



‘Crap Hats’, Berets and Peak Caps

Boot Camp & Military Fitness Institute 8/15/2014

'CRAP HATS', BERETS AND PEAK CAPS

CONTENTS

	Page
1.0 Introduction	2
2.0 The Term 'Crap Hat'	2
2.1 French Foreign Legion	3
2.2 Other Examples	3
3.0 The Origin of Military Berets	3
3.1 Scottish Roots: The Blue Bonnet	3
3.2 Spanish Connection: The Carlist Wars of Succession	4
3.3 French Connection: The Chasseurs Alpains	4
3.4 British Roots: Tanks and World War I	5
3.5 New British Units: Elite and Special Forces in World War II	5
3.6 Mid-20 th Century and Onwards	6
4.0 21st Century and the US Army	6
4.1 The 'Green Berets'	7
5.0 Wear Style	7
5.1 Individualisation	7
6.0 UK Service, Regimental and Corps Beret Colours	8
6.1 Other Adornments	8
7.0 Tongue in Cheek	9
8.0 References	9

1.0 Introduction

Headwear is one of the most defining items of military clothing, with the beret having been a component of the uniforms of many armed forces throughout the world since the mid-20th century.

The colour of a beret signifies which part of the military an individual belongs to; carries the Service, Corps, Regimental or unit badge; and when worn in combat, the headwear used can instantly inform combatants of whom they face.

Berets in some countries are particularly associated with elite units, who often wear berets in more unusual colours, and certain professions. Examples include:

- The grey beret of the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC);
- The maroon beret of a number of Commonwealth parachute troops and the Danish Jægerkorpset;
- The green beret of the Royal Marines Commandos, Finnish Marine Commandos (Coastal Jaegers), French Commandos (Bérets verts), French Foreign Legion, Irish Army Ranger Wing, Rhodesian Light Infantry and the United States Army's Special Forces (ubiquitously known as the Green Berets);
- The scarlet beret of the Royal Military Police and the Russian Special Forces (i.e. Spetsnaz);
- The beige or tan beret of a number of Commonwealth Special Forces units (e.g. the Special Air Service) and the US Army Rangers;
- The grey beret of the Polish GROM; or
- The wide black beret of the French Chasseurs alpins, the first military unit to have worn berets.

An unusual form of beret is the camouflage beret, mostly issued to Special Forces. Countries that issue camouflage berets are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, PRC, Denmark, Ecuador, Israel, Paraguay, Panama, Philippines, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, and Thailand.

This article will provide the reader with a description of the term 'crap hat', and its association with berets and peak caps. The article will then move on to the history of berets from a military perspective, with an outline of the pertinent facts/dates rather than being a definitive account.

Next, the article will discuss wear style and individualisation in the wearing of berets before moving on to Regimental and Corps beret colours and adornments. Finally the article will provide some links to some 'tongue in cheek' stuff.



2.0 The Term 'Crap Hat'

The term 'crap hat', a noun (vulgar slang), is a term used in the UK military by paratroopers and commandos to refer to an individual from a Service, Regiment or Corps in the rest of the military.

The original meaning of the term was used as slang for Army units who wore peaked caps with No.2 service dress. Subsequently it manifested into a derogatory and offensive term used by the Para's and, later on, Commandos for any Army unit/individual not Para or Commando-trained.

However, there are a number of units, Scots and Irish, who do not wear peaked caps and as such cannot theoretically be known as crap hats (but they are).

The Para's themselves argue that, to a degree, the only non-airborne units who are not crap hats are the Gurkhas, Commandos (Royal Marines and All Arms Commando Course) and the United Kingdom's Special Forces (UKSF) (i.e. the Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Service (SBS)). However, it is said that even then there are those within the UKSF who pour scorn on those from non-airborne units, regardless of the fact that they have passed the UKSF Selection course.

Incidentally, the Para's are known as 'Toms' and the Royal Marines as 'Bootnecks' or 'Booties'.

2.1 French Foreign Legion

The French Foreign Legion uses a term referring to anyone who does not wear the Kepi Blanc (e.g. the French Army) as Casquette Merde.

