

Two Early Japanese Collector Periodicals Paved a Path for BANZAI

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Did you know that BANZAI was preceded by two very similar publications in the early 1970s? Have you ever heard of the Japanese Military Collector Quarterly or the Nippon Militaria? Not many current Japanese militaria collectors are aware of these two pioneering periodicals which paved a path for the future success of BANZAI.

Collector information-sharing in the 1970s consisted of expensive long-distance telephone calls and slow written mail between individuals. There were no quick information access pathways available like we enjoy today. Many collectors operated within a very limited correspondence sphere or within a void all by themselves. The Japanese Military Collector Quarterly and the Nippon Militaria changed those limitations and provided a link and a forum for collectors from across the United States to exchange information.

There was very little public information available in the early 1970s for the study of Japanese military collectibles. A very few and sporadic gun magazine articles on Japanese military firearms items appeared in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Japanese military firearms collectors were lucky to just run across related articles in *American Rifleman*, *Gun Digest*, *Guns & Ammo*, *Guns Magazine*, and like publications. The only available firearms book was Fred Leithe's Japanese Hand Guns published in 1968. Even less information was available in print on non-firearms Japanese militaria items.

The information void began to fill in early 1971 when the Japanese Military Collector Quarterly (JMCQ) appeared as a collective effort of Frank A. Knapp (Rochester, NY) and William Kotrba, Jr. (Lebanon, CT). For the first time, Japanese militaria hobbyists were provided the means to collectively exchange information on a variety of Japanese militaria-related topics, learn intricacies about specific items, share their own knowledge, and buy and sell collectibles. Each issue of the JMCQ featured 18 to 20 pages of short articles on various Japanese military collectibles and some want ads. A subscription cost \$6 per year for four issues, and the want ads were free. The arrival every three months of the JMCQ was eagerly awaited, as a very wide range of subject matter items were covered, and almost all of the information was new. Like BANZAI, member-submitted articles were the mainstay of the publication. And, also like BANZAI, publication of the JMCQ took dedicated effort. In a 1971 letter to my father, Mike Larkin, Frank Knapp commented, "I hope all this effort proves worthwhile as Bill and I are about breaking even at present, but I get a lot of satisfaction in putting out something I feel was needed for quite a while in the Jap collecting field." He further added in the letter, "We hope to get enough info out before the fast buck guys and the wild story tellers ruin a fine hobby as happened in the Nazi field."

JMCQ lasted a short six issues, and it ceased publication in mid-1972. The heavy work load of publication and health issues were cited by the authors in their cancellation notice as the reasons for JMCQ's demise. In that final notice, Frank Knapp and Bill Kotrba announced "a final

contribution of the J. M. C. to Japanese collectors” – they obtained a ruling from the Treasury Department designating all Type 14 Nambu pistols as Curios and Relics. The final sentence in their cancellation notice eloquently expressed Frank’s and Bill’s determination in support of our hobby – “We hope the field of Japanese military collecting will continue to grow, and that we have served some small way in opening up new interest.”

In a January 1973 letter to Mike Larkin, Bill Kotrba lamented, “I seriously feel that a venture like JMCQ cannot get along without active participation by subscribers. Even if we didn’t fold this year, we would have certainly run out of things to talk about within a year. Very few people were willing to help out.” His comments prophesied some of the future problems to come with the Nippon Militaria, and, to a certain extent, with some of the future issues pertaining to the publication of BANZAI. Bill Kotrba further advised that he was going to “try out a few of my ideas.” Shortly thereafter, he offered his “Japanese Military Collectors Directory” for sale. In it was listed the contact information for 206 persons interested in Japanese militaria collectibles. This publication enabled Japanese military collectors to directly communicate with each other. He also had plans for “a monthly classified ad-type newspaper that will only accept advertising pertaining to Jap Military collecting” and “a Price Guide to Japanese Military Relics.” Bill actually tried to publish the ad newspaper, but it folded before the first issue. The “price guide” was subsequently published in the Nippon Militaria in 1975.

After the demise of the JMCQ, Japanese militaria collectible information availability began to expand. John C. Van Lund’s Japanese Military Handguns and Holsters (1972) and Tadao Nakata’s Imperial Japanese Army and Navy Uniforms & Equipment (1973) appeared. With additional Japanese firearms articles in gun magazines, interest in Japanese militaria collecting appeared to be increasing.

