

The Making of a Regimental Uniform



“When a soldier can be brought to take delight in his dress, it will be easy to mould him to whatever else may be desired, as it is general proof that he has thrown off the sullen, stubborn disposition which characterizes the peasants of most countries; therefore every method should be pursued to accomplish what may so justly be looked on as the foundation of order and oeconomy in a corps.”

Bennet Cuthbertson -A System for the Compleat Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry (Dublin, 1768)

In the 18th century, just as it is today, the uniform a soldier wore conveyed the nationality, regiment, rank and years of service of the soldier, and set him apart from the ordinary people of his community. Today, to achieve “the look” of an 18th century soldier, we must consider the colours, style, silhouette, and decoration of the uniform. Officers wore uniforms of fine or superfine quality, dyed with expensive dyes, and decorated with taped buttonholes in wool tape, or silver as befit their rank. Sergeants wore lesser quality than the officers, with wool taped buttonholes, but better than the rank and file, who wore even lesser quality fabrics dyed with inexpensive dyes and no extra decoration.

The material is to be carefully sourced, as colour and quality are both important to achieve the appearance of the soldier’s rank.

Wool - The King’s Royal Yorkers are fortunate, as the wools for their uniform shells are obtained from Gavin Watt, through his contact with a mill in England, wool tape is obtained from Coghlin & Upton in Jordan Station, and any silver tape is obtained from Roy Najecki.

Linen - The linen used for shirts, waistcoat backs and lining, as well as for the coat lining is a medium weight linen, which has proved to be more durable than factory cotton. It can be found in some Fabricland stores, in some fabric stores on Queen Street in Toronto, and in some stores in the fabric district in Hamilton. It is not as cheap or prevalent now as it was in the 18th century, and it cannot be made at home as it was then, but it can be found at a reasonable price if you shop carefully. The linen is washed before use, dried in the dryer, and ironed to remove the wrinkles. This is called pre-shrinking the fabric, and ensures the finished garment will not shrink when laundered.

Canvas - Canvas is used for gaitered trousers, breeches, haversacks, and backpacks. It should be either white or natural, in plain or twill weave, and 10 oz in weight. Anything lighter will not hold up to the rigors of wear, and anything heavier would be uncomfortable to wear, and difficult to sew. Canvas is also preshrunk before the patterns are cut out.

Buttons - The various buttons, both large and small, are obtained through the Regiment.

Thread - Linen thread is obtained from sutlers, and comes in various thicknesses for the various weights of fabric. It should be waxed for strength and easy passage through the fabric.

Wax - The Beeswax used to wax the thread is supplied by sutlers and local beekeepers.

Historically, the uniforms were made up in two or three sizes by the manufacturer in England, and shipped to the colonies to be fitted by the regimental tailor to individual soldiers. A good fit was, and is now important for more than just looks. If the uniform did not fit properly, it would impede the soldier’s movement, and would hang improperly, causing the cross belts etc. to hang improperly as well.

Regimental Coats:

As three is to five, so the skirt is to the waist of the coat. This means if the body is divided into eight, three sections are for the skirt, and five are for the waist. The lapel at the top of the breast is to be 3" wide, and at the waistline, 2 9/32" wide. The coat is to be very snug across the chest when hooked together at the second and fourth buttons. From the lowest hook and eye, the lapels flare outward. The waist tapers inward. From the waist downward, the skirt is lined with buff wool; the rest of the coat is lined with linen. The sleeves are very tight but the armpits are full and not binding. There is a round, close fitting cuff, 3" wide, each with 4 buttons. The lapels and cuffs are to be "working", i.e. the lapel can be folded across the chest and buttoned to the other side, and the cuffs can be folded down over the hands for warmth. All inside seams are sewn by machine; every bit of visible stitching, including the 36 buttonholes, and all the top stitching is done by hand.

