

# THE BONKLIP BRACELET IN HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE.

By : Adrian van der Meijden and  
Thomas Koenig

## Introduction

In the past vintage military wrist watches often have been presented in mint condition of movement, case and dial, and they have been fitted with new, contemporary straps. But in the last few years the level of restoration has asked for increased authenticity, resulting in a disaffection towards overdone restorations as well as in interest in up to now disregarded details like watch straps.

Research on original issued watch straps is quite difficult as leather and straps made of fabric are subject to aging and substantial wear and tear. So, today they are either lost or in devastating condition. Furthermore, British Armed Forces paperwork is not very helpful as only few words are spent on straps. Even if an old watch has still a vintage strap it is not sure, whether this strap is an authentic issued one or just a fancy strap mounted by a later civilian owner.

From the List of Changes as far as ROYAL ARMY equipment is concerned and pertaining to the ROYAL AIR FORCE equipment from AP 1086, it is known that during WW II leather straps for both, wrist watches and pocket watches were predominant. In contrast, the American Armed Forces during WW II already introduced canvas and nylon straps for military service. But information on the exact colour, exact dimensions and the method to attach them to the fixed lugs of the watches is very scarce.

Other than on leather straps and straps made of fabric, the use of metal watch bracelets has been documented much better. The best known metal bracelet issued to the British Armed Forces is the so called BONKLIP. We will try to describe this specific bracelet, which for some twenty years was a standard bracelet for the ROYAL AIR FORCE and the FLEET AIR ARM.

# History and patents

“BONKLIP” appears to be trade name, probably some kind of pun with the words “BON” and “CLIP”. A closer look on a BONKLIP bracelet reveals that it wears not only the brand name on its closure element, but also the inscription “MADE IN ENGLAND, B.H.B. & S, Pat. No. 349657”. (Fig.1,2)



Fig.1, clip of Bonklip bracelet



Fig.2, Bonklip strap in original packaging

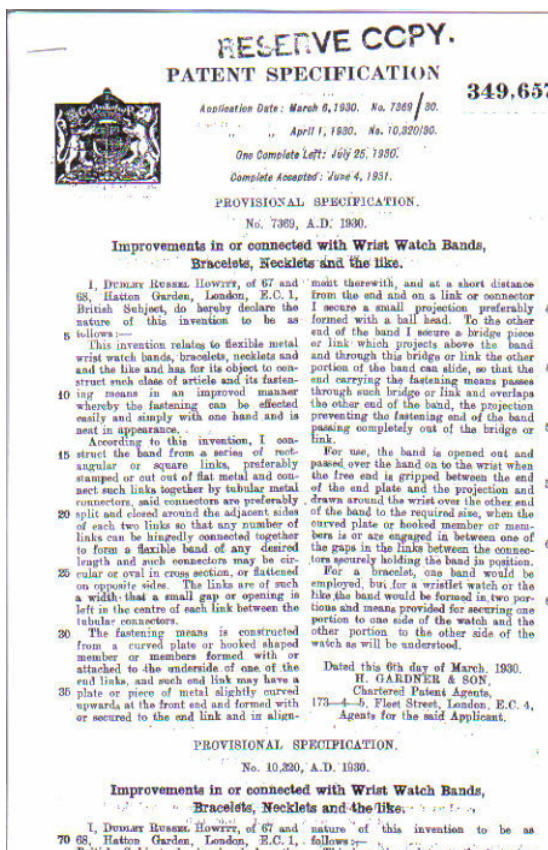


Fig.3, photo of first page of the British Patent

The aforementioned Patent No. leads to the inventor, DUDLEY RUSSEL HOWITT of 67 Hatton Garden, London. The patent has been applied for, on March 6, 1930 and it has been published on June 4, 1930. (Fig.3)

The invention describes the patent specification as follows: "This invention relates to flexible metal wrist bands, bracelets, necklets and the like and has for its object to construct such class of article and its fastening means in an improved manner whereby the fastening can be effected easily and simply with one hand and is neat in appearance".

