

UNIFORM HISTORY

The following are commonly asked questions concerning the history behind Navy uniforms. Additional items will be added to the list as time permits. The information is compiled from various sources some of which may be disputed. If other information is available, we would be happy to view it.

NAVY COLORS-- 27 August 1802 the Secretary of the Navy signed an instruction which set a pattern for the dress of the U.S. Navy in Blue and Gold.

UNIFORM REGULATIONS-- The first uniform instruction for the U.S. Navy was issued by the Secretary of War on 24 August 1791. It provided a distinctive dress for the officers who would command the ships of the Federal Navy. The instruction did not include a uniform for the enlisted man, although there was a degree of uniformity. The usual dress of a seaman was made up of a short jacket, shirt, vest, long trousers, and a black low crowned hat.

FOULED ANCHOR--The fowl anchor as a naval insignia got its start as the seal of the Lord Howard of Effingham. He was the Lord Admiral of England at the time of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. During this period the personal seal of a great officer of state was adopted as the seal of his office. The fouled anchor still remains the official seal of the Lord High Admiral of Great Britain. When this office became part of the present Board of Admiralty, the seal was retained--on buttons, official seals, and cap badges. The Navy's adoption of this symbol and many other customs can be directly attributed to the influence of British Naval tradition. The fouled anchor is among them.

KHAKI--originated in 1845 in India where British soldiers soaked white uniforms in mud, coffee, and curry powder to blend in with the landscape. Khakis made their debut in the U.S. Navy in 1912 when they were worn by naval aviators, and were adopted for submarines in 1931. In 1941 the Navy approved khakis for on-station wear by senior officers, and soon after Pearl Harbor chiefs and officers were authorized to wear khakis ashore on liberty.

BROWN SHOES- In 1913 high laced shoes of tan leather first appeared in Uniform Regulations and were authorized for wear by aviators with khaki's. The color changed to russet brown in 1922. Uniforms exclusive to the aviation community were abolished in the 1920's and reinstated in the 1930's. The authorized color of aviators shoes has alternated between brown and black since then.

PEACOCK--a cold weather version of the first uniform authorized-- the Pea-Jacket. A warm, heavy coat made from "Pee" cloth or "Pilot" cloth, a coarse stout kind of twilled blue cloth with a nap on one side.

BELL BOTTOM TROUSERS--commonly believed that the trouser were introduced in 1817 to permit men to roll them above the knee when washing down the decks, and

to make it easier to remove them in a hurry when forced to abandon ship or when washed overboard. The trousers may be used as a life preserver by knotting the legs.

THIRTEEN BUTTONS ON TROUSERS--there is no relationship between the 13 buttons on the trousers and the 13 original colonies. Before 1894, the trousers had only seven buttons and in the early 1800's they had 15 buttons. It wasn't until the broadfall front was enlarged that the 13 buttons were added to the uniform and only then to add symmetry of design.

WHITE HAT--In 1852 a white cover was added to the soft visorless blue hat. In 1866 a white sennet straw hat was authorized as an additional item. During the 1880's the white "sailors hat" appeared as a low rolled brim high-domed item made of wedge shaped pieces of canvas to replace the straw hat. The canvas was eventually replaced by cotton as a cheaper more comfortable material. Many complaints on the quality and construction led to modifications ending in the currently used white hat.

OFFICERS STARS--were first approved on line officers uniforms on 28 January 1864. All regulations since 1873 have specified that one ray would point downward toward the gold stripe on the sleeve. The reason for this is unknown.

CPO STARS--were introduced with the creation of SCPO and MCPO. The reasoning for stars pointed one ray down is unknown, however, indications point to following the line officers standard.

JUMPER FLAPS--the collar originated as a protective cover for the jacket to protect it from the grease or powder normally worn by seamen to hold hair in place.

STRIPES AND STARS ON JUMPER UNIFORMS--on 18 January 1876, Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce recommended a collar with stars and stripes as a substitute for the plain collar used on the frocks of seamen. Three stripes on the collar were proposed for all grades, with the stripes on the cuffs to indicated grade. One stripe for E-1, etc.