The measurements required to ensure a proper fit are:

Circumferences:

Chest

Arm – bicep, forearm, and wrist

Neck

Lengths:

Underarm to waistline

Center front – from the dip at the throat to the waistline

Center back – from the back of the neck to the natural waistline

Waistline to required hemline (mid thigh for flank companies, 5" from the knee for hat companies)

Point of shoulder to neck

Distance between the shoulders

Arm from shoulder to elbow, and from elbow to wrist

Waistcoats:

Waistcoats are to fit snugly to the body. The top of the garment should be very high, close to the base of the throat. The "points" at the bottom of the garment are to cover the placquets of the fall of the trousers. For flank companies, the hemline is straight across, and low as to cover the waistband of the trousers; the "points" are removed. The waistcoat is wool, as are the front facings. The remainder of the waistcoat is made up in linen. There are no working pockets, except for officers, and the waistcoat front is correct with or without false pocket flaps. The neckline is bound in a bias strip of linen, and 12 buttons and buttonholes are spaced evenly down the front edge (10 for flank companies).

All inside seams are sewn by machine; every bit of visible stitching, including the 12 (or 10) buttonholes, and all the top stitching is done by hand.

Measurements needed for a proper fit are:

Circumference:

Neck

Chest

Waist

Lengths:

Side seam from underarm to waistline, and hip

Neck to point of shoulder

Center front from base of the throat to bottom of trouser waist band

Hip Center back to waist

The Shirt:

The shirt is made of linen in sizes small, medium, large or extra large, and is a loose fitting garment which buttons at the neck and cuffs. It is long enough to reach mid thigh, with loose sleeves. Officer's shirts have neck and sleeve ruffles. There are reinforcement strips on each shoulder, a front slit facing, and a small reinforcement at each side opening in the hem. The sleeve length, wrist, chest and neck measurements are required. The inside seams are machine sewn, with all visible stitches, including three buttonholes and all hems and top stitching, done by hand.

Gaitered Trousers:

These are to be constructed to be roomy in the seat, to fit tightly from the crotch to the knee, and virtually skin tight from the knee to over the shoe. At the rear, the trousers should come as low as to just above the

heel of the shoe. At the front, the extension over the shoe is to fit low, very tight, and well forward on the shoe, completely hiding the buckle or laces. A leather strap is attached to the inseam at the bottom, to go under the shoe at the instep, and buttons on the outside to the lowest button.

All inside seams are sewn by machine; every bit of visible stitching, including the 5 large and 10 small buttonholes, and all the top stitching is done by hand.

The Measurements required for the proper fit of the gaiter trousers:

Circumferences:

Thigh

Mid calf

Above the knee

Ankle

Lengths:

Waist and Hip

Inseam to the knee

Outseam - waist to top of the sole of the shoe

Side hip to crotch seam while in a crouched position

Center back crotch seam while in a crouched position

Depth of arch of foot

Distance from ankle to end of shoe laces

For each garment but the shirt, the pattern is adjusted to the soldier's measurements. A "Toile" or mock up is constructed out of cheap cotton and fitted to the soldier to "tweak" the fit. The garment pattern is given a final adjustment, and is pinned to the fabric.

First, the fabric, after it been pre-shrunk, is folded in half lengthwise. The adjusted pattern pieces are pinned to the fabric with as little wasted material as possible. Sharp shears are needed to cut the double thickness of coat wool. Seams are steamed open, and all lining edges are turned in to prevent fraying. The inside seams of the shirt and gaitered trousers are flat felled (like the inseam on your jeans) by hand stitches.

Labour:

Working 8+ hours a day, it takes about 4 to 5 weeks to make a complete uniform, provided an interim fitting can be arranged. The labour breakdown is as follows –

Regimental Coat: 1-2 weeks depending on Rank.

By way of example, each button hole for a rankers coat takes 15 min to hand sew.

A sergeant's or officer's taping can add an additional ½ hour per button due to the loops added for decoration. (x 36 buttons)

Waistcoat: Just under a week for the regimental cut but if the officer wants embellishment, more time is needed.

Trousers or breeches are again about a week. Fitting of the trousers is ABSOLUTELY necessary for the proper fit.

While a fully machined shirt is readily and inexpensively available "off the rack" at most sutlers, a hand finished ranker's shirt takes about a week, with more time required for fancy ruffles for neck and cuffs which are added to the shirts for officers or NCO's.

The wool and buttons are to be supplied by the soldier through the regimental stores. The thread, linen, canvas, hooks and eyes, and cotton for the mock up are supplied by the seamstress, and charged to the soldier along with the cost of the labour.

Thus is an 18th century regimental uniform constructed.

Loyally Yours,
Debra Turrall, U.E.
The Loyal Needle

