

## The Jäger

In the years between 1700 and 1850, most of the soldiers who fought on foot in the service of various German princes carried smooth-bore muskets. Painfully imprecise, these weapons were all but useless to a man who fought alone. However, when employed by the hundreds, they were capable of spitting out thousands of bullets in the course of a minute or two. In the same period, however, a minority of German foot soldiers carried shoulder arms of a very different kind. Close cousins of the exquisitely crafted sporting weapons of the nobility, these rifles enjoyed considerable advantages in the realms of range and accuracy. Thus, at a time when the definitive virtue of ordinary infantrymen was the mindless execution of a small number of well-practiced drills, these *Jäger zu Fuss* ('hunters on foot') were able to fight in the manner of men stalking deer.

In the "cabinet wars" of the eighteenth century, the *Jäger* found much to do on the margins of armies. On the battlefield, they secured features, such as villages and copses, that interrupted the openness upon which the smooth operation of other arms depended. On campaign, they sought to dominate the empty ground between armies. There they gathered intelligence while, at the same time, doing what they could to hamper the ability of the enemy to do the same. Towards the end of this period, when armies proved increasingly reluctant to resort to battle, they played a central role in the struggle of skirmishes and ambushes, posts and patrols, that Germans called the *Kleinkrieg* ('small war'.)

As a rule, *Jäger* were forest dwellers who, whether as poachers, game keepers, or some combination of the two, had learned both rifle marksmanship and woodcraft in civilian life. Starting in 1813, however, the born-and-bred hunters who served the King of Prussia were joined by *Jäger* of an entirely different sort. In that year, which marked the start of the War of Liberation against Napoleon, the Prussian Army authorized men who could afford to pay for their own weapons and uniforms to form volunteer *Jäger* detachments, each of served as both a repository for practitioners of the *Kleinkrieg* and a nursery for junior officers. (The creator of these units, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, believed that service in the 'small war' provided opportunities to experience in miniature all of the essential elements of full-scale battles and campaigns.)

During the long peace that followed the battle of Waterloo, the Kingdom of Prussia preserved the traditional relationship between its *Jäger* battalions and the civilian keepers of game preserves. Indeed, the only men serving in the ranks of such units who had not been trained as game keepers or forest managers were the 'one-year volunteers'. At a time when service in the line infantry was still largely a matter of spit, polish, and close-order drill, these well-educated sons of prosperous families, the most famous of whom was Otto von Bismarck, found it far more congenial to spend their twelve months in uniform learning how to shoot well and fight independently.

## Rifles of the Jäger Battalions

In 1841, the Prussian Army adopted a new type of shoulder arm. While not as capable of long-range precision fire as the muzzle-loading hunting weapons of the *Jäger*, this 'needle gun' was far more accurate than the smoothbore muskets with which the line infantry had been equipped. Better yet, new shoulder arm was loaded from the breach. This meant that it not only enjoyed a faster rate of fire than muzzle-loaded weapons, but could also be loaded by men who were lying down.

In 1854, the Prussian Army adopted a version of the needle gun that had been modified for the use of *Jäger*. Shorter and lighter than the weapons built for the line infantry, this *Jägerbüchse* was the first military rifle to be provided with sights engraved with different ranges. For most practical purposes, however, it differed little from its generic counterpart.

Soon after the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), most of the armies of the freshly-formed German Empire, of which Prussia was the leading state, began to issue a replacement for the needle gun. Designed by the Mauser brothers, this sturdy weapon made use of metallic cartridges, which were easier to load, less likely to misfire, and less effected by weather than the paper cartridges of the needle gun. As before, the ordnance authorities arranged for the custom-tailoring of the basic weapon to the special needs of the *Jäger*. In particular, the *Jägerbüchse* of 1871 featured a pistol grip, a slightly shorter barrel, and reinforcements of those parts of the weapon that were under stress when it was carried in ways that had been customary among the *Jäger* for more than a century.

In 1888, the German armies adopted a rifle that fired metallic cartridges filled with smokeless powder. Thanks to this new propellant, the firing of the rifle produced far less smoke than the discharge of rifles of earlier types. At the same time, bullets propelled by smokeless powder followed trajectories that were considerably flatter than those of projectiles fired by black powder rifles, thereby reducing the frequency with which riflemen needed to adjust their sights. This simplification, in turn, reduced the time it took to convert a recruit into a capable marksman.

In keeping with the spirit of the times, which emphasized uniformity and interchangeability, the rifle of 1888 was an 'all-purpose shoulder arm' (*Einheitsgewehr*.) Thus, the weapons of this type issued to the men of *Jäger* battalions were indistinguishable from those given to the men of infantry units of other types.

## **Karl Freiherr von Plettenberg**

You were born in Neuhaus, in the province of Westphalia, in the Kingdom of Prussia, on 18 December 1852. Your father, Major Eugen Freiherr von Plettenberg, was a career cavalry officer who belonged to a family whose members had held estates in that part of Germany since the twelfth century. Your mother, Minnette von der Borsch, descended from a family of knights who had served various lords in western Germany since the fourteenth century. Both families had strong links to the Teutonic Knights and the German-speaking aristocracy of the Baltic littoral.



**Colonel Karl Freiherr von Plettenberg  
Circa 1900**

In 1864, you entered the cadet school located in the old hunting lodge at Bensburg. In 1870, on the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, you joined, with the rank of *Portepée-Fähnrich* (senior officer candidate) the 53rd Infantry Regiment (5th Westphalian) of the Prussian Army. In the course of the year that followed, you led a platoon, earned the Iron Cross (Second Class) for valor in the field and, six days before your eighteenth birthday, were promoted to the rank of second lieutenant.

In 1875, you matriculated at the War Academy in Berlin. While you completed all three years of that very demanding course, you failed to qualify for service with the General Staff. Instead, you were assigned to the most prestigious infantry regiment in the German Army of the time, the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards. In 1890, after twelve years with that regiment, you accepted a secondment to the 7th (Westphalian) *Jäger* Battalion. In 1891, you took command of that unit, which was stationed in Bückeberg, not far from the places where you spent your youth.

In 1894, you returned to Berlin to take command of the senior light infantry unit of the Prussian Army, the Guard *Jäger* Battalion. After four years in that position, you took command of the 1st Foot Guards. (While in command of the 1st Foot Guards, you also served as *aide-de-camp* to William II, King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany.)