IDENTIFYING YOUR WW1 PHOTOS

Simon Wills helps you analyse photos of your WW1 relatives who served in the Royal Navy.

You can often learn a lot about a seafaring ancestor just by looking at an old photo, and Royal Navy personnel are no exception. There were many different parts of the Navy during WW1, each with its own uniform, and although it is not possible to cover them all here, I will introduce you to some common types. Most photographs at this time were still taken in professional studios, and comparatively few were taken on board ship or by amateurs in social situations.

Officers
The Royal Navy had several different kinds of officer, although they all wore blue uniforms. Military officers were appointed by a formal process known as a commission. During the war their role was to command the ship and organise its fighting capability. Military officers can often be identified because they carried a distinctive ‘loop’ in the gold stripes that each of them wore on his sleeves. The number and pattern of these cuff stripes indicated the officer’s rank: four stripes for a captain, for example.

Our first photo (on page 22) is of a commander, as is shown by the three gold stripes on his sleeves. Notice the single row of gold leaves on the peak of his cap, which was only worn by commanders, captains and commodores (2nd class). Higher ranking officers were allowed two rows of leaves. On the front of his cap is the distinctive badge worn by officers consisting of a crown above an anchor surrounded by leaves. In photographs, this cap badge is a very good way to identify stripes on military officers’ uniforms showed their rank.

Cuff stripes on military officers’ uniforms showed their rank.

Royal Navy on camera in the Great War

Admiral of the Fleet
Admiral
Vice Admiral
Rear Admiral; Commodore 1st class
Commodore 2nd class
Captain
Commander
Lieutenant Commander
Lieutenant
Sub-lieutenant
Warrant Officer

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Naval uniforms understood

distinguish Royal Navy officers from other seafarers such as Merchant Navy personnel. For most of WW1, engineering officers also carried loops in their cuff stripes but in between the stripes they wore strips of purple material to differentiate them from military officers. These purple stripes do not show up in black and white photos, unfortunately. Because they were appointed to provide non-military expertise, engineering officers were referred to as civil branch officers. Other civil branch officers included surgeons and accountants (which the Navy called ‘paramedics’). These officers did not carry any loops in their cuff stripes, just plain stripes, but they adopted different coloured material in between their gold stripes: red for surgeons and white for the accountant branch.

Junior officers in training were called cadets and they wore a characteristic ‘button and twist’ on their collars. They were entitled to wear the naval officer’s capbadge if they were trained by the Royal Navy itself, but note that some men were trained by separate institutions such as HMS Conway on the Mersey and some of these had their own unique capbadge, which cadets adopted. Cadets were recruited as young teenagers and their youth is often very apparent in photos, especially as it was common for a young man to have his picture taken as soon as he was accepted into training. Once he completed his tuition, a newly qualified cadet was generally appointed as a midshipman, the lowest rank of serving military officer. These men had distinctive large white oblongs on the collar of their jackets known as ‘turfbacks’.

Seamen

By the time of WW1, the Royal Navy seaman had a well-established dress code. The basic uniform was blue, although there were a number of different versions including a white one for wearing in tropical waters. The seaman’s cap carried the name of his ship on a ribbon or ‘tally’, but men in training before they went to sea simply bore the letters ‘HMS’. In addition, during wartime the ship’s name was sometimes replaced by the letters ‘HMS’ for security purposes. There are various features of the uniform that can help you identify an ancestor’s role and his experience. For example, seamen and petty officers wore what were called ‘branch badges’ on their right upper arms to show their area of specialism. This described their role and where they worked on board ship. There were a large number of these badges, and many variations on each design to designate a specific job, but my diagram below illustrates some examples to show broadly which area of expertise was denoted by each badge. Sometimes they don’t show up very well because on certain versions of the blue uniform the badges were red, so the contrast in a black and white photo isn’t very good. You may need a lens to see them.

If you spot a large anchor on the left upper arm of a seaman (known as a ‘klick’), this indicates he was a more experienced rating known as a leading hand.

Petty officers

In WW1, petty officers were distinguished by two crossed anchors surmounted by a crown on their left upper arms. The left arm was also likely to bear one or more v-shaped stripes known as good conduct badges. These were worn by seamen and petty officers to indicate the number of years they had served with good behaviour. One stripe indicated three years of good conduct in service, two was for eight years’ good conduct, and three for 13 years. On their right arms petty officers still wore branch badges to indicate their area of expertise.

A chief petty officer was a highly-skilled specialist. He was allowed to wear a jacket and tie like officers, but his cap badge did not sport the gold leaves around the anchor that officers were entitled to. His field of expertise was shown by branch badges not on his arm, but on the lapels of his jacket.

Women in the Navy

The First World War saw women serve in the Navy for the first time. The Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS) was founded in 1917 and, by the time it was wound up in 1919, around 7,000 women had been recruited. It has to be said that the uniform was not the most flattering, with its sack-like dresses reaching to the ankles and pudding-bowl hats. Female ratings’ cap tallies generally bore the letters ‘WRNS’ with a crown and anchor. Officers, however, displayed their rank by wavy-line cuff stripes, on their cuffs consisting of intertwining gold braid. The number of stripes to indicate rank was the same as in the Royal Navy proper, but the circular loop was replaced by a six-pointed star.

One of the commonest ranks seen in photographs was that of RNR sub-lieutenant, since hundreds of men of this rank were created by commissioning officers from the Merchant Navy into the service. RNR officers had a cap badge similar to that worn by RN officers, except that the letters ‘RNR’ appeared between the crown and the anchor. These letters can often be seen with a lens. The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNRV) was a reservist force for men without significant seagoing experience. Seamen in this service bore the letters ‘RNRV’ on their cap tallies. Officers, however, displayed their rank by wavy-line cuff stripes, on their cuffs consisting of intertwining gold braid. The number of stripes to indicate rank was the same as in the Royal Navy proper, but the circular loop was replaced by a six-pointed star. One of the commonest ranks seen in photographs was that of RNR sub-lieutenant, since hundreds of men of this rank were created by commissioning officers from the Merchant Navy into the service. RNR officers had a cap badge similar to that worn by RN officers, except that the letters ‘RNR’ appeared between the crown and the anchor. These letters can often be seen with a lens. The Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNRV) was a reservist force for men