The Enigma of the Teutonic (Livonian) Helmet



By Cliff Repicky 05302018

Everyone has seen them, from figurines and gaming, to artistic renditions, and it's a given that it will come up in a conversation involving the Teutonic Order, or medieval helmets, it's the winged helmet. The question is, did it(they) exist, and where might it have come from? Can we so readily discount the images of movies and more modern artwork?

The following is what I would call a plausibility study.

Ornamented helmets are nothing new in the history of helmet design, and neither is the fact that helmets with attachments/ornamentation (Helmzier in German) were employed during combat activities, be they staged (jousts & combat pageants), or real world struggles. One need only look at ancient Egypt, Greece, the Far East, or Rome for examples. In more contemporary times, we can find German helmets of the Great War, or US military designs of the Cold War OPFOR helm, or even today's ACH with NVG/camera attachments. The use of papier-mâché, light woods and leather historically, increased their maneuverability and offered a "break away" option should they be struck, grabbed, or harnessed in combat. (*Refer to Image Gallery A*)

The enigma of the Teutonic (Livonian) winged/horned helmet comes at us from a couple different directions.

The first is that it is unwieldy and not combat functional/plausible:

Experienced combatants will attest that, it's not a matter of unwieldiness of design based on the various attachments and their placements (although placement has an effect and will be addressed later; but more a matter of what one trains with, thus making them comfortable with its employment and possible limitations. The use of padding (one wanted to limit the effects of blunt force to the wearer's head) and chin straps help prevent a lot of excessive movement, and when done properly help to negate a lot of the unwieldy feeling (try wearing a helmet with an NVG [Night Vision Goggles] attached on the front for the first time, you'll see what I mean.) Also note that modern devices mounted to helmets tend to be mounted in the front affecting wear as weight is forward, but the horns and wings in question, appear to be mounted on the sides, in line and balanced with the helm's center of gravity. (*Refer to Image Gallery B*)

Readers should also remember that its myth tends to center on the Teutonic Order of the XIII-XIV centuries. These warriors were trained to fight from horseback. The initial weapon employed by them would have been the primary weapon of all mounted medieval Christian knights of the age, the lance. As can be seen in many effigies and paintings from an even later age (helmet ornamentation was quite popular in Germany, based on frequency of images, see *Helmzier* above), the employment of such a helm was quite popular during jousts and ceremonial pageantry.

Christopher Gravett (assistant curator of armour at the Tower Armouries, specializing in the arms and armour of the medieval world) points out in his studies, that crested helmets remained in use on the battlefield longer with the Germans than in other countries.

This fact brings up two points: (1) this style of helmet can be employed during a mounted engagement, often several times (implying that it was seated well, and did not deter the wearer from making more combat approaches against an opponent. The second (2), stemming from the pageantry aspect, is that it served to identify the wearer. From a combat perspective, this would serve a similar purpose as a unit's banner, you could even reference the Knights Templar's Beauséant and its purpose during combat. The Knights Templar's Rule had statutes discussed how the Marshal would designate one brother to hold the banner, which he must not lower, for fear of being punished. It was mounted on a lance. This being said, it makes one lance, and one man combat ineffective as he holds it upright for others to see. He can't lower it to fight. Now, the Teutonic Order, or more specifically the Livonian Order, could have solved that issue with the helms. The wearer's hands are free for the demands of war (reigns, shield, lance, sword or other) for which God trained them for. No useless brethren in a melee. *(Refer to Image Gallery C)*

The second direction of the argument is that it never existed in the Teutonic Order due to no graphic evidence. This is technically false, as the Order's Master on several occasions commissioned artwork that shows helms with ornamentation (horns, antlers, etc.): (*Refer to Image Gallery D*)

