

1870 us cavalry uniforms

1870 US Cavalry Uniforms: A Deep Dive into the Attire of the Frontier Soldier

The 1870 US Cavalry uniform represents a fascinating era in American military history, a period marked by westward expansion, conflicts with Native American tribes, and significant evolution in military fashion and functionality. Understanding the specifics of these uniforms provides invaluable insight into the daily lives, challenges, and identities of the soldiers who wore them. From the practicalities of frontier service to the evolving regulations governing their appearance, the 1870 US Cavalry uniform offers a window into a pivotal time. This article will explore the key components of these iconic uniforms, delve into their historical context, examine variations across different units, and discuss their enduring legacy. Prepare to discover the details that defined the look and feel of the American cavalryman in the pivotal year of 1870.

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Historical Context: The Cavalry in 1870

The year 1870 found the United States Cavalry deeply entrenched in its role during the latter stages of the Indian Wars and the ongoing efforts to secure the Western frontier. Following the American Civil War, many units that had served with distinction were reorganized, and new cavalry regiments were established to meet the demands of policing vast territories, protecting settlers, and engaging in skirmishes with Native American forces. The cavalry was the primary branch of the U.S. Army tasked with rapid deployment, reconnaissance, and offensive actions across the plains, mountains, and deserts. The uniforms worn by these soldiers were a product of both established military tradition and the practical necessities dictated by the harsh environment and the nature of their duties.

The period leading up to and including 1870 saw a gradual shift in military clothing design. While the specter of Civil War uniforms still influenced some aspects of dress, regulations were evolving to better suit the cavalryman's needs. Factors such as durability, comfort in varied climates, and the ability to blend with the surroundings played an increasingly important role. The 1870 US Cavalry uniform, therefore, was not merely a matter of aesthetics but a carefully considered set of garments designed to equip soldiers for a challenging and often dangerous existence. The challenges of supply lines across the vast distances of the West also meant that variations in uniform presentation could exist due to availability and local sourcing.

Key Components of the 1870 US Cavalry Uniform

The typical 1870 US Cavalry uniform was a well-defined ensemble, though variations existed based on specific regulations, unit designations, and personal preference within the bounds of military discipline. Understanding each component provides a comprehensive picture of the cavalryman's attire.

Headgear

The most recognizable headgear for cavalrymen in 1870 was the Kepi, a stiff, cylindrical cap with a flat top and a visor. These were typically made of wool, often in sky blue for enlisted men and darker shades for officers. The Kepi often featured a chin strap, usually of leather, to keep it secure during rapid movement or in windy conditions. Many Kepis were adorned with branch of service piping, which for cavalry was often yellow or gold, indicating their mounted role. Some units also adopted other forms of headwear, including campaign hats or slouch hats, especially for wear in the field where the Kepi's stiffness could be less practical. The choice of headwear often reflected the evolving regulations and the specific demands of the theatre of operations.

Coats and Jackets

The primary outer garment for the cavalry in 1870 was the sack coat, also known as the "kilty" coat. This was a short, single-breasted jacket made of wool, typically in a dark blue or indigo color. It was designed for practicality and freedom of movement, essential for mounted soldiers. The sack coat was usually hip-length and featured a stand-up collar, which could be turned down. Buttons were typically made of brass, often stamped with the U.S. eagle or the initials "US." The sack coat's simplicity and durability made it a suitable choice for the rigors of frontier service. Officers often had more tailored versions of the sack coat, made from finer wool and with a better fit.

In some instances, particularly in colder weather or for specific ceremonial duties, longer coats like the frock coat might still have been in use, though the sack coat was the standard for daily wear. The color and trim of these coats, particularly the piping and collar details, often indicated the soldier's rank and regiment. The versatility of the sack coat allowed for layering with vests or shirts underneath, adapting to the fluctuating temperatures of the Western territories.

Trousers

Cavalry trousers were typically made of wool and were generally a lighter shade than the coat, often sky blue or a similar hue. For the cavalry, trousers were often reinforced with leather or a heavier fabric on the inside of the leg, known as "marlinspike" or "riding patches." This reinforcement was crucial to prevent wear and tear from constant contact with the saddle. Trousers were usually cut fairly loose to allow for ease of movement on horseback. They were secured at the waist with suspenders, and a leather belt was worn over them. Unlike infantry, cavalry trousers did not typically have the prominent stripe down the side that was common in earlier periods, emphasizing function over distinct regimental colors in everyday wear.