Three years later HOWITT found his patent registered at the REICHSPATENTAMT in Germany under DRP No. 577586. (Fig.4)

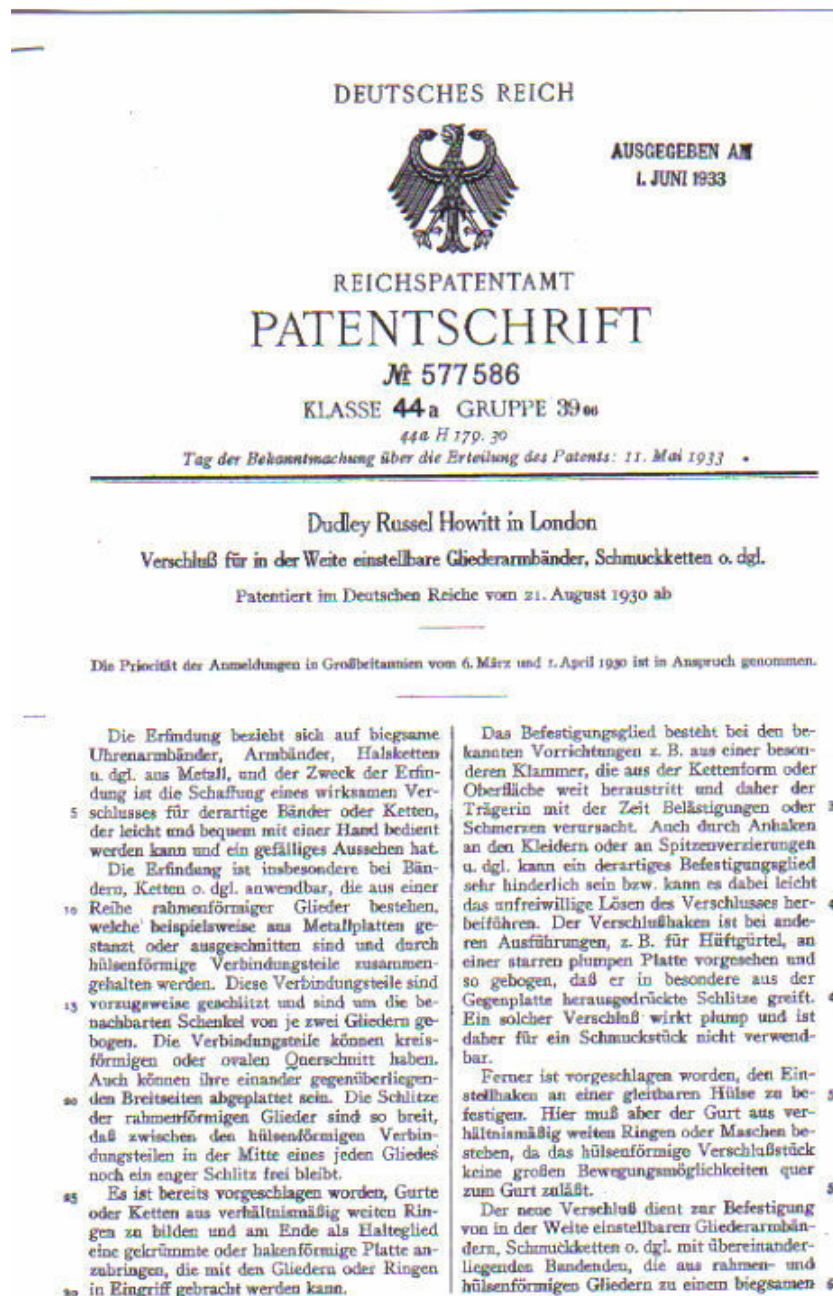


Fig.4, First page of the German Patent

The German Patent application is an exact translation of the English one. The essence of HOWITTS invention is described in the English Patent Abstract GB 349657 (Fig.5) and in additional drawings (Fig.6)

### Improvements in or connected with wrist watch bands, bracelets, necklets and the like

**Publication number:** GB349657  
**Publication date:** 1931-06-04  
**Inventor:**  
**Applicant:** DUDLEY RUSSEL HOWITT  
**Classification:**  
 - international: **A44C5/22; A44C5/18;**  
 - european: A44C5/22  
**Application number:** GB19300007369 19300306  
**Priority number(s):** GB19300007369 19300306

Report a data error here

#### Abstract of GB349657

349,657. Bracelets &c. HOWITT, D. R., 67, Halton Garden, London. March 6, 1930, Nos. 7369 and 10320. [Class 43.] In a flexible metal band, wherein a series of rectangular links 1 are joined by tubular metal connectors 2 and small gaps 3 are left in the links between the connectors, the fastening means comprise a member on one of the end links and adapted to engage one or another of the gaps 3. In Fig. 3 the end link 1a carries a hook-shaped fastening-member 4. The other end of the band carries a bridge-piece through which the band slides and a projection 5, secured to one of the connectors 2, prevents the fastening end from passing out of the bridge-piece. In a modification, the fastening member consists of a plate 8, Fig. 13, the end 8a of which is bent so that it projects through a gap 3 and lies on the next connector 2. The plate 8 may form part of the end link, or it may be hingedly connected thereto as shown. The band may be formed in one piece or in two overlapping lengths adapted to be secured to a wrist watch.

