

Feature



USMC Service Uniforms on the Western Front: 1917-1918 **Byron Connell**

The U.S. Marine Corps struggled to maintain its identity on the western front during WWI by retaining its distinctive uniforms instead of adopting those worn by Pershing's Army.

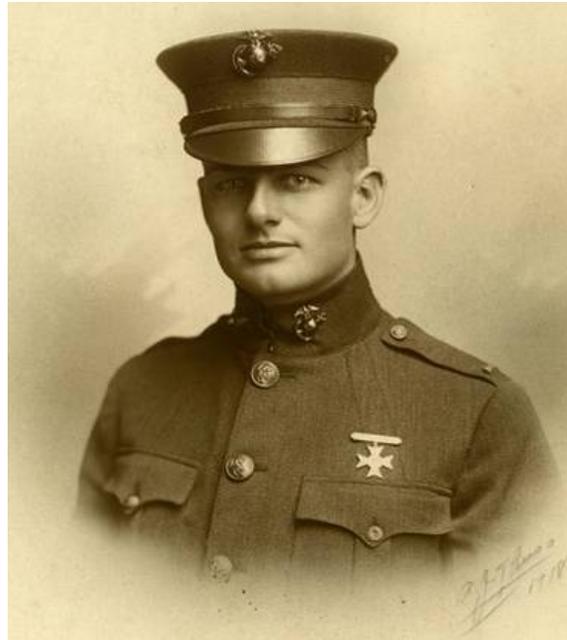
When the United States entered the World War on April 6, 1917, the United States Marine Corps had a total of 13,725 officers and men on active duty. On November 11, 1918, when the Armistice with Germany went into effect, the Corps strength stood at 72,963 officers and men, for a 430 percent increase over 19 months. This was an unprecedented size; the Corps had about 3,100 officers and men at the end

Editor's Note

This is a companion to the author's article, "The United States Army, 1917-1918: A Description of the Enlisted Man's Service Uniform," in *The ICG Newsletter*, IX:2, (March/April 2010), pp. 1-2. The issue is available from the "International Costumer Newsletter" page of the [ICG website](#).

of the Civil War in 1865 and about 4,800 at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898.

In June 1917, the first units of the Marine 4th Brigade arrived in France as part of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), which was under the command of General John J. Pershing of the U.S. Army. In September 1918, they were joined by units of the 5th Brigade.(1)



USMC Lieutenant, c. 1918. Source: [Tennessee State Library and Archives](#).

Question: Didn't the Marines wear the same uniform as the Army?

Answer: Not if they could help it!

General Pershing wanted all American troops to wear the Army's uniform in order to minimize enemy ability to identify particular units. The Marines, however, reported to the Secretary of the Navy. So long as they had access to Navy sources of supply, they would wear their proper service uniforms, which they did from their June 1917 arrival in France until January 1918.

On the Western Front, the Marines lost access to the Navy supply chain in January 1918 and were forced to replace worn-out uniform items from Army sources.(2) Once this happened, Pershing's preference was met. However, this did not affect Marines at home or serving aboard Navy vessels.

Until then, Marines included in the AEF wore their P1917 uniform, very similar to the Army's in outline, somewhat different in detail, and very different in color. While the Army wore olive drab, the Marines wore "rifle" or "forestry" green, a dark shade of green still in use today.

From 1840 until 1904, the Marines wore blue uniforms on all occasions, with modifications from time to time (such as the khaki trousers worn in Cuba in 1898). In 1904, the Marines adopted an overall khaki uniform as a field uniform, while retaining blue special dress, dress, and undress uniforms when not in the field. In 1912, they replaced khaki with forestry green as the

color of the field uniform. Allowing time for existing stock to wear out, green did not come into wide use until 1914.(3)

Question: Why green?

