

# The Democratization of the Army Uniform

By Maj. J. Scot Davis

*Civilians may think it's a little juvenile to worry about ribbons, but a civilian has a house and a bankroll to show for what he's done for the past four years.*

—Bill Mauldin

We are an American Army whose proud history is captured in its uniforms through a variety of devices. I fear that many of those devices are being ushered out in the interest of commonality, in which “every soldier a rifleman” is not just a sound training or readiness principle but also an effort to apply the Army’s modular construct to every aspect of what it means to be a soldier, including how a soldier is supposed to look.

This morning I helped my four-year-old son get dressed for school. After accepting my selection of shorts, he allowed me to help him choose a shirt. Opening the drawer to a rainbow of Thomas the Tank Engine, Lightning McQueen and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles shirts, I asked him, “What color?” “White” he replied. I recommended one that I liked best: a white short-sleeved shirt with a blue infantry tab and crossed rifles that I purchased at Fort Benning, Ga., last year. “How about this?” I asked. He beamed. I praised his choice, remarking that the “guns” were just like the ones Daddy wears on his Army clothes. Puzzled, he looked at my Army combat uniform (ACUs) and asked, “Where?”

I didn’t have time to explain to a four-year-old the Army’s abolishment of branch distinction on the combat uniform so, instead, I carried him to my study where I produced a faded desert camouflage uniform (DCUs) and unzipped the garment bag protecting my “greens” to show him my crossed rifles. He was visibly impressed.

But it wasn’t this early morning conversation with my son that prompted

me to write this article. Ironically, I drew inspiration from an even more unlikely source: *Airman Magazine*. Several weeks ago, while sitting in the barber shop at Headquarters, U.S. Strategic Command, I opened a recent edition of the magazine to find a full-page photo of the Air Force’s new Airman battle uniform (ABU): think ACU with tiger stripes and blue boots. What caught my attention most was not the tiger stripes or the blue boots but the sew-on badges above the left pocket. In the muted colors of the ABU, the sew-on pilot’s wings actually looked good. Pushing service parochialism aside and embracing the Jointness I am here to absorb, I must admit that the U.S. Air Force has done it right with respect to special skill badges, and I propose that the Army adopt similar sew-on badges for the ACU.

The institutional argument for Velcro patches and pin-on combat and special skill badges is that they save soldiers money in sewing costs. I argue that while the Velcro shoulder sleeve insignia, U.S. Army tape, name tape and rank insignia do this, the subdued pin-on badges do not. Perhaps it’s simply my short stature that causes the shoulder belt of my car to connect with my subdued badges during my daily commute. Maybe it’s the result of friction from picking up my children or pushing through the turnstiles on the way to work. Whatever the cause, I pay to replace my Air Assault Badge, Parachutist Badge and Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB)—frequently unavailable at this Air Force base’s military clothing sales store—at least once every two to three months because the enamel rubs off. Conventional solutions are inadequate: touch-up paint leaves a raised surface; a black marker leaves a shiny patina. As one who takes pride in the uniform and the accoutrements I’ve earned, the only solution to tarnished badges is to replace them.

Many would offer another solution.

There are some who would suggest that if they are that much of a problem, just don't wear them. I know many soldiers who have embraced this course of action, citing the fact that it's simply too hard—not worth the extra time to prepare the uniform for wear, never mind the fact that we've already saved time in morning preparation by no longer having to shine boots. Sometimes my pessimistic side leads me to wonder if this was the intent of uniform designers all along: to make the wear of distinctive items so onerous that recipients would shun them altogether, thereby achieving some nefarious end state of making us all look the same. The proliferation of the black beret supports this theory of sartorial sameness as does the loss of branch insignia on the ACU. Certain measures considered for the new Army service uniform (ASU) will complete the democratization of the Army uniform. Soon we may lose combat service stripes, shoulder sleeve insignia, unit crests, oval backings and jump boots for airborne and air assault personnel, and full-size Special Forces, Ranger and Sapper tabs on our dress uniforms as well—this at a time when our force is composed of combat veterans who are proud of their multiple combat tours and the units with which they served. The uniform should fully display the symbols of their sacrifice.

I have contemplated this topic for some time. I debated writing anything at all since we are, in fact, an Army at war and there are larger issues at stake than the wear of a few strips of cloth and metal on our uniforms. I have

known my share of hollow soldiers who hid behind their badges, and I've even encountered a few frauds who mistakenly believed that the addition of a few unearned badges would curry favor and respect among their peers and subordinates.



Army combat uniform (ACU)

The humble side of me eschews any discussion of awards and decorations as self-aggrandizing behavior unbecoming of an officer. This is not just about pin-on badges or the wear of

distinctive items for infantry personnel; I personally endorse the new Combat Action Badge and believe it is long overdue. Nor is it about the ACU in particular. (I like the ACU, even though I think it is not appropriate for all occasions, but that is a separate article.) This is about *esprit de corps*, pride in the uniform and one's achievements, recognition of subcultures within the Army (including "elite" organizations) and institutional acceptance that it's OK to be different.

A Marine officer with whom I work once quipped, "You guys sure do like all those pins and patches." Well, yes, we do. I personally like the unit patches, tabs, oval backings, unit crests, *fourragère*, blue infantry cord, skill badges, combat service stripes and branch insignia for all of the history and achievement—both personal and collective—that they represent. We are not the Marine Corps with its sanitized cammies (and recently adopted sew-on nametapes and "U.S. Marines" tape); nor are we a 1950s-era People's Liberation Army with its simple green pajamas and red star-adorned cap.

