Introduction to Researching Numbered SS Daggers
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This Herder full ground Ehrendolch der SS numbered 7101 under the lower cross guard was linked to SS-Oberscharführer Gustav Unbehauen by the pioneering research of the author of this chapter. Ross J. Kelbaugh Collection

With the collapse of Hitler’s Third Reich in May 1945, a flood of Nazi artifacts flowed from Germany around the world as Allied soldiers brought prized souvenirs home to confirm and celebrate their costly victory. As years passed, much of these spoils of war became relegated to attics, garages, basements and closets as those veterans moved on to face the new challenges of their future. Many of these Axis helmets, pistols, medals, daggers and other souvenirs have now found their way into the hands of a new generation as interest in the dramatic events of that era continues to grow while the “Greatest Generation” slips away. These new owners are now often interested in the study of these artifacts as a springboard to better understand the life and times of that tumultuous era. Amongst all fields of collecting, the context of artifacts and its connection with its original owner has usually been lost in the mists of time. Those that can be definitely linked with a person often command an additional premium as this association now breathes life into the inanimate object. Few other collecting fields present this opportunity to personalize the ownership experience than that of numbered SS daggers. As an unintended consequence, these numbered edged weapons now hold the power today to unlock the door to discovering and understanding the people behind the greatest human tragedy in modern history.
SS Membership Numbers

Portion of a 1934 roster for a SS unit where the SS membership numbers for the entire Sturm (company) were assigned consecutively. Note that they were not given out in alphabetical order.

The SS number (SS-Nummer) is the key to unlocking the door that leads to the person behind the numbered SS dagger. When an individual applied to join the Allgemeine-SS, they were assigned to a SS unit and given the status of SS Anwärter (cadet) as they completed the necessary requirements for full membership. During this time, they were tracked by name and birth date which was the common practice throughout the German military. Once accepted in full membership as a SS-Mann, they received their unique SS number. This number would follow them throughout their association in the organization in their membership and personnel records as well as most official correspondence such as transfer orders, promotions lists, award lists, etc. Though much has yet to be learned about the mechanics of the actual numbering process, documentary evidence reveals that blocks of numbers were assigned by the office of the Reichsführer-SS to Oberabschnitte districts which in turn assigned blocks to SS- Standarten (regiments) under their command. As new units were created, the entire group of new members could be assigned their SS numbers in numerical order at one time from the assigned block. In this case, the numbers were not always assigned in alphabetical order. This is important in researching SS numbers. Though having the names of the people whose SS numbers come immediately before and after an unidentified number, it is possible that the name of that unknown SS Mann does not fall alphabetically between the two known identities. The recipient of the unknown number could also have been a member of an entirely different SS-Standarte adding to the challenges of identification.
It is also important to address a common misunderstanding. Not all members of the SS received a SS membership number. Most members of the Allgemeine-SS, which reached a total membership of about 50,000 by the end of the war, received the unique number. Subsequently, the highest SS numbers encountered are in the low 500,000 range (though several have turned up in records even higher perhaps due to clerical error). As early as 1936, it appears that new members of the SS-Verfügungstruppe were not receiving SS membership numbers. This practice was carried over into the Waffen-SS. Perhaps Himmler recognized the difficulty of maintaining the numbering system when anticipating the dramatic expansion of the combat wing of his organization. Allgemeine-SS men who transferred to the ranks of the Waffen-SS took their unique membership number with them. All new Waffen-SS members did not receive one and are primarily identified by their name and birth date. In searching of personnel files of Waffen-SS enlisted men, with very rare exception, anyone with a birth date from 1920 or later will not have a SS number.

**Finding the SS Mann: The SS-Dienstalterslistes**

A except from the 1937 SS-Dienstaltersliste showing the range of information recorded up to 1938. This includes the ranking number, political/para-military appointments (such as “M.d.R.” or Member of the Reichstag), political/military awards (WW I and later WW II), honor sword (Degen), Totenkopferring, SA Sports Award, Reichs Sports Award, Lebensborn contributor, unit(s) and/or command(s), NSDAP number, SS Number, birth date, and dates of promotions. The SS officer’s birth date is most important for researching other record groups.

