

Great — and Not So Great — Coats

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The reenactment season has begun to resemble the Civil War itself, with campaigning in virtually every month of the year. As your *Watchdog* editors shivered around their campfires at the last Murfreesboro event, they were less concerned about the accuracy of their greatcoats than they were about the garments' ability to keep warmth in and cold out. But if the reproduction greatcoats had been accurate enough to meet original specifications, they would have been warmer.

FEDERAL OVERCOATS

Federal Material

Let's look at greatcoats from the inside out. The Federal 1865 Quartermaster regulations specified that greatcoats were to be made of 6-4 (one and a half inch wide) sky blue kersey, pure indigo dyed, free from shoddy or floss, and the nap slightly raised, weighing 22 ounces per yard, 34 threads of fillings (woof) each square inch, 40 threads in chain (warp) each square inch. Original sky blue kersey wool is about a third thicker than reproduction wool, and does a much better job of breaking the howling winter winds of Northern Virginia and Tennessee.

The body linings of Federal overcoats were to be made of "3/4 heavy lining." This material was not described in the *Quartermaster Manual's* Table of Textile Fabrics, but inspection of both mounted and dismounted overcoats revealed that the primary material was dark blue wool kersey flannel. This lining was the same weight as that used as the lining for fatigue blouses, which was slightly looser in weave than that used for the body of the sack coat itself. A khaki colored linsey material, with a mixture of wool and cotton, was also used as a greatcoat body lining. Sleeves were lined with lightweight cotton. We have never seen an original greatcoat with a body lined with thin cotton, but that material is often used in reproduction greatcoats.

Federal Collars, Capes and Buttons

Dismounted greatcoats, for infantry, heavy artillery, engineers and ordnance, and mounted greatcoats, for

cavalry and light artillery, were made from identical material, were the same length, and both included large cuffs which could be turned down to protect the hands in bad weather. Dismounted greatcoats were single breasted, with a standup collar averaging three inches tall, an unlined, non-detachable sixteen inch cape reaching to the elbows, and a rear vent eleven inches long. Mounted great coats were double breasted, with a stand (two inches) and fall (three and a half inches) collar averaging five and a half inches, a twenty-two inch cape reaching to the wrists, and a rear vent twenty-one inches long.

Federal Waists and Skirts

The appearance of Federal greatcoats was typical of Victorian male fashion, but differed substantially from modern tailoring. The waist was stylishly tight. On the dismounted coat, the pinched waist effect was enhanced by the buttons being offset from the centerline and following the curve of the topstitching, which was one inch from the edge at the neck, and five and a half inches at the fifth button, at the waist. The appearance was further enhanced by the cut of the coat's skirt; the exterior diameter of the buttoned waist was a relatively svelte 44 inches, but flared to 72 inches at the hem. On both the mounted and dismounted coats, the waist could be tightened further by a half-belt set into the seams in back sides. The belt had an eagle coat button on the right, two button holes on the left. The belt had a distinctive taper, with a width of one and a half to two inches at the outside ends, and one inch at the inside ends.

Federal Sleeves

A second stylistic feature of Federal issue overcoats is baggy sleeves, with a diameter of twenty inches at the elbow. This fashion characteristic is visible on officers' frock coats of the period, but is difficult to see on issue overcoats, because the sleeves are hidden by the cape. Reproduction great coats that are based only on photographs, rather than on careful measurements of original specimens, usually miss this detail.

Federal Officers' Overcoats

The regulation Federal officer's overcoat was dark blue, and closed with a French cord and silk knot. Rank was indicated by from one to five strands of black silk braid on the bottom of the sleeve, similar to the braid on Confederate officers' frock coats. Late in 1861, however, General Order 102 authorized Federal officers to wear the enlisted man's mounted overcoat "in time of actual field service." Photographs exist of an officer wearing an enlisted man's overcoat with rank designated on the lower part of the sleeve using the rank device from an epaulet.

Tailor-produced sky blue officers' overcoats also have been observed. These coats are made of finer material than the enlisted man's pattern, and have braid designating rank on the sleeve, but have double-breasted buttons for closure. Reproductions of such overcoats have not been encountered. At this point, reenactment officers are limited to customizing the enlisted men's coats.

CONFEDERATE OVERCOATS

For Confederate overcoats, your choices are even more limited. Although Confederate regulations stipulated that the enlisted overcoat was to be double-breasted, cadet gray, with a stand-up collar, there is no evidence that this coat was ever made or issued in quantity.¹ Confederate Quartermaster records, as well as Southern reminiscences, show that overcoats were only rarely issued. The cloth was considered more valuable for essential items such as jackets and trousers. The best choice for a Confederate impression may be to toughen up and do without, or use a captured Federal item, (but not everyone, please!).

Those wishing to wear a Confederate pattern overcoat should steer well clear of the products that are currently offered on merchants' row. Most of these are nothing more than US patterns made with gray wool; they are even less accurate than the "CS regulation" style. Examination of the few surviving original specimens shows them to differ in almost all respects from the "Confederate" patterns sold by most merchants. Most surviving original enlisted men's coats were made from a wool-cotton jean material that is now tan or brown.² When the Confederate overcoat material was all wool, it

was generally the very dark gray kersey seen in the Richmond depot shell jacket, rather than the medium gray seen in current reproductions. A lay-down collar was common, and those with a stand-up collar lacked the high, square cut and reinforcing stitching of the US pattern. Most Confederate overcoats had capes, but the capes often did not button.³

We regret that we can not recommend any of the current reproduction CS overcoats that we've seen, as all of these appear to be incorrectly based on the US pattern, or some non-identifiable pattern. County Cloth (13793 C Georgetown St., NE, Paris, OH 44669) offers kits based on the overcoat identified to Pvt. Weller, 2nd KY Inf. CS, and one other pattern that may be an import item. These are the only products that we can recommend for those wishing to wear a CS overcoat of identifiable origins. But, we are happy to note that a reproduction of the Curtis overcoat may be available soon -- watch for details in an upcoming issue.

Notes On Confederate Overcoats

¹*Uniforms and Dress of the Army of the Confederate States* (Richmond: Chas. H. Wynne, 1861), 2.

²Surviving CS enlisted overcoats may be seen in the Museum of the Confederacy (Pvt. McGehee, 53rd Va. Inf., 1864-65); Gettysburg NMP (Pvt. Curtis, 23rd NC Inf., 1861); UDC Museum, Charlestown, SC (Pvt. Brown, local unit, date unknown); Kentucky Military History Museum (Pvt. Weller, 2nd KY, apparently a very limited quantity private purchase coat dating to 1861-62); and the Jefferson Davis Museum, Irwinville, GA (Lt. Col. Atkins, 49th Tenn. Inf., 1864 -- apparently an enlisted Western Theatre issue coat).

³Photos of CS soldiers wearing overcoats can be seen in *Echoes of Glory* (Confederate Volume); *The Image of War - Shadows of the Storm* (Vol. 1); dust jacket and page 137, 141; *The Image of War — the Guns of '62* (Vol. 2), page 189; 1988; D. A. Serrano, *Still More*

Editor's Note: The Winter, 1996 issue of *The Watchdog* will contain reviews of overcoats offered by various merchants and suppliers.