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Uniforms and Equipment of the Civil War*

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MILITARY uniforms don't just happen. Like all other human devices and occurrences, they are the product of their times, the results of various developments and forces in the world of their day. Washington, for example, did not wear a coat of blue and buff merely because of chance or whim; nor does the British Guardsman you see in London today wear a bear-skin hat for such reasons. The background of both lie deep in history.

Today, as the program has announced, I will talk briefly about the military clothing and accoutrements of the Civil War. Or, to be more precise, the clothing and accoutrements for that period of our history between the years 1851 and 1872—about twenty years. I would like to start with the broad backgrounds of these things. Why did the men of these years wear the kinds of uniforms that they did? Following that introduction I want to show you a few actual samples of the clothing and then sum up the story by means of slides.

As I see it, there were five controlling factors that produced the dress of soldiers, both North and South, in the Civil War. In general, as I have suggested, these factors came into existence in 1851, or about that time. The first one is political. You will recall that a few years prior to 1851, in 1848 to be exact, Europe was shaken by a series of revolutions that were in some ways as important historically as the French Revolution of sixty years earlier. These revolutions did away with many symbols of conservatism and one of these

*A talk delivered extempore and recorded by tape.

was the universal military garment of the first half of the nineteenth century: the tail coat. With the passing of that coat we entered into a new era of military clothing. This had been introduced somewhat earlier by the French Army and its principal garment was the "frock coat." This is a frock coat and you will notice that it is tailored in a very different manner from the old tail coat.

In the period of the 1850s and up to the Civil War, while the older and more conservative regiments in our country—like the Seventh New York and some of the swank Boston companies—continued to wear the old tail coat, the newer regiments and those that seemed to deal more with the common man, rapidly adopted the frock coat. This kind of coat indicated the stand of the wearer for or against the revolutions of 1848 and 1849 in Europe. The Regular Army adopted the frock coat in 1851. This was, of course, only one of the factors that led to the design, which affected not only coats but other parts of the uniform.

Another factor was the rapidly changing ordnance, and especially firearms, of the period of the 1850s and 1860s. We entered this period with the muzzle loading, single shot musket, often a flintlock, and we came out of it, in the main, with the breech loading, multi-fire or magazine rifle, which fired a cartridge. Now this was a tremendous change in firearms, not only in terms of increased fire power, but also in terms of tactics.

As you know, a man who had to fire a single shot muzzle loader had to stand up to do so, and he went through a considerable number of steps from the manual. He had to reach for the cartridge, bite off the tip, pour the powder into the muzzle, ram the ball down, put back the rammer, and to aim and fire, to mention only some of the steps. He had to do all of this standing up since there was no practical way to load a muzzle loader kneeling, or especially lying down. Therefore, all tactics were based on the man standing up in battle. There were long lines of men—"linear warfare" as it was called—men standing in battle shoulder to shoulder for morale, if for no other reason. Also, this produced the volley fire which was the only effective method of using the smooth bore musket. This formal system of fighting had lasted since the early eighteenth century and, in effect, continued throughout the Civil War.

The rifle began to change these tactics and later, when men with

breech-loaders could lie down and take cover and still load their rifles, a new kind of tactics came into being. Although these tactics did not really arrive until after the war, the soldiers began to have inklings of them. By the end of the war the rifle did get into full use which led to a great increase in range. Each of these changes in ordnance caused corresponding changes in uniforms and accoutrements. It was too early for soldiers to think about protective coloring, but organizations that were made up of riflemen, especially under the influence of the French Army, dressed differently than those who carried the older fashioned musket. Regiments trained in the zouave drill dressed as Zouaves, and the like.

The third factor is one that I imagine is hard to realize today and that is the military eminence of France in the 1850s and 1860s. France, then under Napoleon III—a shadow of his uncle, of course, but still a leader of armies that had fought successfully in the Crimea and Italy—exerted tremendous influence all over the world on military thinking and, in addition, on military dress. Napoleon took special delight in inspecting his troops whenever he could, and in questioning soldiers about whether they liked the coats they were wearing or about a particular kind of button or some piece of accoutrement. As a result, France was looked to as the leader in matters of military dress and I think it is safe to say that, with a few exceptions, all the uniforms we see in America in this period, and all those that lie here in front of me today, stemmed from France in one way or another.

As you know, France lost this eminence in 1870 when she was defeated by the Prussians. A few years later half of the armies of the world, including our own, adopted the spiked helmet in recognition of the fact that the Prussian Army now led the world in military prowess.

The fourth factor was the clothing industry itself. In 1851 the sewing machine was first used successfully in England. Actually, it had been employed for manufacturing even military clothing before that year in France, but it was in 1851 that the knowledge that here was a practical commercial machine was gained in England and America. During the next few years the sewing machine was considerably perfected and by 1860 the making of ready made clothing, virtually unknown in this country before then, was recognized. By

the end of the Civil War it had become an industry of considerable importance.