2.2 Other Examples

- Cherry Beret: the Paratroopers maroon beret.
- Meathead/Redcap: the Royal Military Police's red beret.
- Green Lid or Cabbage: the Royal Marine's green beret.
- Snowdrop: nickname given to RAF police due to the white cover on their hats.



3.0 The Origin of Military Berets

Berets are originally a civilian form of soft headdress originating from France, and are speculated to have been around since approximately the middle ages.

The informal use of berets by the military of Europe dates back hundreds of years and although French in origin the first military use is a bit closer to home than most may realise.

3.1 Scottish Roots: The Blue Bonnet

One of the first informal uses of berets by the military of Europe is the Blue Bonnet, which was originally a soft, knitted blue cap with a flat voluminous crown, it gave the Highlanders their nickname 'Bluebonnets'. It became the de facto symbol of Scottish forces in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The woollen bonnet is thought to have arrived in Scotland through scholars returning home from the centres of learning on the continent during the 16th century ([Scots Connection, 2014](#)). In a country where the weather could change at the drop of a hat (*pardon the pun*), the bonnet was quickly adopted and became an essential item of everyday wear.

The band at the base of a Scottish bonnet originally used to show allegiance. A diced band indicated loyalty to the House of Hanover, or England. A solid, dark blue band indicated loyalty to Scotland. After the Battle of Culloden, in 1746, all Highlanders who joined Scottish Regiments within the British Army were required to wear diced hatbands as part of their uniform.



3.2 Spanish Connection: The Carlist Wars of Succession

As an officially required military headdress, and as identification for a political group, the beret (boina in Spanish or txapela in Basque) can be traced back to the three Carlist Wars of Succession for the Spanish Crown between 1833 and 1876 ([The Beret Project, 2009a](#)).

Carlists (defenders of Carlos V) and *Cristinos* (defenders of Isabella II, called "Cristinos" in reference to Isabella's mother's name Maria Cristina) divided Spain. The Basque Country backed Carlos V. The United Kingdom, Portugal, and France helped the Cristinos ([Yague, 2013](#)).

At the start of the first Carlist War in 1833 the ultra conservative catholic Carlists wore the traditional black beret that was already worn in the Basque region. Liberal troops, who joined the Carlists after defeat at the battle of Alsasua on 22 April 1834, were given distinctive (French made) red berets which were rejected by the regular Carlist troops who chose distinctive blue berets ([The Beret Project, 2009a](#)).



Although the red beret was only originally worn by these Liberal troops, known as the battalion of Guías de Navarra (Navarese Guides) ([The Beret Project, 2009a](#)) in the First Carlist War, French txapelgorris, or red hats, entered the Basque country to aid Cristinos in the area during the Second Carlist War (1846-1849). However, the red beret (txapelgorri in Basque, which later also came to mean 'Carlist soldier') soon gained popularity and became a symbol among all Carlists after the Basque Carlist General Tomás de Zumalacárregui was seen and portrayed with this type of beret ([Yague, 2013](#)).

The red beret became a Falange symbol when Carlism was merged into it after the Spanish Civil War. Today the Basque police force, Ertzaintza, wears red berets. Learn more about the Carlist Wars: <http://www.spanishwars.net/19th-century-first-carlist-war.html>].

3.3 French Connection: The Chasseurs Aplins

The Chasseurs Alpins (Alpine Hunters) are the elite mountain infantry of the French Army, well known for their large, floppy berets called Tarte ([The Beret Project, 2009b](#)).

12 Battalions of Chasseurs Aplins were created on 24 December 1888 from the existing Chasseurs à Pied (Hunters on Foot) battalions and were trained to operate in mountainous terrain and in urban warfare. Their formation was in response to the unification of Italy in the preceding decades and the Italian Army's creation of 6 Alpini regiments of mountain troops positioned close to the French border; which the French saw as a threat.

From their formation the Chasseur Aplins were issued with a uniform which included several features which were innovative for the time, notably the large and floppy blue beret (carrying the yellow bugle horn insignia of the Chasseur branch) which they still retain today. Following the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, the choice of tall Shako-style helmets was increasingly impractical and had begun to be phased out and other countries followed suit after the creation of the Chasseurs Alpins in the 1880s.



