

## Casio F-91W

*“Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun.*

*Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-eight million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.*

*This planet has - or rather had - a problem, which was this: most of the people on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.*

*And so the problem remained; lots of the people were mean, and most of them were miserable, even the ones with digital watches.”*

– Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)

Casio launched its first digital watch, the Casiotron, in 1974, and apparently perfected it 17 years later with the F-91W.

Introduced in 1991 and still available globally today, the Casio F-91W is what many envisage when asked to think of a classic digital watch; square, 3 buttons on the sides, date view, stopwatch, alarm and hourly “beep”.

Powered by a single button cell, Casio claim that it will function for 7 years between changes (assuming 20 seconds of alarm and one second of light usage per day).

It may not be the most accurate timepiece ( $\pm 30$  seconds per month) and does not have an automatic leap year adjustment, but at £6.99 at Argos, it's very difficult to justify purchasing a watch marketed on accuracy, many of which retail at hundreds of times its price.

Despite its relatively low cost, fakes and close imitations are widespread, a problem usually experienced by luxury brands, probably owing to its recognisability, reputation and known reliability. Of course, Casio anticipated this, and on a genuine F-91W the word “CASIO” should appear on the display when the bottom right button is held for more than 3 seconds.

Cheap enough to be regarded as disposable, light enough so not to impose on the wearer, yet water resistant and robust enough to take the all but the harshest beating. It has gained fans in some unlikely places.



You might think that the most malicious aspect of a watch might be its contribution towards the increasing disruption of sleep cycles and seasonal affective disorder, and that this is a small price to pay for being able to quickly view the time. But perhaps this watch is more sinister than it first appears.

Since the early 2000's U.S authorities have used the possession of this model of watch as evidence of involvement in terrorist activities.

In numerous Joint Task Force Guantanamo detainee assessments it is declared that the Casio F-91W is "the sign of al-Qaida".

Indeed, a disproportionate number of suspects have been found to have an F-91W in their possession, and there are several widely available images of known al-Qaida members (including their founder Osama Bin Laden) wearing the model.

Could it be that the link between the F-91W and acts of terror is causal? Perhaps it is now those with digital watches who are especially unhappy, mean and miserable.

It would of course be obtuse to just label this as profiling and ignore the recovered Improvised Explosive Devices that utilise an F-91W as part of its timing mechanism, or the accounts of students at explosives training camps being provided with this watch, but at the same time it must be taken into account that this particular model is abundant, and can be found from high street jewellers to middle eastern markets, and has been for over 20 years.

As well as its apparent widespread use among Islamist bomb makers, the F-91W and similar Casio watches are among those favoured by armed forces around the world, with sterling reviews, recommendations and tales of its apparent indestructability and camaraderie around common ownership. Indeed even the guards at Guantanamo Bay were observed wearing it.

In the less militant population the watch is still widely used, presumably mostly stalwarts still in possession of their old favourites and new owners who just want a simple, non-intrusive timepiece. Strangely, and perhaps owing to its popularity in the 90's, the product has seen some resurgence through rearwards looking fashion trends and nostalgic revivalism, indeed on the Casio website it is found as part of the "Retro" collection. In recent years has been made available in fluorescent colours much less likely to be worn alongside olive drab or camouflage.

In a way, the F-91W could be regarded as the Toyota Hilux technical, or the AK-47 of the watch world, a brutal endorsement from those requiring an all but bombproof device. But by no means isolated to that environment.

In the Science Museum's making of the modern world exhibit, it occupies a small space in the "Technology in Everyday Life c.1968-2000" showcase surrounded by other "miscellaneous digital watches" to outline the broad availability of mass produced consumer electronics at this time. Perhaps, due to its importance as almost a type specimen for watches of that age, its subsequent ubiquity, and quiet infamy, it at least deserves its own label.

But then, I am sure that the same conclusion that a particular item requires greater importance may be reached by anyone who investigates any of the objects in the exhibition.

I still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.