

Army Officer Shoulder Straps

There is evidence that in 1829 army officers started to use shoulder straps to show their rank, replacing chevrons and epaulettes. Officers still use shoulder straps on their blue uniforms today, making these devices some of the longest-lived army insignia.

June 1839, *Regulations for the Uniform and Dress of the Army of the United States*, provided for shoulder straps on frock coats. For colonels and below the central cloth strap was to be one inch wide and between 3-1/2 to 4 inches long, bordered with an embroidery one-eighth inch wide. By 1851 the cloth portion of straps was 1-3/8 inches wide and 4 inches long, with gold borders 1/4 inch wide.

In practice shoulder strap size varied widely. Shown is a Civil War 1st lieutenant cavalry strap, 3-1/2 inches long including the wool around the gold bullion. The bullion edge is only 3 inches long. Until 1917, 2d lieutenants wore shoulder straps with no bars. 1st lieutenants added one bar and captains two bars. While the lieutenant bar is gold color, the same as the embroidered edge, the single bar, not the color, shows the rank.



Philip Sheridan was a colonel only in 1862, and his oversized Civil War cavalry shoulder strap, with a metal eagle and double edge is at the left. Sheridan became a brigadier general in December 1862.

A more conventional Civil War strap for an infantry colonel has faded, but has double bullion embroidery edge. The typical fading of blue resulted in the infantry switching among light blue, a medium blue, and white.

As noted, until World War I 2d lieutenants were distinguished by officer uniforms that had no rank insignia. In 1917, 2d lieutenants received a new and unique rank: a single gold bar.



White became the infantry color in 1872, replacing light blue. In May 1898 the infantry returned to blue. Left is an Infantry 2d Lieutenant strap from the Spanish American War period.



Blue faded badly so in 1903 the infantry again embraced white. A major's white strap, with its partly moth-eaten white field, is next. The white reverse, made of ribbed cotton, and with the clips, shows it was

made in the Philippine Islands. Small metal loops were sewn to the coat, then the clips on the strap's reverse held the insignia in place. Since white dress coats were popular in the Philippines, this arrangement allowed white uniforms to be washed frequently while preserving rank insignia.



Nineteenth century staff officers, regardless of their branch, wore straps with dark blue fields that appear black. Only infantry, cavalry, and artillery officer straps were branch colored. A pair of late 19th century major's staff straps have interesting leaves. Their stems were



made in pairs so all stems could point towards, or away from, the shoulder seams.

One reverse of these leather-backed, Philadelphia made straps has fastening devices like those made in the Philippines.



Chaplains wore shoulder straps with shepherd's crook between 1880 and 1888, when chaplains omitted shoulder straps. The army introduced a new strap with a cross for chaplains in 1898. These lasted until 1914, although in 1918, they briefly returned.

The first branch to add their colors to shoulder straps was the Corps of Engineers, when the War Department directed, on March 17, 1902, these officers wear shoulder straps with a red field and a white border. Before WW I the size of the piping was not specified and in some cases the piping was, by today's standards, very narrow. A recent engineer strap with the white trim much wider.



The new 1902 Uniform Regulations broadened the move to colored backgrounds. Signal Corps officers went to orange with white piping and Ordnance wore black with scarlet piping. Quartermaster officers received buff straps and Medical Corps officers maroon, which was notably without piping.

During World War I dress uniforms fell into disuse, but in 1926 those men who owned the old pre WWI dress uniforms could again wear them. Then in 1938 regulations again prescribed a new dress blue uniform, although in 1936 a slightly different dress uniform was briefly authorized.



World War II again resulted in the suspension of dress blue uniforms, but in 1956 they returned. Women joined the army in great numbers during WW II and have become a major part of the service. Women's shoulder straps were 3-1/2 inches long, versus the male size of 4 inches. Initially WACs had straps of moss green, but with the demise of the WACs women began to wear shoulder straps of all branches. With the 1956 reintroduction, non-bullion shoulder straps were authorized and became widely worn. Three military police post WW II straps provide examples of common construction styles, with the colonel's strap made in the less expensive non-bullion version, which is also a sample of the smaller women's size.

