



## Collecting Relic Helmets

Over the past several years there has been a slow but increasing interest in WWII German “relic” helmets. The term “relic” best characterizes helmets which include those found in abandoned bunkers, excavated from old burial grounds and battlefields, combat damaged shells, and rusted hulks no longer bearing any paint or insignia. In most

the less, people still want to collect them.

Perhaps their interest in relic helmets has risen in part to the lack of available (and affordable) original and untouched helmets within the collectors’ market. The number and quality of original helmets that have avoided any postwar tampering has been shrinking for many years.



*A ground dug helmet from Germany shows a splinter fragment concussion from an artillery round. (Private collection, Germany)*

cases, these relic helmets are actually in far worse condition than a helmet in average standing. Relic helmets are rusty, damaged, and incomplete at their very best. Many of these helmets bear no resemblance to their former condition whatsoever! Never

Interest in relic helmets might also be an after effect of the growing number of quality “fakes” that continue to be sold to unsuspecting buyers. Rather than getting “stung” for hundreds if not thousands of dollars, many new collectors prefer to have a helmet

that they can have solid confidence in. What better way to have confidence in a helmet’s authenticity than to have it pulled directly from the ground of a former battle site?

### ***A Worthy Investment?***

With such growing interest in these helmets, many collectors ask whether or not they are worth the monetary investment. After all, no one is simply giving these rusty helmets away. Rusted and ground dug shells of elite units or military formations such as the Waffen-SS often bring high price tags. The fact that the Euro is stronger than the Dollar makes such helmets even more expensive since the majority come from Europe and Russia. Ground dug Luftwaffe paratrooper helmet shells are often equally as expensive if not more so. It is not uncommon to see relic paratrooper helmets sell for \$400 to \$750 at auction or simply from the gun show table! Common relic shells such as a rust pitted and damaged M1942 helmet with less than 5% decal and only 10% remaining paint might sell for \$50 to \$75. Those in slightly better condition may sell for \$200 to \$300. Are these helmets worth it? Will they even hold their value over time? This is an excellent question which often receives little or no attention. Seller tactics



usually do not disclose such information and eager buyers are generally happy to spend their money without asking questions of this kind.

Without a doubt, it is very clear that demand for German WWII helmets is very high. As one of the most sought after WWII collectibles, a German helmet in any condition seems to be of interest to collectors. At present, there appears to be no let down ahead. Helmet prices (and values) continue to stay their course and most appear to be increasing well beyond their initial purchase price. Given that most collectors prefer to invest their money in helmets that are in good condition, original, and also complete, it would seem that a rusted helmet shell with holes and damage would be worth less than a helmet in good standing. Such appears to be the case with relic helmets.

While interest is growing in these helmets, values seem to be dictated mainly on seller pricing. Sellers who are personally involved in acquiring relic helmets from foreign battlefields must recoup their expenses. Many consider themselves a sort of modern "treasure hunter". With shovel, map, and former battle plan in hand, they scour the farm fields of countries such as

Poland, Latvia, and Russia for "the find of the decade" which may bring hundreds if not thousands of dollars from the right buyer. From a collecting standpoint, it would seem that a relic helmet that is nothing more than a rusted shell is going to continue to be far less valuable than a complete helmet in average condition. At the present time, it is unlikely an advanced collector will pay top dollar for a rusted shell when he might be able to acquire an above average helmet for the same or less price. After all, a helmet that has been dug from the ground and that is already in the advanced stages of decomposition is not going to last as long as a helmet that is in average shape and has never been exposed to the elements. Once advanced rust sets in, there is literally no method to halt the process without damaging the shell itself. Coating a helmet with rust protective paint, clear coat acrylic, or rust inhibitors of any kind only negates the value that the helmet holds in its "original found state." From a metallurgical standpoint, a rusted shell dug from the earth is going to eventually crumble away far sooner than a helmet that is not damaged in this fashion.

