

The US Army's General Staff Corps and Its Insignia

On February 14, 1903, President Roosevelt signed "An Act to Increase the efficiency of the Army" and four days later the Headquarters of the Army published it as General Orders Number 15. The brief act did five things. First Congress established a General Staff Corps. Second it defined the General Staff Corps duties. Third it severely limited the composition composition of the Corps from the Chief of Staff down to 20 captains or first lieutenants on a four-year detail. Next it provided that the Chief of Staff would supervise the various staff departments enumerated and lastly the act made the recently created Chief of Artillery an additional member of the General Staff.

The wrestling act for real control of the War Department continued until World War I, although the Chief of Staff attained better control of the army and the staff did conduct better long range planning starting about 1912, after Henry L. Stimson became Secretary of War in 1911 and Leonard Wood became Chief of Staff in 1910. In 1916 Congress increased the GSC to 55 officers when it changed the number of non-generals to ten each colonels and lieutenant colonels, 15 majors and 17 captains. No more that half of the offices could serve in Washington at army headquarters – the rest were to be part of the tactical units, although at the start of World War I this latter provision was suspended.

Members of the General Staff wore a variety of special insignia through World War II. Some of these are briefly discussed and shown.



The first General Staff Corps insignia was a general's star, 1-1/4 inches wide, with a superimposed 3/4 inch US coat of arms (left). Although the size has changed over the last 100+

years, the design remains. Similar designs but made in bronze color for service uniforms (right), were worn in the field. A World War I version made in England is shown.



The army had decided that the chief of staff of a regular army division had to be a member of the CSG, but with the first major mobilization of the National Guard in 1916 to support actions on the Mexican border, chiefs of staff of National Guard divisions and their major assistants, were not GSC members. As a result of the army's interpretation of the law, these personnel received a different insignia—a hollow six-pointed star (left). This was used from 1916 into 1917 when Congress gave the President powers to expand the army for the war and organize it as required.

In France members of the AEF general staff received armbands “to insure free circulation.” These silk armbands were made in France and had silver and gold hand embroidered insignia. The armband colors showed where the office was assigned. AEF headquarters had a red, white, and blue; numbered army headquarters had red and white, while corps headquarters had white and blue. These are the same colors associated with army and corps flags and generally with shoulder patches for these organizations. (The army adopted shoulder patches at the end of WW I). Three of these are shown. The AEF division GSC armbands were red and of a similar design.



For use in the trenches, to avoid large bright colors, the AEF prescribed a miniature armband, “about 4 inches long and about one inch wide” with a clip on the back. The wearer could simply slip the spring-backed “trench clip” onto the front of his coat between the second and third buttons. Two trench clips are below:



In November 1941 the War Department changed the General Staff Corps armbands. While retaining the same general color scheme but with the sequence changed, the Quartermaster Corps went to a more cost effective approach of armbands of wool with applied letters “GSC” rather than bullion embroidered insignia on silk, while eliminating the small trench clips.



Interestingly the General Staff Corps was the source of the cuff braid worn on the sleeves of officers' service uniforms. To further distinguish GSC members; the army had them add black braid in 1905, 1/2 inch wide, on their service uniform coat cuffs, three inches from the sleeve end. The army had adopted khaki in 1898 and olive drab in 1902, but the lower sleeves were bare until this GSC addition. In 1907 the army had all other commissioned officers wear olive drab coat cuff braid on their service uniforms, but until 1941 members of the GSC wore black braid. From 1905 through 1921 GSC officers also wore their distinctive black braid on the overcoat sleeves.

In December 1931 Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur initiated a study action that ultimately resulted in a badge introduced by War Department Circular 45, August 2, 1933. The badge, retroactive to retroactive to June 4, 1920, is still worn.

Some pre World War II badges are easily identified by eagles that are larger than those on later versions as shown in the November 1941 edition of AR 600-35 that covered insignia. The Office of the Quartermaster General documented the official design in August 1933 that is very similar to the current style.



General Staff badges, Left to Right: 1930s badge with oversized eagle; 1930s badge with proper sized eagle; and a 1960s badge.

Ever since the badge was established, Army Chiefs of Staffs have been entitled to wear a large badge—one that is three inches in diameter rather than the regular two inch size. Starting in the 1990s, there were remade for collectors. Original three inch badges are very scarce.