As numbered SS Daggers evolved from souvenirs to eagerly sought collector items, a few astute collectors recognized that at least some of the identities linked to SS numbers could be uncovered. This was made possible through the SS-Dienstalterslistes der Schutzstaffel der NSDAP or SS Officer Seniority Lists published during the 1930s and 1940s for full time Allgemeine and Waffen-SS officers. The personal information provided varies among some of the editions, but generally an individual’s ranking,
awards, SS number, birth date, NSDAP membership number (though not all were members), current assignment, and dates of promotions are provided. This serves as an invaluable starting point for conducting SS officer research. By the 1970s, original and microfilmed copies from archives began to be circulated, copied, and re-printed and numbered SS daggers identified to SS officers found among the entries began to enter the market. Today these lists can be found reproduced on the internet and are a primary tool for beginning the research and identification of numbered daggers. The following were all of the SS-Dienstalterslistes published with the SS officer ranks included:

October 1934* (SS-Untersturmführer to Reichsführer-SS)
July 1935* (SS-Untersturmführer to Reichsführer-SS)
October 1935 (SS-Untersturmführer to SS-Brigadeführer with some SS Mann to SS-Hauptscharführer)
December 1936* (SS-Untersturmführer to Reichsführer-SS)
December 1937* (SS-Untersturmführer to Reichsführer-SS)
December 1938* (SS-Untersturmführer to Reichsführer-SS)
June 1939: The 1938 Corrections Supplement (SS-Untersturmführer to SS-Obergruppenführer)
January 1942* (SS-Standartenführer to Reichsführer-SS)
April 1942* (SS-Standartenführer to Reichsführer-SS)
October 1942 (SS-Sturmbannführer to SS-Obersturmbannführer)
May 1943 (SS-Standartenführer to Reichsführer-SS)
October 1943 (SS-Sturmbannführer to SS-Obersturmbannführer)
January 1944 (SS-Standartenführer to Reichsführer-SS)
July 1944* (SS-Hauptsturmführer to Reichsführer-SS & Generals der Waffen-SS)
October 1944* (SS-Sturmbannführer to SS-Obersturmbannführer)
November 1944* (SS-Standartenführer to SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer)

(* issues included in The Key database)

In any research of this nature, the management of the information found in these lists is essential to its usefulness. The digital age revolutionized this research. A pioneer Canadian collector and researcher, Bernard Brulé, published in September 2000 The Key, a numerical index to the SS Dienstalterlistes. Using a database program, Brulé extracted all of the SS numbers found in most of the SS-Dienstalterslistes (designated by * above) along with the specific issue and page number of its entry and sorted them in
ascending order. Over 19,000 SS numbers of SS Officers were now available for further research. Since entries in The Key did not include the name of the officer, the page numbers provided for the SS-Dienstalterslistes still have to be consulted to find the officer who was assigned the membership number. Today the identity of the SS officer can be found among the growing number of databases on the internet. For more information about the SS-Dienstalterslistes, see Brulé’s article in the SS Dagger Forum at www.GermanDaggers.com.

The SS Records in the Berlin Document Center

Despite the devastating destruction of aerial bombing and ground combat, hundreds of tons of Nazi German military and political records were captured by Allied forces by the end of the war. The extensive bureaucracies of the NSDAP, the Wehrmacht, Kreigsmarine and Luftwaffe had generated huge amounts of personnel and unit operational records whose value for denazification, demilitarization, demobilization as well as for intelligence purposes had been planned for since the beginning of the liberation of Europe. Heinrich Himmler, himself an obsessive record keeper whose records of gifts to SS personnel and their costs included even those given to his wife and daughter, created an extensive bureaucracy employing a legion of typists that generated extensive records as well. These were of particular interest to Allied forces for post war prosecution of SS personnel for war crimes, especially after the horrors of Nazi concentration camps were revealed and the International Military Tribunal declared the SS to be a criminal organization. Much but not all SS records survived, however, as a concentrated effort was begun to destroy as many as possible once it was accepted that the war was lost. For today’s researchers and collectors, this probably included the central index of all SS numbers and their recipients maintained at SS headquarters in Berlin that was either destroyed under Himmler’s orders or captured by Russian forces and never shared with the West.

Immediately following the war, those SS records gathered from throughout Western Europe and Germany (where many had been dispersed and hidden) were brought together in a complex of buildings in the American sector of Berlin named the Berlin Document Center (BDC). There they were organized and sorted with some eventually shipped to Alexandria, Virginia, and microfilming commenced. Eventually, the original records were
returned to the Germans and the microfilm was deposited in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C., where they are accessible today at the National Archives branch known as Archives II, in College Park, Maryland, on the outskirts of the nation’s capital. For the purposes of this chapter, the records held in the National Archives will be the focus since they are open to public access without restriction. Anyone with photo identification can apply for a researchers permit to conduct their own research or independent researchers are available for hire. Microfilm rolls can be directly accessed in the Microfilm Room. Equipment is available for making paper reproductions and copies of rolls can be purchased in either microfilm or DVD format. (For more information about the holdings of the National Archives, locations, hours, exhibits, etc. visit www.archives.gov)

Recent Discoveries

Since SS No. 7101 was not in the SS-Dienstalterslistes, the dealer offering the dagger with this number for sale was unable to identify the original owner. It was identified by the author from this document, listing members of a SS-Sturmbann with SS membership numbers between 3000 and 15000, discovered through a comprehensive search of BDC records.

