

From Scarlet to Khaki

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, traces the evolution of the field service uniform.

Military historian Michael Barthorp noted:

'The infantryman, a soldier who fights on foot, has always formed the bulk and backbone of any army. The bulk, because he is the cheapest type of soldier to maintain; the backbone, because, in the ultimate test of battle, though an enemy may be weakened, even irretrievably shaken by the action of horsed or armoured cavalry and artillery, it is the infantry which must eventually close with the enemy and, having overcome their resistance, hold the position so gained ... Rightly, the infantry arm has been called 'the Queen of Battles.'

The British infantryman's uniform was, for over 200 years, distinguished by his red or scarlet coat. Its origins can be traced to the English Civil War, where regiments on both sides wore red. Britain's first standing army, The New Model Army, was created by Oliver Cromwell's Parliament in 1645 and wore red clothing. As the years went on, red came to be recognized in Europe as the mark of an English soldier – much in the same way that the St. George's cross became a symbol of national identification.

And so red it was, until the Battle of Ginniss (1885) in the Sudan, when, for the last time, the infantry wore red tunics in battle. This was during the ill-fated Gordon relief expedition, where Charles Gordon believed that the sight of red coats would overawe the Dervishes. That belief was never put to the test, as the relief force arrived 'two days too late.'

Crimean War 1854



Second Anglo-Boer War 1899

LEFT Zulu War 1879

But we are jumping ahead of the demise of the red uniform. In 1846, The Corps of Guides in India, at the orders of their Commanding Officer Lieutenant H. B. Lumsden, dyed their white cotton clothes with the juice of a species of palm tree – or, another version has it that river mud was used. This produced garments of a shade that blended with the dull Indian countryside. The new color was called 'khaki,' from a Persian or Urdu word meaning 'dust.'

During the Indian Mutiny (1857), the regiments dyed their white uniforms using a variety of substances, such as coffee, curry powder, mulberry juice, and other natural dyes, which produced a variety of shades and some blotchy effects. The home authorities were not pleased with the uneven results of the various homemade, non-colorfast dyes. Nevertheless, the need was recognized for a color less conspicuous than the red of the Zulu War of 1879 and the Egyptian Campaign of 1882.



Culloden 1742



French & Indian War 1758



Napoleonic War 1815



Indian Mutiny 1857



Egyptian Campaign 1882



Sudan 1898



World War I 1914



Gordon Relief Expedition 1885

For the Gordon Relief Expedition (1884-1885), the mounted Camel Corps were clothed in grey serge jackets and light brown breeches, with a white sun helmet. In 1884, a patented dyestuff was developed that produced a colorfast khaki color and this became the official active service uniform color in India. It was also used in the Relief Expedition, much to the concern of Queen Victoria who dubbed it 'a sort of café-au-lait shade.'

The discovery of synthetic dyes also made it possible for the rank and file to change their red home-service uniforms for scarlet ones. Scarlet, derived from the rare cochineal insect and therefore very expensive, had heretofore been reserved for officers' uniforms. (More information on cochineal can be found in the article 'Why Red?' which appeared in Volume 2 #17 of The Standard.)

Khaki was universally approved for Foreign Service wear in 1898 and was worn at the Battle of Omdurman that year, and then in the Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902).

Some lessons are hard to learn, however. Though the Scottish regiments wore khaki tunics as they went into action against the Boers, they continued their tradition of sporting colorful, conspicuous tartans. The marksmanship of the Boers soon convinced the Highlanders to adopt khaki kilt aprons to cover their tartans, and the Lowland troops to forego their tartan trews in favor of khaki trousers.

HEADGEAR

The headgear of the British infantryman also went through numerous transformations. The list includes mitre caps, bicorn hats, bearskins, bonnets, tall and short shakos, and field service helmets that ranged from dazzling white to a muted khaki (reflecting the need for less 'advertisement'). The trend toward more practicality also was evidenced by the popularity in the Boer War of the 'colonial' slouch hat – a lighter and more practical headgear than the helmet. Similarly, the troops at the outbreak of World War I modified their headgear.

The peaked service cap had a stout wire ring in the crown to make it 'smart' – which also created a fine flat surface that reflected the sun. The increased use of aircraft for spotting made this feature a dangerous one!



The lessons of the Boer War relegated the full-dress uniform of scarlet to ceremonial purposes, and, at the end of World War I, it was not re-issued to the bulk of the Army. The exceptions were the Brigade of Guards and occasionally regimental bands.

While the scarlet tunic has largely faded away, the British infantryman will always be remembered for the color he wore. ■

Jim Hillestad operates under the name "The Toy Soldier Museum." His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227, or visit his new website at www.the-toy-soldier.com.



Victorian period officer's tunic (left) and WWI officer's tunic (author's collection)