

Short Snorters: Keeping the Memories Alive

Haunted by the specter of war and the uncertainty of their fate, young soldiers, sailors and airmen forged an unbreakable bond, not of steel but of paper money.

by Michael E. Marotta
ANA 162953

WORLD WAR II changed the face of civilization and united people around the globe in a common cause. The horrors were very real, and the future uncertain. Understandably, America's fighting men sought a sense of security, comfort and legacy. The numismatic manifestation of this longing was the "short snorter," a bank note (or other paper that served as money) that bore the autographs of officers, enlisted personnel and others connected with the war effort. Today, like the Big Band sound of Glenn Miller, they are a reminder of a people who have been called "The Greatest Generation."



Trading autographed bills, or "short snorters," was a popular pastime among World War II airmen.

Birth of a Tradition

ABOUT 100 YEARS ago, a "short snort" was a slang expression for less than a full shot of liquor. Pouring short snorts guaranteed barkeepers a little extra profit in each bottle. Also, drinking only a short snort allowed the imbiber to honestly point to his moderation.

Years before federal aviation regulations, pilots discovered that alcohol and airplanes do not mix, and fly-boys who drank heavily did not live long. Soon, pilots jokingly were calling each other "short snorter."

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AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



The United States \$1 silver certificate was the bill of choice for most short snorters, although the use of foreign currency was not uncommon.



KEITH REBACK

How and why the phrase was applied to paper money is not quite clear. The best testimony comes from an article by Carl Cleveland of Mercer Island, Washington, that appeared in the August 1984 issue of *Air Museum News*.

According to Cleveland, the tradition started with a pilot named Jack Ashcraft, who flew with the Gates Flying Circus, perhaps the most popular barnstorming outfit of the 1920s. One night, Ashcraft was sent out to bring back a case of champagne. Instead, he spent the night with a woman and did not come back until the next morning. Knowing he would be in trouble, he worked out a diversion. Before his boss could reprimand him, Ashcraft quickly asked him for two dollar bills. On one of them, Ashcraft wrote "Short Snorter Number 1" and signed his name. He asked his boss to sign the other and then traded notes with him. Now, said Ashcraft, they were members of a club. From this obscure beginning, the signing and swapping of short snorters became a tradition among pilots.

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“Have a Snort on Me”

AS AVIATION EVOLVED and matured, so did the customs involving short snorters. Before America entered World War II, pilots commanded large, multi-engine cargo planes supported by crews of specialists in the air and on the ground. Aviators would celebrate their first trip across the equator or their first landing at a foreign airport by signing and swapping dollar bills and other bank notes. Often just crewing together for the first time provided enough of an excuse.

Soon, a new twist was added: if an aviator had swapped short snorters with someone before, he could be challenged to produce his note. If he could not, he had to buy the next round of drinks (reaffirming the connection between short snorters and liquor).

Once America entered the war, thousands of soldiers and sailors came into contact with hundreds of pilots and aviators, and the tradition spread. A company being shipped out would pass notes around, each soldier signing as many as he could. The notes often were taped or pasted into long streamers. A wounded soldier going home would collect an autographed dollar bill from each of his buddies. “When you get home, pal,” they would say, “have a snort on me.”

Some men documented history on their short snorters, getting signatures from people they met along the way. Movie stars and other celebrities on morale tours often would sign notes. It was easy for the notes to become streamers several feet long, even up to 30 feet or more.

World’s Longest

BY ALL REPORTS, the world’s longest short snorter was assembled by Captain John L. Gillen, a stenographer in the Army Air Corps in the early '40s. He had gathered a number of signatures on a single dollar bill, but set his sights higher when he saw the collection of autographs accumulated by screen actress Marlene Dietrich.

Gillen traveled extensively, and by 1946 his short snorter was 75 feet long and had 500

Captain John L. Gillen was reported to have the longest short snorter. It measured 100 feet.

PHYLLIS CLARK



signatures. Among them were Hollywood stars (Joe E. Brown, Bob Hope, Dorothy Lamour, Ann Sheridan, Dinah Shore), baseball legends (manager Leo Durocher), royalty (the Duchess of Gloucester) and military brass (General Claire Chenault, Admiral Richard E. Byrd and General Dwight D. Eisenhower). By the 1950s, his roll of short snorters had grown to 100 feet.

While Gillen successfully publicized his short snorters as the longest, more impressive ones have surfaced since. A sale conducted by Stack's on September 8-9, 1993, featured a roll of more than 450 notes stretching 175 feet in length.

One Writer's Remembrance

THE SHORT-SNORTER TRADITION never was well documented, and written description is hard to come by. Only a couple of years ago, a news story by John Steinbeck, "Short Snorter Looms as Menace" (datelined September 7, 1943, and originally published by the *Los Angeles Examiner*), came to light. *MPCgram*, a free E-newsletter for collectors of military money (mpcgram@yahoo.com), carried the story. It appeared again in the November/December 2001 issue of *Paper Money*, produced by the Society of Paper Money Collectors.

In May 2001, I was one of five pilots grounded at the Delaware County (Ohio) Airport, waiting for bad weather to roll past. I told them the story of the short snorter. We took out our dollars, signed and exchanged them. A few weeks later, at the end of aviation ground school, I spun the yarn again. This time, I came prepared with a stack of demonetized notes from Latin America and the Middle East. When that airport hired a new manager, we gave the outgoing manager a party at which people signed a string of notes starting with an American dollar and including an Iraqi 5 dinars. Then, at the annual Delaware County air show and fly-in, the former airport manager showed his roll to the crew of the Confederate Air Force B-24 *Diamond Lil*. He asked them if they knew what a short snorter was. They knew darned well what it was.

WHETHER LONG OR small, crumpled or crisp, every short snorter has a story to tell. They are portable memorials to the men and women who died for freedom and to the thousands who persevered to share the tale. •

Michael E. Marotta is a frequent contributor to *THE NUMISMATIST*. His November 2001 article, "Sir Isaac Newton: Warden and Master of the Mint," earned him second-place honors in the ANA's annual Heath Literary Award competition.



After World War II, American soldiers no longer were paid in "real money," but in Military Payment Certificates (MPCs). Short snorters on such certificates are known, but not common. DAVID SEELYE