

Capturing the JAWS WATCH

Watch-loving film buffs have long sought the identity of the elusive divers' watch from the 1970s blockbuster. Now the surprising answer can be revealed.

BY GARY AND CHRISTIAN STOCK



The *Shawshank Redemption*. *Die Hard*. *The Godfather*. *Scarface*. *Jaws*. A small group of films that crystallize the American spirit so well they demand a respectful viewing and a fresh six-pack from any American male when encountered while channel surfing. So, two years ago, when a Fourth of July weekend *Jaws* marathon invaded a family Sunday afternoon, attention simply had to be paid.

But on this particular occasion, something else demanded attention as well: during the scene in which shark researcher Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) readies his poison harpoon, his distinctive divers' watch fills the screen. Two brothers, both vintage-watch buffs, asked a simple question: "What watch is that?"

The answer should have been a mouse click away. The two-second close-up seemingly provided plenty of detail, and the clothes, cars, sunglasses, and, yes, watches worn by movie char-

The movie frame that started the quest: as shark expert Matt Hooper prepares a poison dart, the camera lingers on his distinctive 1970s-style divers' watch.



Top: In his shark suit, Hooper prepares to descend. The fact that he now wears his dive watch over the sleeve of his bulky wetsuit indicated that its bracelet might not be the original. Above: the watch shows up again in Hooper's dinner at the home of Sheriff Brody and his wife.

acters are a much-discussed and well-documented field of Internet chatboard knowledge. Multiple Web sites will give you the exact details of Sean Connery's Rolex from *Doctor No* — a no-crown-guard Submariner 6538 on a croc strap, in case you were wondering — or even Al Pacino's Seiko chronograph from the obscure 1970s racing flick *Bobby Deerfield*.

However, on the subject of Hooper's *Jaws* watch, the Internet for once fell largely silent: a few screen captures and a lot more questions. Some message-board habitués theorized that it was an undocumented Omega, or maybe a Seiko. But most agreed that it was a mystery: in fact, the *Jaws* divers' watch was the best-known unknown timepiece in history.

Until now.

HOW DO YOU FIND a minor prop from a film made under exceptionally chaotic conditions almost four decades ago? We quickly concluded that the most direct resolution to the identity of the *Jaws* watch would be to ask somebody who might have handled it during filming.

COULD IT HAVE BEEN DREYFUSS'S OWN
WATCH, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING IT WAS
THE 1970s, BEFORE PRODUCT PLACEMENTS
BECAME COMMON IN FILMS?



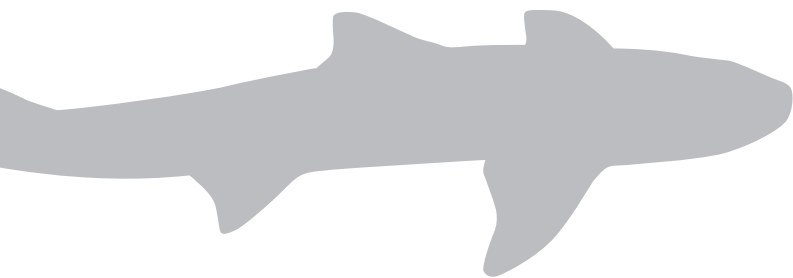
An opening letter to Mr. Dreyfuss produced no response — not surprising, given that other fans have apparently asked the same question, without receiving an answer. After viewing a number of documentaries on the filming and reading the very entertaining *Jaws Diary*, a bestseller in its own right, we concluded that the stunt diver from the scene in which Dreyfuss's character is attacked in the shark cage, Dick Warlock, was probably chronologically the last member of the production to wear the watch. The amiable Mr. Warlock didn't recall any of the details of the watch, however, nor did stunt coordinator Ted Grossman, who managed the stunts filmed on Martha's Vineyard during the movie's marathon 1974 shoot.

Dreyfuss wears the watch consistently throughout the arc of the narrative, from first arrival in the fictional town of Amity to his final, miraculous survival after the sinking of the Orca. Theory: could it have been his personally owned watch, especially considering it was the '70s, before product placements became common in films? Evidence suggested this was not likely, for two reasons. First, the watch was taken from Mr. Dreyfuss and transported across the country to be used in the filming of the terrifying shark-cage attack scenes at the film's climax, which, as it turns out, were filmed (sans live shark) in a pool in California. Second, we unearthed some home-movie footage taken on Martha's Vineyard during the film's production, which showed Dreyfuss lounging by his trailer, wearing a much chunkier sports watch.