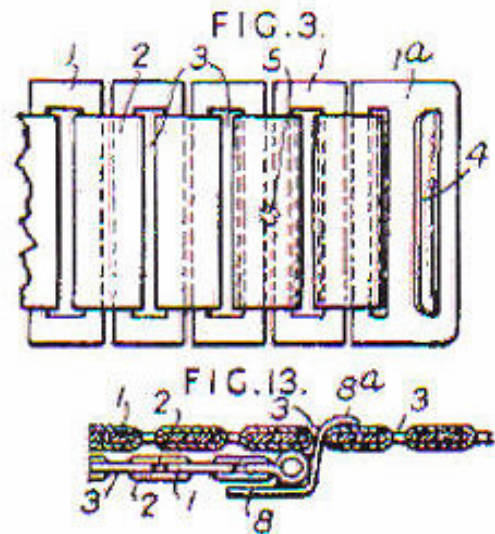


Fig. 5 , Abstract GB 349657



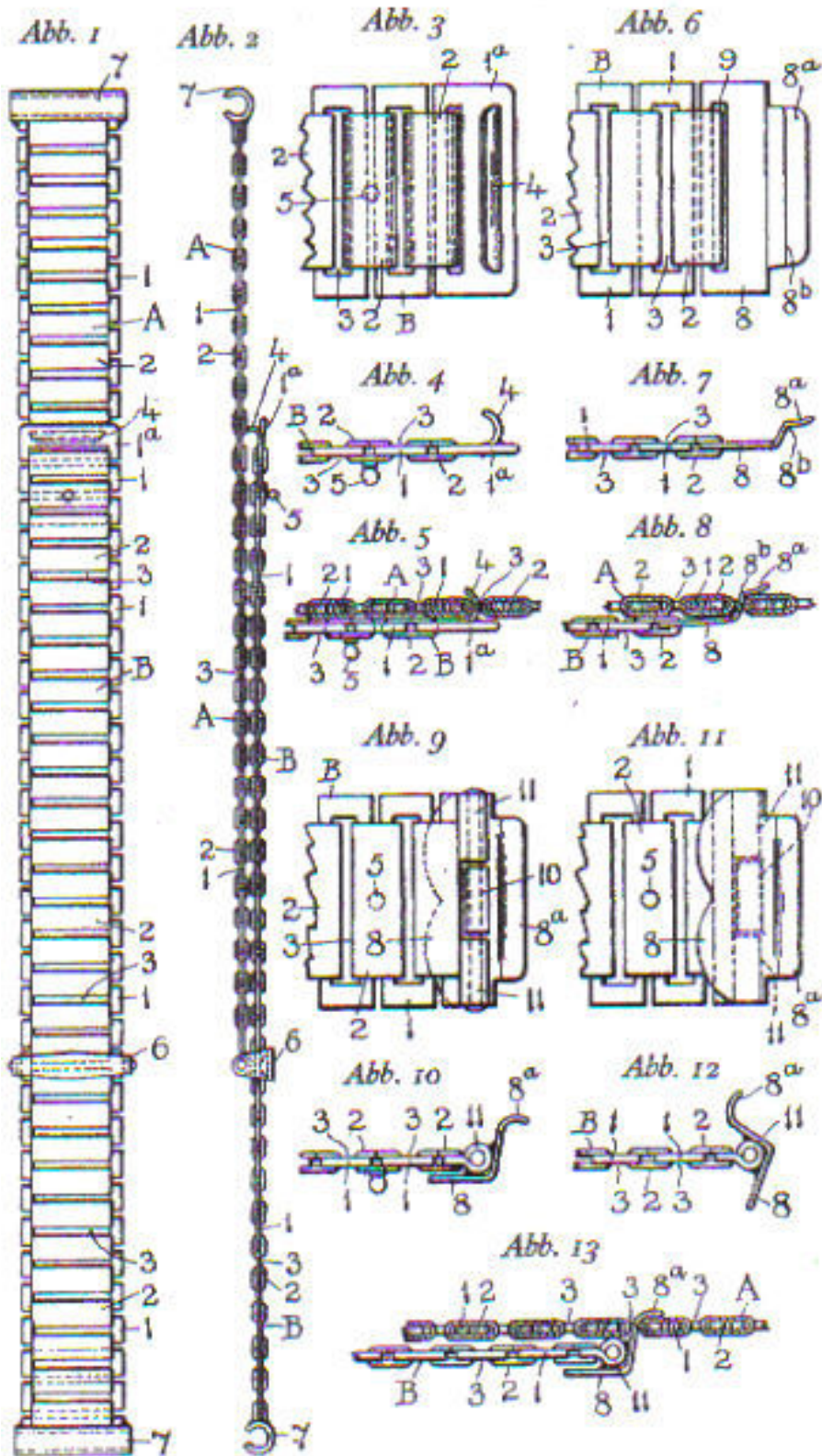


Fig. 6 , additional drawings

## **U**se in the British Armed Forces

As the invention originally was made for jewellery and for improvement of the inferior closure systems of bracelets known of that era, it is no surprise that the British Armed Forces took no notice of this patent immediately.

But during WW II the Allied planes flew higher and higher, resulting in the need to provide warm clothing to the air crew members as the cockpit at that time lacked heating. That caused some inconvenience to the navigators: Their watches, 6B/159 Navigational Wristwatches, were worn on normal, short pigskin straps and therefore beneath the warm Irvin flight jackets. It took some time to uncover the watch and it was nearly impossible to handle the sextant for navigation and simultaneously record the exact time. There was an increasing demand for a strap, which length easily could be varied, allowing to wear the watch directly on the wrist, but also over the flight jacket.

This specification was met in 1949 when one of the most famous military watches, the Mk. 11, was introduced into RAF and FAA service. It was the first watch in the RAF fitted with a BONKLIP strap. (ref.1 ).