### ***Helmet Preservation***

If relic helmets are likely to

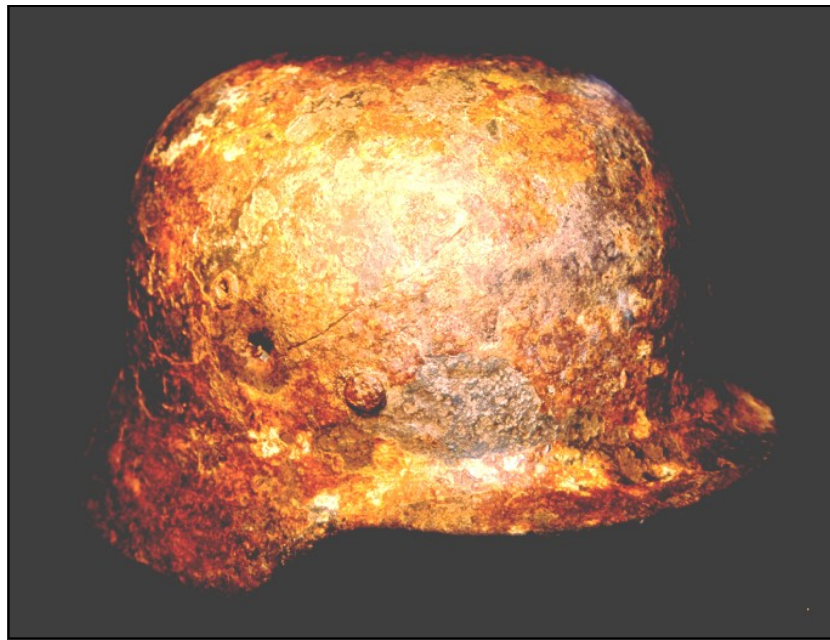
crumble into pieces over a collector's lifetime, what is the best method to preserve helmets of this kind? Is there anyway of saving these helmets so that they retain their value and historical interest? The answer is yes of course and it all has to do with how the helmet is stored. Helmets that are rusted inside and out and those that have been ground dug are likely to be in a very poor state of condition.

The most basic preservation technique is to ensure that the helmet is clean of any mud, soil, or other contaminants that have surrounded it while in the ground. A simple and delicate cleaning using soap and warm water is likely to do the job. Since water is involved in this process, it is always best to use a hand held electric blow dryer to evaporate excess moisture that will remain in the deep pits of the helmet. Remember, most rust is formed as a result of exposure to water and moisture. Once clear of any dirt or sand, it is best to seal the helmet in a clear plastic bag. This will prevent the shell from being exposed to moisture in the air that will most certainly continue to accelerate the decomposition of the metal.

Seal the helmet in a plastic bag? Many collectors balk at the notion that their new found collectable must now live within their collection as a semi-permanent sealed-in-



plastic relic. If this concept is objectionable to you, then please read further. While cleaning and sealing your helmet in a plastic bag is the best preventive measure you can take, it is possible to leave your helmet exposed on a shelf if the environmental conditions in your home are in balance. Helmets that are likely to be exposed to moisture ridden air, humid conditions, and unstable temperatures are going to continue to deteriorate rapidly. It is not uncommon to see a relic helmet have portions of its rim break away or crumble just a few months after being cleaned and placed on a shelf. This kind of deterioration will continue unless the helmet is stored in a stable environment. It is for this very reason that many museums throughout the world prefer to place their most valuable articles in sealed containers within temperature controlled environments. The best advice one can take is to seal the article in a long term storage container or place it in a temperature controlled environment of 70% (or less) humidity and no more than 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Even so, this is really no guarantee that decomposition will cease. As stated earlier, once it has begun it can not be stopped. The



*In 2001 this bullet shattered helmet was found along a foot path in Oosterbeek, Holland. The helmet was in shallow undergrowth along the lines of the German assault which was leveraged against British airborne forces during the battle for Arnhem in September of 1944. (Airborne Museum Hartenstein, Oosterbeek)*

only method to ensure the helmet's continue existence would be to coat the entire helmet with a rust inhibiting paint or finish. While this might be valid for some, the fact remains this simply will negate or diminish any value the helmet has.

### **Sources of Relic Helmets**

If you are collector interested in obtaining a relic helmet, where can you find one and will it be authentic or just another fake? The good news is that most relic helmets are in fact 100% original. The

reason being that in most cases their values have not reached levels where faking one is tempting to a fraud artist.

To the same effect, creating an artificially rusted shell requires an extensive amount of time. If time is of the essence, then rust and corrosion can only be formed through the use of acids and caustic chemicals. Most fraud artists are not interested in such complex procedures unless the pay-off is high. At present, it is not. Time, availability of helmets, and collector interest will impact this most.



Today collectors can find relic helmets for direct purchase at most large gun and military shows. In addition, most online military auctions carry a few helmets of this kind. Large Internet auctions where buyer to seller transactions are done in a competitive environment often attract many relic helmet sales. Potential buyers need only search such auction sites to find a relic helmet. At any given time there is at least five to 10 relic helmets for sale on auction sites of this kind. Many relic helmets go unsold for reasons stated earlier.

### ***Where do they all come from?***

If they are not being faked why are there so many for sale? The answer is quite simple. Following the emergence of a free market economy in Eastern Europe, many enterprising relic hunters determined that people in the West were interested in articles of historic value. Given the fact that people living in established countries with strong economies generally have more disposable income for collecting, it only took a short time for these relic hunters to determine that there was an active buyers market in the US and other Western

countries. Before long, the first “ground dug” helmets began to appear from sources in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Latvia, and any number of Eastern European nations that bore the brunt of German military power between 1939 and 1945.

