DANISH WAR MEDALS FOR
THE WARS OF 1848-1850 AND 1864

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Introduction

The purposes of this article are threefold. First, it is hoped that the low cost of two out of three of these medals, $63.25 for an 1864 War Medal and $113.00 for an 1848-1850 War Medal will show individuals of all ages that are thinking about becoming a collector of medals that it is possible to be a collector without being wealthy. Second, that medal collecting does not require the purchase of many medals to be an educational and enjoyable hobby. Third and finally, that the collecting of a single or several medals can lead to an education in history, the artists that design, engrave and produce medals, and the national culture of the past and its effects on the present. For example, The Danish War Medals of 1848-1850, 1864 and the combined medal for 1848-1850 and 1864 (see the photos of the three medals) are historically intriguing for many reasons. First, these medals were all issued in 1877, 27 years after the first war and thirteen years after the second war! Second, these medals were all designed and manufactured in Paris, France rather than in Denmark. Third, the medals were issued only to surviving veterans. Next of kin did not receive medals for their fallen loved ones. Fourth, there were only a limited number ever struck. Fifth, the medals were issued for service rather than victory as the first war ended in stalemate, while the last war ended in complete defeat for Denmark. Finally, both wars were fought for the same reasons.

Historical Background

Denmark is a small, nation located north of Germany on the European continent and it has the boundaries of the North Sea to the west and north and the Baltic Sea to the east. Denmark traces its roots back to the Viking Danes and this nation is culturally a part of the Scandinavia.

The Danish War Medals of 1848-1850, 1864 and the combined medal for 1848-1850 and 1864 were, curiously enough, not instituted until June 26, 1875 and not issued until 1877, a full 29 and 13 years after the wars! The 1848-1850 war was viewed as a victory by the Danish who managed to suppress a rebellion and hold off the combined armies of Prussia and the German Confederation. The War of 1864 was fought and ended in 1864 but resulted in a major defeat for Denmark and King Christian IX. The Danish defeat and the subsequent political finger pointing by politicians and the military may have been the reason why the medals for the 1848-1850 and 1864 wars were not created earlier. However, Danish veterans of the wars, who had undergone great hardship in combat, faced an overwhelmingly modernized enemy force in both wars, and the bitter winter weather conditions in the last war, petitioned the Parliament and King Christian IX for the creation and issuance of medals to commemorate their wars. The Danish War medals were issued only once in 1877 to all officer, sailor and army veterans who were still alive. Next of kin were not issued medals! Officers, sailors and soldiers of mobilized and standing units had to write a letter requesting the medal to be issued to them for their service in the war or wars. Once a request letter was received by the Ministry of War an application form was sent to the veteran for completion. There was no service time requirement, all a serviceman had to do was to provide his name, rank and unit assigned to during the war. The letters of the officers, sailors and soldiers still survive in the Danish archives and have been used to conduct studies of writing abilities and educational levels among different Danish social classes.

The War of 1848-1850

The War of 1848-1850 or the First Schleswig War was caused by rising German and Danish nationalism. Danish nationalists wanted the King of Denmark to formally take the three duchies, Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg, for which the King of Denmark was Duke and incorporate them into the Danish Kingdom. German nationalists wanted to have the three duchies join the German Confederation because the duchies were predominantly German in population, customs and language. Danish nationalists, the King of Denmark and the Danish government in Copenhagen felt a good compromise to this conflict would be to allow Holstein and Lauenburg to join the German Confederation while Schleswig with its many ethnic Danes would join the Danish Kingdom. German nationalists of the three duchies stated that the Danish compromise was unacceptable as all past agreements stated that the duchies would not be separated (a position that was not true according to subsequent research).

All that remained to be done was to strike a spark and war would erupt. From March 21-24, 1848 there were
demonstrations in Copenhagen by Danish citizens demanding the adoption of a liberal constitution. King Frederik VII accepted the new constitution that had a clause incorporating Schleswig into Denmark. The unrest in Copenhagen combined with the clause to incorporate Schleswig were the sparks that led to an uprising by the three duchies. The German nationalists centered in the city of Kiel proclaimed a provisional government, an act of rebellion. In addition, Schleswig-Holstein's prince, Prince Frederik Noer led a Lauenburg military unit and Kiel students to the fortress of Rendsburg with the intention of taking over the fort with its military garrison and vital stores of ammunition. The Prince entered the open doors of the fort, and after speaking to the men of the Schleswig-Holstein units convinced them to join the German nationalist cause. In one swift action Prince Frederik Noer had taken all the military stores and units for all of Schleswig-Holstein without firing a shot. However, the consequence of the Prince's action was war.