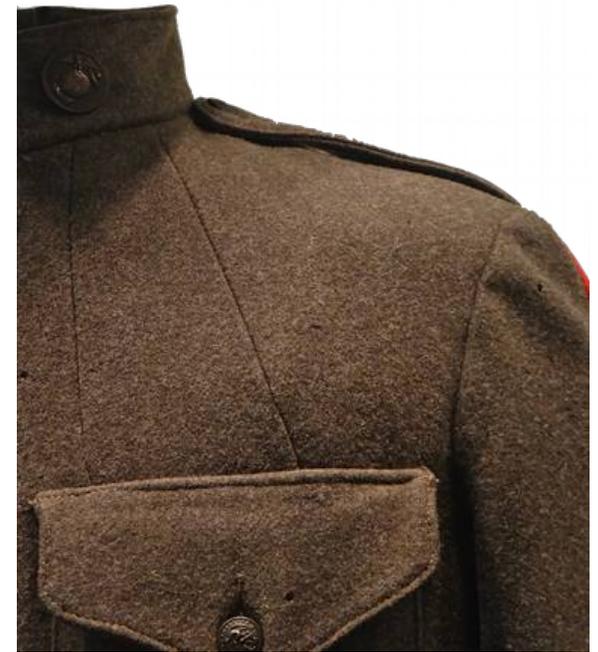
Answer: For several reasons. First, the Marines had worn green before. During the Revolution, the Continental Marines wore green coats with either white or red lapels. While the Marines were given blue uniforms in 1797, when the Corps was re-established, they wore green once again between 1834 and 1839.(4)

Second, since the Napoleonic Wars, forestry green had been the traditional color for elite light infantry units, such as the British Army's Rifle Brigade, supposedly because that's what foresters wore. In 1917, it also was similar to the jaeger color of German Army rifle units, unfortunately.(5)

Blouse (Tunic): A single-breasted sack coat, of dark green wool, not so heavy as the Army blouse. It had a plain stand collar. The skirt of the blouse fell about at the wrist when the arm fell naturally to the side. On each side of the chest, two vertical seams ran from the collar to the pockets, one angled to about the inner end and the other to about the outside pleat. The sleeves had pointed cuffs (similar to those worn today on the green uniform), unlike the plain round cuffs on the Army blouse. A dark brown leather waist belt with a rectangular, open-frame brass buckle could be worn over the tunic when an enlisted Marine was not wearing a cartridge belt; however this was not seen universally.



Above and below: M1917 forestry green Marine blouse (tunic) has stand-up collar, four outside patch pockets, and closes with five Marine Corps buttons. Photos: Tina Connell.



Two vertical seams run from collar to pockets. Shoulder straps fasten to blouse with bronze button. Photo: Tina Connell.

Five dark bronze regulation Marine Corps buttons closed the front of the blouse; two hooks close the collar. The blouse had shoulder straps loose on three sides and let in at the shoulder seam, reaching to the collar; the inner end was rounded and was fastened to the blouse with a small, dark bronze regulation button.

The blouse had four outside patch pockets, two at the breast and two below the waist. The breast pockets had vertical pleats; those below the waist were of an unpleated "bellows" design. All were rounded at the bottom edges, covered with single rounded-pointed flaps and buttoned on the flap by $\frac{5}{8}$ inch dark bronze regulation buttons.

The 1912-design blouse lacked the pockets below the waist. Some of these blouses were worn in France, occasionally with the lower pockets added.

Officers and men wore the same blouse, with insignia of rank the only difference. Officers, of course, could purchase privately tailored uniforms. Some were made of baratheia rather than woven wool.

Like all personnel of officer rank of the Allied and Associated Powers on the Western Front, Marine officers wore “Sam Browne” belts over their blouses.(6) This was a dark-brown leather waist belt with a rectangular, open-frame brass buckle and a narrow cross-strap running from an attachment at the left rear of the waist belt, under the right shoulder strap to an attachment on the left front of the belt. It was adjusted by a small open, square bronze buckle and several buckle holes. The strap’s tongue tapered slightly to fit through the buckle.

The Sam Browne belt was a universal indication, on the Western Front, that the wearer was an officer, not an enlisted man, no matter what uniform he wore.(7)

Ordnance Lt. wears privately purchased uniform, officers service cap, and Sam Browne belt. Source: [AEF Doughboys](#).



