

Is the Flag “Backward” on Soldiers’ Sleeves?

By Ms. Lisa Burgess

Why do American soldiers wear the US flag insignia “backward” on the right shoulder of their utility uniforms, with the canton (the rectangle with the stars) on the observer’s right? It’s a question that soldiers hear frequently as they travel through civilian airports or talk to members of other services. And it does look “wrong” because US federal code calls for the canton to always be positioned on the left.

The soldiers aren’t wrong, however, and neither are their tailors. The Army has two authorized flag patches, one to be worn on the left shoulder, with the canton on the left, and another “reverse field” patch worn on the right shoulder, with the canton on the right. The two different orientations are mandated because Army regulations call for the flag “to be worn so that to observers, it looks as if the flag is flying against a breeze.”

What does a stiff wind have to do with this custom? The rule is a nod to the US Army’s early history, when wars were fought as a series of carefully choreographed battles, with two armies meeting on a field, clashing head-on until one side emerged victorious. In those battles, infantry and mounted cavalry units would always designate one soldier as “standard bearer” to carry the colors into the fight. As the standard bearer charged, his rapid forward movement would cause the flag to stream back. And since the Stars and Stripes is mounted with the canton next to the pole, that section would always be forward. So if a soldier were charging into battle, the flag would give the appearance of forward motion. When worn on the right shoulder, the flag only appears to be backward. And that’s why soldiers wear the flag patches on the right shoulder backward. Because retreat in battle, as any soldier will tell you, is not the Army way.

Notes

1. A variation of this article was printed in the 28 February 2004 European edition of Stars and Stripes.
2. A change to Army Regulation 670-1, *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia*, dated 5 September 2003, instructs all soldiers, regardless of deployment status, to permanently wear the US flag insignia on utility uniforms. This includes battle dress uniforms (BDUs), desert BDUs, maternity BDUs, cold-weather coats, air crew BDUs, and combat vehicle crewman uniforms and jackets (cold weather). The mandatory wear date is 1 October 2005.

Ms. Burgess began her career in journalism in 1985 after graduating from the University of Chicago. She joined the Pentagon press pool in 1989, covering national defense topics for a variety of publications before joining Stars and Stripes in 2001. Ms. Burgess has a master’s degree in national security strategy from the National War College and has twice been named as a Freedom Forum Fellow.



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