

Collecting and Shooting the Military Surplus Rifle

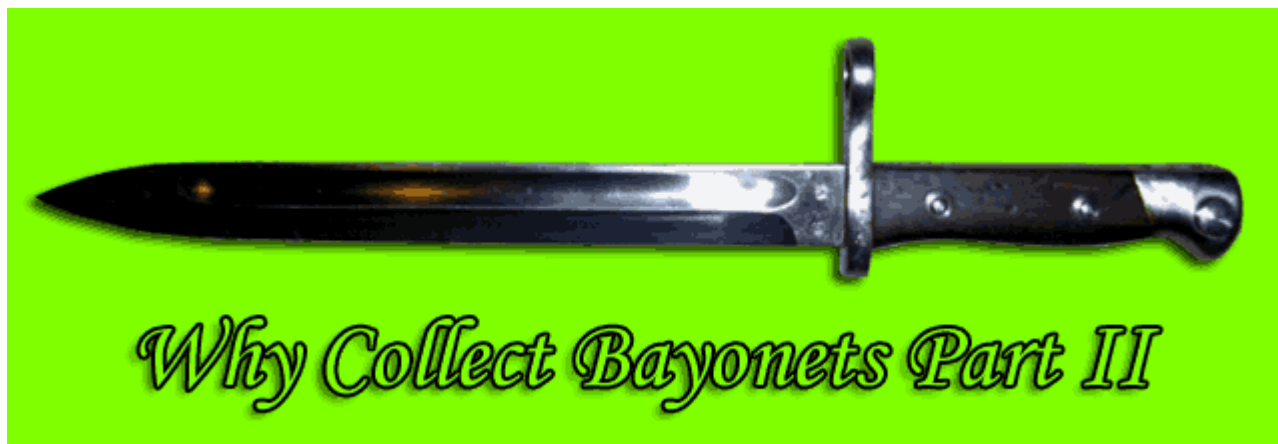


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Article by [Ralph Cobb](#)

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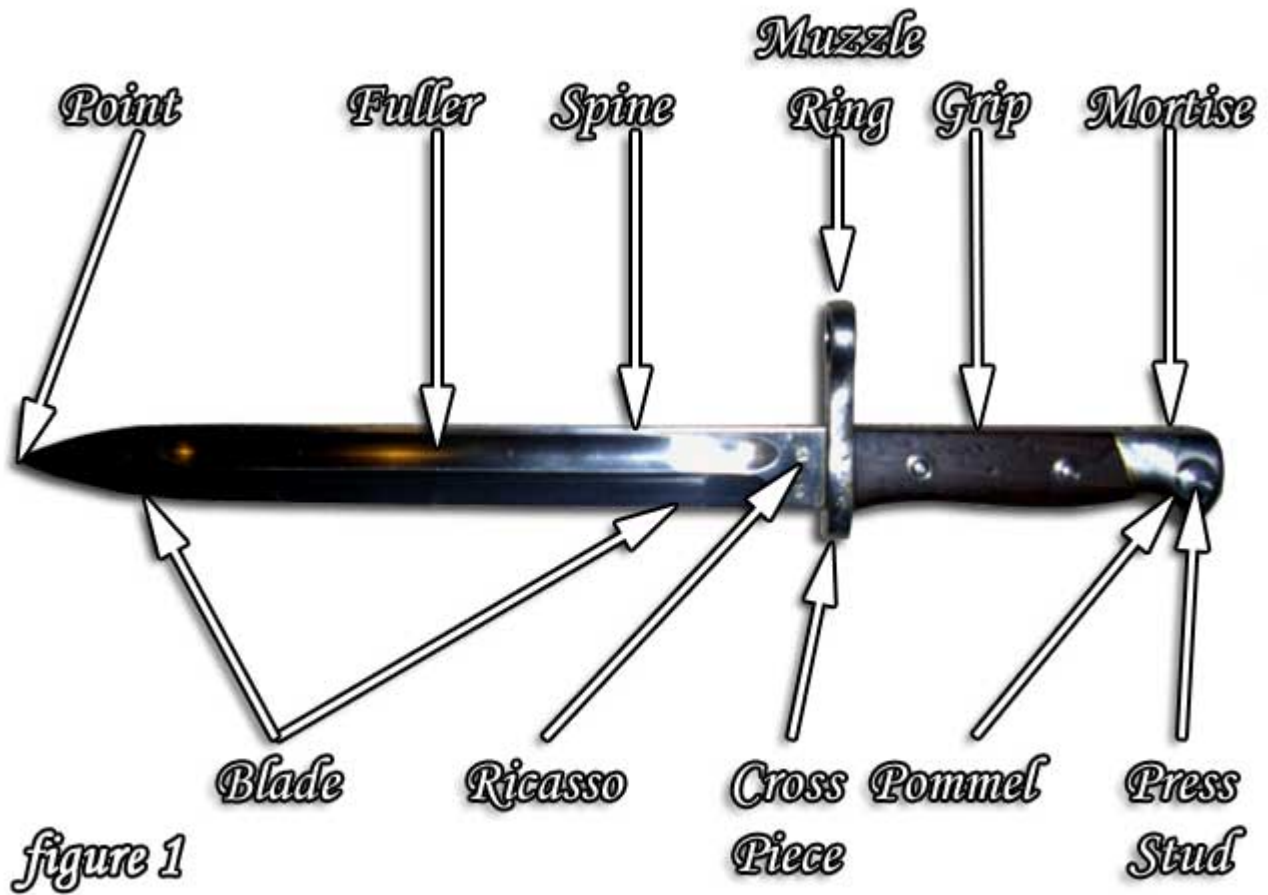
This is the second part of an article regarding bayonets and bayonet collecting. [Part one](#) covered a brief history of bayonets, bayonet types, getting started in bayonet collecting, and where to look for bayonets. In this article, I cover some of the more technical aspects: bayonet terminology, bayonet identification, condition issues, care of your collection, storage and display, and frogs.

