

The Essayons Button

By Dr. Larry D. Roberts

As with many aspects of military history, the origins and originators of military customs, emblems, and insignia are lost to the mist of the past. This is certainly the case with the distinctive button worn by engineer officers—the Essayons Button. Evidence does suggest that it is the oldest uniform element or emblem unique to the Corps of Engineers.

The history of the Essayons Button can be traced to the earliest days of the Corps of Engineers. As early as the American Revolution, there was an effort to distinguish the uniforms of the engineers from those of the rest of the Army. However, during the Revolution, officers wore buttons either identifying them with their states, if they were militia, or with “USA,” if they were with the regular Continental Army.

In 1794, Congress authorized a regiment of artillery and engineers that took station at West Point, New York. In time, the officers of this regiment wore a button with an eagle standing on a field piece. Later, the eagle disappeared and the inscription USA&E, for U.S. artillery and engineers, was placed on the button. In 1802, the artillery and engineers were separated, forming their own independent corps. Once again, efforts were initiated to create something that could distinguish engineer officers from those of other branches or arms.

Sometime between 1802 and 1814, the design for the Essayons Button was developed. At that time, the Corps’s primary mission was the construction of coastal fortifications. The first Commandant of the United States Military Academy, and Chief Engineer, Major Jonathan Williams, was given the freedom to develop uniform items for the Corps and the cadets at West Point. A map of the coastal fortifications at Charleston, South Carolina, drawn in 1806, shows an eagle with a scroll in its beak with the word “Essayons”—the first time that this French word, meaning “we will try,” is found on a formal document produced by the Corps. A map made of the defenses of New York Harbor the following year also had an eagle and the word “Essayons.” In addition, it had a water bastion, and rays depicting the rising sun. Therefore, by 1807, all of the elements of the Essayons Button had been adopted and used by officers of the Corps.



The earliest reference to the Essayons Button is found in an account written by General George D. Ramsey. Recalling his days as a cadet in 1814, he noted that “... Captain Partridge was never known to be without uniform... His was that of the Corps of Engineers, with the embroidered collar and cuffs and the Essayons Button...”¹ Clearly, Major Williams and other officers of the Corps had arrived at a design for a button to distinguish the uniform of the engineer officer.

Influenced by the historic ties with French engineers, the leadership of the Corps of Engineers had not only adopted the French term “Essayons” but also had incorporated it into a button showing the principal mission of the engineers—fortification.

In 1840, the War Department officially endorsed the button for the Corps of Engineers. General Orders 7, Adjutant General’s Office, dated 18 February 1840, described the button as “an eagle holding in his beak a scroll with the word ‘Essayons,’ a bastion with embrasures in the distance, surrounded by water, and rising sun...”² Of interest, the same general order also authorized the turreted castle for wear by engineer officers. Coincidentally, the Commanding General of the Army at that time was Alexander Macomb, a former engineer officer.

The Essayons Button was, therefore, uniquely associated with the Corps of Engineers. When the Army adopted a standard button for its uniforms in 1902, the Corps already had almost a century of identification with the Essayons Button. Consequently, the Corps of Engineers was the only branch authorized to retain a distinctive button on the uniforms of its officers.

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Endnotes

¹ Raleigh B. Buzzaird, “The Essayons Button,” *Insignia of the Corps of Engineers*, <<http://www.sigma4photo.com/civilwar/insignia-hist.pdf>>, accessed 17 February 2009.

² “Insignia of the Corps,” <http://140.194.76.129/publications/misc/un16/c-2.pdf>, accessed 17 February 2009.