

A Fifty Fathoms honouring French Combat Swimmers

A pioneer in the development of military and civilian diver's watches, Blancpain pays tribute to its original collaboration with the founders of the French Combat Swimmers unit. Inspired by this heritage, the Manufacture unveils a 300-piece Fifty Fathoms limited edition bearing the symbols of French commando frogmen.

When Jean-Jacques Fiechter, himself an outstanding diver, took the helm of Blancpain in 1950, he began working on a reliable and robust timing instrument capable of accompanying him in his underwater adventures. This was a major challenge given that there were no watch industry precedents that might be used as a blueprint. Guided by his own experience, he defined and developed the fundamental specifications that a watch genuinely dedicated to scuba diving must meet : luminescent hands and hour-markers contrasting with a dark dial, a secured rotating bezel, a self-winding movement, perfect water-resistance, and an antimagnetic case.

In parallel, beginning in 1952, Captain Robert "Bob" Maloubier and Lieutenant Claude Riffaud, founders of the newly formed French Combat Swimmers unit, began their quest to find a watch suited for their aquatic missions. The two officers envisaged finding a watch that would become an indispensable piece of equipment for their divers. Working together, they assembled a list of specific criteria for an instrument that would meet their requirements. The first tests which they conducted with "water-resistant" French watches were inconclusive. These watches were far too small, the dials were hard to read, and the cases were far from waterproof. Having heard that the director of a Swiss watchmaking house was testing a new model of watch when diving in the south of France, they decided to contact Jean-Jacques Fiechter.

In 1953, Blancpain was able to deliver to the French team a watch for testing that fully met their criteria. The watch performed brilliantly in all of the tests and it became one of the essential pieces of equipment for the French Combat Swimmers corps. Later, the same occurred for naval forces around the world. This unique timepiece was named Fifty Fathoms.

In tribute to its close collaboration with the founders of the French Combat Swimmers unit, Blancpain wanted to unveil a special edition of its Fifty Fathoms diver's watch. Supporting this initiative, the French army authorized the Manufacture to engrave the Combat Diver Qualification Badge – featuring a central anchor, dedicated to sailors and flanked by two winged seahorses representing the underwater world as well as parachutists – on the caseback of the new model. The watch face discreetly displays a second emblem – the number 7. As oxygen becomes toxic when its partial pressure reaches 1.7 bar, the maximum depth that commando frogmen can reach when using pure oxygen is seven metres, a number that has thus become a symbolic figure in this milieu.

Faithful to the reputation of its ancestor, the special "Nageurs de combat" edition new model ensures robustness and reliability thanks to the 1315 self-winding movement. Equipped with a date window, it notably features a silicon hairspring serving as an antimagnetic shield, while three series-coupled barrels provide a five-day power reserve. The 45 mm-diameter satin-brushed steel case is water-resistant to 30 bar (approx. 300 metres).



Like the original model, the hands and hour-markers of the "Nageurs de combat" watch are covered with luminescent material, contrasting with the matt black dial. Their geometrical shapes evoke the generation of 1950s Blancpain military diving watches. Lending an additional subtle touch, the hands are painted white, just as they are on period watches. In the same vintage spirit, the traditional triangular mark that appeared on the first Fifty Fathoms models is back in its original spot at 12 o'clock. Meanwhile, the black unidirectional rotating bezel highlights a luminescent time scale protected by a curved sapphire insert that is extremely resistant to shocks and scratches.

The limited edition Fifty Fathoms "Nageurs de combat" watch is the latest chapter in the long history of Blancpain's relationship with the oceans. It finds its place within the brand's collection as an authentic tribute to the combat divers who contributed to the birth of a watchmaking icon.