Veterans are a wonderful source of perspective. As I considered the subject of today's uniform transformation, I sought the experiences of others in past wars to gauge the level of pride they felt from the presentation and wear of distinctive combat and special skill badges on the Army uniform. Was their experience as meaningful to them in their wars as it was for me in mine? In an effort to juxtapose my own experience in Iraq, I asked four veterans of

the Korean and Vietnam wars to describe the circumstances surrounding the presentation and wear of badges in their eras. I found their respect for the badges they wore to be just as significant, just as memorable and just as worthy of display as my own.

My uncle was a technical sergeant with the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team in Korea. He joined the regiment in Korea in August 1952 and was holding down one corner of the Iron Triangle when the firing stopped at 2200 hours on July 27, 1953. The regimental commander, then-Col. William Westmoreland, personally presented him his Combat Infantryman Badge during a battalion formation, in a rear rest area after 30 days of combat in a forward combat area. At the time, there were no sew-on versions of the CIB, so he did not wear the award in combat. After the war, however, the Army introduced a color CIB patch, which my uncle proudly sewed on his fatigues above his jump wings. He explains that he and his fellow paratroopers took their fatigues to a tailor to make them more form-fitting. This was common practice in his unit, and soldiers did so at personal expense. They wore brown jump boots—also purchased at personal expense. He exclaims, “You could pick out a trooper from 100 yards. I never heard any complaint from anyone about the cost ... you wanted to do it.” Apologizing, he nevertheless voiced his opinion that, “The ‘old Army’ had a lot of pride and looked sharper than today’s troops.”

**M**y friend was a squad leader in Company B, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, during the Korean War, the same company I commanded 54 years later in Iraq. His experience with the CIB wasn’t as positive: A survivor of Task Force Smith, Joe did not receive his award until five months after his initial combat when he was sent to Japan on R&R. In fact, he mentions the presentation of the CIB in the same sentence as delousing: “Arriving at the center, they deloused me, gave me a hot shower and hair cut, paid me and, along with my brass (U.S. and crossed rifles), gave me my CIB.” De-

spite this inauspicious presentation, he could not be more proud of the silver and blue badge he received in 1950. He wrote a poem about it, fashioned it into a wooden wall hanging for me and wore his CIB proudly on a dark blue baseball cap the day he visited my company in Hawaii, training for its deployment to Iraq. When I mailed him a picture of “his” company receiving its CIBs in Iraq, he responded, “Scot, don’t ever let anyone tell you that you can’t wear it.”

My dad was a reconnaissance pla-

toon leader for the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in Vietnam. He received his CIB in January 1968 in a platoon formation after 30 days of combat. His company commander presented the award, which he and his soldiers wore as a subdued patch sewn on by a local AAFES-contracted Vietnamese seamstress. Later he wore the colored patch on his olive drab fatigues until the BDUs were authorized in the early 1980s. My dad kept his original pin-on CIB, and I carried it with me to Iraq, where I received

mine—five months after the fact—from my battalion commander and wore it on my DCUs for about 30 minutes. It now hangs in my dad’s office in a frame it shares with photos of each of us in our respective wars.

My father-in-law provides a noninfantryman’s perspective on the presentation and wear of badges. He was an Army aviator who served two tours in Vietnam on the ground and in the air, flying both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. He received his aviator wings from the commandant of the U.S. Army Aviation School at the conclusion of flight school in 1972. He writes, “I wore my wings at all times I was in uniform, bar none. Specifically, we wore them on fatigues as sew-on, first in their bright, color version, and later in the subdued version ... We wore them in Vietnam on our regular fatigues and our jungle fatigues—always as sew-on.” On his second of two trips home, he traveled by military aircraft through Travis Air Force Base, Calif. Wearing his Army flight suit and surrounded by Air Force pilots and

crew, he recalled, “I felt I was in a special group and felt being part of the other services’ aviators and pilots was a real plus. It made me feel a little taller ... since we all bought into the ‘swash-buckling’ reputation aviators had.” Almost 40 years after earning his wings, he says, “I am very proud of my aviator wings and badges. This includes my branch insignia. I would feel naked without them.”

My own experience contains elements of each of these. Like my dad and uncle, I received the CIB in a formation in a combat zone. Like my friend, I waited five months to receive the badge. Like my dad, I hired a local tailor to sew on my company’s CIBs and combat patches in Iraq. And like my father-in-law, I felt “a little taller” than my 5-foot, 4-inch frame as I passed through Kuwait and Dallas and later through Los Angeles and Honolulu proudly displaying the brown CIB and 25th Infantry Division combat patch on my DCUs.

Soldiers want to display the badges

they’ve earned. Like nature, they will find a way; like a doting father, they will spare no expense. I’ve seen it in the West Point cadet who sewed his prior-service jump wings on his BDUs by hand, in his barracks room the night before his first football weekend. I’ve seen it in the Army Ranger who made sure the set of jungle fatigues he wore into Rio Hato, Panama, displayed the Expert Infantryman Badge (EIB) he had just earned. I’ve seen it in the line of soldiers at a Wahiawa, Hawaii, tailor shop who simply did not want to wait for the unit-funded contractor to “sew” (with a healthy dose of visible glue) their EIBs, Expert Field Medical Badges and wings on their CIF-issued DCUs. I’ve seen it in a platoon of soldiers who deployed to Iraq with brown CIBs pinned to the insides of their DCU boonie hats. Though the BDUs, jungle fatigues and DCUs have gone the way of the Ike jacket, the badges should not.

I once knew the black subdued badges as something you pinned to an olive green parka when you trained in Alaska, or to the BDU field jacket you never wore; somehow they’ve exploded from the never-read subparagraphs of Army Regulation 670-1 (Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia) to become the Army standard. Return the black metal badges to the obscurity from whence they came and resurrect the sew-on badges for the ACU. Soldiers should not have to trade the annoyances of pin-on, weather-beaten badges for a sterile uniform quietly dressing us up to look like “an Army of one.” □

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