Identifying Uniforms

Naval uniforms were officially introduced to the Royal Navy in 1748. Styles changed every few decades. More information on pre-1850s uniform can be found in *Dressed to Kill: British Naval Uniform, Masculinity and Contemporary Fashions, 1748 – 1857* by Amy Miller, 2007.

For over a century and a half, since the Uniform Regulations of 1856 were introduced, uniform has become more standardised. When trying to find out more about a piece of uniform see if it contains any of the following:

- A sailor's square rig, or uniform, consisting of collar, lanyard, blue collar, black scarf and white shirt (popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and still worn by junior ratings today on ceremonial occasions). It is worn with a stiff hat with a soft top and ribbon tally. These tallies are embroidered with either 'HMS' or the name of the ship that person was assigned to.

- A blue double-breasted jacket with a collar and tie usually worn by senior ratings and officers. Worn with a peaked cap consisting of a badge with a naval crown and anchor on the front.

- A blue double-breasted tailcoat worn with standing collar, gold shoulder boards or epaulettes. Worn with gold laced blue trousers by senior officers on ceremonial occasions.

- White clothing which is issued for use in tropical theatres of operations.

- Overalls, jumpers, greatcoats, duffle coats, battledress, camouflage combat dress, caps, berets and helmets are just some examples of working dress.

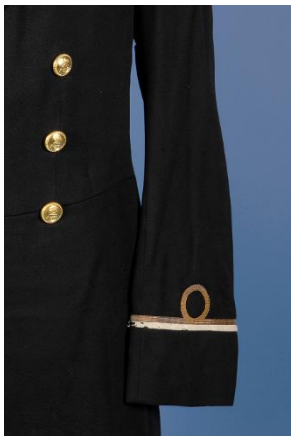


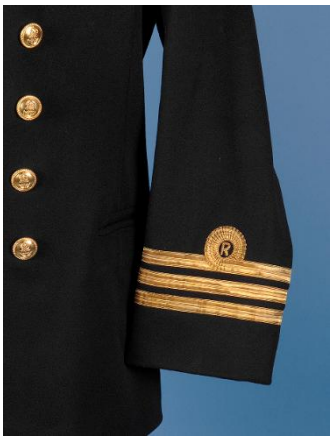


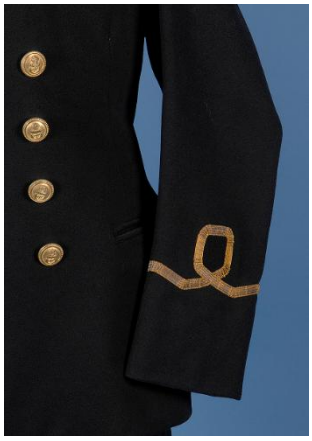


If you are trying to identify the naval rank associated with the uniform take a closer look at the following:

- Jacket cuffs (including cuff slashes). Rank distinctions were made through gold or silver lace stripes with or without a loop. The stripes may have colours in between or the loop might have a letter in the middle to distinguish the person's branch. If the lace is wavy it means the individual was in the Royal Naval Reserve.





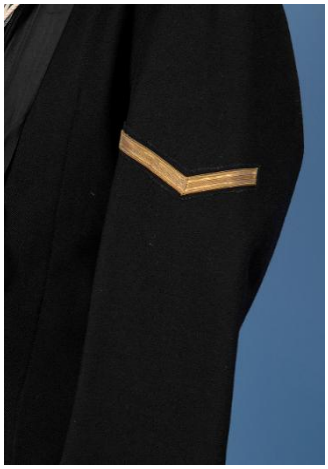


- Shoulder badges, shoulder boards and epaulettes – look for badges or the number of stars
- Collars – look for badges and colours
- Swords and buttons – look for the manner in which buttons are worn, i.e. Chief Petty Officers are distinguished by three buttons worn horizontally on each cuff.
- Cap peaks or cocked hats – look for badges and braiding



Note: Chevrons indicate length of service for naval ratings in either 5, 7 or 12 years. They could also be First World War chevrons. Normally found on the sleeve or forearm where speciality badges could also be found.

For more information, please consult '*Rank and Rate: Royal Naval Officers' Insignia Since 1856'* by EC Coleman*,* 2009. Another good source on early 20th century naval uniform is: '*Stripes and Types of the Royal Navy: A Little Handbook of Sketches by Naval Officers Showing the Dress and Duties of All Ranks from Admiral to Boy Signaller'* by Robert Blyth*,* 2020.



Uniform for particular branches of the Royal Navy can vary:

Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)

The uniform for all ranks consisted of a double-breasted jacket, shirt, tie, and skirt. Working dress similar to men's uniform was also worn. Senior officers wore tricorne hats. The major difference was that all insignia, including cap badges and trade badges, were blue.



Submarine Service

Uniform on submarines is the same as the surface fleet, although on some occasions in the early 20th century they wore 'pirate rig', which was effectively civilian clothing. Knitted jumpers known as

'woolly pulleys' were also popular. From 1971 submariners wore the Royal Navy Submarine Insignia in the form of a gold brooch, on their left breast. These heraldic dolphins are nicknamed the 'Kissing Kippers'.

Fleet Air Arm



Naval flying began in 1909, but at that time there was no formal flying uniform and the first pilots adapted civilian clothing and motoring attire for use. Freezing temperatures, dust, exhaust particles, rain, etc were all reasons for developing official flying clothing – jackets, goggles, gauntlets, scarves and boots. In 1916, Flight sub-Lieutenant Sidney Cotton accidentally invented 'Sidcot suits' when he discovered that his grease-impregnated overalls kept wind and cold out.

In modern day jets a hard helmet with a sun-visor, oxygen and radio communication is essential. The pilots wear special high-tech 'G' suits to enable their bodies to cope with the forces exerted during manoeuvres.

Royal Marines

The Royal Marines retain a number of distinctive uniform items. These include the green 'Lovat' service dress, the dark blue parade dress worn with the white Wolsley pattern helmet (commonly referred to as a 'pith helmet') or red and white peaked cap. The scarlet and blue mess dress for officers and non-commissioned officers and the white hot-weather dress of the Band Service. Their badge consists of a globe surrounded by laurel leaves.

Below are some further sources and organisations to help you:

1. *Uniforms & Insignia of the Navies or World War II* by Andrew Mollo, US Naval Intelligence, 1991

2. *Badges and Insignia of the British Armed Services* by WE May, WY Carmen, John Tanner, 1974

3. *Men-At-Arms British Air Forces 1914-1918 (1 and 2)* by Andrew and Peter Cormack, 2000

4. *Vintage Flying Helmets* by Mick J. Prodger, 2004

5. *Flying Clothing* by Louise Greer, 1979

6. *Uniforms of the Royal Marines: From 1664 to the Present Day* by George Newark, 1997)

7. *Personal Distinctions, 350 Years of Royal Marines Uniforms and Insignia* by John Rawlinson, 2014

8. Royal Navy Dress Policy: https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/-/media/royal-navy-responsive/documents/reference-library/br-3-vol-1/chapter-38.pdf

9. Royal Navy Distinction of Rank: https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/-/media/royal-navy-responsive/documents/reference-library/br-3-vol-1/chapter-39.pdf

10. Defence Clothing Catalogue: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5feca4c8e90e0712003eee24/s_3-6.pdf

11. Association of Wrens: https://wrens.org.uk/about-us/history/