

The 17th Totenkopf (Death Head) Hussars

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Photos by the authors

"The pride of the Kaiser, respect of the people, and feared by the enemy", these words were written by a young woman in Braunschweig in 1907. These comments were entered in her diary after watching a gala parade of the 17th Hussar Regiment prior to their participation in the Kaiser maneuvers of 1907. The 17th Hussars, one of the most colorful of all Imperial German regiments, possessed a fierce pride in their regimental history which permeated into their insignia, uniforms and eventual decor on their regimental beer steins.

The regiment was established on 1 April 1809 in Braunau through the efforts of Duke Friedrich Wilhelm of Braunschweig, Luneburg and Ols. Its first name, the "Black Troop" (which originated from the color of their uniform), was gained during the period May through August 1809. During this time, they made their historic march from Braunau through Saxony, to Braunschweig and on to Oldenberg. The Black Troop then fought to liberate German ground from Napoleon's occupation. As the French armies swept through all of Europe, the regiment allied itself with the English military forces where they were evacuated to, and quartered on, the Island of Wright and later at Cork, Ireland. There, after three years of training, the regiment proceeded on 25 December 1812, to the east coast of Spain where it served under the command of Wellington. In the last stages of the war, the regiment returned to Germany and participated in the assaults against Beabant, the Battle of Quatrebras (16 June 1815), the Battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815) and on to their triumphal arrival in Paris (2 July 1815).

The regiment fought with Prussia in 1849 in Schleswig-Holstein; against Austria in 1866 and against France in the 1870-71 War of Liberation where they distinguished themselves and were recognized for significant victories including their most successful attack at Mars-la-Tour on 16 August 1870. It was at this time the regiment was authorized to wear the silver death head insignia on their

black busby (fur covered helmet) along with a ribbon banner which read "Peninsula, Sicilien, Waterloo, Mars-la-Tour" commemorating their most noteworthy campaigns to date. On 18 March 1886, a new military convention between Braunschweig and Prussia was concluded and in accordance with its terms, the regiment was officially named the "Braunschweig Hussar Regiment No. 17, Death Head Hussars" where the number 17 referred to the regiments standing in the unified Prussian military order. This incorporation with Prussia resulted in the utilization of new equipment, weapons, and uniform decor in the Prussian style although the regiment was permitted to retain its unique skull and crossbones insignia.

With the advent of WWI on 1 August 1914, the entire German Armed Forces were mobilized, both on land and sea, which included the 17th Braunschweig Hussar Regiment. Within seven days, the regiment was fully mobilized, in the field and was once again on the march against their hereditary enemy — the French. They participated in various battles which included the Marne, Lille and Laon on the western front; Gorlice, Tarnow, Galicia, Over Brest-Litvosk and on to the Pripet marshes on the eastern front. The 17th also served as divisional message center, provided support to machine gun troops and conducted intelligence gathering patrols. With the armistice in 1918, the 17th returned to their home in Braunschweig and in the following years became active in Freikorps activities and became additionally known as "Volunteer Squadron Krossa". The 17th's service continued through the Weimar Republic period and into World War 2 when it was finally disbanded with the surrender of Germany in 1945.

With this rather colorful history, one can easily view a 17th Hussar reservist's stein and appreciate the sense of pride and tradition once reflected by members of the regiment. These reservists, upon completing their tour of duty with the regiment, would select the type, body style and lid decor that they could afford and place their order with the local manufacturer's salesman, usually located in the Kaserne, or in the closest city. Whether the selected stein was in stoneware, pottery, porcelain or

glass, it often contained the skull and crossbones in the body decoration as well as the banner commemorating the battles of "Peninsula, Sicilien, Waterloo, Mars-la-Tour".