Sergei Eisenstein* brought the ornamented helmet to visual prominence for the "modern day" audience, with his production of the 1938 movie Alexander Nevsky that focuses on the Battle of Lake Peipus in 1242, a defeat of the German crusaders at the time (We'll look at some missing details of this in a bit). In it, the senior knights/princes of the "Teutonic Order" (It was actually the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order) wear a full spectrum of elaborately decorated great helms. The anti-winged helm crowd will first point out that this production was a propaganda creation, designed to show the Germans as "monsters". I'll be the first to agree there, but let's take a look at that logic in more detail for a moment. (*Refer to Image Gallery E*)

Teutonic Order researcher Jonathan Hodge (author of the detailed work: Teutonic Portrayal Foundations - The Environment of Teutonic Prussia) points out that:

Eisenstein, though somewhat strange as viewed by his contemporaries, was well studied in historical art and was a polyglot, both speaking and reading in German. He was definitely familiar with German history, art, and culture. Eisenstein's goal was clearly to make the knights appear as quintessentially German and Christian as possible. So, even in the 1930s historians, and probably the Russian cultural memory, saw the knights with those helmets (it's interesting to note that the current official website of the Order shows Teutonic Knights with helmet ornamentation. <u>See link</u>).

Based on a number of effigies displaying horns, and two surviving frescoes from different churches in Russian Kaliningrad (formerly Teutonic Konigsberg) also depicting horned helms, it seems likely that the Russian cultural memory saw these things as German. How else could Eisenstein have chosen that to represent them as quintessentially German if his people didn't already recognize that element? Most significant contact between early Russians (Rus) and medieval Germans was the Order.

If on the other hand, Sergei Eisenstein's intent was to use their likeness to portray the Germans as monsters (*a Baltic Boogeyman*), then he was addressing a psychological/mental aspect that all folks have. Much like the applications later seen in Dracula or Friday the 13th movies, graphic images that touch a part of a target audience's mind, designed to trigger the flight or fight response.

Now let's for a moment visit the pagan villagers of Northern Europe at the time of this enigma (mid XIII cen). They lived in wooden dwellings, making a living by farming the land, fishing, or hunting. They worshipped the old ways, Deities tied to what they knew; the sun, crops, woodlands, etc. Now out of the fog comes riding (on possibly a large ghostly apparition-based on trappings his mount might be wearing), an apparition that is larger/taller (due to his mounted position), wearing clothing and armor that was probably new to their knowledge (and white for that matter....remind me of what color ghosts are in most regions of the world), with their faces hidden, now that helm and its design is being employed as a psychological weapon. *(Refer to Image Gallery F)* In Alan V. Murray's work; The Sword Brothers at War: Observations on the Military Activity of the Knighthood of Christ in the Conquest of Livonia and Estonia (1203–1227), we see that the Order wasn't beyond employing psychological warfare to counter pagan numerical superiority on a battlefield.

Now we can quickly revisit the first point;

Our helm wearer is mounted and engaging dismounted targets (Plausibility of use in dismounted combat can be seen in both SCA and BN/Bohurt activities). (*Refer to Image Gallery G*)

Targets are lower than his helm while sitting in the saddle. We've seen that he can employ a lance against another opponent. After initial contact, he's at liberty to circle around for another pass (rearming if necessary from a group of armed attendants), or employ a secondary weapon of his choosing; sword, mace, or axe. Can you imagine the chaos of these simple pagans on foot after the impact of several to many densely formed armored riders (Shock & Awe)? Now we have crusaders chasing fleeing targets in several directions, and after a while, they'll want to reform and prepare for follow on operations. If by chance the initial contact turned into general melee, then separated units could rally around those they recognize, because they could see them above the scrum and from a distance.

Now to answer where Sergei Eisenstein might have gotten his inspiration from. From all accounts, he probably got his inspiration from the Codex Manesse, a Geman book of songs/poetry produced for the most part in the early XIV century, although there are several other examples from the period as well, but he mustn't forget as Mr Jonathan Hodge points out, he was very familiar with Germanic culture.

