

500 years of the Papal Swiss Guard : "Swiss Guards receive comprehensive weaponry training"

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **33 (2006)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **01.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906397>

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"Swiss Guards receive comprehensive weaponry training"
Since 1 August 1998, 40-year-old Colonel Elmar Th. Mäder from Eastern Switzerland has commanded the 110-strong Swiss Guard in Rome. How is the mandate to provide personal protection for the pontiff and permanent surveillance of his Vatican residence carried out in this age of terrorism and state-of-the-art weaponry? Peter Amstutz asked the Guard Commander.



Guard Commander Col. Elmar Th. Mäder

Col. Mäder, the core task of the Swiss Guard is to "constantly defend the safety of the sacred person of the Holy Father and his residence." How is this actually organised round the clock with 110 men?

Col. Elmar Th. Mäder: We are not responsible for all the security, only for the entrances

to the Vatican, the palace and the Holy Father. The Vatican also deploys the gendarmerie and, outside the Vatican, the state police. 110 men are sufficient for our tasks in the inner sanctum of the Vatican. Our bodyguards are specially trained.

What requirements must a Guard meet from the commander's standpoint?

In addition to the standard requirements – height, age, Catholic, Swiss citizenship, completion of recruit training etc. – the most important criteria are an ability to adapt, physical and mental strength, and a flexible approach to leisure time.

How are Guards trained to perform their personal protection duties?

Only longer-serving Guards from corporal level upwards perform personal protection duties. Here, the important criteria are training and experience in the Pope's environment, and training with the Federal Council's personal security unit, with annual refresher courses.

Could the Guard's security mandate not be better served by deploying some of its members in civilian clothes?

This is already happening. Uniformed Guards are deployed in surveillance duties at sentry posts, on ceremonial duty and on regu-

lar duty. Our uniform serves two functions: as a form of representation and to convey authority. Sector chiefs and bodyguards operate only in civilian clothes. During audiences, for example, roughly half of the Guards stand watch in civilian clothes.

Is the "halberdier" image of the Guard during ceremonial duties a deliberate understatement, in order to divert attention from the protection corps' true capabilities?



Swiss Guard in the armoury, preparing for the oath-taking ceremony.

No. Ceremonial duties are part of our remit. But on average they account for only about eight percent of our total time. Eighty percent of our duties are surveillance. The halberd is used as a decorative weapon only on ceremonial duty. On the other hand, we don't want to show off our strengths: that would be inappropriate.

in an ecclesiastical context. But that doesn't mean we are not a well-trained effective force.

The Guard has access to firearms. Do they also have the opportunity to become effective marksmen and take regular shooting practice?

All Guards receive comprehensive weaponry training. There are plenty of opportunities to train and these are regularly exploited. With regard to the infrastructure, we work with part-

ners but conduct our own training courses. The knowledge acquired in the courses is incorporated in our own courses for Guards. This form of training allows us to motivate Guards to serve additional tours of duty.

What personally prompted you, a lawyer and accountant, to take over command of the Swiss Guard?

Even when I was completing my studies I asked myself what I could do in a professional

capacity for the Church. The priesthood was also an option, but I had no vocation in that direction. As a member of the Swiss Student Association I got to know my future wife on a pilgrimage to Rome, at a private mass followed by an audience with Pope John Paul II. This encounter

left a deep impression on us both. During my stay I also got to know the Swiss Guard. A few years later a friend of ours who is a priest suggested that I could fulfill my vocation by applying as an officer in the Swiss Guard. It took four years of applications before I was permitted to join the Guard.

As a senior officer in the Guard, it is extremely satisfying to guide young people on the threshold of adulthood. At the age of 20 to 25 we are all impressionable. Whether I like it or



A halberdier swearing his oath in the Vatican reception hall.

not, I am the type of person who influences my troop. And I want to exert this influence in a targeted manner.

It means we can offer professional training for a federal diploma in surveillance and secu-

rency.

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500 YEARS OF LOYAL SERVICE TO THE POPE

■ The "smallest army in the world", the Guardia Svizzera Pontificia or Swiss Guard, is celebrating its 500th anniversary. On 21 June 1505, Pope Julius II asked the Confederation of Cantons to send "200 hired infantrymen from your country". The reason? "At God's behest we intend to avail ourselves of their services to guard our palace." The first 150 men marched 850 kilometres to Rome under the command of Kaspar von Silenen of Uri.



On 6 May, 1727, 147 Guards died in the service of Pope Clement VII. The 189 men of the Swiss Guard fought heroically alongside their commander Kaspar Röst of Zurich during the Sack of Rome by 20,000 German, Spanish and Italian soldiers under Emperor Charles V. Every year, almost 300 young Swiss apply for the Guard, but only 25 to 35 recruits are required per year. The candidates must be Catholic Swiss aged be-

tween 19 and 30, with an unblemished record. They must have completed recruit training and be at least 1.74 metres tall, and prepared to serve for at least two years. They must follow the instructions on their commander's information sheet: "Teeth must be in good condition. Bring along your military service booklet with authorisation to serve abroad, two pairs of solid braces for the uniforms, a shoe-cleaning kit for black uniform

shoes and, if possible, an old set of bed linen." Guards are only permitted to marry when they reach the rank of corporal, are 25 years or older, and have served for three years.

■ On 6 May each year, the new Guards take their oath in the Damascus Courtyard of the Vatican, raising their right hand and placing their left hand on the flag of the Swiss Guard corps: "I swear I will faithfully, loyally and honourably serve the Su-

preme Pontiff and his legitimate successors, and also dedicate myself to them with all my strength, sacrificing if necessary also my life to defend them. I assume this same commitment with regard to the Sacred College of Cardinals whenever the See is vacant. Furthermore I promise to the Commanding Captain and my other superiors respect, fidelity and obedience. I swear to observe all that the honour of my status requires. I, Halberdier

[recruit's name], swear I will observe faithfully, loyally and honourably that which has now been read out to me. May God and his saints assist me."

■ The Swiss Guards experienced their biggest nightmare of recent times on 13 May 1981, when the Turk Mehmet Ali Ağca shot and severely wounded Pope John Paul II. At the time Alois Estermann, later 31st commander of the Guard, was on bodyguard duty and threw him-

self between his charge and the would-be assassin. On 4 May 1998, when Lance Corporal Cédric Tornay of the Valais shot Estermann and his Venezuelan wife ten hours after swearing his oath, and then killed himself, things looked bad for the Swiss Guard. The Vatican published an explanation that is disputed to this day, claiming that Tornay committed the murder in an act of revenge. PETER AMSTUTZ