

# Virtual Author Talk



## American Red Cross Uniforms in World War I Shirley Powers

*A volunteer historian for the American Red Cross has documented WWI uniforms from vintage ARC publications in her "Guide to American Red Cross Uniforms."*

According to Shirley Powers, "There is a growing interest in the Uniforms of the the Red Cross, especially those worn during the war years. I first dove into the American Red Cross (ARC) National Uniform Collection as a volunteer historian in 1996 and began collecting documentation on them."

In April 2000, Shirley created *A Guide to American Red Cross Uniforms*. It is a compilation of information from uniform manuals, photographs from the ARC Archives or magazines, and first hand accounts of "what we were wearing." It includes descriptions and drawings of many of the uniforms from 1914 to 1996. The April 2006 Second Edition has information that became available since then.

The Editor wishes to thank Shirley Powers for permission to reference some of the WWI era entries for 1917 and 1918. The Second Edition of *A Guide to American Red*

*Cross Uniforms* is available as a [PDF file](#) on Shirley's "Collect ARC" website.

### Pre-World War I

Prior to World War I, the only prescribed uniform was for authorized volunteer nurses called on for service by the ARC. According to a Nursing Service bulletin dated April 1910, these nurses would wear plain white uniforms with



Left: Uniform for nurses on active service. Right: Blue cape worn by nurses on active service in event of war, bearing insignia of the Red Cross. Source: ARC 150, Mar. 21, 1917.

Bishop collars and caps of a pattern provided by the American Red Cross. In the event of war, the Red Cross would provide each nurse called for active service with a blue cape lined in red bearing the insignia of the Red Cross.

### March 21, 1917

*Nursing Service Information for Applicants, ARC 150.*

Uniform: Unless otherwise specified, Red Cross nurses, when called upon for active service under the Red Cross, will be allowed to wear a white uniform. [left at left] Caps and brassards will be supplied by the red Cross at time of assignment to duty. In the event of war the Red Cross will provide all nurses called upon for active service with a blue cape [right at left] bearing the insignia of the Red Cross. Nurses are not allowed to wear any portion of the Red Cross uniform except when assigned to active service. Capes, caps and brassards are to be returned to the Red Cross upon termination of appointment.

Members of the Town and Country Nursing Service wear a blue uniform, including a coat and hat, which they are expected to provide. A fully equipped bag is usually provided for their use by the organizations employing them.

## July 20, 1917

*Instructions for Nurses Called Upon for Service in Military Hospitals, Department of Military Relief, Bureau of Nursing Service, ARC 161.*

Equipment issued by the Red Cross for foreign service:

- 1 outdoor uniform [left below] of dark blue cloth consisting of skirt, to be worn with either detachable blue cloth



Outdoor uniform (left), Long ulster coat (right). Source: ARC 161, July 20, 1917.

or white waist (the latter to be furnished by the nurse) or a Norfolk coat, all regulation style.

- Coat--long blue ulster [right below]
- Cape--dark blue, lined with red and insignia on left side.
- Hat--blue felt.
- Caps and brassards
- Caducei--1 pr; U.S. letters--1 pr.

Equipment to be furnished by the nurse assigned to a foreign service:

- High black shoes, lace or button, rubber heels, to be worn with outdoor uniforms.
- 2 white regulation shirt waists
- 1 pr. tan kid gloves
- 6 slip-on aprons
- Additional equipment to be furnished by nurse (includes):
- White uniforms (not less than six)
- Extra shoes with low rubber heels and broad soles, black or white
- Rubbers, raincoat, and umbrella



## November 27, 1917

*Uniform for men working abroad from minutes of War Council meeting.*

The uniform recently adopted by the Red Cross men working abroad, had been modeled on the British Army uniform. [left]...That the official American Red Cross uniform for men will hereafter be the American Army uniform, with the appropriate Red Cross insignia as specified in the order of the Secretary of War published in the Official Bulletin on August 7, 1917.

Note: Men serving abroad held rank similar to that of the military, according to the work they performed.

Insignia:

- Hat: Grades 1-7, Greek cross in red enamel above the coat of arms of the United State in bronze metal. (cross moved below coat of arms in 1919.) Grades 8-17, Greek cross in red enamel.
- Both sides of collar or coat or shirt: the letters U.S. in bronze metal and Greek cross in red enamel, placed as are the U.S. and corps insignia of officer of the Army.
- On both sleeves of coat or shirt: horizontal bands of blue cloth, number depending on the Grade--1-7. Grades 1

Uniform for men working abroad. Source: War Council meeting, Nov. 27, 1917.

& 2 also had stars (2 & 1 respectively) to denote their rank. Grade 8-14: of same forms and in same positions as prescribed for chevrons of similar grades of the enlisted strength of the Army, but of dark blue cloth with Greek cross in red cloth 1 inch above each chevron. Grades 15-17: Greek cross of red cloth on sleeve midway between shoulder and elbow.