### Bayonet Terminology

Bayonet terminology differs some from what is commonly associated with knives. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, the following diagrams point out some of the basic parts of the bayonet and the proper terminology for describing them.

#### Knife or Sword Bayonet Terminology

(Chilean M1895 Knife Bayonet)



**Socket Bayonet Terminology**

(U.S. M1873 Cadet Bayonet)

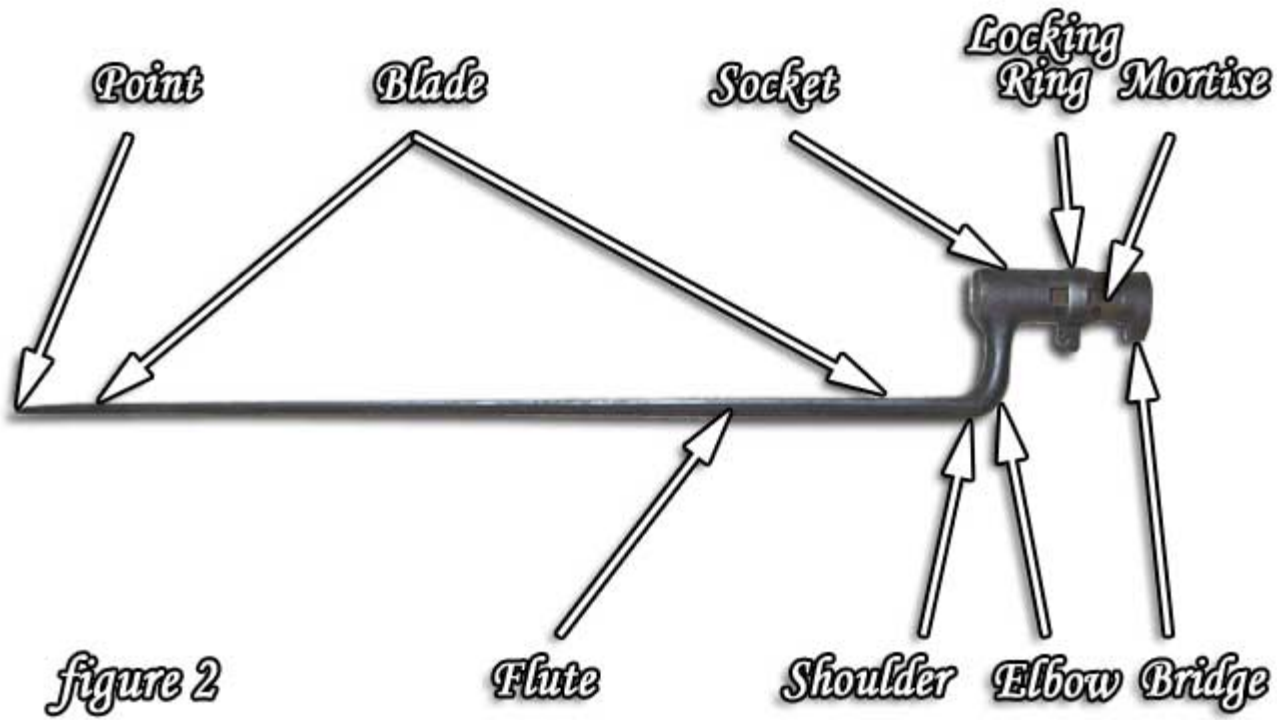


