

Short Snorters *of World War II*



Fans of these signed notes throw away the rules of collecting in their pursuit of history.

by Paul McIlvaine

OVER TIME, most paper money enthusiasts seek to assemble a specialized collection of a desired currency that includes at least one of each date/type/Friedberg number/series in the best condition they can afford. The note's value usually is paramount and largely depends on its condition and scarcity. Writing or inscriptions usually render the specimen as defaced and unsuitable for any serious, high-value numismatic collection. Independent certification by an established firm verifies the authenticity and quality of the issue and reduces the risk associated with the purchase. Finally, the collector reaches a point where the collection is deemed complete.

However, a collection of "short snorters" from World War II defies this sequence of events. Each note—even those in the same series (i.e., with the same Friedberg number)—is unique. The bills are distinguished by the names and information written on them, and by the historical significance that information conveys, such as dates and locations. Thus, no short snorter collection is ever complete. The numismatic value assigned to condition generally is neither important nor applicable, and certification rarely is needed. The question, then, is "Why?"

Definition & History

A logical approach to this question needs to begin with a definition of a "short snorter." ©

▲ The face of a Series 1935A U.S. \$1 Silver Certificate (North Africa/Europe Yellow Seal) short snorter bears the written date "1943" (top left) and eight signatures. A tradition of drinking alcohol evolved with the notes.

Short snorters were conversation pieces, particularly in establishments that sold alcohol to men and women who served in the military.



▲ During a long journey in a Liberator's hold in October 1943, servicemen had time to sign their names on a string of short snorters composed of paper money from all the countries over which they flew.

◀ The words "short-snorter" often were written along one of the bill's edges.

Michael Marotta's article "Short Snorters: Keeping the Tradition Alive" in the November 2002 issue of *The Numismatist* concurs that the short snorter's definition and tradition are not well documented. However, for the purpose of this article, a short snorter is described as "a piece of paper money circulated during war and/or in a combat zone and signed by friends and comrades. The writing commemorates events, dates, exploits, assignments, locations,



people and/or related information." In other words, it is a portable scrapbook prior to the information age.

The U.S. Series 1935A \$1 Blue Seal Silver Certificate was the most common bill in circulation during World War II and became the note of choice for short snorters. Special-issue paper money, such as Series 1935A Brown Seal/Brown Serial Number \$1 Hawaii Overprints and Yellow Seal/Blue Serial Number North African/European \$1 Silver Certificates also were popular, but did not circulate as widely. Many soldiers added foreign currency acquired during duty in various theatres of operation. Short snorters consisting of many bills taped together end-to-end also were popular and carried everywhere by their owners.

Short snorters were conversation pieces—icebreakers, so to speak—particularly in establishments that sold alcohol to men and women who served in the military. Over time, some rituals about challenges and buying drinks evolved. A 93-year-old man recalls being a WWII B-24 pilot in the Pacific Theatre: "When we went to the Officers Club for refreshment, we would typically challenge the fellow next to us at the bar by asking, 'Do you have your short snorter?' If he produced it, the encounter was a draw and everybody then bought their own drinks and signed each other's short snorter. If the fellow could not produce his short snorter, then he was obliged to buy drinks and sign the challenger's short snorter." A P-38 pilot (now 88 years old) recalls much the same process in the European Theatre, except his description was more colorful!

A variation of this tradition involved the number of signatures on a short snorter. Someone might be challenged to produce his short snorter, and the signatures were counted. The individual with the fewest signatures was required to buy drinks. Someone with foresight soon learned to collect as many signatures on his short snorter as possible to avoid this potentially expensive situation.

Paper money that meets this definition should

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indeed be proclaimed a “short snorter.” Those that do not, but are close, can be called “short-snorter variants.”

Determining Authenticity

Nothing prevents an unscrupulous individual from writing on a circulated bill dating from World War II and then proclaiming it a “short snorter.” However, the only significant profit that person stands to make would come from forging signatures of famous people, such as Ernie Pyle, Winston Churchill, General George Patton and the like. Thus, short-snorter collectors, especially those who purchase notes of high value, should familiarize themselves with some signs of authenticity.

Series. The first thing to look for is the correct series of bill (including foreign currency), in this case, notes that circulated during World War II. (Some of the more common U.S. bills used have been mentioned.) For example, the Series 1935G \$1 was not in circulation at this time, making it suspect as a WWII short snorter. The signature of the U.S. Secretary of Treasury should be that of the person in office when the note was issued.

