

# FELIX SCHLAG

## AND THE GREAT WAR

*Historic documents shed light on the World War I service of the Jefferson nickel designer.*

**A**S WE APPROACH the World War I centennial, it seems fitting to reflect on the only designer of a circulating U.S. coin who was a combat veteran of the conflict. German-born sculptor Felix Oskar Schlag (September 4, 1891-March 9, 1974) gave a number of interviews and speeches in the mid-1960s recounting the 1938 open competition for the design of the Jefferson nickel. He generally opened these discussions with a description of some life events that shaped him:

To impress upon you that the winning of the competition was more than just an accidental achievement, as some may think, I shall relate to you something of my background. ...Just to set the record

straight, and to correct errors concerning the often disputed Jefferson nickel competition, I have written my life story.

my convalescence, and my struggle to find my way back to a normal life.



▲ **FELIX SCHLAG HOLDS PLASTER MODELS** of his designs for the Jefferson nickel, first struck in 1938.

...A chapter refers to my experiences as a front line soldier, my long hospitalization due to shrapnel wounds,

Beyond the brief reference to his experience as a “front line soldier” in World War I and subsequent hospitalization, no further details about Schlag’s military involvement have ever been published. Fortunately, the curious can piece together the specifics of his service with the assistance of three historic documents made available by *Ancestry.com*: two World War I Personnel Rosters from Bavaria, Germany (1914-18), and a German Casualty List dated December 1, 1914. The records are handwritten in the Old German style, commonly referred to as Sütterlin, a script

PHOTO: ETHEL SCHLAG/OT. THOMPSON



▲ **FELIX SCHLAG LIKELY BEGAN TRAINING** with live ammunition in February 1914, and as a gunner, he was taught how to use the 10.5cm Feldhaubitze ("field howitzer," above).

that has been out of conventional use for nearly 75 years.

The preceding discussion is not offered as a lesson in German lettering, but rather to explain that these items are written in a font unfamiliar to current generations. A transcription from Sütterlin into German is required before the text can be translated into English. Fortunately, a handful of Sütterlin transcription services are available online, and Google Translate does an excellent job of converting the resultant text. From this transcribed and translated baseline, the journey into Felix Schlag's past can begin.

### Military Training

In her 2009 manuscript *Handbook of Imperial Germany*, Janet Robinson discusses Germany's "universal military service" requirements at the turn of the 20th century. The 1888 *Wehrordnung des Deutschen Reiches* ("Military Order of the German Empire or Imperial Law") established that all males were liable for military service commencing on their 17th birthday. During peacetime, all age-eligible men were required to register, and were placed on the rolls of Landsturm 1st Ban (essentially a militia).

When Felix Schlag turned 17 years old in September of 1908, he was suitable for duty, but not mandated to sign up. Obligatory military service typically began at the age of 20 and, therefore, at age 19, Schlag would have

reported to Spring 1911 *Musterung* (registration).

During this time, Germany was experiencing significant population growth, and consequently enjoyed a high peacetime enrollment. In fact, close to 1.3 million eligible men reported to the musterung each year in 1911 and 1912. Despite that men were required to report, they still had to be accepted into the ranks, and it was not uncommon for their service obligation to be deferred for one or two years. Robinson notes that, in actuality, less than 20 percent of recruits were selected each year for the 1911 and 1912 classes.



▲ **CROWN PRINCE RUPPRECHT** of Bavaria was in charge of the German 6th Army, which Schlag was assigned to 9 months and 10 days after he began military training.

(Schlag's active duty was postponed for two years until 1913.)

Once assigned to a class, men were required to report for training in the fall of their class year. Schlag's records indicate he reported for active duty on October 23, 1913, at the age of 22. He was given the rank of *Kanonier* ("gunner") and assigned to the Bavarian 12th Field Artillery Regiment (FAR) 4th Battery. For the next 14 weeks, he learned the basics of being a soldier and slept on a straw mattress on a wooden bunk in brick or stone barracks.