With access to an active buyers market with money to spend, relic hunters were soon at their task of locating helmets and related parts for direct sale or export. Many of these relic hunters were and are themselves collectors and people generally interested in WWII history. After all, who else would be willing to

trudge through the swamps of northern Russia to seek helmets lost in the mud and in areas that haven't seen any human visitor since 1944!

Likewise, there are now many US relic hunters that travel these countries or whom have established strong contacts for the export of battlefield relics. Relic helmets can come from old bunkers, trench lines, fields, junk yards and scrap heaps, forgotten storage facilities, farms or barn yard buildings, old homes, and war graves. Locating such relics is not easy and it requires an extensive amount of time “in the field”.



*Many German helmets were converted into utilitarian kitchen implementations after the war. This M1942 model helmet has been factory reengineered into a household colander for washing vegetables. (National Liberation Museum, Groesbeek)*



### ***Does grave robbing really happen?***

The actual competition between relic hunters for such artifacts is far more aggressive than what most North American collectors realize. In fact, competition is so intense and the desire for profitable sales so high it is not uncommon for some relic hunters to rob the graves of long buried soldiers. While this is not always the case, it has been firmly established that many battlefield relic hunters are willing and quite able to locate and excavate the graves of fallen soldiers without any risk of legal action or criminal investigation. Such is the case in some Eastern European countries, and in particular those in former Soviet Republics. In these territories, the war graves of fallen German soldiers are not entirely protected. While some clearly are protected, there are many war graves and cemeteries that have been abandoned or have had their markers removed. In fact, it was general government policy within the former Soviet Union to demolish the grave markers of fallen Germans following (and during) WWII. In addition, such was the extent of death on the battlefield that it is estimated that more than 50% of all fallen soldiers (including Russians) never received a proper burial. If

they did, it was in a shallow or remote grave in a field, forest, or hill far away from any town or city. Few dead were fortunate to be buried in an actual cemetery. Likewise, very few fallen soldiers were repatriated to their homeland for burial. As a result, many war graves can still be found today in uninhabited areas of Eastern Europe and Russia. These areas are much sought after by the few brazen relic hunters who feel it necessary to plunder the earth for relics where the dead have fallen. The plundering of German war graves has been well documented by the German media and is a solidly established fact. The treasure hunters seeking these relics are commonly referred to as the "black diggers".

While this all provides intriguing questions as to the source of most relic helmets, collectors must ask themselves if they are comfortable with obtaining a relic that has potentially been unearthed from a grave. This author has handled and seen articles for sale that have included the skeletal foot and leg shank of a German soldier with rotted boot.; photographs of "black diggers" removing gold fillings from the skulls of German soldiers unearthed from their graves; and skulls still sitting inside their rusted helmet shells. In addition, it is not uncommon to find relic

helmets with the remains of skin tissue and hair still stuck to the rusted interior. As obscene as this is, there are many collectors who take an active fascination with the thought of owning something dug from a grave. After all, they often make the claim, "Who can argue that the helmet is not authentic?" While obviously true, we must all draw the line somewhere.

At the present time, few sellers of relic helmets are likely to come clean with where they have obtained all of their artifacts. Clearly speaking, not every person selling a relic helmet or artifact has found it in a grave. There are relics that are found simply sitting in shallow soil or hiding beneath overgrown foliage. But potential buyers of these artifacts should be armed with the factual information presented here. Asking questions of the seller beforehand is required before buying any relic helmet unless one feels it unimportant that they are directly contributing to the continued robbing of war graves for the sole sake of someone's profit.

In the United States and almost all Western European nations, the deliberate robbing of war graves is a criminal offense punishable by fine and imprisonment. Individuals who seek relics from unprotected graves, such as those associated with U-Boat



men lost off the Eastern Coast of the United States, are in jeopardy of \$10,000 fines, a felony offense, and years of imprisonment. This is not the case in all parts of the world. Despite the active robbing of graves for WWII battlefield relics, it is surprising that most buyers are completely embarrassed by the thought of asking the seller a few questions at the time of purchase. In fact, most buyers just prefer to buy the artifact they desire under the guise of a “don’t ask—don’t tell” policy. For this reason, all collectors of relic helmets are encouraged to ask the right questions prior to purchasing any ground dug or battlefield found helmet. If the seller becomes skittish or seems to dodge the question, be aware of the fact you may be dealing with someone who is willing to rob the dead for profit.

The photographs at right show a number of items dug in the soil of Russia. Many of the artifacts came from bunkers and trench lines, yet at the same time some of the items shown came from mass graves where the soldiers were buried one on top of the



*German helmet shells dug from battlefields in Russia. Many of the shells retain their original wartime paint finishes as well as combat damage.*



other in a hasty fashion.

The old adage that proclaims “Let the buyer beware!” remains true for many

of the relic items purchased today. **GH**