DISTINGUISHING MARKS/RATING BADGES--In 1841, insignia called "distinguishing marks" were first prescribed as part of the official uniform. An eagle and anchor emblem, forerunner of the rating badge, was the first distinguishing mark. In 1886 rating badges were established, and some 15 specialty marks were also provided to cover the various ratings. On 1 April 1893, petty officers were reclassified and the rating of chief petty officer was established. Until 1949 rating badges were worn on the right or left sleeve, depending on whether the person concerned was on the starboard or port watch. Since February 1948, all distinguishing marks have been worn on the left sleeve between the shoulder and elbow.

RIGHT ARM RATES--established in 1841 and disestablished 2 April 1949, originally signified men of the Seaman branch. During WWII these rates included Boatswains Mate, Turret Captain, Signalman, Gunners Mate, Fire Controlman, Quartermaster, Mineman, and Torpedoman's Mate. Other ratings wore rates on the left sleeve.

FLAT HATS--First authorized in 1852 the flat hat was eliminated on 1 April 1963 due to non-available materials. The original hats had unit names on the front, however, unit names were taken off in January 1941.

MEN'S NECKERCHIEF--the black neckerchief or bandanna first appeared as early as the 16th century and was utilized as a sweat band and collar closure. Black was the predominant color as it was practical and did not readily show dirt. There is no truth to the myth that the black neckerchief was designed as a sign of mourning for Admiral Nelson's death.

NECKERCHIEF SQUARE KNOT--there is no historical significance to the knot other than it being a knot widely used by sailors which presents a uniform appearance.

DUNGAREES--in 1901 regulations authorized the first use of denim jumpers and trousers, and the 1913 regulations originally permitted the dungaree outfit to be used by both officers and enlisted with the hat of the day.

ENLISTED WOMEN--the first enlisted women's uniform was comprised of a single breasted coat, blue in winter and white in summer, long gull bottomed skirts and a straight-brimmed sailor hat, blue felt in winter and white straw in summer, black shoes and stockings.

COMMAND AT SEA PIN--established in 1960 to recognize the responsibilities placed on those officers of the Navy who are in command, or who have successfully commanded, ships and aircraft squadrons of the fleet. The component parts, a commission pennant, an anchor, and the line star, were determined to be ideally suited for a design which would be symbolic in the ready identification of those officers who have attained the highly coveted and responsible title of Commanding Officer of our commissioned units at sea.

AVIATION GREEN UNIFORM--in SEP 1917 the "Forrestry" Green uniform of the U.S. Marine Corps was authorized for aviation officers as a winter working uniform. The earliest use of the uniform by enlisted men came in 1941 when chief petty officers designated as Naval Aviation Pilots were authorized to wear the uniform. In NOV 1985 Aviation Working Greens were authorized for wear by women in the aviation community.

CLOTHES STOPS--a small diameter cord, approximately 1/2 inches, used to tie laundry to a clothes line. The early Navy clothes pin. Issued in recruit training until 1973.

NAVY GRAY UNIFORMS--gray uniforms in the same style as khaki were first introduced on 16 April 1943 as an officers uniform. On 3 June 1943 the uniform was extended to include Chief Petty Officers. On 31 March 1944 cooks and stewards were permitted to wear the gray uniform. The Navy abolished use of "grays" on 15 October 1949.

COCKED HAT--a hat worn by officers with ceremonial uniforms commonly referred to as a "fore and aft" hat. During the 1700's the hat was worn parallel to the shoulders, but in the 1800's was modified to be worn with the points to the front and back. Wearing of the Cocked Hat was discontinued on 12 October 1940.

HAVELOCK--a protective cover worn by women over the combination cap to provide cold weather protection. Sometimes referred to as the "Lawrence of Arabia hat" because it fell to shoulder length in the manner of a hood. A rain hood was also issued to provide rain protection. Discontinued in 1981.

CUTLASS-- a short saber with a cut and thrust blade and a large hand guard. Issued to enlisted men as a sidearm and maintained in ships armories until the beginning of WWII. The weapons was officially declared obsolete in 1949. The Cutlass was considered an organizational issue item, but was never considered to be a part of the enlisted uniform.

EAGLE ON CROWS/DEVICES-- for many years the U.S. specified modified forms of the Napoleonic Eagle in the devices and insignia used to distinguish the various ranks and ratings of enlisted men and officers. This eagle was usually cast, stamped or embroidered facing left and the same practice was used by the Navy. Why the Napoleonic eagle faced left is unknown. In 1941 the Navy changed the eagles facing direction to follow the Heraldic rules which faces the right toward the wearers sword arm. This rule continues to apply and the eagle now faces to the front or the wearers right.

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