EDUCATION

Guide For Mess Dress Wear Army

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Introduction: The Prestige of the Mess Dress

For soldiers in the United States Army, few uniforms carry as much history, prestige, and formality as the Army Mess Dress. Often referred to as "the tuxedo of the Army," this uniform is reserved for evening social functions, formal dinners, military balls, and ceremonies that require a heightened level of decorum. Wearing it correctly is not merely a matter of personal style; it is a reflection of the discipline, heritage, and pride that define the profession of arms. Missteps in its assembly can be noticeable to senior leaders and fellow service members who have a keen eye for detail. This comprehensive guide for mess dress wear Army will walk you through every element, from the history of the uniform to the minute details of accessories, fit, and proper wear. Whether you are a newly commissioned officer attending your first dining-in or a seasoned non-commissioned officer preparing for a formal event, understanding the nuances of this uniform is essential. By the end of this article, you will have a thorough understanding of how to wear the Army Mess Dress with confidence and exactness, ensuring you present yourself in the best possible light at any formal occasion.

The History and Purpose of the Army Mess Dress

The Army Mess Dress has its roots in the 19th-century British military tradition of officers wearing formal evening attire for mess dinners. The United States Army adopted a similar concept, creating a uniform that blends the formality of a civilian tuxedo with distinct military identifiers. The primary purpose of the mess dress is to foster camaraderie, honor traditions, and provide a dignified setting for professional and social gatherings. It is not a combat uniform or a daily work garment; it is a ceremonial and social uniform that represents the Army's values both on and off the installation. Understanding this tradition is the first step in appreciating why every detail, from the placement of medals to the style of the bow tie, is governed by strict regulations found in Army Regulation 670-1 and DA Pam 670-1. This guide will serve as a practical companion to those regulations, translating official language into actionable advice.

Key Components of the Army Mess Dress

To wear the mess dress correctly, you must first understand its individual pieces. The uniform consists of several distinct components, each with specific requirements regarding color, material, and placement. Below is a detailed breakdown of the essential elements.

The Mess Jacket

The centerpiece of the uniform is the mess jacket. For officers, the jacket is dark blue with a black shawl lapel, often adorned with black satin or grosgrain piping. Enlisted personnel wear a similar dark blue jacket, but without the satin lapels. The jacket is cut short, similar to a civilian dinner jacket, and features a single button closure. The button should be black or covered in black fabric. The jacket must fit snugly at the shoulders and waist, with sleeve length allowing approximately a half-inch of the dress shirt cuff to show. A properly fitted

jacket is crucial; a jacket that is too loose or too tight will detract from the overall professional appearance.

The Trousers

Army Mess Dress trousers are dark blue with a black satin or grosgrain stripe down the outer seam of each leg. This stripe is the equivalent of the tuxedo trouser stripe and adds to the formal aesthetic. The trousers should be hemmed to break slightly on the top of the shoe, or have no break at all for a more modern appearance, depending on the preference of the command or the specific event. They are typically worn with suspenders (braces) to ensure a clean, crisp line. A belt is not worn with mess dress trousers, as the waistband is covered by the jacket when worn closed.

The White Dress Shirt

Under the mess jacket, a white formal dress shirt is required. This shirt must have a wing or fold collar, designed to accommodate a bow tie. The shirt should have a plain front, though some variations may include a pleated front. French cuffs are standard, requiring cuff links. The shirt must be freshly laundered and properly starched to maintain a crisp appearance. The collar should sit neatly under the lapels of the jacket without bunching.

The Bow Tie

A black satin or grosgrain bow tie is worn with the Army Mess Dress. It must be a self-tie bow tie, not a clip-on, as a self-tie is considered more formal and professional. The bow tie should be tied symmetrically and sit squarely between the collar points. The size of the bow tie should be proportional to the wearer's face and collar; generally, a bow tie that is about 2.5 inches wide is standard.

Footwear

Footwear for the Army Mess Dress consists of black patent leather oxfords or low quarters. The shoes must be highly polished to a mirror shine. For female soldiers, black pumps or low quarters are authorized. Socks must be black and long enough to cover the calf when seated. Patterned socks are not authorized; a plain, high-quality black dress sock is required.

Headgear

The headgear worn with the Army Mess Dress is the Army blue service cap (for officers) or the army green service cap (for enlisted personnel). However, for many formal events, headgear may not be worn indoors, per tradition. When worn, it must be clean, properly shaped, and placed under the left arm when not on the head. The cap carries the officer's or enlisted personnel's branch insignia and rank.

Awards, Medals, and Badges

One of the most complex aspects of the mess dress is the proper wear of awards, medals, and badges. The regulations are specific, and errors are easily spotted by those familiar with the uniform.

Full-Size Medals vs. Miniature Medals

For the Mess Dress, miniature medals are worn instead of full-size medals. Miniature medals are scaled-down versions of the full-size medals worn on the Army Service Uniform. They mount on a metal bar and are worn on the left side of the jacket, centered between the shoulder seam and the lapel. The medals should be stacked in order of precedence, typically in rows of two or three, depending on the number of awards. A clear, prescribed gap between rows is required for uniformity.

