



SUPPLY  
LINE

Artifact Backgrounder

## Service Dress Cap



### DEFINITION

The **service dress cap** was a military hat made from khaki-drab wool serge cloth. It was the standard cap worn by British and Canadian troops during the First World War.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The winter **service dress cap** was known among the troops as the “Gor Blimey”; the nickname is from the common English contraction of “God blind me,” an exclamation of surprise. Gor Blimey was likely applied to the winter **service dress cap** by virtue of its soft peak, floppy appearance, and loose fit. The cap could easily slip forward over the eyebrows, leading British soldiers to exclaim “Gor Blimey!”

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout the 19th century, regiments of the British Army, as well as the Canadian Militia, wore various types of brightly coloured uniforms, caps, and ornamental headdress. At the end of the South African War (1899–1902), the British Army introduced the khaki service dress uniform for all soldiers, adding a khaki **service dress cap** in 1905.

The Canadian Militia issued its own version of the khaki service dress uniform after the South African War. Like the British Army, the Canadians added a **service dress cap** in 1905.

## EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

**Service dress caps** made by Canadian and British manufacturers were very similar in design and appearance. The cap featured a round, flat top, reinforced by wire. A short, stiff peak was fitted to the front of the cap. Regimental cap badges were displayed at the front of the cap, centred on the cap band.

While the caps looked very smart on the parade ground, they were not well suited to field service, especially during cold weather. The service dress cap offered no protection to the ears and did not fit over top of the knitted woollen caps and balaclavas that British and Canadian troops wore during the winter months on the Western Front. As a result a winterized version of the **service dress cap** was introduced.

When the Mark I steel helmet was introduced in 1915–1916, the winter cap became obsolete as soldiers could wear a woollen cap or balaclava under their helmets in cold weather. By 1916 all soldiers were issued with helmets which were to be worn at all times in the forward areas, so a **service dress cap** was only required behind the front lines. As a result, a soft version was introduced. It was essentially the same as the 1905 pattern, except that the stiffeners in the crown and peak were omitted, permitting the cap to be folded and carried in the pack or coat pocket.

## VOCABULARY LIST

### **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 forces:**

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.

**Insignia:**

Small symbols, usually made of metal or cloth, and displayed on the clothing to indicate the wearer's rank, or the organization (battalion or division, for example) to which the wearer belongs.

**Khaki drab wool serge cloth:**

A coarse, durable woolen cloth ranging in shade from light beige to a darker brown or green. *Khaki* is a Hindi word that describes the colour of soil. The British Empire forces adopted khaki uniforms during the 19th century to enhance the camouflage and concealment properties of soldiers' clothing.

**Militia:**

In common English usage, a *militia* 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.

**Regiment:**

A military unit of varying size, but typically consisting of between 500 and 1,000 soldiers. During the First World War period, *regiment* was used somewhat interchangeably with battalion in British English. As an adjective (regimental), the term was also used to describe any manner of activity with which battalions were concerned.

**Regimental cap badge:**

A unique insignia, usually made of metal, and displayed on hats worn by soldiers of the British Empire forces. The badge indicated a soldier's regiment, battalion, or other branch of service (medical corps, artillery, et cetera).