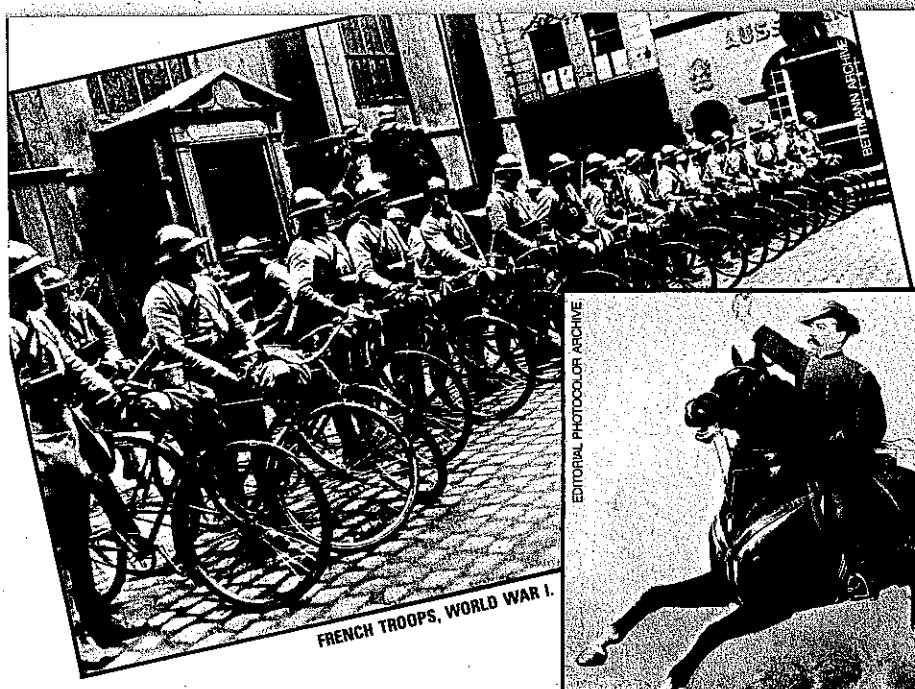

FRENCH TROOPS, WORLD WAR I.

GEN. PHILIP SHERIDAN, CIVIL WAR HERO.

TURKISH OFFICER, 19TH CENTURY.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

How Military Uniforms Have Kept Up With the March of Time

BY ANNE HOLLANDER

Battle dress was literally the first "drop dead" apparel. Its original function was to frighten the foe and inspire corresponding courage in the wearer. That dual spirit still dwells in all military costumes, although most modern uniforms no longer include body paint and animal heads or full armor and plumes. The most striking aspect of a uniform remains its isolating character: It sets the wearer apart from the humdrum and haphazard, the domestic and personal, all ordinary commercial and social elements in life. A man in uniform is one responding to a call; there's something fearsome about him, a kind of threat.

Our complex society's first military uniforms were introduced in the heyday of heraldry by kings and nobles to distinguish their followers and defenders. Somewhat later, during the Renaissance, specially selected bands of foreign fighters in distinctive dress, like the French king's Scottish Archers or the pope's Swiss Guard, added an element of exotic ferocity to the prestige of the armed retainer. That same kind of alien ruthlessness was subsequently attributed to the regiments of Eastern Europe's hussars and Turkish Janissaries often hired for wartime service by Western nations. Their vivid, strange uniforms were quickly adapted by their employers' armies to lend similar connotations of uncompromising speed and power—the suggestion of energy unencumbered by sentiment. Foreign mercenaries were seen as fighting for the love of combat and displaying their extraordinary skills, so elements borrowed from their uniforms could suggest a superior brand of ruthless detachment.

Whether ferocious foreigners or hand-picked native sons, the elite corps of fighting men serving a powerful leader has had romantic appeal since the days of the Pretorian Guard, and probably long before. Even if the corps no longer fights but functions only as an honor guard, the strong arm of a potent leader is still symbolized by his personal troops. Besides having high prestige, any distinctive trappings they wear, even if elaborate and/or cumbersome, convey a message of potential physical force.

Consequently, it's not surprising that Oliver Cromwell, during England's Civil War in the 17th century, discovered he could make a rabble of ordinary men proud and eager to fight simply by dressing them all in smart uniforms. Uniforms could apparently instill instant *esprit de corps* in a group of very diverse and undisciplined citizens, and, since then, their power has been thoroughly acknowledged and deliberately put to use. Military fashion, whereby all uniforms borrow

more from each other than from civilian clothes, dates roughly from Cromwell's time. That movement has advanced on its own course, keeping a proud distance from the flux of outside modes, steadily emphasizing its heraldic and honorific character, its heavy symbolic freight. So successful has the allure of such apparel been that it's even had a broad and long counterpart in civil life, extending from schoolroom to postal service and hotel staffs.