In a 2009 article, "The German Soldier in WWI," Richard H. Keller described a typical day. The men began at 4:45 a.m. to wash, shave and straighten up their quarters. At 5:45 a.m., squads were formed for personal inspection and in preparation for the training lieutenant's arrival. Morning drills continued from 6 a.m. until a mid-day lunch break. Afternoons were reserved for parade-ground drilling and physical training. When the exercises concluded, men ate their evening meal and were permitted to enjoy a beer or a pipe at the canteen before lights out.

After his first few weeks of basic training, Schlag likely took part in a formal ceremony, pledging himself to God and the Fatherland. The observance was intended to instill in the men the gravity of their responsibility and service duty.

In January 1914, Schlag would

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have begun training with live ammunition and reportedly received specific education on the 10.5cm Feldhaubitze ("field howitzer") 98/09 artillery piece. Basic training concluded in early February 1914, when the recruits were inspected by the commanding officer and, assuming they passed, received permanent assignment to the company. The class would then proceed to six weeks of company exercises, followed by two weeks of battalion-level training. The final phase of instruction, known as field exercises, would begin in August, in preparation for September's "autumn maneuvers."

### The Great War Begins

The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife on June 28, 1914, interrupted this time-honored program for Schlag and his class. On August 1, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, and Schlag's unit was mobilized just 9 months and 10 days after he began his training. The 12th FAR was assigned to the German 6th Army, 3rd Bavarian Division, 3rd Bavarian Field Artillery Brigade. The 6th Army fell under the command of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria.

On August 3, 1914, Germany declared war on France and the next day invaded Belgium. On August 6, 1914, orders dispatched Schlag's unit to Landau Garrison, roughly 80 miles southwest of Frankfurt and 125 miles east of Lorraine, France. Two days later, on August 8, 1914, the 6th Army detained in Faulquemont, 28 miles northeast of Lorraine, and on August 10, Schlag found himself north of Château-Salins, about 18 miles southeast of Lorraine.

The French launched an offensive on August 14, desiring to recapture the province of Lorraine,

which had been lost to Prussia since 1871. The German Schlieffen Plan called for the Alsace-Lorraine armies to retreat east and allow the French to advance with little resistance. Prince Rupprecht, seeking a more prominent role for his 6th Army, convinced leadership to allow a counterattack. Schlag's records indicate that, on August 19, he was ordered to a border protection command post in Lothringen (Lorraine).

En route to this assignment, Schlag apparently experienced his first combat near Lidrezing, France (about 30 miles east of Lorraine), when the French attacked the German fort in Morhange. This marked the beginning of the German counteroffensive and is generally considered to be when the Battle of Lorraine became part of the larger "Battle of the Frontiers."

The Battle of Lorraine lasted from August 14 to September 7, 1914, and Felix's regiment participated in the fighting from August 20 to 22. Ultimately, the outnumbered French were defeated at Lorraine and forced to retreat.

On August 22, the German 6th and 7th Armies pursued the retreating French south to Nancy-Epinal, where Schlag participated in a series of attacks for the next 23 days (August 22-September 14, 1914). Allegedly, the largest of the engagements occurred on September 6, and included a massive German artillery assault, which was observed by the Kaiser. For the most part, the fighting around Nancy-Epinal ended about



PHOTO: WIKICOMMONS/FRED HUFNAGEL

September 11, with the French successfully holding off the German offensive.

According to the U.S. Army's Histories of German Divisions, Schlag's Bavarian Division then pushed north toward the Mortagne River, raiding the village of Gerbéviller as it passed through the town. French resistance halted the soldiers' progress, and on September 15, 1914, Schlag was 64 miles north of Gerbéviller in Metz.