Top left: each of the distinctive elements visible in the film appears in the Alsta Nautoscaph — harlequin bezel, sword hands and indices, and cushion case. Left: the beating heart of the Jaws watch is a classic Valjoux 2452 automatic movement.



From this angle, the features of the Alsta Nautoscaph snap into clear focus, exactly matching Hooper's watch in *Jaws*.



THOSE MINOR SETBACKS could hardly be expected to deter two watch buffs inspired by a steady diet of “CSI” reruns. The next stop was our own little crime laboratory, in the form of the nearest PC. The two-second shot at the ship’s rail in which Hooper prepares to poison the shark would hopefully provide the clues that would reveal the watch’s identity. Using a laptop, a DVD of the film, and some free software that would probably have cost the CIA millions a few years ago, we enlarged, measured, sharpened and even reversed the watch image, resolving enough detail to map the case and dial, and even to detect movement of the seconds hand.

All of this forensic analysis revealed that the *Jaws* watch had an interesting mix of attributes: Seamaster-style arrowhead dial indices, sword hour and minute hands, an internal date-magnifying lens on the inside of the crystal, and dial markings showing a short logo. Plus the two most distinctive features: an unusual “harlequin” dive bezel, with the arc between 12 o’clock and 3 o’clock reversed in silver, and a very noticeable steel bracelet with portholes.

Based on these clues, in the finest CSI tradition, we created a composite sketch of the *Jaws* watch. Our quarry now had a face; we simply needed to give it a name.

EACH DAY FOR the next year or so, eBay and Google dutifully delivered a couple dozen suspects in the form of search results, and we ran them to earth over morning coffee. Research in the digital age doesn’t wear much shoe leather, but it’s hard on the mouse wrist.

Many vintage divers’ watches featured the arrowhead dial and sword hands — a testament to the pervasive influence of Omega’s styling. But not a single watch had the harlequin bezel and porthole bracelet. Expanding our search to Cooksey Shugart’s *Complete Price Guide to Watches*, 20 years’ worth of Sears catalogs, and even a day at London’s vintage horology shrine, Burlington Arcade, turned up nothing that matched.

Then a thought: could the bracelet be leading us away from the actual identity of the watch? Screen captures and movie footage showed that the bracelet appeared to fit the watch lugs poorly. Further, we noticed that Dreyfuss wears the watch directly on his wrist in most scenes, yet refastens it to rest on top of his thick wetsuit in the shark-cage scenes, with no visible extension clasp showing. Our conclusion: the steel bracelet had to be expandable. Sure enough, research revealed the exact bracelet as a Speidel TwistOFlex, that icon of old-fogeydom worn by everybody’s grandfather. Amazingly, you can still buy a TwistOFlex Mach 1, brand new — on eBay, of course, fresh in its dime-store plastic tray, portholes gleaming.

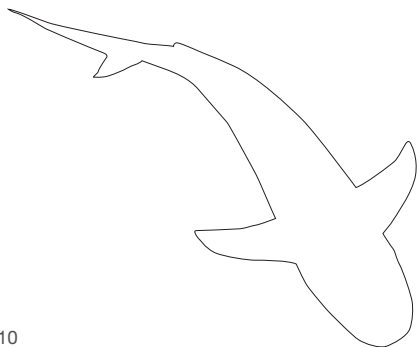
WITHOUT THE MOST distinctive visual element — the oval portholes — to divert us, we began to broaden our search to include watches without regard to their bands.

And then, one day, somewhere around Search No. 3,000, it was simply there, one more eBay listing, for a battered divers’ watch being sold as part of a bedraggled junkshop lot.



Almost 40 years later: the Jaws watch, posed to match the original film frame

*ALL THE DETAILS
WERE SUDDENLY
EXACTLY RIGHT —
THE CASE, THE
BEZEL, THE DIAL,
THE HANDS, AND
EVEN THE OVER-
SIZED CROWN.*



The experience was a bit like those crime-drama scenes where someone recognizes a killer after viewing a huge archive of mug shots: the bleary-eyed eyewitness tells the detective, “Too many faces; I’ll never remember,” then turns the page and shouts, “That’s him, I’d know him anywhere!” All the details were suddenly exactly right — the case, the bezel, the dial, the hands, and even the oversized crown. The auction title read (drumroll, please), “Alsta Nautoscaph Vintage Diver.” Seven days and \$100 later, the watch arrived by parcel post, a time capsule from the summer that we all avoided going back in the water.