As with every item of RAF equipment, a Store Ref. No. was assigned, not only to the Mk. 11, i.e. 6B/346, but as well to the BONKLIP straps. As three different versions of the BONKLIP were in use with the RAF, three different Store Ref. Nos. were issued, namely 6B/2763 (17.5 mm in width designated to be used with the Mk. 11, 6B/3224 (19.0mm) and 6B/3033 (20.0 mm in width).

The last two to fit the chronograph 6B/551 H.S 9. and the Watch, Wrist, General Service 6B/9101000.

The size of the links of the strap is for all three aforementioned types of BONKLIPS the same. Only the end pieces vary in width according to the size of the lugs of the different watches. The 17.5 mm 6B/2763 was tailor made for the IWC Mk. 11 with 18 mm lugs, while for the Jaeger LeCoultre Mk. 11 having only 17.0 mm lugs, some material had to be filed off to make the end pieces fit.

There is no evidence that the ROYAL ARMY has ever used a BONKLIP strap. Probably the BONKLIP was never issued outside of the RAF and the FLEET AIR ARM. That would be plausible as except for diver's watches there was no need within the ROYAL ARMY and ROYAL navy (except for the helicopter and plane pilots) to vary the width of the bracelet/watch strap during a mission. For diver's watches BONKLIPS were not really suitable, because the watch was fastened more secure with a nylon "NATO" strap and because BONKLIPS could have corroded when steadily used in salty sea water. BONKLIPS mounted on 6B/159 Navigational Wristwatches and on Royal Army service watches probably are no authentic issued straps, but have been "upgraded" by their owners in a way.

