war conferring with the Allied leaders in Europe and planning strategies for the invasion and defeat of the Axis. You can also find the note on Tom's site at: http://www.shortsnorter.org/Harry_Hopkins.html

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WANTED

Missing In Action

Reward



Short Snorter

A short snorter is a bank note usually autographed and exchanged between service men and women during World War II and the Korean War. Short snorters are a "vanishing breed" of artifacts once treasured by their original owners because they forever bound them to others who had like experiences in war. Short snorters do not have much value to the general currency collecting community as they are usually severely worn or damaged. Tape was used to string them together in a roll as they were carried at all times.

They are valuable to family members of those brave men and women who served our country and sacrificed for our freedom.

Learn more at www.shortsnorter.org

"Wanted" poster from Tom Spark's short snorter web site: www.shortsnorter.org