### May 20, 1918

*The Motor Corps Service, ARC 305.*

The Bureau of Motor Corps Service has been created at National Headquarters in order to encourage and facilitate the organization of Women's Volunteer Motor Corps in Red Cross Chapters throughout the country, and also with a view to standardizing and increasing the efficiency of the existing units.

Uniform [right]: Same as February 12, 1918 [ARC 403] except for canvas leggings not mentioned, leather only. Also, short skirt or breeches of same material as coat. (not listed as optional):

- A long gray coat of whipcord or Oxford cloth, with inverted box pleat in the back, and belt of same material.



- Hat. Close fitting of same material with small red cross in front.
- Tan canvas or leather leggings.
- Short skirt of same material as coat (optional).

The wearing of the uniform is entirely optional but recommended.

### October 5, 1918

*American Red Cross Uniforms for Women in Foreign Service Other Than Nurses and Doctors ARC 410 (revision).*

The Regulation Uniform must be worn always during working hours and in any public place. The uniform may be made by any tailor from Oxford gray whipcord following specifications.

**Tunic:** [right] Single-breasted, four-buttoned, plain sack tunic made on general lines of American Army Officer's tunic; with a notch collar and soft lapel. The tunic has a two-piece back with a peplum below the waist and has four patch pockets. Tunic skirts to extend half way from the point of the hip to the bend of the knee. The two inch belt of the same material is to be stitched around the waist. The tunic may have an inverted pleat in the center back, which is stitched down below the shoulder blade (optional). Vent in the center of back of tunic skirt to extend from bottom edge of belt through bottom edge of tunic skirt. The tunic is lined.

- Pockets: Two outside breast patch pockets with box pleat in the center, covered by a three-pointed flap, fastened in center with a small button. Two large patch bellows pockets on the skirt, covered by a flap slightly rounded at the corners and fastened with a small coat button.
- Shoulder loops: On each shoulder a loop of same material as the coat let in at the sleeve head seem, and reaching to the edge of the collar, buttoned at the upper end with a small coat button.
- Buttons: black vegetable ivory with a raised cross in the center and the words "American Red Cross" around the circumference. [Original version was made of metal with gun metal finish and a raised cross in the center.]

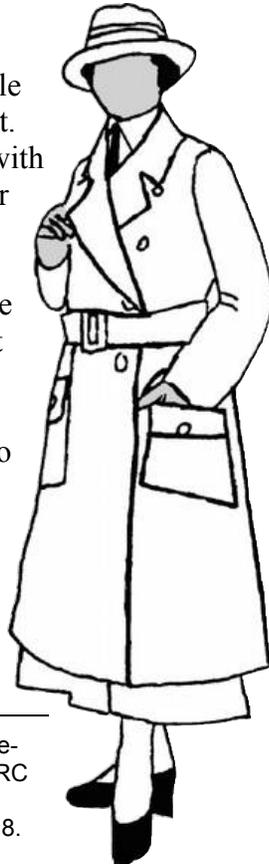


Left: Woman's motor Corps Service uniform. Source: ARC 305, May 20, 1918.. Above Women's foreign service single-breasted tunic based on American Army. Source: ARC 410, Oct. 5, 1918.

**Skirt:** Plain four-gored, opening in the center front, having a side pleat of about 1 1/2 inches wide down the front. A patch pocket on either side of the front of the skirt to be sewn flat with a box pleat down the center. Skirt to be made on an inside belt. Bottom of skirt to be not more than 7 inches from the ground.

**Hat:** Same shade of cloth as uniform, but lighter in weight with a flexible stitched brim. Band of black grosgrain ribbon with double flat bow in front. Ribbon to be edged at top with small band of the same material and shade as service color.

**Overcoat:** [right] To be made of the same color and style material but of a heavier weight. Double breasted military coat with deep inverted pleat down center back and open vent down the back, starting about five inches below waist line. Collar is made with a tab underneath, so that it can be turned and buttoned up. Full belt with leather-covered buckle and two patch pockets to be put on slanting. Coat should be lined to the waist and if material is not of very heavy weight, should be lined and interlined throughout.



Right: Women's foreign service double-breasted military overcoat. Source: ARC 410, Oct. 5, 1918. Far right: Canteen overcoat. Source: ARC 403, Nov. 1918.

**Service Colors:**

- Staff of Commission or National Headquarters in Washington: *Royal Blue*.
- Department of Military Relief (Canteens, etc.): *Horizon Blue*.
- Department of Civilian Relief (Social Workers, etc.): *Dark Red*.
- Department of Development (Surgical Dressings, etc.): *Bottle Green*.
- Clerical Service: *Tan*.
- Transportation Service (Chauffeuse): *Peacock Green*.
- Transportation Service (Delegate to meet ships or trains) : *Wine*.
- Transportation Service (Delegates: automobile loaned to Commission for service): *White*.