The Tarte was such an unfamiliar fashion outside France that it had to be described in the 11th edition of the [Encyclopaedia Britannica \(1910\)](#) as “a soft cap or tam o’shanter.” The tam o’shanter was a variation of the original Blue Bonnet.

3.4 British Roots: Tanks and World War I

The British Army beret dates back to 1918 when the French 70th Chasseurs Alpins were training with the British Tank Corps (later renamed the Royal Tank Corps in 1923 and predecessor of the Royal Tank Regiment ([NAM, 2014](#))).

The Chasseurs Alpins wore a distinctive large beret (see above) and Major General Sir Hugh Elles, the unit’s first commander ([NAM, 2014](#)), realised this style of headdress would be a practical option for his tank crews who were forced to work in the confines of a tank. The tin hat (combat helmet) was not necessary in the tank, and the beret could also help keep sweat at bay in the very hot tank and aided the wearing of headphones.

However, Elles thought the Chasseur beret was “too sloppy” and the Basque-style beret of the French tank crews was “too skimpy”, so a compromise based on the Scottish tam o’shanter was designed. The colour black became popular as a tank crew headdress, since it did not show oil stains picked up inside the interior of the vehicle. Black berets continue to be worn by armoured regiments throughout the Commonwealth.



This headdress was adopted as early as 1918, despite complaints that the beret was “too foreign and feminine”, and was formally adopted in March 1924 after being submitted for the approval of George V in November 1923. Other armoured regiments followed but the beret was not widely adopted by the British Army until 1943, although there were some exceptions.

3.5 New British Units: Elite and Special Forces in World War II

Following the Spanish Civil War (July 1936 to March 1939) the choice of berets for tank crews became a more common practice, and during this period German panzer crews’ also began to wear black berets (with the addition of a padded crash helmet inside).

During the early years of the war units such as the Commandos, Parachute Regiment and precursors to the Special Air Service and Special Boat Service also adopted the beret.

Later in the war, a rather baggier beret-like hat, called a General Service (GS) Cap, was issued to all ranks of the British Army (although armoured, parachute, commando, Scottish and Irish units remained exempt) to replace the earlier Field Service Cap. The GS Cap was not popular, and after the war was replaced with a true beret ([Gordon, 2005](#)).



Initially the majority of the British Army was issued with the dark blue beret, although certain Regiments and Corps which had adopted a distinctively

coloured beret before 1943 where allowed to keep that colour. Since then, more colours have been adopted by Regiments and Corps as a way to commemorate associations.

3.6 Mid-20th Century and Onwards

Berets have become the default military headdress of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, just as the morion, tricorne, shako, kepi, and peaked cap were each common headgear in their own respective eras. The beret is now worn by many military personnel of the majority of nations across the world.

Today, every British military unit wears a beret, with the exception of the Royal Regiment of Scotland and the Royal Irish Regiment, who wear the tam o'shanter and the caubeen respectively. However, the Scots and Irish Guards wear berets, as frequently do the Royal Irish Regiment, on operations. Many of these berets are in distinctive colours and all are worn with the cap badge of the Service, Regiment or Corps. The cap badge for all services in the UK is usually worn directly over the left eye. A selection of UK military berets by colour are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Selection of UK Military berets

				
Adjutant General's Corps	Royal Marines	General Service	Intelligence Corps	Para's
				
RAF	Royal Military Police	Special Air Service	Army Air Corps	Worn by a variety of infantry units
				
	Queen Alexandria's Royal Army Nursing Corps	Caubeen	Tam O'Shanter	

Although the standard operating procedure (SOP) (i.e. standard practice) of the British Army is to wear combat helmets in combat situations, there have been decisions, most notably in Iraq, where berets were worn on patrols to portray a more approachable image to the local population.

4.0 21st Century and the US Army

On 28 November 2001 the black beret was as adopted as standard issue across the US Army, unless soldiers were approved to wear a different distinctive beret. These distinctive berets being:

- Paratroopers: maroon beret;
- US Army Rangers: tan beret; and
- US Army Special Forces: green beret.

The black beret was originally authorised for women on 20 January 1975 and then restricted for ranger and airborne only units in 1979, although airborne forces later moved to the maroon beret on 28 November 1980.