For many years the conventional wisdom among collectors was that a SS number could not be identified if it was not in the SS-Dienstalterslistes. Some SS officers (wartime lists excluded some lower officer ranks) along with non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel, with very limited exception, were not included. Further research of numbered SS daggers not found in these lists usually ended there. In recent years all of this has now changed.
While working in 2006 on an unrelated research project in the Microfilm Room at the Archives II, this writer walked over to the other side of the room to look at the cabinets holding the microfilm rolls of the Berlin Document Center. Noticing a drawer labeled for “SS Enlisted Men,” curiosity caused a roll to be pulled for examination. Among the files of late war Waffen-SS recruits were the personnel files of Allgemeine-SS members who were pressed into combat service. These records, which included their SS number, were the catalyst for the current project of mining the BDC records for SS membership numbers not in the SS-Dienstalterslistes. To date, a database of more than 90,000 numbers (numbers continue to be added every week) has been created and 150 numbered SS daggers, whose original owners had been lost, have been identified in the past three years. Some of these can be viewed on the author’s website (www.ssdaggers.com).

**Researching the SS Mann**

Once a SS member is identified, four major record collections in the BDC within the National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized (Record Group 242) form the basis for research. These include SS Officer Files, SS Enlisted Files, and the Race & Settlement Files. Since most SS members were also members of the NSDAP (National Sozialistische Deutsch Arbeiter Partei), Nazi Party membership files are also an important resource. The starting point for researching a SS member is the Master Index of SS Names (“the Black Books”) composed of 32 black loose-leaf binders in the Microfilm Room. These contain the printouts of names, birthdates, and the specific record groups in which a SS name appears for more than one million SS names found in the major SS record groups. It also includes those recorded on documents that were gathered as part of “SS Lists” collection. Finding aids for each of these record groups are then used to determine the roll number on which the files are reproduced.
SS Officer Files

The first document in a SS Officer’s File is usually his *SS-Führerstammkarte*. This is the front of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Josef “Sepp” Dietrich’s and also notes he received an Honor Sword (*Ehrendegen*) in silver. Service personnel cards (*stammkarten*) went through a variety of formats before this was adopted as the standard for SS officers’ records from 1936 until the end of the war. Dietrich’s earlier 1934 *SS-Stammrolle* notes his receipt of the SS Honor Dagger (*Ehrendolch der SS*) though it is not know if it was numbered.

*Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler created a department (*SS Personalhauptamt*) whose functions included the maintaining of records for all officers of the SS beginning with the *Allgemeine-SS* and later with the *Waffen-SS*. These personnel records were captured by the U.S. Third Army in 1945. The approximately 53,000 SS officer files (909 microfilm rolls) are among the most used WW II records by researchers and can be quite valuable in researching an officer’s military career. The number of documents found in a file can vary considerably. Most contain an SS Officer’s earlier *SS-Stammrollen* and later *Führerstammkarte* that provide a
summary of a SS officer’s promotions, assignments, awards, political activity, education and family status. Also included can be photographs of the individual, correspondence, auto-biographies (Lebenslauf) and records relating to military promotions and awards. Documents from other SS agencies were also added to these files after the war as captured records were sorted. In some cases, records can also be hard to read due to the effects of fire and water damage. Included among these files are those for many SS Officers not found in the SS-Dienstalterslistes. It is also possible that the file for a specific individual is not present. Names and birthdates for all of those found in these records were included in the Master Index of SS Names.

SS Enlisted Men Files

The September 1934 SS-Stammliste for Gustav Unbehaun, SS No. 7101, was a format used for SS Officers, NCOs and enlisted men and included more information about the individual’s awards and participation in NSDAP events than earlier cards. Unbehaun’s receipt of the Ehrendolch der SS pictured in this article is noted (column 2).
The SS Enlisted Men records contain approximately 380,000 files (1,738 microfilm rolls) that were assembled after the war from records captured from numerous SS agencies for SS non-commissioned officers and enlisted men. Unfortunately, most of these files are for late war Waffen-SS recruits who did not receive a SS membership number. The records of some Allgemeine-SS members, however, are also found among them since many of these men, who were usually over the age of forty, were called back into service as replacements for Germany’s huge military losses. These files can contain personnel record cards (SS-Stammkarte), photographs, personal documents, SS membership cards, and many other types of records relating to the SS-Mann. Names and birthdates for all SS personnel found in these records were included in the Master Index of SS Names.