The only notable difference from this directive and that of February 28, 1918 is: Buttons of black vegetable ivory with a raised cross in the center and the words "American Red Cross" around the circumference. No mention is made of Service Colors for Transportation, however the other services remain the same.

**November 1918**

*Manual of Regulations and Specifications for Chapter Workers' Uniforms & Insignia ARC 403.*

It is obligatory for all officers of Canteen Service to wear the full uniform, and it is desirable that it be worn by all canteen workers. If this is not possible, all workers on outdoor duty must wear the apron over their outer garments. The hat must always be worn when on outdoor duty; and when on indoor assignments the cap and apron must be worn.

**Overcoat:** [below] The material for this overcoat should be of heavy blue silvertone cloth. If impossible to obtain the silvertone cloth a material resembling it in shade of color, as nearly possible, is acceptable. The coat shall be lined with flag-red flannel. It is double-breasted, fastening down the front with a single row of four standard Red Cross black buttons. The back is plain and has no vent.



The skirt of the coat is full. The sleeves are plain, with cuffs approximately 6 inches deep with rounded corners piped in the same red flannel as used for the coat lining.

The collar is to be a straight scarf approximately 12 inches wide, and long enough to cross under the chin and reach over the shoulders to within 4 or 5 inches of the belt line in the back. This scarf collar is to be lined with red flannel as used for the coat lining.

The coat shall have a 3-inch belt of the same material as the coat, fastened in front with a cloth-covered buckle and supported by narrow straps placed on each under-arm seam. Two large patch pockets are set horizontally below the belt. These pockets are closed by oblong flaps buttoned at the center with a standard Red Cross black button.

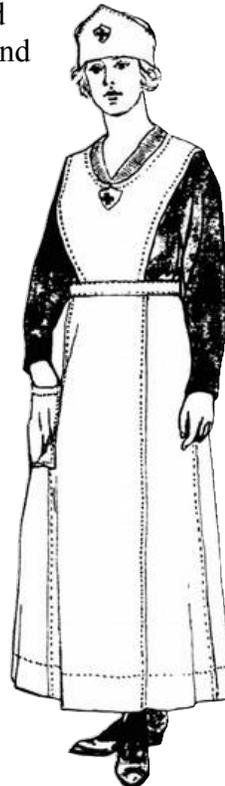
**Cape:** [below] The Canteen cape is to be made of light weight blue silvertone cloth. It shall be a straight model, cut with little flare and unlined. The fronts are separate from the body of the cape, of the same length. They are held in place by a 3-inch belt that extends around the waist under the cape and fastens with a button. The cape shall have a scarf collar lined with flag-red flannel and made like the collar of the overcoat.

**Hat:** The winter hat shall be of the same material as the uniform. The service color is worn on the winter hat in a narrow band of red flannel inserted at the base of the crown. The summer hat to be worn with this uniform shall be a black straw sailor with a black ribbon band.



**Apron [left]** The specifications of the apron for this uniform are the same as for the apron prescribed for Reclamation work. The material shall be horizon blue chambray or gingham, or any cotton washable material of this shade of blue. The white collar and cuffs should always be worn with this apron. This apron may also be worn as a dress, provided the skirt measures at least 2 1/2 yards around the bottom and is sewed up the back.

**Auxiliary Apron [right]** This model of apron may be worn as an alternative to the above apron. This apron has a full skirt, with a full V neck bib which extends of the shoulders, the ends crossing in back and fastening at the waist with pearl buttons. This apron is designed to wear over the worker's own dress.



**Cap:** The indoor cap for this uniform to be worn with either apron, shall have a pointed brim of heavy white material, such as pique, and the crown shall be of white lawn or of any thin white material.

**Insignia Canteen Shield:** The insignia for this uniform is a white shield in the center of which is woven a Red Cross and the words "A.R.C. Canteen Worker" in small blue letters. The shields are made in two sizes, 1 3/4 inches and 2 1/2 inches. The large shield must be worn on the left sleeve of the overcoat halfway between elbow and shoulder, and in the middle front of the cape. The small shield is to be worn on the front of the apron in the center at the base of the neck-band, on the center front of the crown of the hat, and on the center front of the brim of the cap.

*Shirley Powers is a volunteer who has been with the American Red Cross since 1974. She primarily document "things" as opposed to people or events. When the Uniform Lending Closet was begun in 1996 as many chapters were celebrating their 80th Anniversaries and wanted something for a display or "fashion show," she rediscovered her sewing skills to mend uniforms. In 1999 she became "official" as a Volunteer Historian--Memorabilia for the Historical Resources Department at ARC National Headquarters. Visit her [Collect ARC](#) website for more about the history of the American Red Cross.*

Far left: Canteen cape. Above left: Canteen apron. Left: Auxiliary canteen apron. Source: ARC 403, Nov. 1918.