Footwear

The standard footwear for all branches of the U.S. Army, including the cavalry, were sturdy leather boots. For cavalymen, high-laced boots, often reaching the calf or just below the knee, were common. These boots provided good ankle support and protection, essential for riding and dismounted duties. They were made of durable leather, typically black or dark brown, and featured hobnails in the soles for added traction and wear resistance. Boot heels were usually moderate, designed for riding stirrups. Officers might have had more finely crafted boots, but the fundamental design for practicality remained consistent. Spurs were a common addition for cavalry boots, aiding in controlling the mount.

Belts and Accoutrements

A critical part of the 1870 US Cavalry uniform was the array of belts and accoutrements that carried essential equipment. The primary belt was the waist belt, typically made of leather and fastened with a distinctive brass buckle, often oval-shaped and featuring the U.S. eagle. This belt supported various items, including the pistol holster, cartridge box, and bayonet scabbard if applicable. A cross-belt, or saber belt, often worn diagonally from the shoulder to the opposite hip, supported the saber and sometimes the cartridge box. These belts were essential for the soldier's personal armament and carrying capacity, ensuring that vital supplies were readily accessible.

Other key accoutrements included:

- **Cartridge Box:** Usually made of leather, worn on the cross-belt, and designed to hold ammunition for the carbine or pistol.
- **Pistol Holster:** A leather holster, typically worn on the waist belt or pistol belt, holding the soldier's sidearm.
- **Saber Knot:** A strap of leather or braided cord that attached the saber hilt to the wearer's wrist for security.
- **Haversack:** A canvas bag worn over the shoulder, used to carry rations and personal items.
- **Canteen:** A metal or rubber-lined canvas container for water, typically worn suspended from the shoulder or waist belt.

Insignia and Rank

While the 1870 US Cavalry uniform was generally practical, insignia played a crucial role in identifying rank and branch of service. Officers wore

distinctive insignia on their caps, collars, and sometimes on their coats. These could include stars, bars, or wreaths, usually in gold or silver embroidery. Enlisted men's insignia were often made of brass or embroidered in wool. Cavalrymen could be identified by specific colors in their uniform trim, such as yellow piping on Kepis or collars, though this varied based on regulations and unit traditions. Shoulder straps or epaulets were also used to denote rank, especially for officers. The specific patterns and placement of insignia were governed by detailed Army regulations, which were updated periodically to standardize the appearance of the force.

Variations and Unit Specifics

While there was a standard framework for the 1870 US Cavalry uniform, several factors led to variations across different units and even between individual soldiers. The broad mandate of cavalry on the frontier meant that adaptability was key, and regulations sometimes allowed for modifications to suit specific environmental or operational needs.

Armored Cavalry

Although the term "armored cavalry" might evoke modern imagery, in the context of the 1870s, it primarily referred to units that were heavily equipped or those that might have adopted heavier woolen fabrics or even rudimentary protective elements if available. More significantly, the distinction often lay in the tactical role. Cavalry units were broadly categorized, and their uniform presentation, while adhering to core regulations, could subtly differ.

Light Cavalry

Light cavalry units, such as those often tasked with scouting, skirmishing, and reconnaissance, prioritized speed and mobility. Their uniforms were designed to be as lightweight and unencumbered as possible. This might mean less emphasis on heavy overcoats and a greater reliance on lighter fabrics for their jackets and trousers. The specific design of their accoutrements, such as the type of carbine and holster, would also be tailored for quick deployment. The overall impression was one of agility and readiness for rapid action across the vast Western landscapes.

Dragoon Regiments

Historically, Dragoons were mounted infantry, but by 1870, most U.S. Army Dragoons had transitioned into the general cavalry role, retaining their numerical designations. Their uniforms would have largely mirrored those of other cavalry regiments. However, some historical traditions might have

lingered in the specific insignia or minor detailing. The transition meant that the distinction between "Dragoon" and "Cavalry" in terms of uniform became increasingly blurred, with both branches adopting the common cavalry dress.

Specialized Units

Certain specialized units might have had slightly different uniform requirements. For example, units operating in extreme desert environments might have favored lighter colored trousers or even canvas overcoats in place of wool to combat heat. Similarly, units engaged in patrols in densely wooded areas might have had practical modifications to their gear for ease of movement through brush. While official regulations provided the baseline, the practicalities of frontier service often necessitated adaptive measures that could lead to minor, yet significant, variations in how the 1870 US Cavalry uniform was presented in the field.

Materials and Manufacturing

The materials used in the 1870 US Cavalry uniform were primarily sourced from American manufacturers. Wool was the dominant fabric for coats, jackets, and trousers, chosen for its durability, warmth in cold weather, and relative resilience to the elements. The quality of the wool could vary, with better grades often reserved for officers' uniforms. Cotton was used for lining, shirts, and sometimes for less critical parts of accoutrements.