The three-century development of the military-dress uniform has resulted in a very sophisticated, flattering form of masculine attire. Dashing simplifications of cut and shape have evolved in wartime, when regulation dress is pared down or loosened according to necessity. Dazzling elaborations and minute distinctions of color and insignia proliferate in peacetime, when the uniform's visual power becomes a matter of competition and overt virile display. Military dress makes virtually any man look and feel his best—mainly because it's been perfected to do just that.

Credit for most of this evolution goes to the 18th-century Prussian army, especially under Frederick the Great. The Prussians achieved Europe's most highly disciplined fighting force, with the greatest number of

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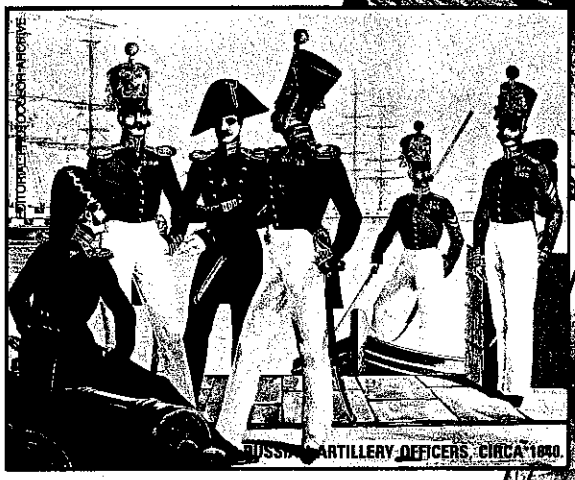
GERMAN OFFICER, WORLD WAR II.

"DAVID—NAPOLEON AT THE ST. BERNARD PASS."



RUSSIAN ARTILLERY OFFICERS, CIRCA 1880.

GORDON HIGHLANDERS, WORLD WAR I.

GERMAN MARINES, WORLD WAR I.

ENGLISH SOLDIER, LATE 18TH CENTURY.

ENGLISH DESERT ARMY, WORLD WAR I.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

(continued from page 95) meticulous dress regulations. An extremely snug fit was a Prussian innovation, as was strangling leather neckwear and powdered hair worn in a tight pigtail. But the trimness of military costume isn't only a matter of fit; it also lies in the use of complementary colors that vibrate against each other; contrasting facing to outline all edges; plus buttons, epaulets, straps and stripes that deliberately emphasize the body's posture and silhouette.

Such details were developed during the 18th century, at first around the basic civilian outfit of coat, waistcoat and breeches worn with a tricornered hat. Although colorful edging and fanciful trimmings were nothing new, the gold braid, feathers and fringes were now being rearranged to suggest disciplined virile strength, not free play of the imagination. Soon, coats and waistcoats were discarded in favor of the austere high-necked tunic, trousers and tight boots borrowed from the East. With the addition of faintly barbaric embellishments copied from Polish, Hungarian and Turkish crack troops—fur, sashes, frogging, high headgear—the Western European military male emerged around 1800 as the visual personification of the most desirable masculine qualities.

The extreme constriction and troublesome accessories of the dress uniform were only seen as challenges to be overcome. The officer's strength, endurance and bravery in the field were confirmed by his capacity to stand or sit on his horse like a statue for hours, wearing pounds of heavy gear. In his brilliant uniform, incorporating sartorial elements from the heroic past of fierce allies and enemies, he carried with him the combined and accumulated luster of countless hard-won victories. It's no wonder, then, that kings began and have since continued to wear uniforms for all public ceremonial occasions. In their perfected state, they can give rulers the quintessential appearance of selfless dedication miraculously fused with male sexual pride. Contemporary young men who wear bits and pieces of old military gear steal the look not only to mock it, but to share in it.

"Uniforms, once a badge of service, now represent honor and distinction."

Within any finely tuned visual scheme, slight exaggerations and distortions are all the more likely to seem ridiculous. Consequently, an elaborate full-dress uniform is one of the easiest costumes to parody and trivialize. And small errors in design can be crucial. When a uniformed honor guard was installed at the Nixon White House, spectators were unfortunately reminded of Victor Herbert, not Balaclava, and the scheme had to be abandoned.

Since 1914, most military dress has been modified to be even more attractive, this time in the direction of brisker functionalism. For the first time, the look of physical comfort has crept into the recipe, in obedience to the general laws of 20th-century style. Partly to retain his dignity, the military male now wears a dress uniform with a looser fit, more sober color and fewer accessories. Even so, neat braid and embossed metal buttons, along with crisp flaps and straps, still carry a charge, their message of a disciplined force only waiting for orders to act.

In America, especially in these perverse, self-interested times, the military look still holds its traditional appeal. The uniform, once merely a badge of service, now represents honor and distinction, and its actual appearance has contributed to its meaning. A dress uniform stands out as a triumph of formal design symbolizing formal behavior. Its color, cut and trim all speak of the time-honored rituals of warfare—the discipline and order that keep brute violence at bay. GQ

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