

Duties and Rights of the Soldier

a. **THE OATH.** Every German soldier, upon induction, is compelled to affirm his legally established military obligation by means of the following *oath* (vow, for atheists): "*I swear by God this holy oath* (I vow) that I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer of Germany and of her people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and that, as a brave soldier, I will be prepared to stake my life for this *oath* (vow) at any time." If, because of an oversight, the oath has not been administered to a soldier, he is held to be in the same position as though he had sworn it; the oath is regarded only as the affirmation of an inherent legal duty.

b. **MILITARY DISCIPLINE.** The German system of military discipline is rigorous, and excesses are severely punished. In principle, absolute and unquestioning obedience towards superiors is required. However, since the summer of 1944, when the Army came under the political influence of the Nazi Party, new orders were issued providing that disloyal superiors not only need not be obeyed but in emergencies may be liquidated by their own men. Officers who do not lead their men into combat or show other signs of cowardice or who, for any reason, mutilate themselves, are normally condemned to death. Divisional commanders and other high-ranking combat officers are specifically ordered to set an example of leadership in the front lines; this explains the high casualty rate among German generals.

Traditionally, German superior officers were addressed only indirectly, in the third person, as "Herr Major is absolutely right." Hitler, however, is addressed directly as "My Leader". Therefore, the Nazis made use of the direct form of address toward superior officers at first optional, then compulsory. Superior officers and noncommissioned officers are addressed as "Mr." (*Herr*) followed by their rank; in the *Waffen-SS*, however, only by their rank: "*Herr Leutnant!*", but "*Untersturmführer!*"

Originally, a distinction was made between the regular military salute and the "German salutation" (*Deutscher Gruss*) which consists of saying "Heil Hitler!" with the right arm outstretched. In August 1944 the latter type of salute was made compulsory throughout. Everyone salutes his

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own superiors as well as others entitled to a salute according to the following general rules: Every officer is the superior of all lower-ranking officers and all enlisted men; every noncommissioned officer is the superior of all privates; every non-commissioned officer in one of the first three grades is the superior of lower-grade noncommissioned officers *in his own unit*. There is no general rank superiority otherwise among non-commissioned officers or among the various grades of privates; however, all members of the Armed Forces are obligated to "greet" one another as a matter of military etiquette.

Members of the Armed Forces are forbidden to associate with foreigners even if they are racially related; marriages between soldiers and non-German women are subject to approval, which is given only after a very thorough investigation; the offspring of such marriages are considered to be German. In the *Waffen-SS*, such marriages are entirely prohibited for German personnel.

Men who severely and repeatedly violate military discipline, but not to an extent that warrants a death sentence, are transferred to correction battalions for a probationary period and given arduous and dangerous assignments; if incorrigible, they are then turned over to the police for extreme punishment.

c. PRESERVATION OF HONOR. Honor is considered the soldier's highest possession. Except in extreme cases, he may be given the opportunity to redeem himself for a dishonorable action by a heroic death in battle or, in milder cases, by exceptionally brave and meritorious service in the lowest grade of private to which he is reduced from his former rank. However, there also exists a rigid personal honor code for officers. Under its provisions, they are obligated to defend their own personal honor as well as the good name of their wives by every possible means and are held to account for violations committed by themselves or their wives. According to the German conception, special honor rules apply to officers and those civilians who are socially their equals. These rules provide in extreme cases for settlement by duel with pistols until one of the two parties is fully incapacitated. This is a leftover from feudal times; before Hitler's assumption of power, a half-hearted attempt was made to outlaw duelling by officers, but the penalties provided were light and did not carry moral stigma. It is significant that under Hitler, duelling of offi-

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cers was legalized in cases where all efforts at settlement by an officers' court of honor (appointed by a regimental or higher commander) fail; however, for duels between two officers, but not between an officer and a civilian, a decision must first be obtained from the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Their medieval conception of honor has a strong influence on the mentality and actions of many German officers. An officer is obligated to react to deliberate insults instantaneously, in a positive and masterly fashion, and to protect other officers from becoming the object of public disgrace.

In the SS, "qualified" enlisted men (i.e. those who carry the dagger) are subject to the same honor rules as officers, being obligated to "defend their honor by force of arms".