In December 1974, Bill Kotrba, introduced the Nippon Militaria, subtitled “The Japanese Military Collectors Journal.” Also published quarterly and costing \$6 per year, the Nippon Militaria (NM) carried-forward the pioneering efforts of the JMCQ. Each issue contained up to 20 pages of short articles on Japanese militaria, editorials/letters to the editor, drawings, images, want ads, and more. Essentially, it was the JMCQ with another name. It was also fraught with the same problems as was the JMCQ. In a July 1975 letter to Mike Larkin, Bill Kotrba stated, “We thought that interest in ‘Jap Militaria’ had increased since J.M.C.Q. days, and that members would sign up new members etc. Such has not been the case and our membership is smaller now than it was 3 yrs. ago.” (Note: There were 130 subscribers to the NM in 1975.) “Nippon Militaria was started for a 2 yr. trial period, if things have not improved by the time we’ve put out issue #8 I’m afraid Nippon Militaria will cease to exist.” He added, “It takes approx. 100 hrs. per issue from start to mailing, so one years issues consume 400 hrs. of labor. Considering our first years profit of \$50-\$60, it comes to around 15 cents per hour, thank God my wife is typing free!!”

The NM lasted through its eighth issue in September 1976. Bill Kotrba’s cancellation notice stated the primary reason for the demise of the NM was financial due to a 40% decline in membership. He noted, the “Nippon Militaria has always been a ‘labor of love’ and never achieved a following large enough to turn it into a profitable venture. We were quite happy running the newsletter on a break-even basis, but with this large drop in membership, it is quite

obvious that at the present level, we will end the coming year with a loss which we are unwilling to absorb.” He ended the notice with the statement, “We’d like to take this opportunity to thank all of the fine people we’ve met through our association with Nippon Militaria and for their interest and continued support over the years.”

Like BANZAI to follow, the JMCQ and the NM were not just “newsletters.” They fostered growth in our hobby. Bill Kotrba’s 1973 “directory” helped collectors communicate independently. The initial December 1974 NM issue listed five “purposes” to guide the publication: (1) to “keep the collector informed of recent findings,” (2) to “bring collectors together and provide them with a common voice,” (3) to “stimulate new and individual research in the field, encourage correspondence, and a fraternal relationship,” (4) to “keep the collector informed of the value of various Japanese Military relics,” and (5) to “keep [collectors] informed of fakes, and other questionable items circulating in collector circles.” Both the JMCQ and the NM served those purposes well (as does BANZAI, today). The NM “price guides” published in December 1975 for rifles, pistols, and accessories provided a value benchmark which collectors followed for many years. Each issue was eagerly awaited for new information about various Japanese militaria collectibles.

In the later 1970s and early 1980s following the demise of the JMCQ and the NM, a few more gun magazine articles on Japanese militaria were published. As before, collectors were lucky to find them. The outstanding Military Rifles of Japan by Fred Honeycutt, Jr. and F. Patt Anthony (1977), and the two outstanding pistol books by Harry Derby, The Hand Cannons of Imperial Japan (1981) and Fred Honeycutt, Jr., Military Pistols of Japan (1982), were a huge positive impact on Japanese firearms and accoutrements collecting. But, while new information was forthcoming, there was no available forum for collectors to share information; it was back to relying solely on telephone calls, letters, and chance meetings.

It took almost six years for the void to fill. Don Harper took the baton from Frank Knapp and Bill Kotrba to publish the first BANZAI in April 1982. During those intervening years, general Japanese militaria collector knowledge suffered, as there was no venue through which individual collectors could share information. BANZAI changed that trend and has continued the legacy of the JMCQ and the NM – But, not without difficulty. It should be noted that BANZAI has, at times, also experienced many of the same pitfalls encountered by the JMCQ and the NM (relatively few subscribers, lack of article submissions, etc.). The fact the BANZAI has persevered for over 25 years is a testament to the increased support provided by subscribers and to the hard work and dedication of Don Harper, Kathleen Harper, and Doss and Ruth White.

Together, the Japanese Military Collector Quarterly and the Nippon Militaria helped lay the groundwork for the great expansion of research and knowledge we enjoy today in the field of Japanese military collecting. Our hobby has grown and prospered through the subsequent efforts of BANZAI and individual authors. Today’s information technology provides other interactive venues and allows collectors to share information in real-time. This information explosion has resulted in a huge expansion of our collectibles knowledge. But, it was the pioneering efforts of Frank Knapp and Bill Kotrba which helped foster early growth in the Japanese militaria collecting fraternity. For that early work, we all owe them a debt of gratitude.