Buttons: The dark bronze buttons were very slightly convex rather than flat. The buttons on the front of the blouse were 7/8th inch; on the shoulder straps and on the pockets they were 5/8th inch. All carried the Marines’ device of an eagle with wings spread and facing forward clutching a fowl anchor and surrounded by 13 five-pointed stars running from wing-tip to wing-tip. (This design had been in use since 1804.) The same buttons, in a one-inch size, were worn on the greatcoat (see below).(8)



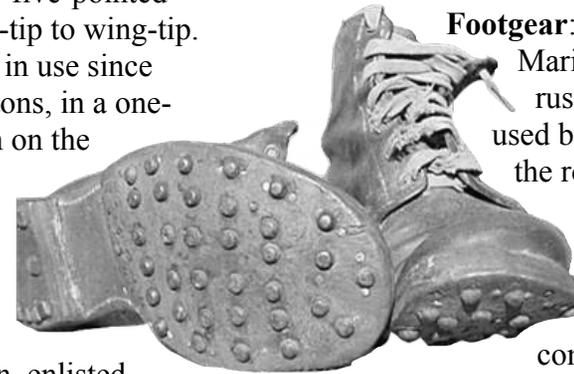
USMC brass tunic button. Photo: Tina Connell

Trousers: Unlike the breeches the Army issued to enlisted men, enlisted Marines wore dark green long trousers with side seam pockets and belt loops. A crease was steamed into each leg. A cloth strap and brass buckle at the waistband’s rear could adjust the waistband size. The trousers were tucked into khaki canvas leggings, laced up the outside with seven studs and held with a leather strap under the instep of the shoe.

In contrast, Marine officers wore dark green riding

breeches, sometimes of whipcord, the inseam reinforced by a double layer of cloth. The legs were slightly pegged. Initially, the trousers had a one-quarter inch scarlet welt down the outside of each leg. This welt was later omitted. They usually were worn with brown leather Stohwasser clamshell gaiters.

Both officers and men wore a one-inch wide khaki web belt on their trousers, with a dark bronze open-frame rectangular buckle and rectangular tip.(9)



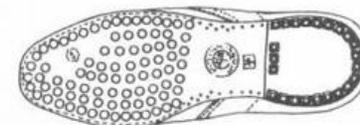
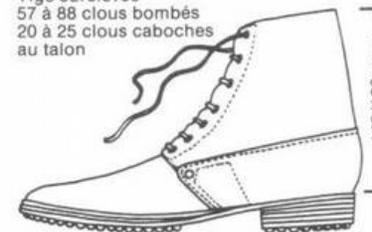
Footgear: Initially, enlisted Marines wore the same russet brown ankle boots used by the Army, made with the rough side of the leather on the outside, laced up the front. They quickly proved too lightly made for conditions on the Western

Front and were replaced first by French or British boots as an interim measure.

Ultimately, they were replaced by the “Pershing” boot, a 4½ inch high ankle boot, also with the rough side outwards, which had reinforced hobnail soles and metal “horseshoes” on the heels. They were heavily greased to make them waterproof.

MODÈLE 1917

Tige surélevée
57 à 88 clous bombés
20 à 25 clous caboches
au talon



Above: M1917 Field Shoes, probably rebuilt in the AEF. Left: drawing of the French shoe shows difference in hobnail patterns Source: [U.S. Militaria Forum](#).

Officers wore the same boots, with the Stohwasser gaiters. However, officers could also wear a variety of other boots, including knee-length “aviator” or field boots laced up the front.(10)

Shirt: Unlike the Army’s three-button placket shirt, the Marines wore a button-through shirt in khaki flannel with a pointed collar and two breast pockets, each closed by a buttoned pointed flap. Unlike the Army, Marines did not wear neckties at this time. The shirt collar frequently was pulled up on the neck to minimize chafing from the tunic collar.(11)



Marine button-through shirt in kaki flannel with pointed collar and two breast pockets, each closed by a buttoned pointed flap. Source: [U.S. Militaria Forum](#).