In it we find an individual identified as Tannhäuser who was a German lyric poet and singer. Details of his biography are obscure beyond the poetry (plausibility avenue), which dates between 1245 and 1265. It's believed he shared familial lineage with the old nobles, the Lords of Thannhausen, who held castles at Tannhausen, near Ellwangen and Dinkelsbühl; and the Tannhausen castle, at Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz, all in Bavaria or Southern Germany (this will be important in a moment). (*Refer to Image Gallery H*)

The Codex Manesse identifies him as a knight and poet who founded the Venusberg, the home of Venus, and spent a year there worshipping the goddess (kind of farfetched but wait...paganish in sound, sort of like Livonia and surrounding areas of the time. **.).

It says that after leaving the Venusberg, Tannhäuser is filled with remorse, and travels to Rome to ask the Pope if it is possible to be absolved of his sins. The Pope replies that forgiveness is as impossible as it would be for his papal staff to blossom. Three days after Tannhäuser's departure Urban's staff blooms with flowers; messengers are sent to retrieve the knight, but he has already returned to Venusberg, never to be seen again. It is believed that he died after 1265. So where did he go?

The Codex Manesse depicts him clad in the Teutonic Order habit, suggesting he might have fought the Fifth Crusade (1213–21 sort of early for him just based on the image's age in the Codex, but Lake Peipus battle occurs in 1242 giving a possibly better description to his graphic age in the depiction, coupled with his death around 1265), or refer back to the possible dates for the writing of the Codex. (Knights were allowed to join in the order without taking the vows and serving an appointed time; this appointed time could be the duration of a campaign or a set number of years. They were allowed to marry or be married, but they were constrained to leave half of their goods at their deaths as a bequest to the order. Tannhäuser of Richard Wagner fame was such a knight brother serving his time. He wears the grey habit of one who might have served for a specific period of time and then returned to the West with a full white cape of the Order. The Northern Crusades were supported by annual arrivals of Crusaders from Germany and the rest of Europe, who return home after the crusading season ended), but there's another avenue that's not been explored, the Northern Crusades and the great Prussian Insurrection of the 1250s-1260s.

It's also a recorded fact that nobles from around Europe (Germany, England, etc) could participate in the "Winterreise" and "Sommerreise" (seasonal campaigns against pagans)- while being guests of the Teutonic Order. So people were likely to bring their stylized helmets to be recognizable to their hosts and allies as they campaigned in Lithuania. They held status as crusaders per Papal privilege in 1245.

One might question if they were allowed to retain their headgear during these operations, opening a plausibility door to Tannhäuser's helmet scheme seen in the Codex. This is further opened to the realm of possibility, due to great helms first appearance in Prussia with the Teutonic Knights. About this time the Teutonic Order and its affiliates launched these types of campaigns. Again, thanks to Mr Hodge's extensive research we find that the use of decorated helms is also mentioned in the Teutonic Rule of 1264 (at the height of the Prussian Insurrection) literally lists crests as the domain of the drapier.

As I pointed out earlier, the Battle of Lake Peipus occurred in 1242, well within Tannhäuser's life time. There were at this time three Orders with militant missions in Northern Europe supporting a crusade against Prussian pagans. They were, the Teutonic Order (proper –this is the one most everyone is familiar with), the Order of Dobrzyń, and finally the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, who after being defeated at Saule in 1236, were incorporated into the larger Teutonic Order proper, but remained an autonomous entity with its own Master. Pay close attention to the details in the next few paragraphs.

The other thing to point out is that not every member of the Livonian Order or Teutonic Order was wearing one. They weren't prolific, only worn by a few nobles or senior Order folks, who were seen at the right place, at the wrong time (ie: Peipus in 1242). In this case, the wearers were killed or captured, thus decreasing the habit, due to their "personalities" being removed from the playing field.

