

# Knights Cross Trivia

The Knights Cross was Germany's equivalent to the U.S. Medal of Honor and the U.K. Victoria Cross. There were several grades of the Knights Cross. Each grade is pictured below. First is the Knights Cross, next is Knights Cross with Oakleaves, next is Knights Cross with Oakleaves and Swords, next is Knights Cross with Oakleaves, Swords, and Diamonds, next is Knights Cross with Golden Oakleaves, Swords and Diamonds (awarded only one time to Hans Ulrich Rudel) and finally, not pictured, the Grand Cross of the Knights Cross (a larger version of the Knights Cross and awarded only one time to Hermann Göring)

There were 7,366 Knights Crosses awarded, 890 Oakleaves, 160 Swords, and 27 Diamonds.

The Knights Cross was a variation of the sought after Iron Cross which had 7 grades;

When one was decorated with the Knights Cross it was worn from a ribbon around the neck. The Iron Cross first class was worn on the left side of the uniform replacing the Iron Cross second class with a chest ribbon. One **had** to win the I.C. second class in order to be considered for the first class award.

The Knights Cross was a highly respected decoration and among the troops it was the greatest honor one could achieve for many. Troops took great pride if their officers or fellow soldiers received this medal.

Soldiers and sailors would often joke about having "an itchy neck" that could only be cured by wearing the Knights Cross ribbon. In the free section of my website I have a listing of all recipients by branch of service.

The highest grade of the Knights Cross (Knights Cross with Golden Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds) was tailored for Hitler's favorite fighter, Oberst **Hans-Ulrich Rudel** of the Luftwaffe, who destroyed more than 500 Russian tanks (and a battleship at Leningrad!) in his dual-cannon equipped Ju-87 Stuka aircraft in over 2500 combat sorties!

Of all the awards produced during World War II in Nazi Germany, none hold the mystique as much as the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. In fact, the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross is the most famous grade of the Iron Cross. The Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross or RK was instituted by Adolf Hitler at the outbreak of World War II on September 1st, 1939. This award was unique since it had not been in existence prior to that time. During World War I the Pour Le Merite or PLM was the highest award for valor. The problem with the PLM is that it could only be awarded to officers. Adolf Hitler, an enlisted man in World War I, decided to change that when he became Chancellor and then Fuehrer of Germany. When he launched Germany into a second world war just twenty-one years later, he decided to have a decoration that would bridge the gap between the Iron Cross 1st Class and the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross. In addition he wanted a decoration that could be awarded regardless of rank(\*4). Out of this debacle the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was born.

The Knight's Cross was larger than a Iron Cross 1st or 2nd Class. Those awards measured 43.5mm to 45mm across the frame. The Knight's Cross measured 48.2mm to 48.8mm and was suspended from a 45mm neck ribbon of black, white, red, white, black material. Incidentally, the ribbon was fastened around the neck using a variety of methods. Some men even used garter belts as fasteners. Since the collar hid most of the ribbon anyway, the owner was virtually limited by his own imagination. The Knight's Cross was made of real silver and the silver content of real Knight's Crosses range from 800, 900, to 935 silver. The content marks can be found on the reverse of all upper frames of all original pieces. Knight's Crosses found with a silver content mark 925 are to be viewed with much suspicion and should be treated as a fake. In addition to the silver content number, maker codes can sometimes be found on the reverses of rarer crosses. Knight's Crosses will bear the markings 800 2, 800 L/12 (C.E. Juncker Berlin), 935 4 (Steinhauer and Lueck), 800 21 (Gebr. Godet & Co.), or 800 65 (Klein & Quenzer A.G.).



The Knight's Cross was to be awarded for acts of ultimate bravery in the face of the enemy. The award was also extended to foreign nationals fighting with the Wehrmacht or SS. The Knight's Cross was unusual in other ways. Unlike awards as the British Victoria Cross, or US Medal of Honor which were strictly valor based. The Cross could also be given on a point basis. For example, a pilot could of received the Knight's Cross in 1940 for downing 26 aircraft. As the war went on the tally got higher, in order to receive the award. A U-boat commander could get the Knight's Cross for sinking 100,000 tons of shipping. In all these cases exceptions were made. Unlike the Victoria Cross, a Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross could also be given for successful command of a battle, or even in some cases for a successful withdrawal. In some cases the Knight's Cross was even given for services rendered. As a result of all of this, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was a all around award. Judging by it's low number of recipients 7,318 Knights Cross awards were very stringent.

Some of the early Knight's Cross presentations and a few later special awards were made by Hitler personally. In most cases awards were made by divisional commanders, corps commanders, army group commanders, or in a few instances district officials. Recommendations for the Knight's Cross was generally made by the individuals commanding officer with final confirmation coming from Adolf Hitler who was commander in chief of all the armed forces of the 3rd Reich.

The Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was presented in a elongated black leatherette case, which contained the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross and a folded length of neck ribbon.

The Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was such a famous decoration, that the Nazi's were fast to capitalize on it's popularity. During WWII, postcards were produced by the famous photographer Hoffman, and the war artist Willirch (see the article on Hoffmann). These postcards featured portraits of Knights Cross winners. These cards proved to be very popular, and were avidly collected by adults and especially by German youth. These cards are even widely collected today.