Greatcoat. Officers and men alike wore forestry green wool double-breasted coats, to approximately the top of the leggings (i.e., mid-calf), with two rows of five dark bronze one-inch regulation buttons each, stand and fall collars falling slightly below the top row of buttons, vertical slash side pockets, shoulder straps, and a tab and one dark bronze button on each cuff. The shape of the cuff tab resembled the shoulder strap but was shorter.

When not wearing cartridge belts, enlisted men wore brown leather belts with rectangular frame brass buckles over their greatcoat. Officers wore Sam Browne belts.(12)

Headgear: *Field hat.* Marine officers and men wore their Model 1912 field hat, a brown “Montana peak” hat (like Smoky the Bear’s) similar to those worn today by U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps Drill Instructors (male). The hat had the peaks facing directly fore and aft and to each side. Each had a grommeted ventilation hole.

The hat was about 5½ inches tall and had a three-inch brim with either three or



five rows of stitching around the brim. It had a grosgrain ribbon around the base of the crown. Two grommeted holes in the peak allowed attachment of a leather chinstrap (not always worn). The Marine hat device of a dark bronze eagle, globe, and foul anchor (see below) was affixed to the front of the crown. In addition to the grosgrain ribbon, officers wore a cord of mixed red and gold around the base of the crown.

Unlike the Army, the Marines did not have their own fore-and-aft “overseas cap”; after January 1918, they began using the Army’s cap.



“Shipboard” hat: Shipboard Marines and officers wore P1897 visored caps, with bell-shaped crowns. These were similar in shape to that worn by U.S. Navy officers (with a narrower crown than the one in use since the Second World War), in forestry green wool, with a

Above: P1897 “shipboard” hat. Photo: Tina Connell. Left: Greatcoat and field hat worn by Evald A. Johnson, 13th Marine regiment MP in France, 1918. Source: [Portraits of War](#).

brown leather visor, a ¼ inch wide brown leather chin strap at the front, affixed by two small dark bronze regulation buttons, a 1 7/8 inches deep forestry green woolen band below the crown, and the eagle, globe, and fowl anchor hat device at the front of the crown.(13)

Helmet. At the Front, Marines initially wore French “Adrian” helmets or, later, the British Mark 1 or U.S. M1917 steel helmet. The latter two were of British pattern (the “basin” or “cream soup plate” shape), painted olive drab, with a brown chinstrap. Marines frequently re-painted helmets forestry green. Unlike the field cap and shipboard cap, normally no insignia was worn on the front of the helmet.(14)



Insignia: Until November 1918, enlisted Marines wore no insignia on their collars, unlike enlisted soldiers. Marine commissioned officers wore a small dark bronze eagle, globe, and anchor device (minus the foul rope) on each side of the front of the collar. These were in

Top: M1917 steel helmet. Above: Bronze collar insignia of Marine commissioned officer. Photos: Tina Connell.

Non-Commissioned Officers' Rank Insignia					
	Line		Staff		
	<i>Title</i>	<i>Insignia</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Insignia</i>	
6 th Grade	Private	None			
5 th Grade	Private 1 st Class	1 Chevron	Private 1 st Class	1 Chevron	
4 th Grade	Corporal	2 Chevrons	Corporal	2 Chevrons	
3 rd Grade	Sergeant	3 Chevrons	Sergeant	3 Chevrons	
2 nd Grade	1 st Sergeant	3 Chevrons surmounting a Lozenge (point up)			
	Gunnery Sergeant	3 chevrons surmounting an Exploding Bomb in front of Crossed Rifles			
1 st Grade	Sergeant Major	3 Chevrons surmounting 3 arcs	Quartermaster Sergeant/Drum Major	3 Chevrons surmounting 3 horizontal Ties with a specialty Device between	
	Master Gunnery Sergeant	3 Chevrons surmounting 3 arcs with the same Device Between as the Gunnery Sergeant			

pairs, with the bottom of the anchor pointed toward the front of the collar. Marine warrant officers wore their rank insignia on the collar instead (see following section).