Ribbon Racks on Mess Dress

Some soldiers may choose to wear a miniature ribbon rack in place of full medals, though the traditional mess dress calls for miniature medals. If ribbons are worn, they must be miniature size to match the scale of the

uniform. Unit awards are worn on the right side of the jacket, typically in miniature form as well.

Badges and Insignia

Badges, such as the Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB), Parachutist Badge, and Special Forces tab, are worn on the left side of the jacket above the medals. The highest precedence badge should be placed uppermost and centered. On the right side, you may wear foreign badges earned, along with the Army Staff Identification Badge or other special skill badges. The placement must be precise, typically 1/4 inch above the pocket seam or at a specified distance from the medals.

U.S. Army Branch Insignia

Branch insignia is worn on the lapels of the mess jacket. For officers, the branch insignia is worn on the left lapel, and the U.S. insignia on the right lapel. For enlisted personnel, the branch insignia is worn on both lapels. The insignia must be clean, polished, and correctly aligned.

Proper Fit and Tailoring

A uniform that fits perfectly is more comfortable and looks significantly more professional. When preparing your mess dress, consider the following fit guidelines:

- Shoulders: The shoulder seam of the jacket should align precisely with the outer edge of your shoulder. There should be no pulling or excess fabric across the back.
- Sleeves: The sleeves should end at the wrist bone, allowing about 1/4 to 1/2 inch of the shirt cuff to show. The sleeve length should not cover the entire hand.
- Jacket Length: The bottom of the mess jacket should fall at the crease of the elbow when arms are at the sides. It is a short jacket, not covering the seat of the trousers.
- Trousers: The waist of the trousers should sit comfortably at your natural waist, not hips. They should be tailored to have a clean break on the shoes, without bunching.
- Shirt Collar: The shirt collar should close comfortably around the neck, leaving just enough room to insert one finger. The collar points should sit flat against the chest.

A professional military tailor or a uniform shop experienced with mess dress should handle any alterations. Do not attempt to alter the uniform yourself unless you have expertise in formal garment tailoring.

Accessories and Accouterments

Accessories complete the mess dress uniform and must be chosen with care.

Cuff Links and Studs

French cuffs require cuff links. For the Army Mess Dress, black onyx or black enamel cuff links are the most common and acceptable. Some soldiers use miniature rank insignia as cuff links, which is a time-honored tradition. Additionally, the shirt front requires dress studs. These studs should match the cuff links in style and material. They are inserted into the buttonholes of the shirt front, replacing standard buttons. A set of matching cuff links and studs adds a level of sophistication that is expected at formal events.

Suspenders (Braces)

Suspenders are worn with the mess dress trousers to hold them in place without causing a belt line to show. They should be black and clip or button to the trousers. The suspenders should be worn under the jacket, making them invisible to observers. Button-on suspenders are generally preferred over clip-ons, as they lie flatter and are less likely to slip.

Pocket Handkerchief

A white linen pocket handkerchief is a traditional and acceptable addition to the mess jacket. It should be folded

neatly in a straight square or a puff style and placed in the left breast pocket. The handkerchief must be clean and ironed. It should never contain any logos or patterns.

Name Tag

A black-backed name tag is worn on the right side of the jacket, centered above the pocket flap. The tag should be engraved with the soldier's last name only, in a clear, serif font. The name tag must be clean and free of scratches.

Occasions for Wear

The Army Mess Dress is not a daily wear uniform. It is reserved for specific formal occasions. Understanding when and where to wear it will help you prepare appropriately.

1. Dining-In and Dining-Out: These are formal military dinners with traditions of speeches, toasts, and camaraderie. The Mess Dress is the standard uniform for these events.
2. Formal Balls: The Army Birthday Ball, unit balls, and other formal celebrations often require mess dress.
3. Weddings and Ceremonies: Military members may choose to wear mess dress to a formal wedding or a ceremony where the occasion calls for the highest level of formality.
4. Official Social Functions: Events such as the Army-Navy Game formal events, retirement ceremonies with formal receptions, and regimental dinners may call for mess dress.

Always check the invitation or event announcement for the designated uniform. If it says "Mess Dress" or "Formal," this is the attire expected.

Female Soldiers and the Mess Dress

Female soldiers have two options for the Army Mess Dress: the standard mess dress uniform with trousers and jacket, or the mess dress uniform with a skirt. The skirt must fall to the knee or slightly below, and it is worn with the same mess jacket. Female soldiers may also wear a white blouse with a bow tie instead of a dress shirt, though the dress shirt is also authorized. The same rules apply for the wear of miniature medals, insignia, and badges, with the same precision and attention to detail. Headgear for female soldiers includes the army blue service cap, or a black beret, depending on the event and local policy.

Etiquette and Best Practices

Wearing the mess dress is about more than just the physical uniform. It is about behavior and decorum. Here are some essential etiquette points:

- Remove the Jacket: The mess jacket should be worn at all times during the formal portion of the event. It may be removed only after the head table or presiding officer has set the example, or during a break. Check with the protocol officer if unsure.

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