Puzzlement about the brand is entirely understandable: Alsta, though a known name, is in fact obscure enough that it makes other historical 1960s makes like Enicar and Clebar seem world-famous by comparison. For two fairly serious watch buffs, the immediate response was, “No wonder no one can identify the darned thing,” followed quickly by the sense that maybe there was more to the story than simply a no-name timepiece randomly selected by a junior wardrobe assistant.

Examination soon showed that while Alsta was the marking on the dial, the case interior was engraved “Alstater Watch Co.” There is no town of Alstater on any Swiss map — indeed, the word *alstater* translates as “from all cities” or “global” in Swiss German — but U.S. horological brand registration records finally revealed that a trademark for Alsta had been registered in January of 1948 to an address in the crowded, ever-changing jewelry district of Manhattan — hardly a revealing detail.

The term “Nautoscaph” was more illuminating. The word itself is in all likelihood an adept piece of saltwater-flavored marketing. In 1960, a research sub named the Bathyscaph (Greek for “deep ship”), set a not-since-equaled record for descent with an onboard crew: it carried two men to the 35,000-foot depths of the Marianas Trench, the world’s deepest sea floor, and made headlines around the globe. Presumably some canny marketer of the day recognized the associations of the craft’s name, and coined the *Jaws* watch’s model designation to take advantage of it.

Searching for watches using the Nautoscaph brand name yielded both questions and answers. Even though it had never been registered as a brand name, Web searches turned up dive watches marked “Nautoscaph” from former Breitling importer Wakmann, as well as from Solvil et Titus, Emewo, and Andre Bouchard. Varied in styling, they nevertheless all seemed to share the distinctive double-domed caseback and the impressive 999-foot depth rating of the Alsta.

IN THE DAYS AFTER its arrival, our *Jaws* watch gave up a few but not all of its secrets on the workbench. Whatever its provenance, someone had worked hard to construct a rather impressive piece of horology for the time period. The stainless-steel case employs what in the ’60s would have been state-of-the-art features to achieve water-resistance: a wide inner rear gasket that bears directly on the caseback to increase sealing surface area, and an oversize spring-loaded crown with multiple internal water seals, using the same submarine-hatch principle as Rolex and IWC, in which increasing water pressure actually increases the effectiveness of the seal.



Left: Hooper's watch is reborn, using a vintage Alsta Nautoscaph and a Speidel Mach 1 expandable bracelet. Below, left: the story behind the Alstater Watch Company, whose brand name appears on the movement, remains a mystery.



The *Jaws* watch movement is a rather luxe version of the Valjoux 2452, an old design that actually lives on today in the highly regarded, contemporary ETA 2824. A design that makes old-time watchmakers smile in admiration, the 2452 in the *Jaws* watch has the kind of components that you might find today only in watches above \$5,000, including a screw balance and a rhodium-plated ébauche.

Looking back at skin-diving magazines of the era gave us another perspective: at that time, a divers' watch was a key piece of safety equipment, the only way to prevent decompression sickness. And the choices for an honest-to-goodness divers' watch that could survive more than a dishwashing expedition were few: well-heeled adventurers might choose a Rolex Submariner or Omega Seamaster, their less affluent friends a Seiko 6300-series or possibly a Zodiac Sea Wolf, both at that time sold principally at military PXs. In that era, the Nautoscaph would have been a genuine bargain: a moderately priced divers' watch guaranteed to a depth greater than the Rolex Submariner of the day (300 meters versus the Rolex rating of 200 meters).

In short, all very appropriate for a certain scruffy shark expert from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute known to invest his considerable family wealth in unpretentious but high-grade marine electronics, cages, and dive gear. In 1974, an Alsta Nautoscaph would have been a very plausible choice to place on Dr. Matt Hooper's wrist.

THOUGH NOT LIKELY the actual watch worn by Dreyfuss, the *Jaws* watch has been identified and captured in archetype. Now mated with the correct period porthole bracelet, it looks exactly like the timepiece worn during the harried Martha's Vineyard filming. But there are certainly other mysteries beckoning to intrepid watch buffs. No one seems to know what company actually designed and manufactured the innovative *Jaws* watch, sold it under many names, then allowed it to lapse into obscurity. Did the little known Alstater Watch Company actually engineer the impressive Nautoscaph? Did another factory develop the entire design and sell it as a private-label piece to any wholesaler ready to order 50 of them?

But those are hunts for another day. Tonight, they're running *The Shawshank Redemption* on TV, commercial-free. And attention must be paid. ○

Gary and Christian Stock are brother watch aficionados who also share a background in computer science and film lore. Technical analysis and watch photography are by Stephen Hammersley, www.villagewatchmaker.com.