In 1981 the MINISTRY OF DEFENCE issued the DEFENCE STANDARD 66-4(Part 5)/Issue 3, Watch, Wrist, Electronic, Navigator, Luminous and Non-Luminous. This Standard superseded the DEFENCE STANDARD of July 1973. The 1981 Standard declared that several items in his Majesty's service were no longer cleared for issue. Among other military items, the last 4 surviving W.W.W. watches, namely IWC (listed as International), Omega, Record and Timor were taken out of service. Also IWC's most famous military watch, the Mk. 11, and the mechanical wrist chronographs had to go. Together with the watches the BONKLIP bracelet was not provided anymore. Nylon and leather straps with the NATO stock number 6645-99-527-7059 were the replacements. (Fig.7)

TABLE III(B)  
ITEMS NO LONGER TO BE PROVISIONED  
WRIST STRAPS

APPENDIX TO DEF STAN 66-4 (PARTS 1-14)  
TABLE III(B)

|   | SERVICE REFERENCE NUMBER |                          |           | ITEM NAME | ITEM DESCRIPTION                | NATO STOCK NUMBER OF REPLACING ITEM WITH DEF STAN (LATEST ISSUE) |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------------------------|--|
|   | NAVY                     | ARMY                     | AIR FORCE |           |                                 |  |
|   | (a)                      | (b)                      | (c)       |           |                                 |  |
| 1 | 0552/160648              | -                        | -         | STRAP     | Diving supervisor's             | 6645-99-124-2986<br>(Nylon)<br>DEF STAN 66-15 (PART 1)           |
| 2 | -                        | W10/<br>6645-99-910-1003 | -         |           | Webbing                         |  |
| 3 | -                        | -                        | 6B/321    |           | Fabric                          | 6645-99-527-7059<br>(Nylon/Leather)<br>DEF STAN 66-15 (PART 2)   |
| 4 | -                        | -                        | 6B/169    |           | Leather                         |  |
| 5 | -                        | -                        | 6B/2763   |           | Bracelet, Bonklip, 17.5 mm clip |  |
| 6 | -                        | -                        | 6B/3224   |           | Bracelet, Bonklip, 19.0 mm clip |  |
| 7 | -                        | -                        | 6B/3033   |           | Bracelet, Bonklip, 20 mm clip   |  |
| 8 | -                        | -                        | 6B/2594   |           | Webbing                         |  |

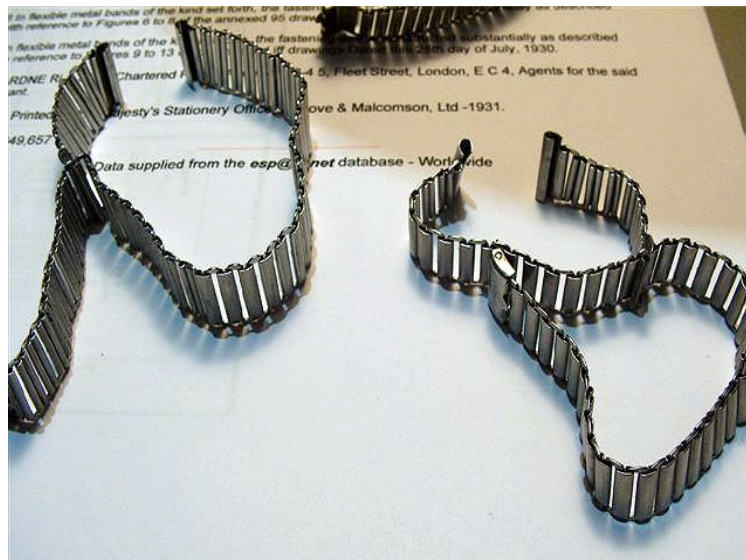
Note:  
- indicates that the column heading does not apply.

**Fig.7, Table IIIB, Defence Standard 1981**

For what reason the BONKLIP had been the first choice in the Royal Air Force for such a long period?

