



SUPPLY  
LINE

Artifact Backgrounder

## Puttees



### DEFINITION

**Puttees** are strips of cloth, which were worn wrapped around the lower leg in a spiral pattern, from the ankle up to below the knee. They provide ankle support and prevent debris and water from entering the boots or pants. Khaki-coloured wool **puttees** were widely worn with ankle boots by British Empire soldiers during the First World War.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment were nicknamed the Blue Puttees. When the regiment was raised at the start of the war, they did not have enough khaki-coloured cloth available to outfit the soldiers with standard **puttees**. Blue cloth was used as a substitute, and the nickname followed.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the second half of the 19th century, British soldiers serving in India started wearing **puttees** inspired by local tribal dress. They took their name from the Hindi term *patti*, meaning bandage, strap or binding. Although **puttees** could be awkward to put on and remove, they

were reasonably comfortable to wear and far less expensive than tall leather boots.

By the time of the First World War, **puttees** were standard issue throughout the British Army.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

The **puttees** worn by British Empire troops remained largely unchanged throughout the First World War. Over the course of the war they were adopted by other armies as well.

For example, chronic leather shortages caused the German army to use **puttees** in the place of the tall leather boots initially worn by soldiers.

At the start of the Second World War, **puttees** were widely replaced with simple canvas web anklets in British service, and the Canadian Army followed suit. However, **puttees** continued to be worn with some tropical uniforms, and short ankle **puttees** were issued in the British and Canadian armies even after the Second World War. They were discontinued in the 1960s when the Canadian Army replaced the ankle boot with a tall general service combat boot.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Tightly-wrapped **puttees** might have encouraged or aggravated trench foot by restricting blood flow to the feet. Trench foot was prevented by keeping boots well-oiled and generously sized, loosening the puttees, rubbing oil into feet and lower legs and wearing clean, dry socks.

## VOCABULARY LIST

### Ankle boots:

Low cut leather boots as worn by soldiers in the British Army, as well as most other soldiers of the British Empire forces throughout the First World War period. Soldiers also referred to these as 'ammunition' boots, because they were supplied by the British Munitions Board at Woolwich Royal Arsenal, which was otherwise responsible for developing ammunition and explosives, rather than military clothing or footwear.

**British Empire forces/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.

**Trench foot:**

A foot condition caused by prolonged exposure to damp and cold. The feet become numb, and will eventually be covered with blisters and sores. In severe cases, the toes or feet require amputation.