

The Leatherneck – Story Behind the Legend

BLUF: Leatherneck is a military slang term for a member of the United States Marine Corps. It is generally believed to originate from wearing a leather “stock” or collar around the neck, which kept the head erect. The leather stock collar appeared in the uniform of Continental Marines in 1776 and remained an article of the Marine uniform until 1872.

SETTING THE STAGE: As early as 1755, British soldiers began wearing a leather or horsehair collar as part of their uniforms. Following the French and Indian War, shipboard Royal Marines added the stiff collar to their uniform. The leatherneck replaced the linen gorget in the enlisted uniform, though officers still wore the gorget. The legend of the leatherneck holds that it was added as protection for the jugular vein during battle. The belief that the collars served as a protective device is not valid. A more recent explanation for the collar evolves around the pride of the wearer. A British soldier who holds his head upright displays his pride in the group and himself. One who wears a leather stock collar cannot help but keep the head upright. This explanation, however, has also given way to a more practical reason.

One of the biggest problems within the ranks of British soldiers on guard duty was surrendering to sleep. In some cases, a soldier was hanged for the offense. To set an example for the offender and still maintain discipline, the British officers ordered the negligent soldier to wear a metal collar around the neck for some time. During the Seven Years War, known as the French and Indian War in North America, the leather stock collars became a permanent uniform part to help the soldiers fight off the temptation of falling asleep at the wrong time. There was also a secondary benefit to the soldiers wearing a leather collar. When the soldiers wore the stiff collar during a battle, their rifle aim improved. This effect was the primary benefit and why the British Royal Marines began wearing the collars in the early 1770s.

THE STORY: In 1776, the Naval Committee of the Second Continental Congress prescribed uniform regulations for the Continental forces. Marine uniforms consisted of green coats with buff white facings, buff breeches, and black gaiters. Also mandated was a leather stock to be worn by officers and enlisted men alike. When the United States Marine Corps was reborn in 1798 through an Act of Congress, the leatherneck remained a part of the Marines’ uniform. This tradition continued until 1872 when the uniform change removed the device from the uniform regulations. However, the visual image of the leatherneck remained with the Marines, who wore a strip of black glazed leather attached to the inside front of the dress uniform collar.

One of the Marine Corps’ traditions is the name “Leatherneck” being applied to Marines because of their leather stock collars. Supposedly, the origins of the name were first used by sailors serving onboard ships with Marines. One of the disputes in the name’s origin is whether it originated in the Royal Marines or the U.S. Marines. Etymologists H.L. Mencken and William Morris recount the tale that British sailors called Marines leathernecks, not because of their collars, but because Marines washed only their faces, omitting the rest of their bodies, resulting in an unwashed and leathery neck. They both come squarely down on the British-origin side, stating that the term crossed the Atlantic during the First World War. They may be correct about the origins, but the dates are wrong. Modern etymologists and historian J.E. Lighter stated that the term appeared in the American vocabulary at the end of the 19th century. The earliest unequivocal citation refers to the Royal Marines as leathernecks, dating from 1889-90. Considering that the American Marines were coming in direct contact with the British military in the Orient during this time, they began to exchange vernacular terms. This historical occurrence is the belief of the present-day Royal Marines and sailors.

Whatever its origins, it is wrong to think of the leatherneck as a protective device. It is most likely that, in the beginning, it had a practical application related to proper military function. During the 19th century, the leatherneck became part of the tradition and the military fashion of the day.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the origins of the leatherneck collar?
2. What misconceptions have become a part of the leatherneck as it relates to Marine Corps traditions?
3. What is the leatherneck's relationship to the British Royal Marines and the U.S. Marine Corps?

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