

MILITARY HEADGEAR

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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-Research Note on Berets (prepared 1979)

Beret headdress in military uniforms is a relatively modern fashion. The beret's military appeal did not emerge until World War I, after which its use became widespread, not just functionally but as a distinctive badge for elite troops, especially airborne and commandos. Berets are now eminently fashionable military garb.

The word "beret" traces back in English to 1850 at least, but the cap itself boasts more ancient origins. Standard reference authorities attribute the beret as a distinctive article of clothing to the Basques, a unique ethnic group in the northern Pyrennes region common to France and Spain. The "boina," a small, round woolen cap with a flattened top, still typifies Basque peasant dress.

Similar in appearance to boina and beret, and of equally ancient origin, are the distinctive cloth caps of Scotland: the bonnet and tam-o-shanter. The early bonnet was much thicker than the modern beret, whereas the tam-o-shanter is a bonnet with a pom-pom on the top and is often favored by modern Scots units. The bonnet appeared in military uniforms at least as early as the English Civil Wars, being noted at the Battle of Marston Moor, 1644.

The first wearing of an actual beret as part of a military uniform can probably be attributed to the Spanish. Although none of the sources consulted for this report document a first appearance of the beret, several allude to its early Spanish use. Possibly inspired by beret-wearing Spanish troops, French mountain fighters, the elite Chasseurs Alpains, adopted in 1891 a large baggy-type beret, deep blue in color. Earlier, French marines wore a dark blue beret.

Although the warfare of 1914-1918 led to nearly universal adoption of steel helmets, it also introduced berets into the main-stream of Western military uniforms. Nearly all pertinent sources identify the tank as the casual agent. Its cramped and obstructive confines compelled the British Royal Tank Corps, for one, to adopt a more functional headgear than their cumbersome and easily-stained khaki cap. Officially adopted in 1924, the new British black Beret was a compromise between the "skimpy" beret of the Basque peasant and the "sloppy" beret of the French Chausseurs Alpains.

Later, select units within the Tank Corps wore distinctively colored berets, e.g., gray for the Royal Dragoons (Mechanized) and brown or red for the 11th Hussars (Armoured). Interestingly, the beret became a symbol of progress and modernization, with "hidebound colonels" refusing to allow berets to be worn in their regiments.

Meanwhile, the beret also capped heads in the armed forces of other European nations, most notably French fortress troops, German tank troops, and others, as follows:

Belgium:	mountain (Ardennes) troops - green frontier motorcycle troops - black
France:	commandos -green airborne troops - red tank corps - black fortress troops - khaki mountain troops - blue Free French independent fighters - maroon
Germany:	tank troops -black
Great Britain:	commandos -green paratroopers - red all combat troops (1943-) - khaki tank troops - black
Italy:	royal marines -green and khaki royal and republican parachutists - black, khaki, and green women's auxiliary corps - green
Soviet Union:	Army Administrative Section (female) - green

Only the British Army appears to have adopted the beret wholesale. Besides distinctive berets for its elite troops, khaki-cloth berets became the general service cap, being first issued to Irish troops in 1943 and eventually replacing most other hats in the British Army.

German experience with berets contrasted with the British and French forces. The only beret-like headgear worn was the short-lived black panzer cap (Schutzmutze), which consisted of a special leather crash helmet over-fitted with a large beret. By the winter of 1939-1940, German tank crews no longer wore it.

After 1945, berets proliferated among the armed forces of most nations. By 1960, berets joined the military uniforms of Canada, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Iran, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, and Vietnam. Furthermore, national units of United Nations peace-keeping forces wore light blue berets.

Meanwhile, the armed forces of the United States were not immune to this military fashion. The US Marine Corps tested blue and green berets in 1951, but did not adopt them. (Additional testing by the Marines took place in 1976-1977.) The US Air Force permitted para-rescue men to wear red berets in 1966 and female personnel blue berets in 1969. Black berets were authorized in the 1970s for US Army personnel assigned to Ranger units and for all female soldiers. The US beret's preeminence, however, belongs to the US Special Forces.

The idea and origin of the well-known Green Berets is claimed by officers of the 77th Special Forces Group in 1954 at Fort Bragg, NC. Wishing to bolster esprit and distinguish themselves from other airborne troops, they decided to adopt a distinctive article of uniform, choosing the beret because of its association with high professionalism and unconventionality. Their model was the British Royal Marine Commandos. Without higher authority, these officers procured from local commercial sources "what looked like man-sized Girl Scout berets"- and thereby began the legend.

Before that legend encrusted, however, a running battle ensued between Special Forces and higher headquarters over the unauthorized headgear. When the 82d Airborne Division attempted to similarly outfit itself with red berets in 1956, Headquarters, Department of the Army prohibited all berets. Persistence kept the beret firmly on the heads of the 10th Special Forces Group in Germany despite official opposition. Eventually a sympathetic President, John F. Kennedy, in 1961 bestowed official authorization on the green beret. Even then, some senior commanders continued to issue "take-off-the-beret" orders. Not until 1965-66 did Army policy preclude major commanders from denying Special Forces personnel their privilege to wear the green wool beret. It required a decade of controversy and struggle to achieve this particular exception to uniform standardization.