By the time of the Battle of Lake Peipus in 1242, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, were now a part of the larger Teutonic Order and known as the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order (1237). They had originally been subject to the authority of the Archbishop of Riga (*who by the way is shown wearing a winged helmet in battle*) but, with the capture of Livonia and Estonia which they ruled as sovereign states, they were effectively independent. The new Master of Livonia, a senior Teutonic Commander now became a provincial Master in the Teutonic Order and the knights of the combined body adopted the Teutonic insignia. Historically though, this union had been brought up on a number of occasions, but the Teutonic Order representatives who went to visit and assess such possibilities, had returned with unfavorable reports about the Livonian brothers regarding their less than acceptable adherence to any Rule. (*Refer to Image Gallery I*)

One can be reminded of the images of Templars playing chess, which was not approved by their Rule set forth by St Bernard himself. Apparently as the saying in the military still goes today, "When one is farther away from the flag pole, things are done a bit differently." For who knows better what works and doesn't work "at the tip of the spear" than the fighting man over the politician? (*Reference the provisions for adapting the Order's Rule based on local understanding of conditions*) The bottom line here is that no Order remained true and by the letter of their Rules, as evidenced by provisions for local commanders to decide what's best?

Now refer back to the location of the Tannhäuser family's holdings in Southern Germany. Members of important families throughout Europe sported images, crests, etc., that helped them identify themselves to others (very popular in Germany). The earliest Livonian knights had come mostly from southern Germany. Knights and those of distinguished families could see better chances of assignments to leadership positions with the Orders, this is because with their acceptance and positions came support and resources. They had been fighting pagans in Livonia and surrounding areas for nearly 40 years. This is a lot of time to establish solid TTPs (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures). You can bet they would stack the deck with every combat multiplier at their disposal before battle, since they were always outnumbered by the indigenous population (the same issue faced by the other preeminent Orders in the Outremer). Note: Helmold III. von Plesse was from Mecklenburg and member of the Order of the Sword Brothers in Livonia, who's crest shows winged like attachments to his helm. He died in 1236 (*remember previous reference to the Battle of Saule...coincidence?*).

The Battle on the Ice was fought between the Republic of Novgorod led by Prince Alexander Nevsky and the crusader army led by the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Knights (see, not the Teutonic Order proper, but an organization that had a somewhat rogue history but wore the mantel of the black cross- and to the world representing Germanic Knights of Christ) on April 5, 1242, at Lake Peipus. It was a significant defeat sustained by the crusaders during the Northern Crusades, which were directed against pagans and Eastern Orthodox Christians and the perfect setting for Eisenstein's propaganda film for a Russian audience during the time of Hitler's rise to power. The defeat marked the end of their campaigns against the Orthodox Novgorod Republic and other Slavic territories for the next century. It should be noted that a handful of Brother Knights were recorded as taken prisoner during this event. One would think that his captor would love to secure his prisoner's accoutrements to show his prowess upon his return home, but after the years, they became misplaced, forgotten, or passed on and sold into oblivion. *(Refer to Image Gallery J)*

There is an abundance of images from the XIII-XIV that show helmet ornamentation was quite popular, and many of the countries that are found to have these images, participated in the Teutonic Order's reisen activities. Why would we draw the line at the borders of the Order, when examples of "shared" culture exist on other crusading fronts? (*Refer to Image Gallery K*)

They say that behind every myth there's a bit of truth, but folks rant about no existing visual or tangible evidence to support the ideal of the Military Order winged helmet. I'll refer them to the whole Russian removal of German, Catholic, and Western images after the revolution through the Cold War. A complete disregard for the value of this historical evidence is demonstrated in churches like the Ordenskirche in Arnau, which after the collapse of Teutonic Order, became German Lutheran parish. After WW2 the Soviets used the church for grain storage. It contained more than 200 frescoes (paintings which give idea of Teutonic Order art), and almost all of these frescoes were destroyed by the communists. Clearly the thought of having anything Teutonic related would have been a no go, if you wipe it clean, its memory will disappear after a few generations ***. Then there's the whole Catholic shadow of the Military Order in an Orthodox land. Have you ever seen a faction leave anything from a rival up, that might possibly contest the status quo? (*Refer to Image Gallery L*)