The first battle of the war took place on April 9, 1848 at Bov, and it was a Danish victory over the Schleswig-Holstein forces, who had occupied the city of Flensborg. General Krohn and Prince Noer were defeated and forced to withdraw south where they waited for the forces from Prussia and the German Confederation to join them. The war would now become an “on again, off again war” with summer campaigns that saw battles won by both sides followed by winter truces. The winter truces became a time when the European major powers, like Great Britain, France and Russia, tried to negotiate an end to the war. The Great Powers pressured Prussia and the German Confederation to end the war so that the political system before the war would be restored.

The battles of the war were usually on a small scale and many were considered large skirmishes. Except for one cavalry action at Fredericia in 1849, the battles took place between Dybbol and Mysunde, a very small area in Schleswig. Some battles took place two or three times in the same place as both sides seemed unable to deliver a knock-out blow to the other. Some of the battles (Figure 1) were:

1848  
Battle of Bov  
Battle of Mysunde  
Battle of Oeversee  
Battle of Dybbol (twice)

1849  
Battle of Dybbol  
Battle of Vejby  
Battle of Heligoland (naval)  
Battle of Fredericia

Naval engagements were limited as the Royal Danish Navy dominated the North and Baltic seas. The Germans had only a small, one year-old “fleet” which the Danish blockaded. The only naval engagement was called the Battle of Heligoland, June 4, 1849, when German vessels ventured out of the Weser River to disperse the Danish blockade ships. An inconclusive exchange of fire took place and the Danish Navy again forced the German Navy back to port, blockaded.

The Danish strategy was to hold the Schleswig-Holstein, Prussian and German Confederation forces to a standoff while the Great Powers hopefully would intervene and end the war, allowing Denmark hold its possessions. Denmark also hoped to receive aid in the form of supplies and troops from the Scandinavian nations. Only Sweden provided troops and material at the very start of the war. The German strategy was to take the three duchies by defeating Denmark.

Finally, on July 2, 1850 Denmark and Prussia signed a peace treaty in Berlin that restored both countries to their original rights before the war. The Danish King then ordered the Danish troops into Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg to restore Danish authority. The Schleswig-
Holstein forces, without the Prussian and German Confederation support, crumbled and from July 2 to November 24, 1850 lost every battle. Denmark restored its control over the duchies and won the war. On August 2, 1850 there was also the signing of the London Protocol by all belligerents and the Great Powers, which restored the rights of all before the war started. The only problem with the two peace agreements is the fact that neither addressed nor solved the cause of The First Schleswig War. The issue remained that the predominantly German duchies of Holstein and Lauenburg wished to be part of the German Confederation as did many of the Schleswigians. Danish troops in 1850 marched victoriously through Copenhagen but were not rewarded with a war medal.

The War of 1864

Research has revealed that this war was variously named: The War of 1864, The Danish War of 1864, the Second Schleswig War, The Prussian Danish War, and The German Danish War to name a few. This war, like all wars, had a number of causes and principal among them was the desire of Prussia to incorporate the duchies of Holstein, Schleswig and Lauenburg into Prussia (Figure 2). Prussia viewed the incorporation of these duchies, which were linguistically and predominantly German, as part of a first step in bringing forth a unified German nation with Prussia as the leading Germanic force, not Austria. After the first war (1848-1850) over these duchies was concluded Denmark agreed to not incorporate Schleswig into the Danish Kingdom and in turn the Danish King would retain his rights as Duke of the three duchies. The three duchies would have the right to join the German Confederation, which Holstein and Lauenburg did. These treaty provisions were honored from 1850 until November 18, 1863 when Denmark’s new King, Christian IX was presented with a new constitution drafted by the Danish Parliament. The new constitution contained a clause making the duchy of Schleswig a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, a clear violation of the Treaty of 1851 that ended the First Schleswig War. With great reservations, King Christian IX signed the new constitution. The immediate reaction of the German Confederation, encouraged by the Prussian Prime Minister Otto Von Bismarck, was to send German Confederation troops into Holstein and Lauenburg on December 24, 1863. Prussian Prime Minister Bismarck recognized the opportunity presented by Denmark’s actions and now Bismarck would put Prussia as the leader of the Germanic forces and people, while at the same time diminishing Austria’s hope to be the leader of the German people.

The Danish army retreated away from the advancing German Confederation forces to take up positions at their traditional defensive line called Danevirke (Figure 3). The Danevirke line was legendary among the Danes as this fortified line had historically held back all German invading forces in the past and right up to the war of 1848-1850. From December 24, 1863, until February 1, 1864, there was no fighting between the Danish forces on one side and the Prussian, Austrian and German Confederation forces on the other.

The strategy of Prime Minister Otto Von Bismarck and Prussia was simple. Unleash Prussia’s modern mobile army to lead German forces to seize Schleswig and defeat the Danish army in a fast war. The Danish strategy would be the same successful strategy that had worked during the First Schleswig War of 1848-1850: to hold the Danevirke line and create a military stalemate, which would lead to the intervention of the major European powers to