

The Origin of Gorget Patches

By Major Alastair Donald

Gorget¹

With the exception of the cuirass of the Household Cavalry, the gorget may be said to have been the last survival of plate armour used in the equipment of the British Army. The name 'gorget' comes from the French word *gorge*, meaning throat. In the armour of the 14th century, that part of the body between the headpiece and the breast and back plates was protected by chain mail attached to the headpiece (Fig.1), the weight of which was borne by the head. Around the middle of the 15th Century, the helmet was introduced (Fig.2), which covered the head and had a visor with slits, but the combined weight of helmet and chain mail would have been impossible to bear. Therefore the chain mail was replaced by the 'gorget'. This was originally a piece of armour built up around the neck, almost reaching the helmet (Fig.3). Later this took the form of several plates riveted together, thereby allowing rather more movement of the head. In the first half of the 17th century pikemen formed the greater part of armies and their defensive armour consisted of a steel cap, breast and back plate, gorget, shoulder plates and plates to protect the thighs (Fig.4).

The gorget was in two pieces, front and back with a low neck. In the second half of the 17th century the back plate of the gorget was often discarded and then, from being a piece of defensive armour, the front plate gradually became an ornamental badge of rank for officers. Later it signified that the wearer was on duty. At first it was of the normal size, often decorated with embossed battle scenes and hung round the neck by a ribbon. In 1684 a Royal



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

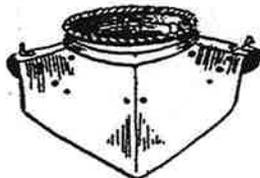


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Warrant instructed Captains to wear gold coloured gorgets, Lieutenants black studded with gold and Ensigns silver. Gradually it became smaller and lighter, and by 1702 a uniform gorget had been introduced for all officers, and this hung low on the upper part of the chest. In most regiments it was engraved with the Royal Arms² (Fig.5³). A silver Marine Officer's gorget c1760 shows an anchor with a crown above between the initials 'G' & 'R'. Gilt gorgets worn in the Corps between 1797 and 1830 can be seen in the RM Museum and have the Royal Arms above an anchor in a shield and with two 'sprigs' of laurel below (Fig.6). The ribbons of gorgets often matched the colour of the facings of the regiment and ended in rosettes at the shoulders of the gorget. Although there was a lack of uniformity in wearing the gorget, it seems that by the end of the century the ribbons were often attached to the lapel buttons of the

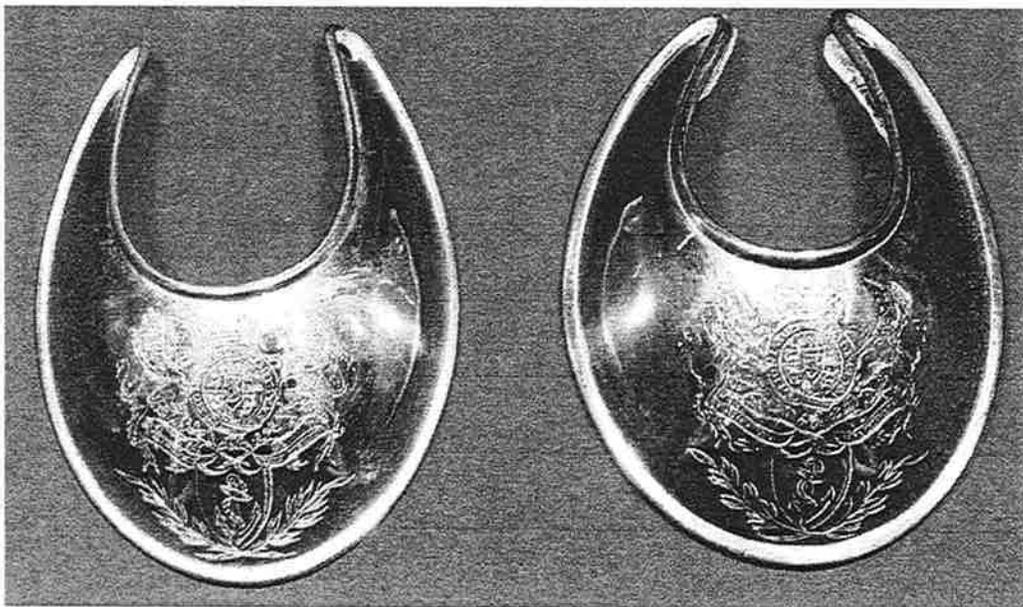


Fig. 6

coatee. The gorget was abolished in Britain in 1830, but it continued to be worn for another thirty years or so in some foreign armies; in fact even during the Second World War in the German Wehrmacht and some paramilitary organisations, different types were worn by certain personnel, such as standard bearers and military police, to signify they were on duty.⁴