Rank insignia. Marine officers and enlisted Marines between the ranks of private first class and sergeant major were divided between line and staff services. Enlisted men in staff services had different rank titles and slightly different rank

insignia from those in line units. Officers had the same rank titles and insignia across both line and staff. However, staff officers wore the insignia of their staff department on the tunic collar behind the eagle, globe, and anchor insignia.

The staff consisted of a small cadre of long-service specialists in the following branches: Aviation, Mess, Music, Paymaster, Quartermaster, and Signals. The

Adjutant and Inspector's Department, another staff branch, consisted only of officers.

Noncommissioned Officers. To show rank, enlisted Marines wore 80-millimeter-wide chevrons on each arm of the tunic, midway between the elbow and shoulder.

Chevrons, arcs, and bars were embroidered in forestry green silk on red gabardine backgrounds. The chevrons had a slight concave curve from the base to the peak.



Above the rank of Gunnery Sergeant or First Sergeant, line noncommissioned officers (NCOs) wore arcs ("rockers") at the base of the chevrons, tying their ends together. NCOs in staff positions wore straight bars instead of arcs.

Commissioned Officers. Marine officers held the same rank titles as did Army officers and wore the same rank insignia on their shoulders. These are the same as those worn today, although Rankin describes them as "more ornate in design," with two exceptions.(15) First, Second Lieutenants wore no distinctive rank insignia. Their single gold bar came into use only in December 1918, after the Armistice. Second, the Marines had no rank higher than Major General. On November 11, 1918, it had only three major generals, one of whom was the Commandant of the Corps.

Commissioned Officers' Insignia Rank		
Rank	Insignia	
Second Lieutenant	none	
First Lieutenant	One Silver Bar 3/8 inch wide by 1 inch long, usually stamped so as to appear bullion-embroidered, worn perpendicular to the shoulder strap	
Captain	Two Silver Bars, each 3/8 inch wide by 1 inch long, 3/4 inch apart and joined to each other at top and bottom by thin silver straps, usually stamped so as to appear bullion-embroidered, with the bars perpendicular to the shoulder strap	
Major	One Gold 7-Pointed Oak Leaf, 1 inch high by 1 inch across, with the stem facing the shoulder	
Lieutenant Colonel	One Silver 7-Pointed Oak Leaf, 1 inch high by 1 inch across, with the stem facing the shoulder	
Colonel	One Silver Spread-Wing Eagle, 3/4 inch high by 1 1/2 inches between wingtips, worn in pairs with the head facing front and the wings farthest from the shoulder	
Brigadier General	One Silver 5-Pointed Star 1 inch in diameter, worn point up (toward shoulder)	
Major General	Two Silver 5-Pointed Stars in a row, each 1 inch in diameter, worn point up	

Warrant Officers. Warrant officers were specialists serving as officers by warrant of the Secretary of the Navy rather than by a commission granted by Act of Congress. They ranked above the most senior NCOs and below the most junior Second Lieutenants. They wore the same uniforms and insignia as commissioned officers except that, in France, they wore

Left: Rank insignia of Marine Corporal on each arm of tunic. Right: Chevrons on cuff indicate six-month periods of overseas service. Photos: Tina Connell.

their insignia of rank on each side of the front of the collar, where commissioned officers wore the eagle, globe, and anchor insignia. (Elsewhere, they wore their rank insignia on the shoulder straps.)

The two specialties in which a warrant could be issued were Ordinance and the Quartermaster service. Ordnance warrant officers had the rank title, "Gunner"; Quartermaster warrant officers had the title, "Quartermaster Clerk."(16)

Warrant Officers' Insignia Rank		
Rank	Insignia	
Gunner	Circular disk with fire bursting from the top (a "bursting bomb")	
Quartermaster Clerk	Quartermaster Department insignia: Crossed key and sword surmounting a 13-spoked wheel with 13 5-pointed stars around its rim.	

Other Insignia. Beginning in September 1917, officers and men wore a gold bullion chevron, point down, on the left cuff of the tunic for each six-month period of overseas service. The same chevron on the right cuff signified a wound received in combat. (This was before the revival of the Purple Heart medal.)