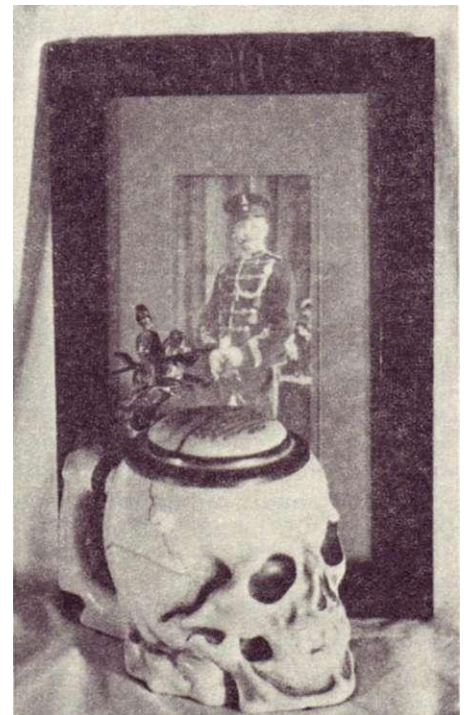


Figure 1 - 17th Hussar skull regimental stein with original framed photo of "Reservist Wiegmann 1908-11", the cap worn in the photo also bears the metal skull and crossed bones.

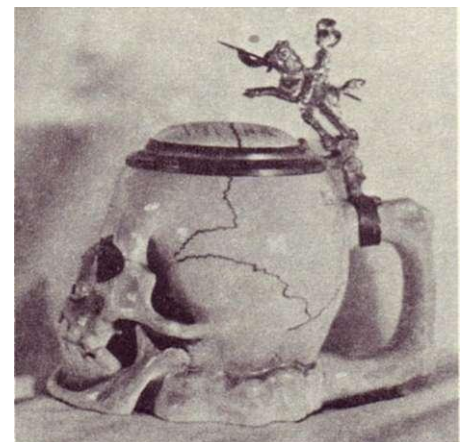


Figure 1a - side view.

Reservist steins of the 17th can be found dated throughout the entire spectrum of German regimental stein production (1870-1918) and in a variety of types. For regimental collectors, the 17th offers an unusual deviation from the standard format and decor found on many steins

produced in the 1900-12 period. It is one of the few regiments that adapted a character-type body style for their regimental steins — the skull (Fig. 1). These skull regimental steins were produced in porcelainlike stoneware in three very similar styles. One being a bit larger than the other two. They were predominantly produced in 1/2L. size and were of reasonably good quality. The basic body style of the skull stein was a standard production item of several firms and were generally produced with plain lids and sold as student (medical) steins. The regimentals were produced using this basic body style with a mounted rider thumblift and the military designations added as special orders. Some examples have been found with a glass viewer inserted in the eye of the pewter horse on the thumblift which contained a miniature photo of the Kaserne or parade ground of the 17th.

The majority of skull steins produced, both regimental and student types, were made to conform to standards and regulations of the period and most will be found with the molded "Made in Germany"



Figure 2 - Scarce porcelain variation with 2 skulls on front panel, dated 1894-97.

mark in the bottom of the stein. This by no means detracts from the value or originality of the stein, but rather indicates that it was from a standard production mold which was also used to produce the popular student stein. The manufacturer would, on special order, use the standard stein body and then add the regimental thumblift, markings and designations. These reservist steins were then sold through the regimental Kaserne to those reservists who were willing to pay for a unique souvenir at the conclusion of their active military service.

Other regimental steins made for the 17th Hussar reservist fall into the more conventional types as illustrated in Figures 2, 3 & 4. Figure 2 is an example of a more unusual porcelain dated "1894-97" to a "Reservist Kallmeier, Braunschweig". It features the mounted Hussar finial, Prussian eagle thumblift and four side panels depicting the reservist's garrison life. The large center panel is flanked by two skulls and crossbones, while most others incorporated only one in the body decoration. Another variation in porcelain is shown in Figure 3 and is dated "1899-1902". This stein has a very unusual, large metal skull and crossbones affixed to the front panel of the stein (Fig. 3a); while Figure 4 dated 1900 to 1903 has basically the same format, but the



Figure 3 - Variation with metal skull & crossed bones affixed to front panel. "1899-01".

