

## U. S. Army Breast Cords

With the 1902 pattern enlisted dress uniform men wore a branch colored breast cord. Examples of this being worn are shown at the right, as drawing by H. A. Odgen. Virtually no units received the 1902 pattern uniforms before 1904 since the Quartermaster General's Department had to manufacture and then stock caps, coats, trousers, chevrons, and other components.



In December 1904 the army redefined when the breast cord would be worn. The Table of Occasions in the back of the General Order described which components made up each uniform. Full dress uniforms were similar to dress uniforms except the full dress included white gloves and the breast cord. The omission of these two accouterments resulted in the uniform simply being “dress.”

The 1907 uniform regulations changed this so white gloves were worn if the men were under arms and the uniform was “dress.” Breast cords were used only with “full dress” uniforms. This practice continued through the 1914 regulations. The army suspended wear of most dress uniforms in 1916.

The army reauthorized wear of the dress uniform in January 1929 but provided no details regarding insignia and accoutrements. As a result, from 1929 into the 1930s some men wore breast cords with their 1902 pattern dress uniform while others omitted cords. When the 1936 lapel style dress uniform was introduced, the army again supplied few details on insignia and breast cords. An example of the 1936 coat with a breast cord is at the right.

Several variations of these breast cords are found. To appreciate these variations it is necessary to identify a few parts (see figure on the next page). Official specifications generally describe the overall breast cord: Two cords run for 27 inches from a netted head that has a small loop. On these two cords is a movable netted slide. Each of the two cords is then braided; one for 16 inches and the other for 18 inches before reverting to single strands. Each of the cords end by being affixed to a plaque that is formed by being braided (plaited) flat using three strands of gimp. Each of the flat plaited plaques is about 2-1/2 inches in diameter and at the end has a tassel.



Cords were worn as shown on the next page in the Odgen drawing. The netted head loop is affixed to the coat's left shoulder next to the soldier's neck using the button. The movable netted slide is adjusted under the right coat shoulder strap so the cords run equally in front of and



behind the soldier's neck. The rest of the cords continue under the wearer's right arm and then the plaited bands run from under the right armpit across the chest and then to the left shoulder.



Colors, materials, and the details of the tassels generally make up the most noticeable variations. The Office of the Quartermaster General adopted breast cord specifications in November 1902 and in January 1908, but the substantial differences between the two versions were simply in the way the documents called out colors. The 1902 specification lists each color and the user, while the 1908 specification simply says, "To be made in color or colors for each arm of the service, as prescribed in clothing regulations." With this change there was no need to publish another specification as long as the design continued.

As would be expected, standard colored breast cords are found today. At the right is a buff colored flat plaited plaques and tassels for a Post Quartermaster Sergeant (1913 and before) or a member of the Quartermaster Corps (1913 and later). Below and left is an unusually colored cord of gray and light blue.



When I obtained it in 1973 I was told it was for a military school, but unfortunately I did not record the institution it represented. The figure below and right shows part of another non-standard colored cord—yellow and white. Presumably it is also from a military school or some fraternal organization that used army type uniforms. This figure also shows tassels with open fringes, a style different from those shown so far.



In the 1902 and 1908 specifications, tassels were to be two inches long, with a netted head one-half-inch high and about 3/4 inch in diameter, "drawn together at the bottom." Two variations in breast cords are defined by these tassels styles: those drawn together and those with open fringes. Open tassels



were used on enlisted helmet cords prior to 1902. An example of such a cord is at the left. These branch colored cords were somewhat similar to the 1902 breast cords but were longer and one end affixed to the helmet. The end that fastened to the soldier's coat had flat plaited plaques and open ended tassels.

Shown below are the red and white plaques and tassels for an original Indian Scout helmet cord of the type used from 1890 until the 1902 pattern uniform came into use. The 1887 specification for these helmet cords call for

each woven plaque to be 2-3/8 high and 2-3/4 inches wide. Tassels were to be 1-3/4 inches long with a braided head 3/8 inch high. This two-color pattern was different from the Corps of Engineer 1887 cord. An example of an engineer cord, in the Corps of Engineer Museum collection, is shown below. Although the colors are red and white, the same as for the Indian Scouts, the ways the colors are displayed are very different.



It is not unreasonable to assume that when the army described the 1902 breast cords, some manufacturers simply used their machines that made the open fringe tassels, while others obtained new machines to make the new style.

Several branches received new colors with the 1902 regulations. Medical switched to maroon and white (at the right) and the Signal Corps went



to orange and white. The post 1902 medical cords have open tassels while the Signal Corps from this same time are closed. The army formed the Quartermaster Corps in 1912 and assumed the buff color previously used by the Quartermaster General's Department. A 1902-1916 buff breast cord could have been worn in 1912 and before by a Post Quartermaster Sergeant, or after 1912, by enlisted men of the Quartermaster Corps. Tassels and plaques for one of these cords are displayed above.

Breast cords were also made in mercerized cotton and from wool. The engineer and medical cords are examples made from wool. The quartermaster and signal versions are examples of some made from cotton.

The West Point Band still wears white breast cords of the 1902 pattern. At the start of the Twentieth Century that band was organized based on an infantry band and wore infantry white chevrons and uniform trim, including cords. When the U.S. Army generally quit wearing dress uniforms in 1916, the USMA Band continued to wear its dress uniform, which included white (infantry) trim. This continued into the 1920s and 1930s and through this process white became associated with that band. An example at the left has one of these cords in its original plastic bag.