Gorget Patches⁵

When khaki service dress was first introduced in India in 1885. General officers wore a red shoulder strap edged with gold braid and Staff Officers had similar shoulder straps but without the gold braid, whilst Departmental Officers (commissariat, medical, veterinary etc) wore blue shoulder straps. Other officers had shoulder straps of the same material as the tunic. This tunic had a stand up collar and four years later the shoulder straps of all officers were changed to the same material as the tunic. General Officers now wore a strip of scarlet cloth, 2½" long and 1¼" high, on each side of the collar. It was pointed on the outer end, with a loop of gold braid along the centre and with a gold stud near the point. Staff officers also wore a gold stud and a similar scarlet strip, but with a loop of scarlet silk. Most Departmental officers wore a strip of either maroon or blue cloth, with black loops and a gold stud also.

Fifty years had elapsed between the abolition of the gorget and the introduction of this patch in India. It has been suggested that there was a connection between the stud or button on the patch and the buttons on the lapel of the coatee, which had often been used to secure the gorget. This idea has been questioned. However, when it appeared officially in an Army Order of 1896, this strip of cloth on the collar was nevertheless referred to as a 'gorget patch'.

The evolution of the gorget patch in the British Army can really be divided into three periods. Although similar to those being worn in India, there were later on in 1896 some minor changes, when a blue serge Staff tunic was introduced. One of these included the addition of a gilt button for Staff Officers, bearing the Royal Cypher within the Garter, the whole surmounted by a Crown (ie similar to that worn on gorget patches by Colonels and Brigadiers today) (Fig.7⁶). Two years later it was felt that the patches on the blue tunic were too inconspicuous and were therefore increased in size. Also the gold cord and stud for general officers were replaced by gold oak leaf embroidery and a general officer's button of a crossed sword and baton within a wreath (Fig.8). Other changes mainly affected only officers of the Departmental Corps.

The next period, which covered the First World War, started in 1913 soon after the service dress and blue tunics with an open collar were authorised. Many of the changes during this period affected the size of the patches, but of course the bottom was now cut to fit the step of the lapel of the open collar tunic (Fig.9). By the end of the war General Officers⁷ were wearing scarlet cloth gorget patches with gold embroidered oak leaves (although in fact there were some exceptions who wore gold chain 'ribbon') and a General Officer's button. All "G", "A", "Q" and "MS" Staff Officers wore scarlet with a line of crimson silk gimp⁸ and, in the case of full Colonels a staff button (Fig.7), whilst other Staff Officers wore their Regimental or Corps button. Officers holding certain administrative appointments, such as in Munitions, wore a dark blue gorget patch with a line of crimson silk gimp and a Regimental or Corps button. A third type worn at that time, was of green cloth with a line of green silk gimp and a Regimental or Corps button. This was worn by officers in certain miscellaneous appointments including officers in Intelligence⁹ on the General Staff in UK. In 1918 a further type came into general wear, when black cloth patches, which up until then had only been worn by the Chaplain General, was extended to all Staff Chaplains.

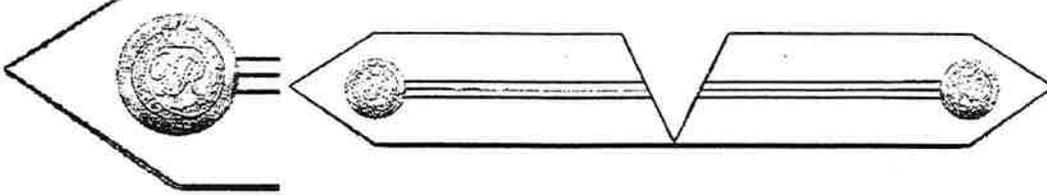


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

In 1921 the wearing of gorget patches was restricted to officers of the rank of full Colonel and above and between then and about 1938 a number of changes were made¹⁰. Most of these were the adoption of certain colours by the various Departmental Corps so that by the time war broke out in 1939 the following was the list of patches being worn by General Officers and full Colonels:

Scarlet	-	Field Marshals. General Officers, Brigadiers ¹¹ and Colonels not belonging to a Corps or Department.
Purple	-	Chaplains with the relative rank of General or Colonel.
Dull Cherry	-	Royal Army Medical Corps.
Maroon	-	Royal Army Veterinary Corps.
Blue	-	Royal Army Ordnance Corps. (Changed to Scarlet in 1941)
Primrose Yellow	-	Royal Army Pay Corps.
Cambridge Blue	-	Royal Army Educational Corps.
Emerald Green	-	Royal Army Dental Corps.

(Bright Blue - Engineers - although not mentioned in any Dress Regulations¹²)

All gorget patches had a line of silk gimp of the same colour as the patch and a Staff button (the scarlet patch had crimson gimp) Patches of beech brown were introduced for ATS Officers of the rank of Controller and above in 1940. White were worn by officers employed as Political Officers during 1941 and 1942. A pigeon grey patch was later introduced for Colonels of the Army Catering Corps¹³. When officers of the Nursing Services started to wear battle dress they (Matron-in-Chief and Chief Principal Matron)¹⁴ adopted gorget patches similar to the RAMC. All gorget patches had a line of silk gimp of the same colour as the patch and a Staff button (the scarlet patch had crimson gimp)¹⁵



GORGET PATCHES TODAY

Maj Gen Julian Thompson in RM General Officers' No 1 Dress
and Col Mick Reece in RM Officers' No 1 Dress

An ACI of May 1940 ordered that gorget patches would not be worn in battle dress and commanders of formations wore a scarlet cord boss at the points of the collar of their battle dress. However this was abolished in November that year when a further order was issued authorising the same patches as in service dress, but of smaller size; Field Marshals and Generals were to have plain gold braid down the centre of the patch in place of the oak leaf embroidery worn in service dress (Fig.10). These are the patches which are now clipped on to open necked shirts and combat dress.

Today only senior Chaplains and senior officers of the Medical, Dental, and Veterinary Services wear patches other than scarlet; officers of the QARANC now have scarlet, but with grey gimp. For Brigadiers and Colonels the silk gimp is now plaited and 5/16-in wide.

[Throughout the years the shape and size of gorgets, and the size of gorget patches, changed many times but in the interests of keeping this article simple, few references to these have been made.]



A Royal Marine Artillery Officer
circa 1816 wearing his gorget

From a drawing by Capt J S Hicks RM
reproduced in "The Royal Marine Artillery" Vol I

Notes and Sources:

- 1 *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* Vol I (1921-22) & Vol II (1923) a series of articles by Capt H Jones MBE.
- 2 It is from an examination of the Royal Arms that the date of a gorget can be determined.
- 3 This shows a gorget of Queen Anne's reign 1702-1706.
- 4 *German Army Uniforms and Insignia* by Brian L Davis (Arms and Armour Press, 1973) p60
- 5 *Journal of the SAHR* Vol 24 p74 article by Maj N P Dawnay.
- 6 This shows a button with George V's cypher.
- 7 Included in General Officers were Brigadier Generals, but the rank ceased in 1921, became honorary and was replaced in the Army by Colonel-Commandant and Colonel on the Staff (see note 11 below).
- 8 Gimp – "Silk, worsted, or cotton twist with cord or wire running through it".
- 9 Hence the origin of the green connection in the Intelligence Corps, including their berets today!
- 10 *Dress Regulations for the Army 1934*.
- 11 In the Army the rank of Brigadier replaced Colonel-Commandant and Colonel on the Staff in 1928.
- 12 *British Army Uniforms of World War Two* by Brian Davis (Arms & Armour Press, 1983) p41 states 'dark blue' but a small wartime pamphlet gives 'bright blue'.
- 13 *Badges and Insignia of the British Armed Services* (Adam & Charles Black, 1974) – The Army by W Y Carman pp148-150.
- 14 *One Hundred Years of Army Nursing* by Ian Hay (pub Cassell & Co Ltd 1953)
- 15 *Dress Regulations for the Army 1934* and *British Army Uniforms of World War Two* by Brian Davis (Arms & Armour Press, 1983) p 41.