On 13 June 2011 the US Army announced that the patrol cap (a kepi-styled straight-sided, flat-topped soft cap, with a double thick bill and internal pocket) would replace the black wool beret as the default headgear for the service uniform (Lopez, 2011), with the beret remaining the headdress for the dress uniform (Army Times, 2011). This reversal was due to feedback from soldiers (Army Times, 2011; Lopez, 2011).



4.1 The 'Green Berets'

The US Army's Special Forces, widely known as the 'Green Berets', wear the green beret because of their link to the British Commandos of World War II. The first US Army Ranger unit, commonly known as Darby's Rangers, was formed in Northern Ireland during the summer of 1942. On completion of training at the Commando Training Depot at Achnacarry Castle in Scotland, these Rangers had the right to wear the British Commando green beret but it was not part of the regulation uniform at the time and was disallowed by the US Army (US Army, 2000).



The green beret was first worn at a retirement parade at Fort Bragg on 12 June 1955 for Lieutenant General Joseph P. Cleland in which onlookers thought that the personnel on parade were a foreign delegation from NATO. In 1956 General Paul D. Adams, the post commander at Fort Bragg, banned its wear (even though it was worn on the sly when units were deployed overseas). The Department of the Army Message 587636 issued on 25 September 1961 reversed General Adams decision and designated the green beret as the exclusive headgear of the US Army's Special Forces.

5.0 Wear Style

The reason why the UK military wears the beret on the right is to free the shoulder that bears the rifle (i.e. when held at the slope on the left shoulder). The 'loose' part of the beret is gathered to the opposite side. However, the armies of some countries – mostly Europe, South America and Iran – have influenced the push to the left.

The general rule for wearing UK military berets taught during Phase 1 initial military training is to shape the head dress back and to the right for the material and to have the leather band level around the head with the cap badge two fingers above the left eye. Scottish Infantry have different rules for the tam o'shanter with the cap badge worn on the left side of the head.

5.1 Individualisation

As long as the cap badge is, approximately, over the left eye, the beret pulled down on the right and it is in good condition, pretty much anything goes. It is possible to identify the owner simply from the appearance of the beret. Everyone tries to individualise their beret and hopes to get away without comment from a Junior/Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO). In that sense it is one of the escapes from the uniformity of the military.

6.0 UK Service, Regimental and Corps Beret Colours

The colours of the berets of the various UK Services, Regiments and Corps are as follows:

- Khaki: Foot Guards, Honourable Artillery Company, Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, Royal Anglian Regiment, Royal Gibraltar Regiment, Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, Royal Welsh, Yorkshire Regiment, Mercian Regiment, 4/73 (Sphinx) Special OP Battery Royal Artillery (the traditional blue was replaced in 2008).
- Light grey: Royal Scots Dragoon Guards
- Dark grey: Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps
- Brown: King's Royal Hussars, Royal Wessex Yeomanry
- Black: Royal Tank Regiment, W (Westminster Dragoons) Squadron, Royal Yeomanry
- Rifle green: The Rifles, Royal Gurkha Rifles, Small Arms School Corps, Essex Yeomanry
- Maroon: Parachute Regiment, all ranks serving with 16 Air Assault Brigade other than in Army Air Corps Units (note that the beret is not restricted to Parachute qualified personnel).
- Beige: Special Air Service including attached troops who are not SAS-qualified
- Emerald grey: Special Reconnaissance Regiment
- Cambridge blue: Army Air Corps
- Cypress green: Intelligence Corps
- Scarlet: Royal Military Police
- Green: Adjutant General's Corps (except Royal Military Police, who wear scarlet; Army Legal Services Branch, who wear black; and Military Provost Staff, who wear navy blue), Military Provost Guard Service
- Dark blue: generic: worn by all other Army units (except Scottish and Irish line infantry regiments), Royal Navy, Royal Marines who are not commando-qualified (and who wear the Royal Marines cap badge with red backing)
- Commando green: commando-qualified Royal Marines, Commando qualified personnel of all services serving in Commando units, Special Boat Service
- RAF blue grey: Royal Air Force (including the RAF Regiment) and Air Cadets (Combined Cadet Force and Air Training Corps)
- UN Blue: personnel serving with the United Nations on peacekeeping missions (with UN Cap Badge)
- White: when the Special Air Service was initially created white berets were authorised but were soon replaced by beige ones. In 2004 the RAF Police were denied permission to wear a white beret.

