RESEARCHING IMPERIAL GERMAN
ARMY AND NAVY OFFICERS

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Have you ever held a military item, be it a medal, sword or maybe a uniform and thought, I wonder who this item originally belonged to? Maybe you have an Iron Cross with a name engraved on the back and want to know more about the person. While not common, it is not unusual to have a named sword or dagger. Named pieces are highly sought after and command a premium price in today’s market. There is a growing interest in researching named items. While it is possible to research almost any named military item, I will focus in on Imperial German because of the wealth of original source material. The purpose of this article is to detail the original source material that is available for researching Imperial German army and navy officers, the methods used, and the benefits of research. At the end of this article I will briefly discuss researching Third Reich military officers. Before I delve into source material and methods, let’s discuss the benefits of research.

Research Benefits

While adding value to an item is a benefit of research, it is not the only reason to research a named piece. First and foremost, in my opinion, is the satisfaction of knowing more about the person and, in some instances, putting a face to a name. A second benefit is authentication. Since named items command a premium price, does it not make sense to make sure that the name is authentic and that the person existed? Would you buy a named engraved 1914 Iron Cross first class if you could not confirm that the person existed? What if you were offered a named Imperial German army or navy sword, would you buy it without confirming the name? Researching a named item before handing over your hard earned cash could possibly save you from purchasing a piece that is not authentic and, in some instances, can make a good purchase price look like a bargain. So to add personal satisfaction and to authenticate a name are the primary benefits of researching a named item. But where and how do we start researching a name on an Iron Cross, a sword, a uniform, a document, or almost any other Imperial German military item? Where do we start? With the Imperial German rank lists.

The German Rank Lists

The Imperial German army and navy rank lists were published annually starting before the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The rank lists are in old German type. This is slightly different than English typeset and a translation sheet is available on the Internet. A German rank list is a list of active, reserve and Landwehr (national guard) army or navy officers, by unit. The rank list details an individual officer’s rank, date of rank, and decorations. The rank lists also detail the army organization from army corps down to infantry regiment. Navy rank lists list ships and ships officers as well as the above officer’s details. An officer’s information can be looked up by his unit, if it is known, or by his name through the name index at the back of the rank list. Before we explore what information the rank lists contain, we need to discuss how the German army was organized.

Often the terms “Prussian army” and “German army” are used interchangeably. This is not correct. Although the Prussian army was by far the largest component of the German Army, it was not the only component. The Imperial German Army was comprised of four individual armies that were administered separately, although in time of war the Prussians and German Kaiser commanded the Imperial German Army. The four individual armies were from the German kingdoms of Prussia, Wurttemberg, Saxony, and Bavaria. Why is this important? Since each kingdom had its own army, which was subordinate to the Prussian Army and Kaiser, and since each kingdom administered its individual army, then each army published a rank list for its own officers! For any given year there are five rank lists; Prussian, Wurttemberg, Saxon, Bavarian, and Navy! Luckily, after 1894, the Wurttemberg rank list is published with the Prussian rank list, although Wurttemberg did continue to publish its own rank list. The Bavarian rank list is titled, not rank list, but Bavarian Militar-Handbuch. The formal German title for each rank list is listed below. For the sake of brevity I will refer to each book as a rank list.

Rangliste der Königlich Prussischen Armee und des XIII. (Königlich Wurttemberg) ArmeeKorps

Rangliste der Kaiserlich Deutschen Marine

Militar-Handbuch des Königreich Bayern

Rangliste der Königlich Sachsen Armee

Now we can take a look at what information is in the rank lists.
You would think that each rank list contains the same information, but this would be an incorrect assumption. While the basic information contained in the rank lists published by each Kingdom is essentially the same, the information does vary. Let’s first explore the Prussian Army rank lists. Figure 1 is a sample page from the 1914 Prussian Army Ranklist for the 3. Thüringen Infantry Regiment Nr. 71. The 3 designates that this is the 3rd Thuringen Infantry Regiment and their Prussian Regimental designation is Nr. 71. Underneath the regimental name is information about where the battalions are located and to the right of this is information as to which Brigade, Division, and Corps the regiment is part of. For IR 71, we see it is part of the 76 Infantry Brigade; with IR 95, both are in the 38th Division, which is part of the XI Army Corps. If we look closer at the page we see that the Regimental Chef is General der Kav Gunter, Prince of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt and Sondershausen, we see that the commander of IR71 was Oberst von During. If we were researching a Major Klemme, we see his entry about halfway down and on the left. The date to the far right of his name is his date of rank of December 18, 1913. The numbers and letters, B ST, next to the date of rank, denote where he resides within his rank class. In other words, his seniority compared to other majors in the Prussian army. To the right of the Klemme’s name we notice three symbols. These symbols, which are listed in the Orders Section of the rank list, are Major Klemme’s decorations. They are the Red Eagle Order 4th Class, Prussian Crown Order 4th Class, and 25-year long service cross. If Major Klemme has a 25-year long service cross in 1913, then he entered the army about 1888. He therefore received the Kaiser Centennial medal in 1897. Why is it not listed with his other decorations? Alas, the Prussian rank lists do not list all of an officer’s decorations, nor do they give his first name. The decorations listed are his German and foreign awards. Among the awards not listed are campaign medals, i.e. 1870 Medal, Southwest Africa, or China Medal. I do not know why this is the case. There are other source materials to try and determine an officer’s first name and other decorations, which will be discussed.

Figure 2: Sample page from the 1914 German Navy rank list.

Let’s now take a look at the German Navy rank lists. Figures 2 and 3 are pages from the 1914 Navy rank list. The first part of the Navy rank list is a list of all ships and ships’ officers. The second part lists the officers in
order of rank. If we look at Figure 2, we see a list of ships' officers for the SM Kanonboat Panther. The commander of the Panther is KorvettenKapitan Fortsch. Also listed are the other ships' officers for the Panther.

The Navy rank list entries are extensive, but they are not complete. Like the Prussian rank list, they do not list all of the officers' decorations and omit his campaign medals. You will notice that KorvettenKapitan Fortsch and Major Klemme were both awarded the Red Eagle Order 4th Class and that the award is represented by a symbol.

For more information about KorvettenKapitan Fortsch we need to see his rank list entry in Figure 3. The first column lists the officer's name and decorations; the second column lists his duty station of N (Nordsee) or O (Ostsee); the third column dates when he entered service; the fourth column is the sea service time - 12 years and 3 months; the fifth column is the date of patent (promotion date); and the last column is his current assignment. Again we will notice his decorations are represented by symbols and also letters. You will notice in Figures 2 and 3 that some of the listings for officers do provide a first name. A navy officer's first name may be listed with his ship entry, rank list entry, in the name index, or not at all.

9. Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 133.

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