And based on a relatively recent discovery in Sweden, a great helm that suffered from being made a target for some sort of projectile practice..... imagine a Teutonic helm being employed on a stake or quintain/pell for Russian or Eastern European aspiring knighthood and archers/crossbowmen??? A chance to learn/you're your skills against a simulated Teutonic Knight (*visual similar targets have been used by armies to give "the feel" and stimulate soldiers for centuries*), the Baltic's most feared war machine. It wouldn't take long to render them unrecognizable. (*Refer to Image Gallery M*)

In summary then, perhaps we should not discount so easily, the modern images of German crusaders specifically focusing on those of the Teutonic Order, the Sword Brothers of Livonia-later the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order (where most of the plausibility lies), and the Order of Dobryzn in the Baltic with their horns and wings on helmets. Recapping the issue, the facts remain:

1. Germans were known to fight in their crests - even considering it as a mark of bravery and honor. They had no battlefield hindrance as commonly perceived. Ludwig IV of Bavaria often did this. He called out his chief rival for not wearing his on the battlefield. He was a close friend, and avid supporter of the Order.

2. Horned crests were quintessentially German. They appear in dozens of effigies and feature prominently in books of heraldry. Horns and variations of them make up the single most common feature of wearable heraldry for German nobility. These German nobles were largely who were participating in Crusades and Reisen (hosted by the Germanic crusading orders). Most high ranking Order members were German. These lend even more credibility to the already strong arguments made about identifying commanders on the battlefield, as well as employing them as a tool for psychological warfare, etc.

3. We have surviving artifacts showing the use of crests and horns by people that clearly represent the Order – (*these works were commissioned by the Hochmeister*) for Order properties (*who would pay for their Order to be misrepresented?*). These pieces exist in multiple media, thus lending to their commonly "understood" use. An example is an effigy and a shield from two different Grandmasters, at least one manuscript, and two frescoes. The two frescoes are in different locations and there are artistic rendering and record of a third that was destroyed. Of the remaining two frescoes, one was heavily defaced by the Russians, the second was buried for years underneath piles of grain as the communists used the former Church of the Order for grain storage.

4. Numerous manuscripts commonly depict horned helmets in battle in Germany and northern Italy which was HRE territory, and more German than Italian at that time. There are some depictions of joust, but more depictions of actual battle. The Manesse Codex is just one example. Additionally there over 100 other representations of horned helms in Germany and northern Italy - including Heraldry for Order towns sporting crests, as well as surrounding countries that participated in the seasonal reisens (ex: Britian, Denmark).

5. We have textual evidence including the Statutes and Rule of the Order from 1264 which explicitly lists crests as falling under the domain of the senior office of the Drapier, and also from descriptions of the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle.

In court, one can be proven guilty through sufficiency of circumstantial evidence in a Criminal Case, so here I play the Devil's advocate on the existence of such helms within the Teutonic Order's efforts in the Baltic, and leave the verdict in your hearts and minds to decide.

"Plausibility Study" complete. "Gott mit uns!"



Effigy of Kuno von Liebenstein also known as von Lichtenstein - Grandmaster of the Order 1404-1410.



Wax seal of Ludwig IV of Bavaria (1306) - Holy Roman Emperor, Protector of the Teutonic Order (Wearing his favorite team's "jersey"?)

Notes:

* Sergei Eisenstein was coincidentally born in Riga, Latvia, where the Bishop Albert founded the Military Order known as the Sword Brothers. Latvia and other Baltic states were also subjected to "Russification or Russianization" during the early 20th century.

** Livonia to the southeast, it turns out, was known as the land of the Mother. (*Any* member of a Military Order under the influence of traditional Templar/Teutonic guidance, would shun the company of women, and punishable by the Rule of the Order, thus adding to the plausibility of Tannhäuser's story)

Back in Karelia, we come at last to a king's decree granting a land to women and protecting them under his rule.