### Injury & Recovery

On September 19, the 6th Army boarded a train heading north from Metz to Dinant, Belgium. The troops arrived on September 21, 1914, after a 125-mile journey. Schlag's involvement in the "Race to the Sea" had begun and, unbeknownst to him, his participation in World War I would soon come to a close. The Bavarian documents indicate that from September 23 to 29, 1914, Schlag fought in the Battle on the Somme (not to be confused with the 1916 Battle of the Somme). More than likely, Schlag was involved in the heavy fighting surrounding the First Battle of Albert, as this

*All told, Schlag spent at least 285 days in various medical facilities during his convalescence.*



**GERMAN SOLDIERS** march toward Albert, France, which is located six miles from where Schlag was injured during combat at Montauban-de-Picardie on September 29, 1914.

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

was where Rupprecht's 6th Army was assigned.

The popular belief at the time was that the war would be over by Christmas 1914. For Schlag, it ended 59 days after his unit was initially mobilized. Schlag's active participation in the "Great War" concluded on September 29, 1914, when he was injured on the battlefield at Montauban-de-Picardie, 6 miles east of Albert.

Schlag was taken to the field hospital in Guillemont, France, where the regimental doctor initially listed him as "lightly wounded" by shrapnel to the right shoulder. The December 1, 1914, German Casualty List indicates that Schlag was one of 41 injured, killed or missing from the 12th FAR, 4th Battery, over its 41 days of combat. The document also modified his status to "se-

verely wounded."

From Guillemont, Schlag was transported some 340 miles east to a reserve hospital in Frankfurt-Weiße Lilie. Seventeen days later, on October 22, he was moved to the Israel Hospital in Frankfurt, where he remained until November 11, 1914. He was then relocated to another reserve hospital, 52 Frankfurt-Seckbach, where he spent nearly the next 200 days. Schlag was sent back to the Israel Hospital on June 6, 1915, only to be transferred a final time, on July 17, 1915, when he returned to Seckbach. All told, Schlag spent at least 285 days in various medical facilities during his convalescence.

In October 1915, perhaps upon his release from the hospital, Schlag appears to have been assigned to the Ersatz Abteilung

of the Bavarian 12th FAR for the remainder of the war. This essentially was a replacement battalion that remained in garrison unless needed.

Based on a January 4, 1916, entry in the Bavarian documents, it seems Schlag returned to the Landau Garrison. On this day, he was officially advised of his pension rights by Captain Bürklein, head of the battery. The document bears both Schlag's and Bürklein's signatures. The significance of this action is unknown; perhaps Schlag was entitled to additional compensation because of the injuries he sustained.

Schlag's records indicate that on January 31, 1916, he was declared "Gen. G.K.V.," which is interpreted as a combination of two service readiness designations: "K.V." meaning fit for active service, and "G.V." indicating fit for

*This decoration was presented to those who demonstrated exceptional bravery in combat or exhibited superior leadership.*

garrison duty. This suggests that Schlag was pronounced generally fit for active service in garrison.

### High Honors

The final significant entry in these documents, dated June 15, 1916, noted that Felix Schlag was awarded the Prussian Iron Cross, Second Class (PEK II). This decoration was presented to those who demonstrated exceptional bravery in combat or exhibited superior leadership. No description was offered as to how Schlag earned this award, nor was it clear if it had been presented to his entire unit or to him individually.

World War I would grind on until the armistice on November 11, 1918. The conflict claimed nearly 37 million military and civilian casualties, including 16 million fatalities. It is unknown if Schlag remained attached to the reserve unit in Landau for the remain-

der of the war. What is certain is that he took part in one of history's bloodiest confrontations, battling for 59 days on the front lines during the fierce opening days. He suffered severe wounds and was ultimately decorated for his actions. As Schlag indicated, his nearly 300-day recovery was long, and it is clear how his involvement in the Great War, although seemingly brief, had a significant impact on his life. ■

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PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (COINS) & WIKIPEDIA.ORG

▲ **THOMAS JEFFERSON'S HOME**, Monticello, has been featured almost continuously on the reverse of the Jefferson nickel since the coin's introduction in 1938.

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PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



▲ **A PRUSSIAN IRON CROSS**, second class, was awarded to Schlag for his exceptional bravery or superior leadership.