Figure 4 - Variation with skull and crossed bones as part of the front panel decoration, "1899-01".

skull and crossbones is an integral part of the body decoration (Fig. 4a).



Figure 3a - Detail view of metal death head insignia affixed to the front panel.

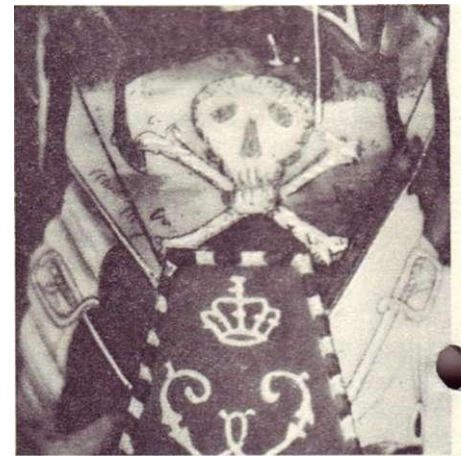


Figure 4a — Detail view of death head as part of the overall panel decoration.

Another variation, made in pottery, is shown in Figure 5. This regimental is dated "1904-07" and is to a "Reservist Hubscher, Braunschweig". It features a mounted Hussar finial and the Prussian eagle thumblift. A glass viewer inserted in the eye of the horse finial contains a miniature photo of the 17th in parade formation. The front panel decor is in relief with crossed flags, the bust of a reservist and a silver horseshoe. This stein is also 1/2 Ltr. and contains two major side panels. The noteworthy feature of this stein, is that there is a large skull and crossbones with the "Peninsula, Sicilien, Waterloo, Mars-la-Tour" ribbon banner behind the handle of the stein. This again was an attempt to incorporate the unique insignia of the 17th as part of the stein decoration and in this case was inserted between the two columns of the squadron roster. Two additional variations of crockery steins have also been noted. The



Figure 5 - Pottery variation dated "1904-07".



Figure 5a - Pottery variation with scarce rear panel showing skull and crossed bones with "Peninsula, Sicilien, Waterloo, Mars-la-Tour" banner ribbon.

thumblift on one was a large pewter skull and crossbones and the stein was dated "1908-10". The other was dated "1909-11" and was made with a large pewter skull finial resting on a pair of crossbones affixed to the top of the pewter lid.

An interesting sidelight to the study of the variations of 17th Hussar regimental steins is the "2140/884 P.U.G. produced by Mettlach and shown in Figure 6. This example, as were all 2140 Mettlach militaries, was made with only one large front panel. The unit designation appears at the top center of the scene. The pewter top is generally a smooth

domed type or in relief (illustrated) with a large panoply of crossed flags, swords, etc. Occasionally, the reservist's name and date of service will be found engraved on the rim ("Reservist Burmann, 1896-98" in this case) which would qualify the stein as meeting the "minimum standards" of a true regimental or 'reservist' stein made for a member of this historic regiment.



Figure 6 - Mettlach #2140 to the 17th Hussar regiment, inscription dated "1896-98".

Steins to the 17th Hussars are uncommon in comparison to other mounted unit regimentals and are often sought after by serious collectors as an example from one of the more colorful regiments active throughout the life of the Imperial German Reich.

Figures 3 & 4 - Mario Pancino Collection
Figures 1, 2, 5 & 6 - Joseph R. Zyla Collection

Regimental questions?

It is requested that any SCI member having specific questions concerning regimental steins or related material please submit them to M. Pancino P.O. Box 345 La Canada, CA 91011. Those questions most frequently asked or deemed to be of universal interest will be compiled and a "Question and Answer" column will occasionally be printed to better serve the interests of all SCI members. A SASE should be included by those requesting individual replies.