figure 2

Scabbard Terminology

(Brazilian M1908 Knife Bayonet)

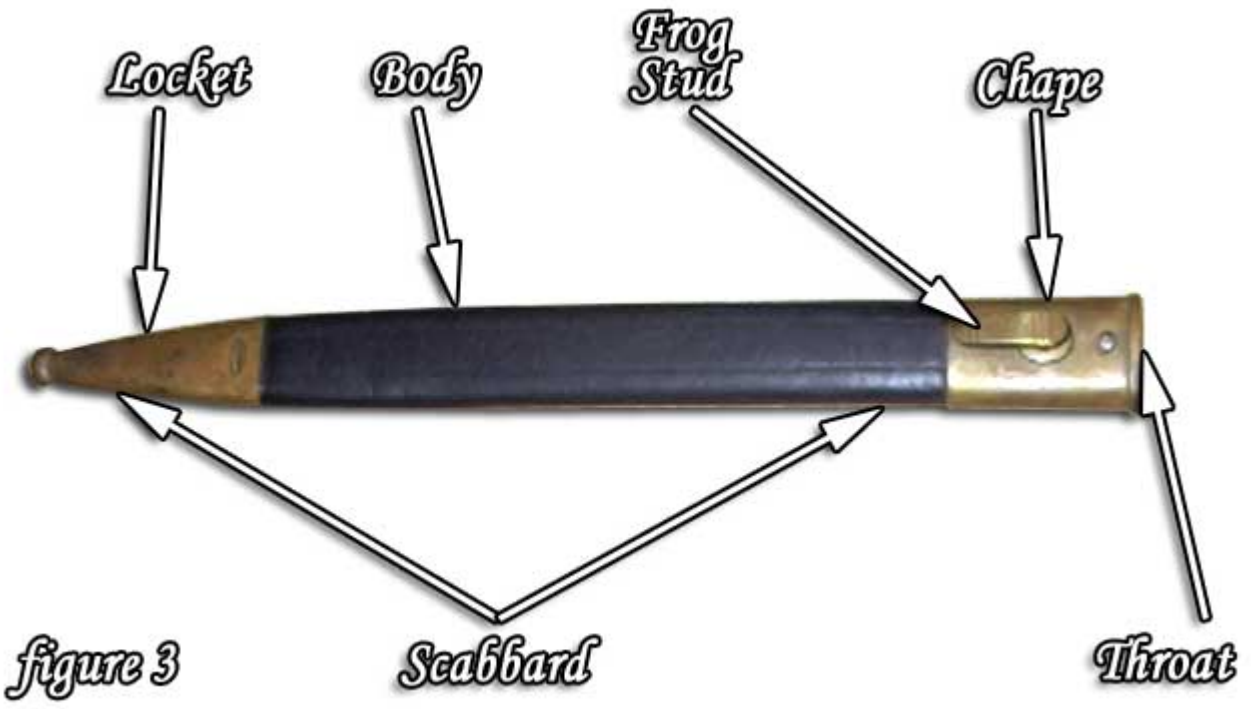


figure 3

Bayonet Identification

Identifying bayonets can be a challenge. Unlike rifles, many bayonets have few markings or none at all. Often, numerous bayonets were produced for the same rifle, so many bayonets look alike. While many countries bought rifles abroad or used hand-me-downs, they almost always had their own bayonets.