Leather was another essential material, used for boots, belts, holsters, cartridge boxes, and saber belts. The quality of the leather was paramount, as these items were subjected to considerable wear and tear. Saddle leather, in particular, needed to be strong and supple. Metal components, such as buckles, buttons, and spurs, were typically made of brass, chosen for its durability and resistance to corrosion. These were often stamped with official government insignia.

The manufacturing process for these uniforms occurred in various locations, from large government arsenals to smaller private contractors. The Union Army during the Civil War had established significant manufacturing capabilities, and these often continued to supply the post-war army. However, the vastness of the Western territories meant that supply lines could be long and tenuous. This sometimes led to reliance on local suppliers or the use of clothing that might not perfectly match the latest regulations but was serviceable.

Daily Life and Practicality

The 1870 US Cavalry uniform was designed with practicality in mind, a necessity for soldiers living and operating in the challenging conditions of the American West. The wool sack coat offered warmth without being overly bulky, allowing for effective movement in the saddle and during dismounted action. The reinforced trousers were crucial for preventing wear from the constant friction of riding. The sturdy leather boots provided essential ankle support and protection on rough terrain.

Beyond the basic uniform components, the accoutrements were vital for the soldier's survival and effectiveness. The cartridge box, haversack, and canteen meant that a soldier could carry enough ammunition, food, and water to sustain himself for several days away from a supply depot. The saber and sidearm were their primary tools for combat and self-defense.

The uniform also needed to withstand frequent cleaning and repair. Soldiers were expected to maintain their gear in good condition, and while official issues of clothing were made, personal mending and adaptation were common. The uniform had to be robust enough to endure dust, rain, heat, and cold, often without the benefit of modern laundry facilities. The simplicity of the sack coat, for instance, made it relatively easy to brush clean or patch.

While the formal dress uniform was reserved for special occasions, the everyday wear of the cavalryman in 1870 was a testament to functionality. The colors, often muted blues and grays, also offered a degree of camouflage against the varied landscapes of the plains and prairies, a subtle but important consideration for soldiers engaged in frontier warfare. The uniform was not just attire; it was a toolkit for survival and service.

Evolution and Legacy of 1870 US Cavalry Uniforms

The 1870 US Cavalry uniform stood at a transitional point in military fashion. It retained some of the formality and design elements that had carried over from earlier periods, while simultaneously embracing a more practical, utilitarian approach dictated by the realities of frontier service. This era saw the refinement of the sack coat as the standard cavalry jacket, a move away from more elaborate or purely ceremonial attire. The emphasis shifted towards durability and functionality, ensuring that the soldier was adequately equipped for the demanding conditions they faced.

The legacy of the 1870 US Cavalry uniform is deeply intertwined with the popular image of the American West. The iconic cavalryman, clad in his blue uniform and broad-brimmed hat or Kepi, became a symbol of American expansion

and the military presence on the frontier. These uniforms represented not just the U.S. Army, but also the efforts to establish law and order, protect settlers, and engage in the complex and often tragic conflicts with Native American tribes.

The enduring fascination with these uniforms can be seen in historical reenactments, museums, and popular culture. They serve as tangible links to a pivotal period in American history, allowing us to visualize and better understand the lives and sacrifices of the soldiers who wore them. The evolution of the cavalry uniform during this period reflects broader changes in military technology, tactics, and the changing role of the United States on the global stage. The practical, yet distinctive, aspects of the 1870 US Cavalry uniform continue to capture the imagination, representing a unique chapter in the history of American military dress.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the primary colors of the 1870 US Cavalry uniforms?

The most distinctive color was the 'sky blue' or 'light blue' for the enlisted men's trousers and jackets. Officers often wore darker shades of blue, and variations existed for different branches and specialties.

Were there significant differences between officer and enlisted cavalry uniforms in 1870?

Yes, there were noticeable differences. While both wore blue jackets and trousers, officers' uniforms were typically made of finer wool, often with more elaborate braiding, metal buttons, and kepis or hats that were of higher quality and design.

What type of headwear was commonly worn by US Cavalry in 1870?

The kepi, a flat-topped, round military cap, was very common. For more informal settings or field duty, slouch hats or campaign hats, often adorned with ostrich feathers or insignia, were also popular.

Did the Indian Wars influence the design or practicality of 1870 cavalry uniforms?

Absolutely. The harsh conditions of the Western frontier led to the adoption of more practical elements. This included sturdy woollens that could withstand wear and tear, and adaptations for comfort in varied climates, though elaborate dress uniforms were still maintained.

What were the key distinguishing features of a cavalryman's uniform in 1870 compared to infantry?