These chevrons were the same as those used by the Army. They were two to three inches wide. The uppermost one was positioned four to five inches above the cuff.



Long-service stripes. Above each cuff, enlisted Marines wore a diagonal stripe pointing from the outside to the inside, in the usual green on red, for each four-year enlistment completed.(17)



Accoutrements: Enlisted Marines other than senior NCOs wore a khaki (occasionally green, at first) cotton web cartridge belt over the blouse or greatcoat, as well as in shirtsleeve order, with five khaki cartridge pockets on each side of the front. It was stamped US (occasionally USMC at first) in black ink. Each pocket held two five-round clips for the M1903 Springfield rifle. [See photo of Greatcoat]

Belts made before 1917 had puckered bottoms to the pockets and covers closed by a snap fastener impressed with either the national eagle or the USMC button insignia. Belts made after 1917 lost the puckered bottoms of the pockets and replaced the snaps with "lift the dot" type fasteners, with a stud and a "doughnut" collar [see photo above], better suited for muddy conditions of the Western Front.

A pair of web pack carriers ("suspenders") was attached to the cartridge belt at each side of the front and in the rear, as were a first aid kit [See photo of Greatcoat], canteen, and bayonet. The first aid kit was a khaki canvas or webbing pouch. The canteen was aluminum, of one quart with an insulated cover. The bayonet scabbard was covered in khaki webbing, with a russet brown leather tip.

The gas mask was carried in a pouch either slung over one shoulder or worn around the neck and braced to the chest (the "ready" position).

The Marine haversack (knapsack) was attached to the rear of the pack carriers and the belt. Henry describes this pack as "an awkward carry when fully loaded. . . . For the assault it was obviously packed much lighter and smaller. Unfortunately, to get something out of the pack it had to be fully opened." A shovel (entrenching tool) and a mess kit were hung at the center of its back. A green blanket, with a woven US in the center, was rolled and carried at the bottom.

Officers, senior NCOs, and machine gunners wore khaki cotton web pistol belts. The webbing had six strands and a series of three vertically aligned grommeted holes, from which to hang equipment. From them, the wearer could hang his brown leather pistol holster, magazine pouch (holding two pistol magazines), first aid pouch, and canteen. The holster had a flap stamped with US. It was worn on the right hip. The other

Top: Kaki cotton web pistol belt with magazine pouch, canteen, and pistol holder.. Above: Haversack (knapsack) attached to rear of pack carriers and belt. Photos: Tina Connell. Above right: Long service stripe. Source: [Wikimedia](https://www.wikimedia.org/).

equipment was the same as that worn by other Marines.

He could use the pack carriers to hold his haversack in the same manner as other Marines. Generally, however, officers carried a musette bag in several varieties in lieu of the Marine haversack. Officers might also carry map cases, compasses, and binoculars.(18)

Weapons: Marines other than officers, senior NCOs, or machine gunners normally carried a trench knife and either a Springfield Model 1903 or Enfield Model 1917 .30-06 calibre rifle.

Officers, senior NCOs, and machine gunners carried a Colt M1911 or M1911A .45 caliber automatic pistol, which was 8.62 inches long.

After January 1918: In that month, it was ordered that, "During the present war, the regulation Army uniform will be regularly issued to Marines of the AEF, thereby gradually replacing the Marine uniform." In other words, Marines would replace individual items of the Marine uniform with standard Army issue items. This change did not affect Marines outside the AEF, at home or on board Navy vessels.



