



## Buying Tips for Beginners

Many people interested in collecting World War II German helmets develop questions regarding the best methods for starting a collection. Questions concerning sources of original helmets, return policies, helmet values, and any number of things related to the hobby are often asked.

The following topics provide some perspective on the hobby from my personal experience having been a collector for more than 20 years. One thing is certain; every German helmet collector has a different opinion about the hobby. Conflicts are common and many people consider themselves "experts" without much experience at all. Those who do not consider themselves experts are likely to "follow" someone they think is.

The level of conflict among helmet collectors in relation to differing opinions about authenticity often reaches epic proportions. Almost every known collector of any notoriety has been criticized by some collector somewhere. This includes those who make a living of selling German helmets and World War II militaria, as well as those who have authored books on the subject. Books are often scrutinized with regards to their photos. Many books are believed to have "counterfeit" helmets included in their pages. If so, the authors of those books are quickly labeled "incorrect" by other collectors.

In many cases, the negative comments are sent directly into public forums, email lists, and

online chat rooms. It almost seems like bashing people with long standing years in the hobby has become a pastime for mid-tier collectors.

If you are new to the hobby of collecting World War II German helmets the following topics may give you some insight into how best to approach your collecting interests. Be advised, collecting helmets of this kind can be difficult and expensive. Many helmets are declared "fakes" even before they have a chance to be thoroughly examined.

### **Best Sources for Helmets:**

New collectors are often curious about the "best sources" for obtaining original German hel-

met. Concern over the number of counterfeit (fake) or misrepresented helmets often leads a beginning collector to presume that there must be just a handful of people who really sell original helmets. Unfortunately, there is no "perfect list" of the best sources (people or vendors) for obtaining original helmets at decent prices. Sure, there are some favorites, but even those people often sell items that are questionable by some element of the collecting community. Naturally, there are vendors with solid reputations who make a living selling all types of German militaria (including helmets), but the most savvy collectors generally buy from (or trades with) a number of dealers and collectors. Few people are willing to sink all their money into dealing with just one person, collector, or vendor. This is wise, because often

***An original M1935 combat helmet repainted with textured paint. This helmet was once a double decal German Army helmet.***





times good helmets turn-up in many different places. Even so, some collectors prefer to only deal with one or two people exclusively.

### ***Militaria Dealers:***

There exists a large number of full-time dealers who buy, sell, and trade helmets for a living. Most turn a healthy profit that far exceeds the typical salary that one can achieve in a high-paying corporate or executive level job. Some of the best full-time vendors who sell all types of militaria can easily generate \$250,000 dollars (or more) of revenue in a given year. Full-time dealers typically sell at gun and militaria shows both in the US and Europe. They also maintain websites that list their items for direct sale. Many supplement their sales by offering items through online auctions such as Ebay or Epier.

Beginning collectors typically prefer to visit these website and decide if a helmet they want to purchase is original or not. Copy the image of the helmet that is for sale and floating it through online web forums is a common way to get collective opinions on a helmet. However, doing so is actually copyright infringement. Even so, many people who do this sort of thing quickly respond by saying there is no legal action that an owner of a website can take against the forum or the person who posted the image. This attitude has lead some well-known vendors to seek legal

action against individuals who “thumb their nose” at the notion of copyright infringement. If you are a new collector who loves to “cut and paste” images into public forums, it would be better for you to simply provide a direct link to the helmet in question. This avoids the issue of copyright infringement entirely.

### ***Online Auctions:***

Online auctions such as Ebay and Epier continue to be popular with beginning collectors. In addition, there are a whole host of auctions sites dedicated just to antique military items. These exist both in North America and Europe. Some companies have even created their own online auction systems to help sell consignment items from both Europe and the US.

Unfortunately, the reliability of the items sold in these auction sites is not that good. While some original items can be found, the trend seems to indicate that many fake items are misrepresented to the extent that sometimes more than 90% of what is offered is nothing more than expensive high-end forgeries or helmets that have been tampered with. To complicate things further, not every seller listing an item on a web auction site knows enough about what they are selling to be able to declare it original or postwar modified.

Return privileges offered by the sellers protect against claims of fraud. As long as the buyer is happy, no one tends to offer any complaints regarding the lack of original items for sale. New col-

lectors should be aware that deliberate and fraudulent misrepresentation of items is so common that many advanced collectors simply avoid online auctions all together. The level of deliberate misrepresentation of military items sold in public online auctions is so high that auction sites of this kind sometimes become a breeding ground for criminal activity.

### ***Gun and Militaria Shows:***

Many gun and militaria shows are held throughout the US and German helmets can often be found for sale at these events. Militaria shows are also common in Europe and draw many dealers and collectors from around the world. Shows of this kind are good places to shop for military items that are owned by collectors as well as dealers. Many vendors prefer to sell only at shows, and as a result their items are never available through online auctions or websites.

Like anything else, beginning collectors should be aware that many fakes items are also sold at shows. New collectors must shop with caution less they buy a counterfeit that was purposely sold for profit. A recent examination of helmets sold at a major international show (September 2003) revealed that nearly 50% of the helmets sitting on vendor tables were postwar alterations or modified helmets. This would indicate that beginning collectors must continue to apply their full knowledge when purchasing at shows. Examination of the helmet for authenticity is important



regardless of where the helmet is being sold.

