



The Military Order of Maria Theresa was the highest military honour of the Habsburg Monarchy.

Founded on 18 June 1757, the day of the Battle of Kolin, by the Empress Maria Theresa, the honour was to reward especially meritorious and valorous acts by commissioned officers, including and especially the courageous act of defeating an enemy, and thus "serving" their monarch.



The awards were officially presented at a ceremony known as a "Promotion". These ceremonies had been numbered consecutively since the 1st Promotion on the 7th March 1758.

It was specifically given for "successful military acts of essential impact to a campaign that were undertaken on [the officer's] own initiative, and might have been omitted by an honorable officer without reproach." It is considered to be the highest honour for a soldier in the Austrian armed services.

Prospective recipients were considered only in regard to their military service records; their ethnicity, birth and rank (as long as they were commissioned officers) were irrelevant.

Knight's Cross recipients were automatically ennobled with the title of *Ritter* in the Austrian nobility for life, and admitted to court. Upon further petition, they could claim the hereditary title of *Freiherr*.

They were also entitled to a pension. Widows of the order's recipients were entitled to half of their spouse's pension during the remainder of their lives.

Classes

Originally, the order had two classes:

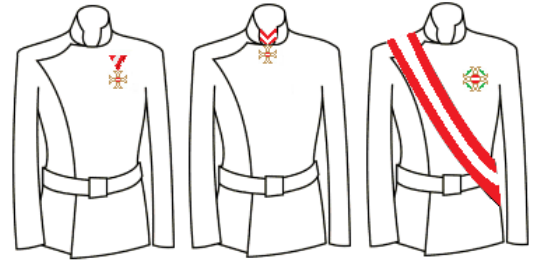
- the **Knight's Cross**
- and the **Grand Cross**.

On 15 October 1765, Emperor Joseph II added a **Commander's Cross**, and a breast star to be worn by holders of the Grand Cross.

The Knight's Cross could be worn on the left breast suspended by the traditional Austrian triangular ribbon or as was quite usual during the First World War with the ribbon being attached internally to the second button of the tunic and worn suspended in that fashion.

The commanders' cross was a neck decoration.

The grand cross holder was distinguished by a breast order and a shoulder sash on more formal occasions.



Insignia

The badge of the order was a gilt, white-enamelled cross. The central disc is also in enamel, bearing the coat-of-arms/national flag of Austria, surrounded by a white ring bearing the motto "Fortitudini" (For Courage).

The star of the order was a silver faceted cross of the same shape as the badge, with a wreath of green-enamelled oak leaves between the arms of the cross. The central disc is the same as the one on the badge.

The ribbon of the order was red-white-red, from the national flag of Austria.



► Grand Cross and the star

Awards

Between 1757 and 1931, membership of the order was awarded a total of 1240 times.

- 61 Grand Cross
- 140 Commander's Cross
- 1.039 Knight's Cross

The last surviving knight of the Order was k.u.k. Fregattenleutnant Gottfried Freiherr von Banfield. He received the honour in 1917 for his services as a maritime aviator during World War I. He died in 1986, aged ninety-six.