A reference book, like [Bayonets from Janzen's Notebook](#) is an essential tool. There is no substitute for doing your bookwork and getting on the web or out to the shows to practice what you've studied. Identifying bayonets only becomes easier with experience.

If present, markings are the most obvious point of identification. For example, most British bayonets have been marked pretty similarly from the 1840s to the present day. Most of the Commonwealth nations (Australia, Canada, India, etc.) also use marking schemes similar to Britain. The U.S., Germany, Japan and many other countries also use distinctive markings. The ability to recognize and interpret markings is an important skill.

Dimensions are also a very important tool. Blade length, overall length, and muzzle ring diameter (if present) are usually sufficient when dealing with knife or sword bayonets. Socket bayonets present a challenge. Many are devoid of markings and differences are more subtle. Dimensions are crucial to identification. Measurements of the socket length, elbow length, and the position of the mortise are also required for identification.

Measure muzzle ring or socket diameters with a caliper to the nearest .001. For all other measurements, a tape measure will do. Measure carefully and get the dimensions within 1/16<sup>th</sup> of an inch. Many bayonet references provide dimensions in millimeters, so be prepared to convert if you measure in inches.

Blade styles can be distinctive. Blades can be fullered or unfullered. Contrary to popular myth, the fuller is not a 'blood groove.' The fuller adds strength and rigidity by making the blade into an I-beam. I-beams are really strong. They're why we can build skyscrapers.

In addition to the basic straight blade, specialized blade shapes exist. Some 19<sup>th</sup> Century sword bayonets have Yataghan blades. The Yataghan has a graceful double-bend that adds strength and rigidity, while keeping the grip and point in alignment for thrusting efficiency. The bolo blade can be either a fat oval shape or an arc shape that is thinner in the middle than on both ends. Bolos are for brush-cutting and were developed for (and hated by) early machine-gun crews. The butcher blade is slightly bulbous, wider toward the point than at the ricasso. It is so named, because of its resemblance to a butcher's knife. Socket bayonets typically have triangular or cruciform (cross-shaped) blades.

The scabbard can also provide important data. For the record, it's a scabbard, not a sheath. Knives have sheathes. Bayonets and swords have scabbards. Note the scabbard construction: all steel, leather body with chape and locket, or composition/plastic. The shape of the frog stud can also be distinctive. Some countries don't use frogs. Their scabbards don't have frog studs, but typically include some kind of integral belt hanger.

### **Condition Issues**

What do bayonet collectors look for? For the most part, they want bayonets with

scabbards. It is difficult and costly to find a solo scabbard for a naked blade. Very old (Civil War and earlier) bayonets are rarely encountered with scabbards, so they are an exception. Matching numbers are to bayonets what they are to rifles. If the bayonet and scabbard are both serial-numbered, matching numbers are a definite plus.

The point should be nice and the blade unsharpened. Sharpening is a major detractor and affects value and desirability significantly. Honest wear is fine. A little surface rust can usually be dealt with, but heavy scale or pitting isn't so good. If the grip or pommel looks like it's been used as a hammer, that's one to pass on.

Steel scabbards should not have major dents or creases. It is nearly impossible to remove dents or creases from scabbards, so don't count on being able to do much. In service, armorers had special scabbard mandrels for removing dents. These do turn up occasionally, but often fetch more than the bayonet. One encounters leather scabbards in all states of preservation. You can't do much to improve old leather. Can't make a rotten or oily scabbard strong, nor a stiff brittle scabbard supple. The frog stud should not be loose, bent, or broken off.

However, a 100+ year old bayonet is rarely a perfect specimen. A good example is my German M1871 sword bayonet. The scabbard leather is hard as wood and the seam is open (the thread rotted away). However, the bayonet looks like it was made yesterday, except for the nice patina on the brass grip and scabbard fittings. Both bayonet and scabbard have matching unit markings, a real plus. Despite the condition issues with the scabbard, it is an exceptional specimen of a scarce and desirable bayonet. Go for the condition that satisfies you and be a happy collector.