Unbehau’n’s later SS-Stammkarte was the format used for enlisted and NCOs from about 1936 through the end of the war. Shown here is the front of the card. The back includes space for more information about political military service, awards, transfers, training, etc.
Race and Settlement (RuSHA) Files

Among the most valuable records for researching a SS member are those of the SS Race and Settlement Office (Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt-SS or RuSHA) that were captured virtually intact at the end of the war by US forces in the Harz mountains. These are composed of approximately 240,000 files (7,811 microfilm rolls) and were maintained by this agency to oversee the Nazi goal of creating the “Master Race.” To accomplish this, marriages of SS men had to be approved by this office to guarantee the purity of the bloodline. The SS member and his fiancée had apply at least three months before their engagement and provide documentation concerning their physical health, as well as extensive genealogical documentation. This was proven through extensive family trees (Ahnentafel) whose genealogical branches were scrutinized for any unacceptable ancestors. Those of NCOs and enlisted men had to go back as far as 1800 for themselves and their potential spouses. SS officers had to trace their ancestry back to the 1750s. Records from other SS personnel files were often combined with these files after the war and service personnel record cards (Stamkarten) are sometimes found though they were not required as part of the marriage application process. Among the most valuable of the required forms submitted by both applicants is the “Questionnaire to the Engagement and request for Marriage (with photos)” or Fragebogen zum Verlobungs- und Heiratsgesuch (mit Lichtbildern). This gives a summary of the SS man’s military and party association including a personal record (Lebenslauf) that is a short autobiography. This is particularly valuable if the SS service personnel record is not available. Most important for researchers today, each person was required to submit three photographs: a three quarter bust, a profile, and a full-length pose. This is often the only source for putting a face along with a name connected to an identified object. Names and birthdates for all SS personnel found in these records were included in the Master Index of SS Names.
The *Fragebogen* is among the most valuable records included as part of the Race & Settlement File, especially if the *stammkarte* is not found. Included in the questionnaire are details about personal, party and military service.
Lebenslauf:

Bauarbeiterlehre in meiner väterlichen Werkstatt arbeitete ich bei
Leibnitzmeister W. Herrmann in Coburg das Holzarbeiten
und besuchte während meiner 5jährigen Lehre bei
meine Mutter an einer Lungenkrankheit, worauf es sich
bei einem Bundeslehrbuch in Kurfürstendorf zu Coburg zurechnen
ließ. Nach Ablegen der Essenerprüfung arbeitete ich in
verschiedenen Fabriken bis zum Jahre 1923. Da ich mich
schon 1923 öffentlich zur Partei bekannte, wurde ich zum
Meistereinzelarbeiter in der Fabrik entlassen. Ich arbeite
Weihnachtstage in der Fabrik und wurde bei einem Aufzug
unfall entlassen, aus der Aufsicht in den Februar ausgezogen.
Ich wurzelte auf Anordnung der Partei 1915 und wurde als
Hilfe in anderen Fabriken angestellt. Der Aufstieg der Partei 1923 bedingt, dass ich seit 1923
meine Abteilung auf den Posten Oberleiters befördert. Am 20. April 1934 wurde ich zum
Oberleiter befördert. Aus der Verwaltung innerhalb der 44. Wieder wurde ich zum Oberleiter
arbeitete, an die Stelle des Oberleiters gekommen

Gustav Unbehaun

1923-34, 35-38

1. Mai 1935
Another important component was the group of three photographs (bust, profile, full length) for the SS Mann and his fiancée. Unfortunately these can sometimes be difficult to reproduce since the microfilm copies can be very low contrast (bottom right).
Gustav Unbehaun’s NSDAP membership card from the NSDAP Zentralkartei (MFKL) file includes his party number, entrance date and notations about withdrawing and later rejoining it. No SS membership number was recorded.
On the reverse his photograph in his SA uniform taken before joining the SS was still attached. These photos are usually better quality for reproduction.