The Letter of Protection by King Birger Magnusson for womankind in Karelia on Oct. 1, 1316.

The original parchment letter was until the end of 19th century kept in the Viipuri (Viborg) city archives. Now it has been moved to the National Archives in Helsinki. The backside of the document contains a writing: Privilege to womankind, wives, widows, and maidens in Viborg and the whole of Karelia given by King Birger Anno 1316 and similarly confirmed by King Albrecht Anno 1360.

All who will see this letter, we Birger, by the grace of God King of the Swedes and the goths, Salute wishing eternal Salvation in Lord. Through this note we will for both those to come as well for those living now, following the advice and consent of the Noble men Gentlemen Canute Jonsson, the judge (lagman) of the Ostrogoth, Thor Kætilsson, and Johannes Brunckow, our high chancellor (drots) and other members of our council, firmly pass a statute, to be obeyed as a law, that all wives and women who live subjected to our castle of Vyborg or in the land of Karelia be they married, widows, nuns or virgins, shall enjoy peace and security like in our realm Sweden herself for both in property and person, so that our royal punishment will most severely meet the transgressors. Therefore all and everyone are strictly prohibited from burdening the foregoing wives and women with any kind of injustice or molesting, or inflicting on them any kind of corporal violence, if he wants in our kingdom to avoid the punishment, which is what is in our Swedish realm told in the due law. Date Yninge Anno Domini 1316, on the first of October.

In the year 1316, Karelia became by a king's decree and seal, a land of women.

*** Aleksander Pluskowski points out in his work The Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade, that much of the physical evidence-remains, frescoes, and traditional historical pieces were eradicated by Russian authorities during and after the great patriotic war (1939-1945). It didn't help that Hitler's propaganda machine used images of Teutonic Knights as material to motivate Germanic people in the war. This provides the possibility/plausibility that Sergei Eisenstein might have had access to images and artifacts to support his helmet designs in his work as well, not to mention many of the original sources of the winged helmet come from Russian sources, like the St Petersburg Collection (figurines and artwork).

References:

William Urban's works:

- The Teutonic Knights
- The Livonian Crusades

Alan V. Murray's: The Sword Brothers at War: Observations on the Military Activity of the Knighthood of Christ in the Conquest of Livonia and Estonia (1203–1227) from the ORDINES MILITARES COLLOQUIA TORUNENSIA HISTORICA Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders, vol. XVIII (2013)

Aleksander Pluskowski's Archaeology of the Prussian Crusade

Andrzej Nowakowski's Arms and Armour in the Medieval Teutonic Order's State in Prussia

Christopher Gravett's German medieval armies 1000-1300, published by Osprey Men At Arms series #310

D. Nicolle's Arms and Armour of the Crusades Era 1050-1350, Western Europe & Crusader States

Eric Christiansen's The Northern Crusades

Nickolas Haydock's Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes

Upton's Primitive Rule of the Knights Templar

Interviews:

Jonathan Hodge (Jonathan is a mental health professional and independent scholar with a passion for medieval history – particularly that of the Teutonic Order. He has conducted in depth studies regarding the Halbbrüdern of the Teutonic Order, the military equipment of the Order in Prussia 1250-1300, and the economic and cultural aspects of the Order in Prussia from 1250-1300). His tireless support helped bring life to a project that has been in development for two years.