You will find that if you look carefully at these uniforms on the table that the earlier ones are all hand sewn. All of the ones produced later in the war—as was this one for example—have been machine sewn. I am no authority on what this meant in actual production, but I believe a single operator could produce about one of these uniforms a day by hand sewing, whereas the same operator could produce ten or more by machine. This made a great difference since under the piecework system people did not put fancy devices like braids across the chest; all of that kind of thing had to be hand sewn. When you get into machine methods you develop standardized clothing from which all fancy devices and careful fitting have disappeared.

Finally, I want to remind you that in this country we had a Regular Army and some thirty or more State Armies. The Regular Army was very small, about 16,000 men in all, but we had an infinitely larger Volunteer Militia. You had such troops here in Vermont and they existed in every one of the states and territories. In some states like New York, there were as many as seventy regiments, all uniformed and all organized—a force of considerable size and importance. Many of these regiments were made up of “native Americans”; these were the old conservative commands. Others were made up of men that only a few years before had come over from some of the “old countries” of Europe. These factors led to a great variety of clothing in the Volunteer Militia. In the main, the volunteer regiments followed the Regular Army in the design and cut of their clothing, but many did not. You will see in the slides not only the old fashioned regiments with the tail coats that they are still hanging on to, but also the newer regiments and companies dressed in regulation army blue uniforms of the latest cut. You will also see others—the Irish regiments wearing green, for example. There was a French outfit in New York called the Fifty-fifth Regiment, dressed in French uniforms; there was a regiment of Highlanders, the Seventy-ninth New York, which wore kilts and even wore plaid trews during its active service in the Civil War. You will see other regiments developing during the Civil War that wore uniforms of French influence, especially the Zouaves and the Chasseurs.

All of this, then, made for a vast diversity in clothing—in the color and cut of the uniforms, and the like. I won't have time even to skim over the subject but I want to remind you that the diversity was there. When you look at photographs of the Civil War, which may be very revealing as far as the cut and form of objects are concerned, you miss the color. Everything becomes a drab monotone. This was before the day of color corrected photography, so that if you look at an older photograph you don't receive the same sense of tone that you do even in a modern photograph. Yellows, blacks, dark reds, and blues are all of the same shade and you receive no sense of the color that could be found on the battlefields of the Civil War. I don't want to overemphasize this point and appear to be talking about the colorful uniforms of, say, the Napoleonic period. But there was much more color in the armies of that day than appears at a superficial glance of the photographs of the war.

Let me say a brief word about one other point. Since I am talking about the armies of the Civil War I want to include those from the South and mention a few facts about the Confederate uniform. Now I actually am wrong in using the word "uniform." The Confederates thought in terms of "clothing" and not uniforms. There is almost no mention of the word in Confederate military documents. They did have, to be sure, a regulation uniform for officers with a prescribed cut of frock coat and prescribed insignia, but the ordinary soldier was not expected to wear a garment that was similar to that of the men around him; he was merely expected to be warmly clothed.

How did the color gray develop? It did not come into wide use until early 1862 when it was recognized as the official color for all Confederate forces. Its origin probably lies in the chance visit of a gray clad New York regiment to Richmond during the 1850s. The Volunteer Militia of that city, every company of whom were in a different kind of dress, was very impressed with the uniformity of this regiment and there began, at that time, a re-clothing along the same lines of a great deal of the Militia in the South. At least we know that the First Virginia Regiment was clothed entirely in gray as it marched out from Richmond at the beginning of the war and that gray was the predominant color worn by Southern Militia at that time. It gradually became the distinctive color just as blue

gradually began to identify the Union soldier rather than specific regiments. As you know, some of your own Vermont regiments went off to war in gray in the early days, but not many months passed before they were clad in blue. By 1862 both sides had decided upon their color; blue, which was the Regular Army uniform anyway, had been adopted by the North, and gray by the South. But, as I have said, as the war developed the Southerner never really had a uniform and before long the gray had actually turned to brown.

Now in the few moments I have left let me run through, briefly, some of the types of clothing we have here on the table. I did not bring with me a tail coat, but I will show you a picture of one in just a moment. This is a frock coat, the first important development of our period. It was not only the uniform of the soldier of the Civil War but was, of course, the dress of the civilian as well. Note the way it is pleated in the back and the long skirts hanging from the waistline. This uniform was worn by officers in two styles; company officers wore them single breasted and higher ranking officers, double breasted. This is an original coat and I would love to have you come up and look at this and the others later if you would like to.