6.1 Other Adornments

Some UK Regiments and Corps wear a coloured backing behind the cap badge. These include:

- Foot Guards: blue red blue patch (less the officers of the Scots Guards, who wear a patch of Royal Stewart tartan)
- Honourable Artillery Company: black circle
- Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment: primrose and blue patch
- Royal Anglian Regiment: small black 'tombstone'
- Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC): red patch
- Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC): dull cherry oval patch
- Army Air Corps: black patch
- Royal Army Physical Training Corps (RAPTC): patch in Corps colours

- Royal Marines 'Red Tombstone' (only on dark blue beret worn by those who are not commando-qualified)
- Royal Welsh Regiment and Mercian Regiment: green badge outline and square respectively
- Queen's Royal Lancers: red patch
- Household Cavalry: blue red blue patch
- Yorkshire Regiment: Brunswick (British racing) green.
- Royal Scots Dragoon Guards: black patch (worn in mourning for Tsar Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, who was their Colonel-in-Chief at the time of his murder)
- King's Royal Hussars: red patch
- Royal Wessex Yeomanry: All ranks from all four Squadrons wear a black patch behind the cap badge.

The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, the only remaining independent fusilier regiment, wears a feather hackle on the beret. Other Ranks of the Royal Welsh also wear hackles.

Members of the Royal Tank Regiment, 4/73 (Sphinx) Special OP Battery Royal Artillery, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, Army Air Corps, Parachute Regiment, SAS and Intelligence Corps wear berets in No.s 1, 2, 3 and 6 Dress. Other English and Welsh Regiments and Corps wear peaked caps in these orders of dress (18). Troops from other Services, Regiments or Corps on attachment to units with distinctive coloured berets often wear those berets (with their own cap badge). Colonels, Brigadiers and Generals usually continue to wear the beret of the Regiment or Corps to which they used to belong with the cap badge distinctive to their rank.

7.0 Tongue in Cheek

- Royal Society for the Prevention of Craphats:
<https://www.facebook.com/RoyalSocietyForThePreventionOfCraphats>

8.0 References

Army Times (2011) *Army Dumps Beret as Official ACU Headgear*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20110613/NEWS/106130309/Army-dumps-beret-official-ACU-headgear>. [Accessed: 11 August, 2014].

Gordon, D.B. (2005) *Uniforms of the WWII Tommy*. Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company.

Lopez, C.T. (2011) *ACU Changes make Velcro Optional, Patrol Cap Default Headgear*. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.army.mil/article/59441/ACU_changes_make_Velcro_optional_patrol_cap_default_headgear/. [Accessed: 11 August, 2014].

NAM (National Army Museum) (2014) *Royal Tank Regiment*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.nam.ac.uk/research/famous-units/royal-tank-regiment>. [Accessed: 11 August, 2014].

Scots Connection (2014) *Scottish Beret Tam*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.scotsconnection.com/Scottish-Beret-Tam---Plain/p--1467/>. [Accessed: 12 August, 2014].

The Beret Project (2009a) *The Beret and the Spanish Civil War*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://beretandboina.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/if-one-historical-event-is-associated.html>. [Accessed: 10 August, 2014].

The Beret Project (2009b) *Les Chasseurs Aplins*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://beretandboina.blogspot.co.uk/2009/09/les-chasseurs-alpins.html>. [Accessed: 10 August, 2014].

The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company of New York (1910) *Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Eleventh (11th) Edition. 1911. Rebound. Volume 27*. New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company of New.

The Spanish War History (2012) *First Carlist War*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.spanishwars.net/19th-century-first-carlist-war.html>. [Accessed: 12 August, 2014].

US Army (2000) *Army Black Beret*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.army.mil/features/beret/beret.htm#History>. [Accessed: 11 August, 2014].

Yague, P. (2013) *Boinas and Berets: A Little History*. Available from World Wide Web: <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/23379/boinas-and-berets-a-little-history/>. [Accessed: 12 August, 2014].