### **Care of Your Collection**

How much care your collection requires is largely a function of where you live. Collectors who live in wet, humid areas fight a determined battle against rust. Being in interior Northern California, I have it pretty good. I keep my bayonets oiled and handle them with cotton gloves. Doing that, I can go 3-4 years before feeling like I need to oil them again. I use silica gel desiccant in each drawer of my storage cabinet as well.

Some collectors use Rust Inhibiting Grease (RIG) and even seal oiled/greased bayonets in ziploc bags for long-term storage. Another preservative product is microcrystalline wax, sold under the trade name Renaissance Wax. I have not used this product, but understand that it is well thought of in the museum field for long-term storage of items that aren't handled a lot.

Bayonets are sometimes found nickel-plated for ceremonial purposes. They deserve special care. I do not apply oil or grease to anything nickel-plated. If oil manages to seep underneath the plating, it can cause the plating to lift and flake off. I apply a non-abrasive paste wax (Johnson's Paste Wax or a hard furniture wax, NOT car wax) to nickel-plated pieces as a protective coating.

Care of antique leather is a hotly debated subject. One of the cardinal rules of conservation is never put anything on an object that you can't take off. The problem with leather is that once you apply something, there is no getting it off. For those who want something, Pecard's Leather Dressing is the product used by most of the experienced

collectors that I know. Oils (e.g., neatsfoot, mink) are a major no-no on antique leather, as they darken the leather and markedly accelerate its deterioration.

### **Storage, and Display**

One of the nice things about bayonets is that they don't present the storage challenge that rifles do. You won't have to buy a bigger house because of your bayonet collection. Personally, I am not an advocate of conspicuous display. However, some collectors prefer to combine storage and display, so I will cover these two subjects together.

For storage, just about any kind of container will do. Bayonets can be carefully piled on top of one another without much concern about damage. The downside to this approach is that the bayonet you need to retrieve at any given moment will invariably be at the bottom of the pile.

When I was starting out, I wanted secure storage to keep the kids away. I did the pile thing in the corner of a gun safe for a year or so. As my collection outgrew that approach, I bit the bullet and purchased a used 10-drawer architect's flat file. While not the most economical approach, it is hard to beat. I lined the wide, flat drawers with indoor-outdoor carpet and put a piece of the carpet on top for a nice work surface. I figure that it will hold about 400-500 bayonets, which, at my rate of accumulation, should carry me for a long time.

One of the more popular display approaches is to mount pegboard against a wall, with 1 x 2 spacers behind it. Decorative moulding can be placed around the pegboard for a finished appearance. Pegboard is very economical and offers maximum flexibility to make changes as a collection evolves.

### **Frogs**

What do frogs have to do with bayonets?

I consulted my giant Random House Unabridged Dictionary on this one. It defines a frog as "a sheath suspended from a belt and supporting a scabbard." Use of the term dates to 1710-1720, perhaps from Portugal.

While the U.S. doesn't use them, frogs are used by most of the world to allow the bayonet to be carried on an equipment belt. Frogs are very collectible in their own right. Anthony Carter was the world's expert on frogs until his passing in 2002. In his three-part book, Bayonet Belt Frogs, Carter identified 589 different frogs.



*figure 4*

This example happens to be a WW I German leather belt frog for the M1898/05 'butcher blade' bayonet. The frog stud hooks through the hole in the front piece, securely holding the scabbard in place. Frogs are typically made of leather or canvas webbing.

So, why collect bayonets?. Because bayonets are fun, fascinating, and a piece of history in their own right. It's easy to get started, and like those legendary potato chips, you can't just have one. My website at ([www.worldbayonets.com](http://www.worldbayonets.com)) has additional information on bayonet collecting.

My objective for this series was to introduce the subject of bayonet collecting to the Surplusrifle.com community. Hopefully, it has raised awareness and piqued curiosity enough for more collectors to take notice of bayonets as they pursue their collecting activity.

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