By cutting off the frock coat at this point, at the waist, where there is a seam all the way around, you achieve a short jacket. The jacket cut in that way was called a "shell jacket," and this was worn as early as the Mexican War and even earlier. The more common jacket of the Civil War was considerably longer and avoided the unpleasant gap which often occurred between the jacket and the top of the pants. This longer jacket was called the "uniform jacket," and was the type of garment worn in the main by mounted men. For mounted men it had two belt rests on the back, as you see here. This was a comfortable garment and American soldiers have always liked to fight in comfort. They have never been particularly fond of fighting in full dress uniforms so in all of our wars we have come to a simplified uniform like this. The jacket is actually a very old design; it goes back into the 1840s and even further. The jacket made of sky blue kersey was the uniform of the Veteran Reserve Corps, of which there were a great many regiments made up of men who had been wounded in action.

Finally, we reach this the second important development of

clothing in this period. There had come into use some years prior to the Civil War a garment called the "paletot." We now know it as the sack coat or blouse. I have one on so I didn't feel I needed to bring another example. This is not cut, as you can see, like the frock coat; it is cut in patterns or pieces all the way down and there is no center or waist seam. This is the common garment of the man today and it was developed in the 1840s. It became very popular for informal civilian wear in the 1850s and during the Civil War was worn as a service uniform by almost all the Northern troops, particularly the Infantry.

I did not bring any trousers along with me. These garments were very similar to what men wear today. Soldiers began the Civil War with a straight, stovepipe style which, during the war, began to increase in size around the knees and to narrow at the ankle, in the French manner.

Headdress was of several kinds. This is the forage cap. It was worn for undress purposes and in field service and was the most popular type of cap used at the time of the Civil War. This particular example was a rather formal model worn by the Fourteenth Brooklyn both in action and for dress parade. It carries the regimental number and an engineer insignia on the front.

This is also a forage cap but it was the standard service cap of the Northern infantry. Notice that when it is extended up and provided with a stiffening inside, it takes the shape of the current dress cap of the period, particularly if you were to place some kind of insignia on its front.

This is the dress hat—it was not a cap—the dress hat of the Northern army called the "Hardee" or "Jeff Davis hat." This is the only object I have on the table that is an American invention. It was developed by Jefferson Davis when he was Secretary of War in the 1850s, and first issued to the Cavalry and later to all of the army. Notice that this one was worn by a cavalryman; you can see the crossed sabers on the front and the fact that it is pinned up on the right side. Can anyone suggest why? Cavalrymen carried their sabers in their right hand and in lifting up the saber he could push the hat off his head if the brim was down on that side. For this same reason infantrymen, who held their muskets normally on the left side, had their hats hooked up on that side and down on the right.

All officers, who also carried swords, had their hats up on the right side.

Let me turn now to shoes, boots, and gaiters, very briefly. I only brought along a pair of riding boots. Notice that these are rights and lefts. This practice had begun around 1800, or even earlier, but it had not advanced too far by the Civil War. These boots do not, of course, have the modern last, but most of the shoes of that period were well made and many of them were pegged. This pair happens to be nailed, but they are well made boots as you will see if you inspect them.

The ordinary soldiers shoes were called "brogans," and very much like the desert boots they sell today. They were about middle height, somewhat higher than our modern low shoes and lower than high shoes. Very few troops, and for reasons that are not clear, wore gaiters during the Civil War. Such as existed were made of leather or of linen, and zouaves wore special leather kinds, laced up the side, which were called "greaves."

Overcoats were worn at this time in winter weather by almost all Northern troops. They were sometimes worn in the South by Confederate soldiers, although most Confederates came to feel they could do without an overcoat. Confederates, I feel sure, never carried them on the march. Overcoats, you must remember, had not been commonly worn by soldiers up to this time. Wars in the old days were rarely fought in winter weather; this was when armies went into winter quarters. Troops were never issued overcoats in the Revolution, for example, except for sentry duty.

And finally, let me speak of one more thing. This is the Zouave uniform. It was, of course, taken directly from the French. There were many Zouave regiments in the Union Army and some in the Confederate Army. The style is based on the whim of a man named Elmer E. Ellsworth, who adopted for a little Militia unit in Chicago in 1860 a zouave uniform and trained the men in the rapid zouave drill. This is a zouave jacket which you can see is quite short and open in front. These came in many different colors, but most of them were blue. Worn underneath the jacket was this vest, which you can see buttons down the side and has a line of buttons sewn on the front. Here are the wide, full zouave trousers and this is a really marvelous pair. It is pleated, as you can see, around the

waist. The real zouave trousers were nothing but a square bag pulled up in the center by a cord. That was the original French style. This is a modified pair, still very full, with the legs sticking through these holes and gathered into gaiters below. With this outfit was worn a sash around the waist and this characteristic fez with its tassel. Almost all of the fezzes worn were red with blue tassels and they were worn far back on the head.

Now we can turn to the slides. [*Colonel Todd showed many interesting slides to his audience —Ed.*]