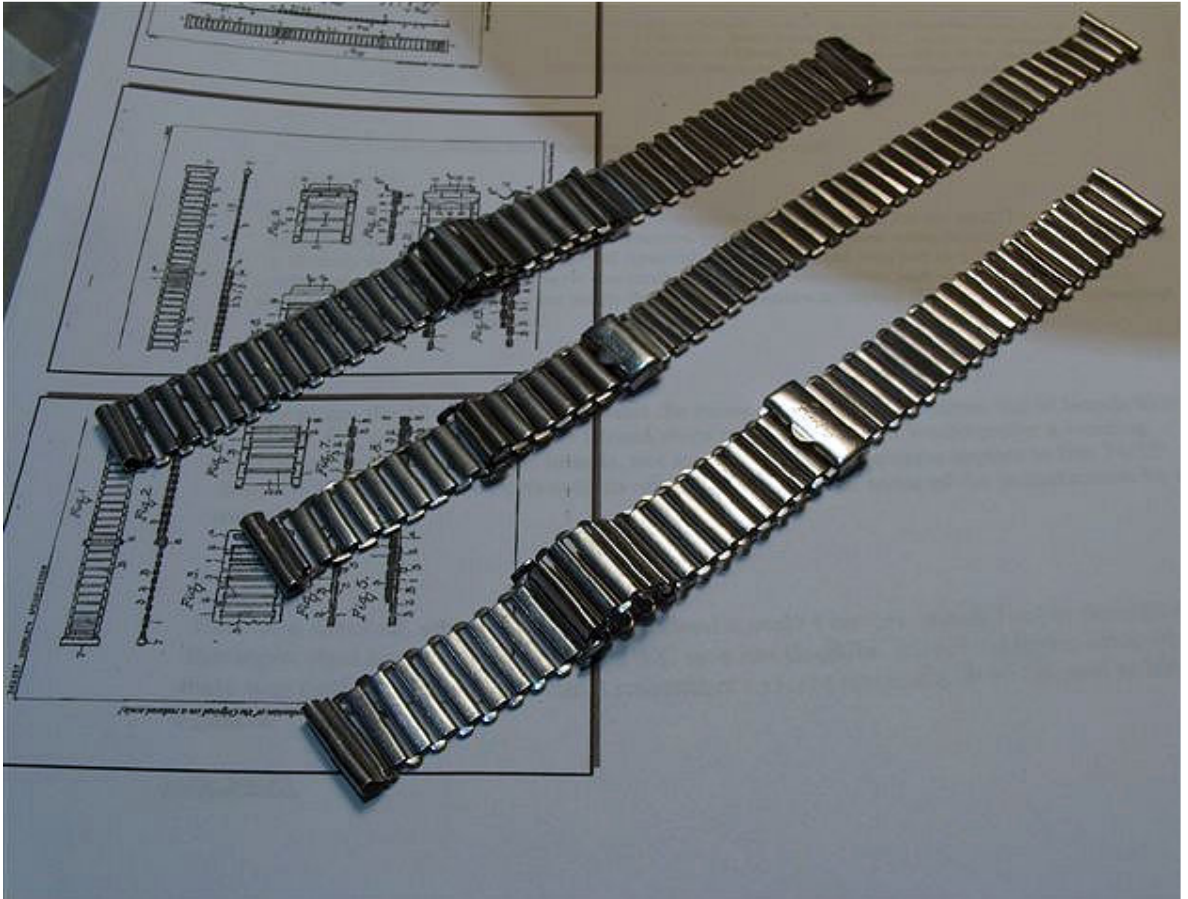
Due to its unique closing system the BONKLIP could be used at different lengths, fitting on the bare wrist as well as over military clothing. Probably no other contemporary metal strap allowed to use every link present, as the one to put on the closing clip .In this way the BONKLIP was adjustable over a wide range, precise to a few millimetres. The nylon straps issued since 1954 allowed that variation as well, but here serious injuries in crash landings have been reported. In contact with fire, nylon melts and causes serious burning wounds of the wrist.

Where many collectors may be charmed by the appearance of a W.W.W. or a Mark 11, few consider a BONKLIP as a nice looking bracelet. Compared to the current sturdy metal straps it looks rather thin and puny. Many collectors therefore use the well known NATO strap or a leather one. In Z. WESELOWSKI's book: "*A concise guide to Military Timepieces 1880-1990*", only 2 wristwatches have been depicted with a metal strap, of which one may be a BONKLIP.(ref. 2 ) However, the BONKLIP bracelet served his Majesty for over 2 decades and this fact indicates that this tiny strap must have been able to fulfil a heavy duty. It is therefore that we have tried to elucidate the history of this peculiar product that has played a modest but obvious role in the British military watch history. (fig.8,9)



**Fig.8,** Bonklips showing the endpieces for fixed lugs





**Fig.9**, Bonklips of different sizes and lengths

## **R**eferences

1. Christian M, Koenig T, and Steer G.  
Man is not lost. An account on the Mk 11 Navigational Writwatch.  
Horological Journal, January 1974.
2. Weselowski Z.M.  
A concise guide to Military Timepieces 1880-1990  
Crowood Press Ltd 1996

## **A**cknowledgement:

The authors want to thank Dr. Hans Goerter for his help and advice to construct this article