

U.S. Army changes service uniforms

After 104 years ... it's back to blue!

By Mark Hubbs
SMDC/ARSTRAT
Historical Office

The United States Army announced on June 6 that the suite of Army service uniforms would be streamlined to one blue dress uniform to be known as the Army Service Uniform.

The Army green uniform will be phased out, and the uniform previously known as "dress blues" will become the new "Class A" uniform. It will be authorized for wear for any situation where the old green uniform would have been appropriate. The blue uniform will also continue to be worn for formal occasions.

For many, this may seem like a break from tradition, but the shift back to blue is actually a return to the uniform colors that have been in use in America since before the Revolutionary War.

In the generations leading up to the change to olive drab in 1902, a Soldier's uniform was intended as both a dress uniform and combat uniform. When most of the European powers began to experiment with green and gray-green combat uniforms at the end of the 19th Century, the U.S. Army followed their examples.

The new uniform color was approved in 1902, and Soldiers began to receive the new olive drab uniforms in 1906 as stocks of the old blue uniforms ran out. The shade of green has changed through the years from the olive drabs used until after World War II, to the deeper green used in the current uniform.

The American association with blue as a uniform color began in colonial times when many militia units chose blue for their uniforms instead of the red of regular troops. This was most likely done to ease logistics, as indigo for blue dye was grown in the colonies, where most red dyes were imported from Europe.

The first standardized uniform used by the fledgling American Continental Army was also blue. In early 1777, the Continental Congress let contracts for ready-made blue uniforms in France. A shortage of blue wool broadcloth resulted in the delivery of only 15,000 blue uniform coats faced with red lapels and collars. Another eight thousand brown uniform coats were also delivered. The troops, however, desired blue uniforms and detested anything other than blue.

As a result Gen. George

Washington "in order to prevent disputes & jealousy among the Troops of the Main Army ... and to give them all an equal chance" was forced to hold a lottery, to determine which of his regiments would receive the blue coats and which would receive the brown.

Blue became so associated with the U.S. Army and our new nation that the U.S. Army Uniform Regulations of 1821 open with the statement "Dark blue is the National Color."

As the uniform evolved throughout the 19th Century, the enduring constant was the color blue for the uniform coat. The trousers emerged as light blue in the 1820s. The wool cloth used for

trousers was called kersey and was a coarser, cheaper cloth compared to the expensive wool broadcloth used for uniform coats. The cheap cloth could not take a consistent deep blue dye as the better quality broadcloth could.

As a result, kersey was dyed a lighter blue. This tradition in the difference in shades of blue between the coat and trousers is carried on in the modern blue Army Service Uniform.

So, in the near future when you start to see our young Soldiers in their blue uniforms, don't think of it as a break from tradition. Consider it a return to our heritage of the "National Color."

'When a Soldier can be brought to take delight in his dress, it will be easy to mold him to whatever else may be desired, ... therefore every method should be pursued to accomplish what may so justly be looked on, as the foundation of order and economy in a Corps.'

— Lt. Col. Bennett Cuthbertson, 1768



Photo courtesy of Todd Post

Recreated French Contract Coat,
c.1778



Courtesy photo

Infantry Sergeant, c.1861



Courtesy photo

The Army Blue Service Uniform