The Marines did not submit easily, especially officers, who could continue to purchase uniforms tailored in Paris, and it is unlikely that 100 percent compliance with the order was ever achieved. Henry says, "the Marines hated the M1912 Army/AEF uniform. It was uncomfortable and poorly made; but more importantly, by losing their distinctive P1917 uniform they were losing part of their identity." As a result, Marines went through a period in which their uniforms were a mixture of Marine green and Army olive drab.(19)

For a description of the Army enlisted uniform, see "The United States Army, 1917-1918: A Description of the Enlisted Man's Service Uniform". [See bibliography] This section will focus on steps Marines took to differentiate themselves from the Army. These were unofficial steps taken by individual Marine officers and enlisted men. The 4th Brigade commanding general called for cooperation in adapting to the Army.(20)

The most obvious difference was on the collar of the Army drab blouse. In the Army, enlisted men wore collar disks identifying them as Army personnel and specifying their arm (e.g., infantry) or service. Marines wore no collar disks and their collars were obviously bare. In August 1918, however, the Navy Department authorized a Marine collar disk bearing their

Far left: Officers and senior NCOs carried Colt M1911 or M1911A .40 caliber automatic pistol. Photo: Tina Connell. Left: US .30 caliber M1917 rifle. Source: [World Guns](#). Right: Marine eagle, globe and anchor attached to front of helmet. Photo: Tina Connell.

eagle, globe, and anchor device. Some replacements may have received and worn the disks on their collars before the Armistice.



In addition, officers and men replaced the blouse's Army buttons with Marine buttons. They affixed the eagle, globe, and anchor hat device to the front of their field hat and to the left front of the Army overseas cap, and occasionally to the front of the helmet. NCOs

displayed their rank with Marine green-on-red chevrons. Marines entitled to long-service stripes used green and red ones.(21)

None of these changes affected the uniform to the extent that it gave the enemy clues about the way the AEF was organized.

Following the Armistice, Marines assigned to the American component of the Allied intervention in Russia continued to wear Army uniforms. Those returning home were re-equipped in Marine green.

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Notes

(1) Maj. Edwin N. McClellan, USMC, *The United States Marine Corps in the World War*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1920 (reprinted 1968), pp. 9-12. Bert L. Campbell & Ron Reynolds, *Marine Badges & Insignia of the World*, p. 18.

(2) Colonel Robert H. Rankin, USMC, *Uniforms of the Sea Services*, p. 182. Bert L. Campbell & Ron Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 18. Mark R. Henry, *US Marine Corps in World War I 1917-1918*, p. 9.

(3) Campbell & Reynolds, *Ibid*, p. 18.

(4) John Mollo, *Uniforms of The American Revolution in Color*, p. 201. Rankin, *op cit*, p. 180.

(5) Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *Uniforms of Waterloo*, p. 119. Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit.*, p. 18.

(6) The "Sam Browne" belt was named for Brigadier General Sam Browne, a 19th century British Army officer who lost an arm in combat and devised the belt to steady his scabbard so that he could draw his sword with only one hand.

(7) Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 17. Henry, *op cit*, pp. 7-8. Rankin, *op cit*, pp 180-181.

(8) Henry, *op cit*, p. 7 and Plate B.

(9) Henry, *op cit*, pp. 7-8 and Plate A. Rankin, *op cit*, p. 181.

(10) *Ibid*.

(11) Henry, *op cit*, pp. 15 & 45 and Plate C. Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 17.

(12) Rankin, *op cit*, 10 and 182.

(13) Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 17. Henry, *op cit*, pp. 11-12. Rankin, *op cit*, p. 181.

(14) For a detailed description of the M1917 helmet, see Byron Connell, "WW II U.S.

Army Officers' Field Uniform and Accessories," *The Virtual Costumer*, X, 4 (November 2012), pp. 41-42.

(15) Rankin, *op cit*, p. 180.

(16) Henry, *op cit*, pp. 17-19 & 45. McClellan, *op cit*, p. 12..

(17) Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 19 (including photo). Henry, *ibid*, p. 19.

(18) Henry, *op cit*, pp. 34-42.

(19) Campbell & Reynolds, *op cit*, p. 18. Henry, *op cit*, p. 16.

(20) Connell, "United States Army, 1917-18," *op cit*, pp. 1-2. Rankin, *op cit*, p. 183

(21) Henry, *ibid*, pp. 9, 12-13, 16. Rankin, *ibid*, pp. 182-183.

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Photos by Tina Connell were take at the [National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri](#).