Cavalrymen often had trousers with a cavalry stripe down the side (typically yellow or gold for enlisted men) and rode boots or shoes. Their jackets might have had specific insignia or decorations denoting their branch of service.

Were there any specific regulations or changes to US Cavalry uniforms around the year 1870?

The period around 1870 saw continued refinement of the post-Civil War uniform regulations. While major overhauls were less frequent, there were ongoing adjustments to materials, cut, and the specifics of insignia based on experience and evolving military doctrine.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to 1870 US Cavalry uniforms, each beginning with *and followed by a short description*:

1. *Iron Will on Horseback: The Regulation Uniforms of 1870*

This comprehensive volume delves into the specific regulations and designs that defined the U.S. Cavalry uniform in 1870. It explores the materials used, the cuts of the jackets and trousers, and the accoutrements that were standard issue. Readers will gain a detailed understanding of the practicalities and aesthetic considerations of these iconic military garments. The book also touches upon the evolution of these uniforms from earlier periods.

2. *Threads of the Frontier: U.S. Cavalry Dress of the Post-Civil War Era*

Focusing on the period immediately following the Civil War, this book examines the evolution of U.S. Cavalry uniforms leading up to and including the 1870 regulations. It highlights how battlefield experience and changing campaign needs influenced design choices. The text details the common variations and practical adaptations made by soldiers in the field, offering a glimpse into the realities of cavalry life. Illustrations and historical photographs bring these descriptions to life.

3. *The American Horse Soldier: Uniforms and Equipment, 1870s*

This essential reference covers the complete spectrum of uniforms and equipment worn by the U.S. Cavalry during the 1870s, with a particular emphasis on the 1870 patterns. It meticulously details headgear, jackets, breeches, footwear, and the various accoutrements necessary for mounted service. The book also addresses the campaign dress and undress uniforms, providing a thorough overview of cavalry attire on the American frontier. Detailed technical drawings are a key feature.

4. *Cavalry Steel and Serge: The Uniforms of the U.S. Army, 1870*

This title specifically targets the 1870 uniform regulations for the U.S. Army Cavalry, analyzing the specific fabrics, colors, and ornamentation. It discusses the influence of European military fashion on American uniform design and the practicalities of maintaining these garments in harsh conditions. The book provides insights into the hierarchy of the cavalry through insignia and rank distinctions. Its focus is on the official standards and their implementation.

5. *From Fort Riley to the Little Bighorn: Cavalry Uniforms in Action, 1870*
This engaging book connects the 1870 U.S. Cavalry uniform to the actual campaigns and experiences of soldiers on the frontier. It describes how the uniforms held up under the demands of patrolling, scouting, and combat during this turbulent period. The text explores the impact of different climates and terrains on uniform wear and tear. Personal accounts and historical anecdotes offer a human dimension to the study of military dress.

6. *Regimental Pride: U.S. Cavalry Uniforms and Insignia, 1870*
Dedicated to the specific insignia, buttons, and badges that distinguished different U.S. Cavalry regiments in 1870, this book is a collector's dream. It details the variations in branch of service colors, shoulder strap designs, and the evolution of cavalry insignia. The importance of unit pride and identity as reflected in their uniforms is a central theme. High-quality photography showcases the intricate details of these elements.

7. *Under the Eagle: U.S. Cavalry Uniforms of the Centennial Year*
This volume examines the U.S. Cavalry uniforms as they were worn in 1876, the centennial year of the United States, which closely follows the 1870 regulations. It provides context on the state of the Union and its military at this significant time. The book details the standard issue attire, but also explores any special or ceremonial uniforms worn during national celebrations. It offers a snapshot of the cavalry's appearance during a pivotal moment in American history.

8. *The Doughboy's Dress: Cavalry Uniforms of the 1870s, A Visual Study*
As a visual-centric exploration, this book heavily relies on photographs, illustrations, and detailed drawings to showcase the 1870 U.S. Cavalry uniform. It highlights the nuances of fit, color saturation, and material texture as captured in historical imagery. The text provides concise explanations of the different uniform components and their purpose. This is an ideal resource for reenactors and illustrators seeking accuracy.

9. *Campaigning in Khaki: U.S. Cavalry Uniforms on the Western Frontier, 1870*
This book specifically focuses on the practicalities of U.S. Cavalry uniforms on the western frontier around 1870. It discusses the common use of khaki or earth-toned overcoats and the wear and tear associated with dusty plains and rugged terrain. The text explores how soldiers adapted their uniforms for field service and the impact of various weather conditions. It offers a gritty and realistic look at the clothing that protected cavalymen.

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