

June 2, 2020

The Humble Compass

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, T. Gum, Site Admin.)

The first usage of a compass in recorded history was in 1190. Since then it has been a tool that every military force has utilized, regardless of origin or time period. The accuracy, markings, and language may differ between these periods, or even between nations, however the basic design is ubiquitous; markings on a dial that rotates freely orient toward identified directions.

In contemporary times navigation is typically completed using digital instruments. Though the trusted instrument, a basic compass, is still utilized for orientation when all else fails... or, as a standard piece of kit when off the grid and without battery resupply.



The current standard issue compass that we all recognize can trace its heritage to the early 19th Century design known as the Schmacalder Compass which was patented in March of 1812 via the Royal Patent Office. The

British troops would use this style of compass into World War One. With a few tweaks, Colonel William Willoughby Cole Verner would improve upon the Schmacalder Compass, leading the British troops to adopt an updated design and carry the instrument through the end of World War I.



The US Army would adopt a compass that more closely resembled a pocket watch (Waltham Pocket Compass) for the longest period of time, until the instrument underwent modification. The Engineering and Topographic Laboratories was responsible for sourcing an updated instrument but found that commercial industry lacked such product, then known as a lensatic compass. This time period of research and development stretched from 1928 to 1938 finally leading to what is widely recognized as “the” military compass, the M-1938 Lensatic Compass.



In contrast to the WWII GI Compass (M-1938 Compass), the Imperial Japanese Army would carry much simpler instruments. Pictured here are two examples that were collected from the battlefield by Staff Sergeant Ralph Bagger.

Bagger was born in Lancaster, PA in 1923. He was drafted into the Army in 1942. Prior to being drafted, he was preparing to enter seminary for training as a Lutheran minister. Bagger served through WWII in France in

the 726th MP Battalion. In September 1945, he was transferred to Okinawa, Japan for a brief tour. Finally, in October of 1946 he was discharged.



The humble compass is an instrument that has lead mankind to find new continents and planets, new homes, and at times, locate targets of interest. However, such a simple instrument relies on advanced mathematics and utilizes navigation techniques better left for another blog post. Today, the standard issue military compass looks relatively similar to earlier models, but is truly high-tech.