Links:

http://www.imperialteutonicorder.com/id16.html

http://www.flickriver.com/photos/roelipilami/tags/helm/

A Russian chip commercial, but it gives a good mounted versus dismounted perspective: <u>https://youtu.be/9XQ_k10mR7s</u>

On line resource of medieval images and crests: http://manuscriptminiatures.com/search/?tags=%22crest%22

German likeness as seen in Alexander Nevsky movie: <u>http://manuscriptminiatures.com/4784/12604/</u>

http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8470169b/f149.item.r=Armorial%20Bellenville

Image gallery

Set A:



Set B:









Set E:





<u>Set G:</u>











From Polotsk, Russia's Museum of Medieval History

Set J:





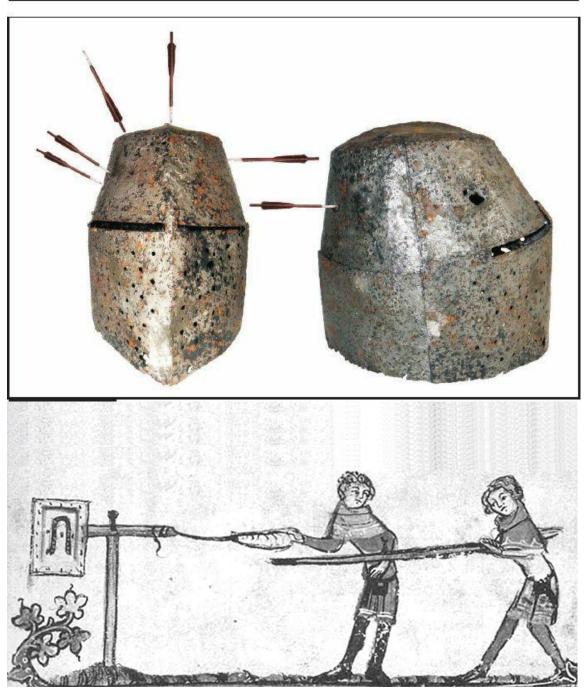






Collections of arms and armour as well as armouries, which may have kept materials from the territory and period in question, have been destroyed or dispersed¹⁷⁰, mainly during disasters which befell Prussia and were particularly grave during World War II. Certain military objects were lost much earlier, e.g. the two swords sent by the Teutonic Knights to Władysław Jagiełło on 15 July 1410 just before the battle of Grunwald, and kept in the treasury of the Wawel castle, Kraków. The swords, which survived the robbery of Wawel by the Prussians in 1795, were given by T. Czacki to Izabella Czartoryska's collections at Puławy, yet they were confiscated by the Russians in 1853¹⁷¹ and have never been seen again¹⁷².

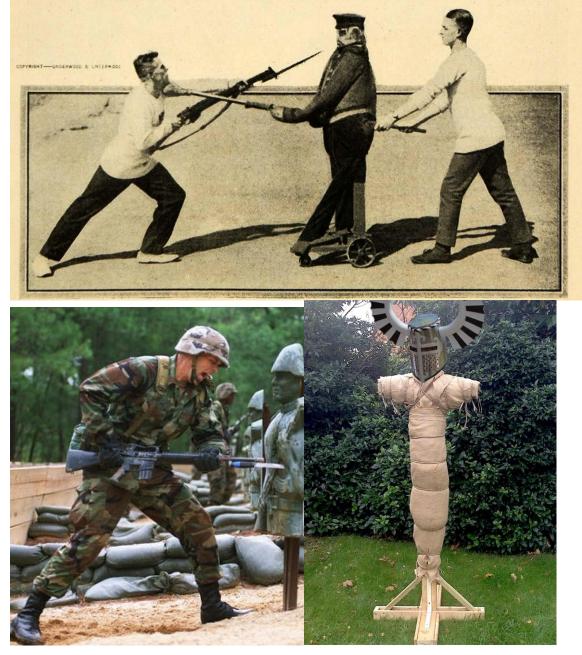




"Train as you'd fight..."

GETTING READY FOR FRITZ

English Tommies are well trained in the use of cold steel, of which German soldiers have a wholesome fear. Company Sergeant Major McKenna, of the British Army Gymnastic Staff, has invented this Boche dummy. It is operated from behind by the instructor and can deliver a healthy jab if Mr. Atkins is not on the job.



Makes you wonder....