Close to the end of the war, American forces captured a paper mill where the official membership registry cards of the NSDAP had been shipped for destruction. They are believed to be 85-90% complete. Many, though not all, members of the SS were members of the Nazi party and their membership can often be documented among these records. The NSDAP Zentralkartei (MFKL) contains approximately 4.3 million registration cards (3,167 microfilm rolls). Entries include a member’s name, date and place of birth, marital status, membership number, date when party was joined, dates for
leaving or rejoining the party, current address, and Ortsgruppe (local party organization) and Gau (administrative region). In addition, photographs of party members were glued to the back of file cards. Though many were removed at some point, 30-40% of the cards still have their photos making it a valuable source to check. A second group worth checking is the NSDAP Ortsgruppenkartei (MFOK) collection of approximately 6.6 million membership registration cards (2,275 microfilm rolls) that were once organized regionally though were re-organized alphabetically and phonetically. These include a member’s name, membership number, date and place of birth, profession, marital status, date the person joined, left, rejoined the Party, address, Ortsgruppe and Gau. This can be important to check as well since it is more complete for the membership than the MFKL. The Master Index of SS Names does _not_ specifically identify SS men that are found in the NSDAP membership files. A separate finding aid helps researchers locate an individual’s card on the microfilm.

Other Research Resources

Several other resources may provide information on SS personnel. The “SS Lists” contain the names of approximately 240,000 members (26 microfilm rolls) of the Allgemeine- and Waffen-SS. The lists were originally put together by SS agencies and were re-filed chronologically after the war at the BDC. As lists, the limited information the provide varies and can include names, birthdates, ranks, SS numbers, and home addresses, but may be worth checking when researching SS personnel. Names for all SS personnel listed with birthdates were included in the Master Index of SS Names. Among the records of the NSDAP, the Party Census of over 200,000 forms living in greater Berlin in 1939 (121 microfilm rolls) that can provide a wealth of information if a SS member as living in the area at the time. Party Correspondence (6,182 microfilm rolls) may contain documents if the SS member exchanged letters with the NSDAP. The SS also maintained separate court system (Gericht) for punishing infractions of the SS Disciplinary & Penal Code (Disziplinarstraf- und Beschwerdeordnung der SS) by SS personnel which may supplement research. If the SS member was involved in war crimes proceedings after the war, the records of the National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records can also be an important resource.

An increasing amount of research material is being published in books and placed on the internet in websites and discussion forums. A search may turn
up a surprising amount of information about a SS member, particularly if he was an officer. If the person was killed or missing in action, the website of the *Gräbernachweis des Volksbundes Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.* or National Union German Military Grave Registration Service ([www.volksbund.de/graebersuche](http://www.volksbund.de/graebersuche)) can sometimes provide a soldier’s date and place of his reported missing in action or death as well as burial site down to the grave location. To conduct this search (you will be required to register online to gain access), the man’s surname, his birth date or date/location of death or report of missing will help to narrow a search due to the often surprising commonality of certain names.

**Research Caveats**

Transposition of SS membership numbers are one common problem when researching Third Reich documents. In this case, however, the SS-*Rottenführer* with SS No. 34 513 initially filled in the wrong SS number on his RuSHA’s *Fragebogen*.

An important point for the collector of numbered SS daggers is the accuracy of the records used to identify the original owner. Even though they were generated a huge professional bureaucracy, human error comes into account. The most common problem is the transposition or jumbling of SS membership numbers by a typist. The number found on a single document may not be the actual membership number assigned to the name linked to it. There have even been some cases where the SS members themselves recorded an incorrect number on a document and at last once case where an individual was mistakenly assigned two different numbers! Information provided on the Service personnel cards and *Führerstammkartes* may also be inaccurate due to human error, lack of updating and the constraints eventually placed on the system as the war progressed. Consequently, before making a major purchase of a dagger that has been identified by a
number, it is important to get documentation confirming the individual’s number from a variety of sources. This can be a particular problem with SS NCOs or enlisted men since there are far fewer personnel files for them in the National Archives. In those cases your best hope is that they have a RuSHA file which may, or may not, resolve the conflict or you may be better off to let someone own that particular piece of history.

The interest in the collection of identifiable SS daggers will only continue to increase as new collectors enter the hobby and records become widely available. Whether you choose to conduct the search yourself or use the services of a researcher who can find your SS Mann, the personalization of the artifact can add a new dimension to its ownership and lead to a better understanding of the people responsible for this human tragedy.

For more information or inquiries about researching numbered SS daggers and other artifacts, contact the author at Historic Graphics & Research, Box 32831, Baltimore, MD 21282-2831 or visit www.ssdaggers.com.