Value. For the most part, short snorters are low denominations of paper currency—usually \$1 or \$2 bills. Higher denominations make any note suspect. The average soldier simply could not afford to tie up too much capital in short snorters greater than a buck or two.

Pen. Signers of genuine short snorters used a fountain pen or, in rare instances, a pencil. Ball-point and felt-tip pens had not yet been invented, and their use renders a short snorter bogus. Different colors of ink are fine as long as they reflect what was available at the time. (Black, blue, brown and red are okay.) Faded inscriptions are to be expected.

Penmanship. The handwriting system (such as the “Palmer Method”) taught in schools before and during World War II should characterize the style of cursive signatures that adorn genuine WWII short snorters. However, some block lettering also was used.

Condition. World War II soldiers usually carried at least one short snorter. Thus, genuine examples can be expected to show fold marks and considerable wear. Most are in very low-grade ©



◀ This French 100 francs is an excellent example of a foreign currency short snorter. Each crew member of the Liberty Ship S.S. *William Windom* signed his name next to his rank or position, neatly typed at the right. The text at the top reads, S.S. WILLIAM WINDOM./THE TENTH SHIP TO ENTER A CONTINENTAL/PORT DURING THE INVASION ARRIVAL DATE/AT CHERBOURG FRANCE JULY 19, 1944.

▼ The face of this Series 1935A \$1 Hawaii Overprint Silver Certificate bears the signatures of its presumed originator (“Fred A. Warren, SK 3/C”) and nine others, as well as the name of the ship (USS LST-510). Nine additional autographs appear on the note’s reverse.



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Combine a healthy dose of skepticism with intelligence when attempting to determine the note's authenticity.

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▲ First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (Panama Canal Zone, 1944) and Vice President Henry A. Wallace (left, Seattle, 1944) signed short snorters for American service-members in World War II.

condition (Good, Very Good, Fine, etc.). Some may have been immersed in saltwater. Bills in better condition (Fine and Very Fine, but still circulated) probably are genuine if they were carried by military personnel who were not on the front lines, but an uncirculated short snorter bearing 25 signatures allegedly carried by a Marine on five Pacific Island invasions usually is fake.

Common Sense. Combine a healthy dose of skepticism with intelligence when attempting to determine a note's authenticity. For example, one bill bore the cursive signature of famous actress "Olivia D'Haveland." Unfortunately, the correct spelling of her name is "de Havilland."

► The inclusion of a date and location (verified by records) on this 20-Reichsmark note adds to its credibility as an authentic WWII short snorter. Tape marks indicate it might have been attached to other notes, as was the custom during the war.



Value Enhancers

Origin. A short snorter should bear the signature of the person who started it. The words "short snorter" also appear on some notes, usually in the margin.

Dates. Ideally, a short snorter should carry a specific date (month/day/year), along with some inscription as to its significance. For example, "Left US 6-28-44. Arrived in ETO [European Theatre of Operations] 8-6-44" are excellent historical markers.

Identities. The ranks, specific names and accomplishments of the note's signers are invaluable. Obviously, the signatures of well-known individuals enhance a bill's value.

Unit/Ship/Aircraft. A short snorter usually has a "unit identity" that can be verified. For example, the name of a military ship can be traced. In 2007 I sent an electronic scan of a note to a man who served on a ship identified on one of the short snorters in my collection. He identified nearly every individual who signed the bill. Authentication doesn't get much better than that!

Locations. Inscriptions of the places a short snorter's owner(s) served or visited during World War II help to establish its authenticity. Keep in mind that a short snorter's real value is determined by the story it tells.

The time for uncovering the interesting background of these bills is running out. Many descendants of World War II veterans are selling, giving away or destroying the bills their ancestors once carried with pride, and the history of many of these notes soon will be lost. Consider adding your findings to the virtual museum at www.shortsnorter.org.

Every short snorter has a history. The notes are portable memorials to the many men and women who fought, were wounded or died in World War II. As a collector, you are pursuing the bill and learning about the person who carried it. ©

Learn More . . .

World War II soldiers carried a vast array of currency to spend or save as mementos. These monies are documented in *World War II Remembered: History in Your Hands* by C. Frederick Schwan and Joseph E. Boling (ANA Library Catalog No. UA60.S3w).

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