The Iron Cross came about in 1813. It was designed by German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The Iron Cross was awarded for bravery in 1813 (The Freedom War), 1870 (Franco-Prussian War), 1914 (World War I), and 1939 (World War II).

At the same time Hitler also reinstated the Iron Cross 2nd Class, Iron Cross 1st Class, and the respective 1914 Iron Cross clasps (spanges).

In all actuality the Pour Le Merite was not the highest award for bravery in the first world war. The highest award was the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross. This award was a huge 62mm Iron Cross worn about the neck. It could only be awarded to men of general rank. There were five recipients of the Grand Cross in World War One. They were Kaiser Wilhelm II, Generalfeldmarschall Paul Ludwig von Hindenburg, General der Infanterie Erich Ludendorf, Generalfeldmarschall Prinz Maximillian Joseph Maris Arnuf, and Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen. Adolf Hitler also reinstated the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross on September 1st, 1939. However this award was only given once in World War Two. The lucky recipient was Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering. Goering was given this high award for his successful command of the Luftwaffe during the campaigns in France and the Low Countries in 1940.

Hitler meant what he said, when he wanted the Knight's Cross to be awarded without rank distinction. During World War Two 1,676 NCO's and enlisted men won this award.

If you measure a Knight's Cross and include the suspension loop, the cross will come to 54mm.

A lot of original Knight's Cross ribbon has a orange cast to the red section of the ribbon.

Original Knights Crosses will have a Swastika that comes up even with the beaded edge of the frame. Crosses that have Swastikas that fall below the beaded frame, should be viewed with suspicion.

Original Knights Crosses will weigh between 30 to 33 grams. This weight will not always hold true for replacement pieces.

As a general rule most presented Knight's Crosses simply bear a 800 silver content number. This number will be found on the reverse upper frame and the suspension loop.

Knight's Crosses bearing a 2 maker mark should have a lazy 2. What this means is that the 2 is laying on it's side. A Knight's Cross with a vertical 2 should be viewed as a reproduction.

It should be noted that post-war versions of the Knights Cross manufactured by the firm C.E. Juncker Berlin are also hallmarked L/12. The only way to tell the difference between a war-time and a post-war piece, is that original war-time examples hallmarked 2 or L/12 have a design flaw in the beaded edge of the frame. Where the beaded edge meets the Swastika, a extra line is formed in the corners of the frame. If you could put these lines together they would form a cross-hatch effect. It would look like this (#), but only straighter. Post-war made crosses don't have this flaw.

Knight's Crosses bearing the hallmark 935 4 are unusual in the fact that the maker mark is stamped upside down. The 4

mark is stamped in incuse relief. That means the 4 is raised out of a stamped depression. The ribbon loop of these crosses will be marked 935 or in some cases 900.

The 800 hallmark on this cross is also stamped in incuse relief, but it is right side up not upside down. The 21 hallmark is simply stamped into the upper reverse frame on the right side.

A lot of Knight's Crosses that bear this hallmark are odd in the fact that the number 65 is sometimes found stamped on the ribbon loop above the 800 silver content number.

A good example is the U-Boat ace Peter Erich Cremer. He received his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross on June 5th, 1942. Yet Mr. Cremer only sank 7 ships totalling 35,968 tons. He got the award for successfully bringing back to port a rammed and badly damaged ship, the U-333. At the time Cremer had only four ships sunk to his credit.

Records indicate that no woman ever received the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross. While several women did earn the Iron Cross 2nd and 1st Class during World War Two. The most famous woman to win both classes of the Iron Cross was the famous test pilot Flugkapitain Hanna Reitsch.

A misconception is that the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was awarded more to Generals than any other rank. This of course is farthest from the truth. Only 6.9% of the German Generals received this award. Or simply put, 502 German Generals received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

If the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was lost, and the owner could prove it was not a result of his own careless negligence, a replacement cross was provided free of cost. A lot of these crosses will bear maker mark LDO numbers such as L/12. If the owner of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was killed in action, the medal was passed on to the next-of-kin.

Printing postcards of Knights Cross recipients was not a new idea to the Nazi. During World War I the famous portraitist Sanke produced postcards of highly decorated German soldiers. The theme of most of these postcards were recipients of the Pour Le Merite. See the piece about Heinrich Hoffmann in the Free Info area of my website.

## 1957

In 1957, all grades of the Knights Cross were included in the laws which allowed veterans to once again wear war time decorations. See the picture below. The Knights Cross, now devoid of all Nazi symbols, had a spray of Oak Leaves taking the place of the swastika but remained otherwise of identical design. In most cases, the rim lacks the mat silver finish. While some of the firms that manufactured the original crosses also made the new Knights Crosses, they are generally of lower quality.

Unlike the 1939 version, the 1957 Knights Cross could be worn as a ribbon. This was a longer ribbon than the 1st and 2nd Class, with a small 1957 Iron Cross in the center. The original color of the ribbon was preserved, as was the leatherette presentation box.

The Oak Leaves, the Oak Leaves and Swords, and the Diamonds were not modified as they displayed no political design, but they were still manufactured after 1957 as replacement pieces. The Grand Cross was not reissued, as it's only recipient, Hermann Goring, committed suicide after his conviction at the Nuremberg Trials.

