

The Quatrefoil – The Real Origins

BLUF: In the United States Marine Corps, the term quatrefoil refers to a four-pointed decoration worn on the top of a warrant or commissioned Marine officer's dress and service caps. According to tradition, the design dates to the time Marines served on sailing ships. The quatrefoil served as an identifying mark to protect Marine officers from friendly fire from the riggings and fighting tops. However, this tradition does not hold up when faced with facts about the Marine Corps during the 19th century.

SETTING THE STAGE: From the earliest days of the Marine Corps, their purpose was to serve onboard ships as sea soldiers. The Marines protected the ship, the captain, and the supplies aboard the ship. The Marines functioned as the main fighting element of a shore party when needed to protect American interests abroad. Their multifaceted role made the Marines invaluable.

Tradition holds that the color blue was chosen for the Corps' naval ties. The red trim is a gesture to the Marines who served aboard the *Bonhomme Richard*, the famous Revolutionary War ship commissioned by the French and captained by John Paul Jones. The first mention in government circles of Marine Corps fashion comes from John Adams' diary from 1779. He states, *"After dinner I walked out with Captains Jones and (Pierre) Landais to see Jones's Marines dressed in the English uniforms, red and white ... You see the character of the man in his uniform, and that of his officers and Marines, variant from the uniform established by Congress—golden buttonholes for himself, two epaulettes (sp); Marines in red and white instead of green. Eccentricities and irregularities are to be expected from him—they are in his character, they are visible in his eyes."* This passage shows that the Marine leaders always wanted their men to be distinguished and distinctive in their dress, which usually dictated Marine attire in its first 100 years of service.

Many traditions in the dress of the Marines have been passed down from these earlier times. Nevertheless, some practices showed more function than style. With the Marines manning their ships' riggings and fighting tops during a battle, they could deliver deadly fire upon the enemy. However, the Marine officers led from the main deck, many times becoming entangled in the fighting. To protect these officers from being mistaken for enemy forces, legend has it that they place a piece of knotted rope on the top of their covers. The tradition of the quatrefoil was born in this tale. There are, however, a couple of problems that get in the way of the story.

THE STORY: Although the quatrefoil yarn is alluring, it has no basis. It was a tactical practice to place some Marines on the fighting tops to snipe at an enemy ship's gunners and officers before the ships closed to boarding distance. However, when a boarding party was sent aboard an enemy vessel, all firing from the tops ceased for fear of hitting friendlies. Once an enemy ship was close enough to board, the Marines would be brought from the tops and formed along the gunwales to repel boarders. Further, a Marine officer's hat was a "fore and aft" design with no flat surface to put a rope on. Also, there is no way a Marine sharpshooter in the rigging could see a quatrefoil from 60 to 70 feet away during the smoke of battle.

The first official use of the quatrefoil on the covers of Marine officers was prescribed in the uniform regulations of the late 1850s. The quatrefoil was the fashionable military style of the era. Many nations were adopting French military styles due to the French army's success in the Italian War of 1859–1861. The French adopted the quatrefoil in the early 1850s, along with the kepi headgear. There is no documentation as to the practical purpose of a quatrefoil design. More often than not, the glamour of one's uniform had to match the romanticism of war during the 19th century.

The Marine quatrefoil is an interwoven braid in the shape of a cross of figure eights found on top of the Marine officers' barracks covers. This pattern continued, transitioning from the top of the fatigue cap to the top of the Marine Officer's Service and Dress covers. The use of the quatrefoil design still appears in the current Marine Corps uniform regulations.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the real purpose of the quatrefoil in the Marine Corps uniform?
2. Why do Marines take great pride in the traditions of their uniforms?
3. What role did foreign influence have on the development of Marine Corps uniforms?

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