### **Collector-to-Collector Sales:**

Many advanced collectors tend to buy, trade, or sell between themselves. To keep things "on the level", many collectors deal among themselves to avoid making costly mistakes. Some beginning collectors are often led to believe that collectors who have written books on the subject of helmets are "trustworthy" sources for original items. Of course in many cases they are correct, but even so there are exceptions to this notion. Published authors are often thought of as "the best and most accurate source of infor-

mation" over any other collector including those who have never published a book on the subject. This not always true as it would seem that anyone interested in publishing a book today can find a firm that will handle the details. In addition, books without text are commonly published on German helmets. This means that it is very easy to simply publish a "picture book" without having the skill necessary to write commentary or text that matches the photos.

As a result, some authors have seemingly taken advantage of their notoriety by deliberately marking up the price of any helmet they sell. For example, a helmet that might be purchased for a mere \$750 could cost \$1500 from a noted author. This is particularly true if the helmet was photographed and placed in the book. Beginning collectors with a lot of money generally are not concerned about the inflated premiums. They often believe that the additional premium they are paying for their helmet is added "insurance" that guarantees their purchase is original.

### **Return Policies:**

At the very least every collector should buy a helmet that has

some type of return policy attached to it. These generally take the form of a three to five day inspection period with the ability to return the helmet for a full refund if not satisfied.

Some vendors and collectors offer "lifetime guarantees" regarding the authenticity of their items. Lifetime guarantees are tricky in the sense that new collectors should be cautious about "buying into the concept" simply because it seems like an "insurance policy" that might help avoid a bad purchase.

Lifetime guarantees make sense if the vendor has a proven track record and can guarantee that they will be able to refund money at your request 25 years from now. Many of the people offering lifetime guarantees will be deceased or at the very least be out of business many years down the road. The idea behind lifetime guarantees is no different than "extended warranties" when you purchase a major appliance or automobile.

The concept behind lifetime guarantees supposes that if you get disenchanted with your purchase, whether this be next year or 15 years from now, the seller is going to "make good" and refund your money. Many sellers that offer lifetime guarantees have commented that they do so with the hope that the buyer will return the helmet 10 years from now. Their reasoning being that a \$750 helmet sold today and returned 10 years from now is likely to be worth 20% more than it was at the time of original sale.



**Reference books are an excellent source of additional information on German helmets.**



The seller has no intention of refunding current market value for the helmet. Instead, they intend to refund the old market price to capture the value inflation at the expense of the buyer.

If an individual collector (not a vendor) offers a lifetime guarantee, this should be scrutinized to a greater degree. Purchasing a helmet from an individual collector in Tempe, Arizona for example, does not guarantee that 10 years from now that collector will even be living in the same city or address. How would you find this person again? How can you guarantee that he will even have the money to provide a refund? What legal basis or contract do you have to prove the person actually sold you the helmet? For this reason, new collectors should be careful when they are offered helmets sold by unknown individuals who offer lifetime guarantees.

### **Market Values:**

No doubt every collector looking to purchase a helmet wants a "good deal". People tend to shop for bargains and they often seek to buy helmets far below market price. Obviously, negotiating prices is reasonable when possible. Even so, many established militaria vendors have no desire to negotiate prices. This is simply because they know they can sell the helmet to another buyer at their asking price. If they do a lot of sales, there is no need to bargain with an interested buyer. Market values

tend to climb anywhere from 3% to 10% per year depending on the item. In addition, most sellers tend to price their helmets according to their competition. A rise in market value is often based on demand for a particular helmet as well as sellers collectively "adjusting" their prices upwards. The thing that most impacts the value of a helmet is demand. Some helmets command prices far greater than what they are really worth simply because there is tremendous demand for them. Other helmets that are rare and historically significant generally have less value because no one is interested in them.

One thing is certain; most collectors prefer to buy combat helmets to any other type of German helmet. Of their choices among combat helmets, collectors tend to want Waffen-SS helmets more than anything else. This has led to the production of large numbers of high-end forgeries of which some are almost impossible to identify as fake.

The production of high-end forgeries follows market trends and buyer interests. If collectors are seeking to own double decal helmets, then people involved in making forgeries produce double decal helmets to meet the demand. If it is a foreign volunteer helmet that is most desired by collectors, then the counterfeiters produce foreign volunteer helmets. Unfortunately, the rash of fake Waffen-SS helmets has led many to refuse to collect such items in fear of buying a counterfeit. In effect, this has caused an increase in value of those helmets thought to be "original".



***Fake decals such as this one are common in the marketplace.***

Many vendors and collectors have taken to doubling the price of their helmets if they think enough people support the notion that they are authentic. Counter to this phenomenon is the concept that any new helmet introduced to the market is a fake. Many collectors take to the notion that the only original helmets are the ones in their personal collections. Anything newly found is often labeled a "fake" whether it is or not. One thing is certain; new collectors must continue to be alert with regards to what they are purchasing if they expect to acquire authentic examples. The hobby is rife with forgeries and bad advice. As a result, originals are increasing in value at a rapid pace. Helmets worth \$250 five years ago now command values that exceed \$750 in some circles. Rare helmets worth \$500 five years ago now can sell for \$1500 or more. As one can see, collecting German helmets is not an inexpensive hobby. New collectors should attempt to build their collections wisely. ***GH***