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Artifact Backgrounder

## Service Dress Jacket



### DEFINITION

The **service dress jacket** is a garment made of khaki wool serge cloth. It was the standard uniform jacket worn by British Empire troops throughout the First World War. The same type of jacket was worn on garrison duty as well as on active field service.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Veterans of Canada's first overseas contingent – known as 'original firsts' – sometimes displayed distinctive blue shoulder straps on their service dress jackets. By the end of the war, this was a proud distinguishing mark that relatively few men survived to wear on active service.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Prior to the 20th century, most armies wore brightly coloured uniforms. They helped soldiers to distinguish friend from foe on smoke-filled battlefields. As weapons improved, however, the brightly coloured uniforms proved to be a liability. The introduction of smokeless gunpowder increased the limits of visibility on the battlefield, and the greater range and accuracy of repeating rifles made it easier to hit a specific target.

After the South African War (1899–1902), the British Army introduced the khaki service dress for all regiments and corps. The Canadian Militia issued its own version of khaki service dress in 1903. There were two principal differences that

easily distinguished British **service dress jackets** from their Canadian counterparts during the First World War. British jackets had five buttons with a stand-and-fall collar. Canadian jackets had seven buttons with a stand-up (or ‘mandarin’) collar.

The service dress jackets worn by officers and other ranks were similar only in colour. Officers purchased their jackets at their own expense from private outfitters, using a finer grade of wool than the coarse serge of the standard-issue other ranks’ clothing. The four front pockets were cut differently on the officers’ jackets and they tended to be more neatly tailored.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

Canada’s first overseas contingent embarked for the United Kingdom in October 1914 wearing Canadian-pattern **service dress jackets**. These garments did not stand up well during training through the rainy fall and winter of 1914–1915. Much of the clothing had been hurriedly manufactured at the outbreak of war, and the finished products were not rigorously inspected before being delivered to the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In January 1915, the Canadian pattern was phased out in favour of the British pattern which also simplified resupply. Canadian pattern **service dress jackets**, however, did not simply disappear. They were issued to recruits in Canada throughout the war, and many soldiers continued to wear their Canadian jackets on arrival overseas. As well, Canadian soldiers who had been issued with British **service dress jackets** sometimes had them tailored to resemble the Canadian pattern.

The wool serge **service dress jacket** may feel uncomfortable to 21st-century hands, but this was not necessarily the case during the First World War. At that time, there was no better material than wool for general wear under all weather conditions. The British-pattern **service dress jacket** was a durable garment, and when ‘broken in’ was reasonably comfortable. It also provided excellent camouflage because of its drab colour. Soldiers literally lived in these garments, often wearing them for weeks on end without laundering (cotton or wool long underwear were normally changed more often). **Service dress jackets** were meant to be loose fitting, to permit freedom of movement, air circulation, and the layering of woolen sweaters underneath in colder weather. In winter, a heavy wool serge greatcoat was worn over top of the service dress uniform.

## DID YOU KNOW?

As a measure of practicality, comfort and safety many officers wore the other ranks' **service dress jacket** in battle. This practice misled enemy snipers, but could also cause confusion in other circumstances. For example, during the Allied crossing of the Canal du Nord in September 1918, a Canadian infantry officer, Captain Gordon 'Winnie' Winnifrith, was killed while wearing

an other ranks'-pattern **service dress jacket**. The burial party that interred Winnifrith's body did not realize that he was an officer, and buried him as 'Private' Winnifrith. It took some detective work on the part of another officer in Winnifrith's battalion before the matter was straightened out.

## VOCABULARY LIST

### **Active field service:**

During the First World War period, soldiers who were posted overseas, usually in a war zone, were said to be on active field service.

### **Battalion:**

During the First World War, a *battalion* was a military unit consisting of approximately 1,000 infantry soldiers. Normally organized into four equally-sized companies of soldiers, battalions were the key elements that commanders used to attack the enemy, or to defend positions against enemy attacks. In the British and Canadian forces, four battalions were grouped together to form a brigade, and three brigades formed a division.

### **British Empire troops:**

In the context of the First World War period, this term refers to all military forces associated with the British Empire, including troops from colonies, self-governing nations (such as Canada or Australia), and various other territories under British influence or protection. Soldiers of many nationalities and ethnicities served with the British Empire forces, including English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Indian, Egyptian and Chinese personnel, as well as Aboriginal peoples from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

### **Canadian Expeditionary Force:**

The military force that the Canadian government raised to serve overseas during the First World War.

### **Corps:**

A military formation consisting of two or more divisions. The division was a formation ranging in size between 10,000 and 20,000 soldiers, and it incorporated its own artillery, transportation, and medical personnel, in addition to its force of infantry soldiers. In 1915, Canada formed its own corps, which eventually grew to four divisions by late 1916.

<b>Garrison duty:</b>	Military service at home stations, usually in armouries, barracks, or other permanent military camps or bases.
<b>Khaki drab wool serge cloth:</b>	A coarse, durable woolen cloth ranging in shade from light beige to a darker brown or green. <i>Kkaki</i> is a Hindi word that describes the colour of soil. The <u>British Empire forces</u> adopted khaki uniforms during the 19th century to enhance the camouflage and concealment properties of soldiers' clothing.
<b>Militia:</b>	In common English usage, a <i>militia</i> is understood to be a non-professional military force. In the Canadian context during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the peacetime army was called the Militia. The Canadian Militia consisted of two basic components. The Permanent Active Militia included career soldiers who served full time. The Non-Permanent Active Militia included a much larger body of citizen volunteers who served on a part-time basis, and who otherwise earned their livings in civilian trades and professions.
<b>Other ranks:</b>	A term that refers to soldiers who were not commissioned as officers. An officer's commission was conferred by the British monarch, King George V. Commissioned officers, such as lieutenants, captains or majors possessed the legal authority to issue commands. 'Other ranks' comprised ordinary private soldiers, as well as various grades of <i>non-commissioned</i> officers (corporals and sergeants for example) who may have filled leadership or supervisory roles, but did not hold a commission, and were therefore not officially authorized to exercise command.
<b>Regiment:</b>	A military unit of varying size, but typically consisting of between 500 and 1,000 soldiers. During the First World War period, <i>regiment</i> was used somewhat interchangeably with <u>battalion</u> in British English. As an adjective ( <i>regimental</i> ), the term was also used to describe any manner of activity with which battalions were concerned.
<b>Repeating rifles:</b>	Hand-held firearms that are capable of holding several rounds of ammunition at one time. The rounds can be fired one after the other in relatively rapid succession.
<b>Stand-and-fall collar:</b>	A style of collar appearing on military uniforms, in which the upper part of the collar is folded over upon the lower band of the collar, similar to a typical men's dress shirt.
<b>Stand-up (Mandarin) collar:</b>	A style of collar appearing on military uniforms, in which the band of the collar stands freely, without being folded over upon itself, similar to the style of traditional Chinese clothing.