

To love the fatherland, as an eagle loves its nest...

The eagle is an almighty bird, the master of the skies, who can look the sun in the eye. In Antiquity Zeus used the eagle as a messenger to communicate his wishes to the people. (...) It is characterized by strength and independence.

Manguin, J., Champagne, J. et Van Den Ruel, M., *Sous nos ailes, l'aviation militaire belge. Son histoire, ses avions, ses insignes.*

Dear visitor,

With this leaflet the Royal Military Museum in Brussels invites you to extend your knowledge of military history. The Museum safeguards remarkable objects from all periods and all countries. The educational service now suggests to trace the eagle in the army.

The selected objects are to be found in following galleries: Historic Gallery, Arcades, 14-18 Gallery, Aviation Hall, Navy Gallery and Russian Gallery.



Historic Gallery

Around 1860 the Mexican people wished to free themselves from European control as embodied by Emperor Maximilian of Austria. This emancipation took place when the Mexicans rebelled against the imperial crown. Maximilian was wed to Charlotte, the daughter of Leopold I. He therefore asked the King of the Belgians to send troops to quash the rebellion. Family ties pushed Leopold I to comply with his son-in-law's request. He constituted an expeditionary corps that was sent out to Mexico from 1861 till 1864.



During his empire (1804-1815) Napoleon I decided to revive the symbols of ancient Rome and he granted every battalion a standard. It consisted of a tricoloured flag topped by an eagle. In his decree Napoleon called his battalions "eagles". Standards in various shapes were created and each standard had its own characteristics. The standards with an eagle are called "picot".



The eagle looks to the right, its wings are slightly spread and in its left talon it holds a lightning bolt. The battalion's number is displayed on the eagle.

Losing a standard is every soldier's nightmare. If the battalion lost its standard by accident the emperor could grant a new one, if he wished to do so. However, if the standard was lost in battle the battalion could not receive a replacement. During the Napoleonic wars the capture of the enemy's flag was as important as winning the battle as such. A victory was not complete without capture of the enemy flag. On the painting we see Wellington after the battle of Waterloo: he is handed two "picots" taken from the French army.





In May 19, 1802 Napoleon I created the Légion d'honneur. The order consisted of four classes (knight, officer, commander, great officer), with a medal for each class. On January 30, 1805 Napoleon created the class of the Great Eagle. All citizens were eligible for the order. On October 28, 1870 the Légion d'honneur became military; it was an acknowledgment of courage when facing the enemy and of the defence of the values of the French Republic.

14-18 Gallery

In 1914 the Germans still wore the same equipment as during the French-Prussian war of 1870-1871. German infantry used the pickelhaube. These helmets were made of boiled leather and black lacquer and carried the national symbol, e.g. an eagle. The helmet's peak protected against cavalry attacks.



During the Great War Germany constituted two police forces. The Landgendarmerie was to maintain law and order on the national territory, whereas the Feldgendarmerie was to do the same in territories conquered by the Germans. The members of the Feldgendarmerie wore a gorget, as depicted here. The gorget was made of polished metal, carried the national symbol and was worn around the neck with a chain.



The arcades

The army has always used musical instruments to convey orders, to raise troop moral, to adapt the marching rhythm or to indicate time. Drums or wooden and copper wind instruments were great favourites. Soldiers were to recognize both instruments and tunes, as orders were conveyed that way. Today the army only uses instruments during parades and ceremonies. The instruments sometimes carry a national symbol, such as an eagle.

Aviation

The first insignias on Belgian military planes appeared during the Great War (1914-1918), when pilots copied the idea from the French. Captain Georges Guynemer's squadron for instance sported a stork. Other common symbols were the bee, the bat, the thistle, the devil, the dragon, the penguin, ... The eagle only appeared in Belgian aviation in 1935, when 5 and 6 squadron of the 3rd hunting group in the 2nd aviation regiment started using it. From then onwards eagles regularly appeared on airplane fuselages.

On July 27, 1942, when Belgium was occupied by the Germans, a Belgian parachutist and commando unit was created in England. The Belgian government in exile decided to supply a Belgian elite unit (4th troop, identifiable by their green berets) to the N° 10 Inter-Allied Commando, as suggested by the British. The unit was led by reserve captain Georges Danloy and was billeted in Abersoch in Wales. The unit's insignia consisted of a Thompson machinegun, an eagle and an anchor, thus symbolizing the three elements the men operated in (air, sea, land).



The para-commandos played an important part in the allied victory during the Second World War, in Korea, in Kolwezi, etc. Today, this unit is split up in Belgium. Parachutists are billeted in Diest and wear a red beret, whereas commandos are to be found in Flawinnes and wear a green beret.

The Navy

George Washington created the American Navy in late 1775, during the American war of independence. This force played a determining part in the Secession War and during the First World War. From 1941 to 1945, during the battle for control of the Atlantic and the Pacific, the American Navy was heavily solicited. During the Second World War the US Navy proved stronger than the English Royal Navy, up till then seen as the most powerful navy in the world.



Contrary to European countries the Americans use the eagle in all forces (army, navy, aviation), as it is an American national symbol.

Russian Gallery

Since Antiquity people have been rewarded with medals. Religious orders appeared during the crusades era. These religious orders eventually gave birth to chivalry orders. Each country has its own orders. We can think of the Polish Order of the White Eagle. The order was created in 1325 by King Vladisla I for his son's wedding. After Napoleon's downfall and the Russian conquest of Poland Tsar Alexander I decided to perpetuate the order. The order is symbolized by two eagles, the Polish white eagle and the two-headed Russian eagle, topped by a crown.



The two-headed eagle dates back to Antiquity and has Hittite roots or can also be linked to the symbol of the city of Lagash in Mesopotamia. Countless dynasties have used the symbol. The Byzantine Empire is an example, with the Palaiologos dynasty.

In Russia the two-headed eagle first appeared in 1472, when Ivan III "the Great" married the Princess Sophie Palaiologos. Through his wedding he obtained the territories of the former Byzantine empire, that had disappeared in 1453 when the Turks took Constantinopel (the present-day Istanbul). Through his Byzantine wife Ivan III was allowed to use the two-headed eagle as a symbol for his empire. With this symbol the tsars wished to highlight not only the fact that they descended from the Byzantine empire and Rome, but also that they ruled over an empire stretching from Eastern Europe all the way to Asia.



The two-headed eagle is still in use today. We can see it on seals, flags, military emblem or it appears in the shape of everyday objects, such as a cigar cutter. Albania uses the eagle as its national symbol.



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