

## Chapter 9H

# SA Army uniform

Uniform is a surprisingly old, although the cost and dress code involved often meant it was not universally supplied or procured. As the very word suggests, uniform is meant to make soldiers look alike. Uniform, however, was seldom uniform, with different ranks often being distinguishable dress rather than insignia. A highpoint in this trend was seen in the European Middle Ages when knights typically wore similar armour – which distinguished them from the peasants in the infantry, but were in turn individualised by their coats of arms – a family insignia embroidered onto their surcoats – the cloth they wore over their mail and armour to keep it cool from the sun and replicated on their shields.

Rank differentiated uniform still persists in some militaries with separate uniform for officers and men. Others are more egalitarian for societal reasons or because of budget. In combat dress common sense quickly prevailed after the outbreak of World War One (WW1, 1914-1918/9) when the predation of sharpshooters quickly convinced officers to dress like their men.

International comparison suggests the SA Army is rather poor in uniform, with most soldiers issued combat dress only. Longer serving soldiers will also be issued service dress, the military equivalent of the lounge suit and “mess dress”, the armed forces’ tuxedo. In most NATO militaries all soldiers are issued service and combat dress. The US Army has three patterns of service dress: A “Classic” pattern in AG344 (Army Green, Share 344), one in blue and one white. A tan uniform wore up to the 1980s have been discontinued. The British Army, in light of the cost of specially-impregnated combat dress, issue soldiers a drab working dress for wear in offices, unit lines and training. (Combat dress is often loosely cut for comfortable wear in the field. It is often impregnated with chemicals that help hide the wearer’s infrared signature and provide some protection against chemical weapons attack. As a result, it is often not meant to be ironed). The result is a soldier who looks sloppy in appearance. Working dress, by contrast, is not meant for field wear and can thus be smart, starched and ironed. The Army currently lacks a working dress similar to naval “blues”.

### **What is the SA Army’s current dress code?**

Dress 1	Kalahari sand parade dress
Dress 1A	Kalahari sand parade dress (with medals and gloves)
Dress 1 B	Kalahari sand parade dress (with medals)
Dress 2	Kalahari sand office dress (long-sleeve shirt & tie)
Dress 3	
Dress 4	Kalahari sand office dress (short-sleeve, open collar)

Dress 5  
Dress 6  
Dress 7  
Dress 8  
Dress 9            Combat dress

### **Where does the SA Army's combat dress come from?**

Loose-fitting and comfortable combat dress is a relatively new development in military uniform, dating to the 1930s. Printing a camouflage pattern onto the cloth used for this uniform is an even more recent development, dating to the 1940s. Up to 1964 the South African military largely wore uniforms of British design. The dominant influence on the design of British Commonwealth uniform in the run-up to World War Two (WW2, 1937/9-1945) was lessons learned from WW1 and the expected demands of mechanisation. This led to the introduction of the Battledress uniform as the standard temperate uniform of the British Commonwealth, in place of the Field Service Uniform (FSU, tunic and tie for officers) worn during WW1. The FSU survives as Dress 1 in the SA National Defence Force. In addition, the Union Defence Force (UDF) adopted a canvas bush warfare uniform for use in warmer climates, the SA National Museum of Military History (SANMMH) notes in an information sheet placed next to a uniform exhibit. The uniform was worn by UDF troops in Kenya and during the Ethiopian campaign.

The replacement of the FSU as field dress was in part motivated by the “smartening up” of the uniform between the wars, so that it had become useless in its original role. One can also argue that it reflected Edwardian dress sense and sensibilities which placed a premium on appearance and a low priority on practicality or comfort. The dual influences of “smartening up” and mechanisation led to the design of a series of experimental uniforms. These were then tested and the preferred design was designated Battledress in 1938. The basic components of this uniform are a loosely-cut waist-length serge blouse and a pair of matching trousers. This uniform was first issued to South African troops in Egypt in September 1941. By the middle of 1943, Battledress was accepted as the UDF's winter dress. It remained the UDF and SADF's winter uniform until replaced by the whipcord combat dress uniform in 1964.

The utility of the latter was, however, undermined by the use of the uniform for ceremonial parades. This emphasised smartness at the expense of comfort and looseness, two prerequisites for a successful combat uniform, the SANMMH says. The WW2 bush warfare uniform was withdrawn as warm weather dress and replaced with a drab veld drill uniform that included short trousers. The uniform had originally been intended for wear in unit lines or base areas and had been considered, on medical grounds, as unsuitable for field dress even before WW2.

### Pattern 1965 combat dress uniform

The SANMMH notes that a decision was taken in the early 1960s to replace the SA Army's summer uniform, consisting of a bush jacket and trousers and the winter field dress (Battledress) with a standardised combat dress uniform. This whipcord uniform was similar to Battledress in style and weight and was first issued in 1965, under the name "new style Battledress." In 1965 the English nomenclature was changed to combat dress, reflecting an American influence prevalent at the time. The Afrikaans "*gevegsdrag*" remained unchanged. (*Gevegsdrag* translates with equal ease as battledress or combat dress.)

"Unfortunately, this change had the same effect as the smartening up of the FSU which had taken place between 1919 and 1838, making combat dress useless a field uniform," the SANMMH laments. "The main result at this attempt at standardisation was that South African soldiers did not have a uniform which was suitable for either hot or cold weather." This situation was aggravated, the SANMMH says, by the use of the uniform as ceremonial dress, and in respects it began to assume the role and functions of service dress. This was reinforced by issuing Reserve personnel service dress whipcord light shade trousers to be worn with the combat dress jacket. This combination was designated service dress.

The Pattern 1965 uniform consisted of a combat jacket, combat trousers and a khaki polyester/cotton shirt; combat boots and worsted socks or shoes with drab veld socks. The Pattern 1963 Ground Troops Helmet, a beret or service dress caps were worn with this uniform.

### Nutria: Pattern 1971 and Pattern 1974 field dress

The failings of this dress soon led to a new project to design a field uniform suitable for warm and cold conditions, one that allowed the soldier to add or remove items of clothing as required by changing environmental conditions. The design team made use of British and American experience in field uniform design and the result was a baggy field dress in "nutria", issued for the first time on a large scale to the 1971 national service intake.

The prototype was based on the British Pattern 1953 and US Model 1951 combat dress and was also green in colour. It was the nutria uniform that was introduced into service in 1971 and the first pattern would be worn until 1975 when it was replaced by a second pattern. This change was preceded by the extensive testing of a green version of the uniform in Angola in 1975, the SANMMH says.

Pattern 1974 field dress was introduced to replace Pattern 1971 because of production problems with the latter. Also, although practical, the sloping position of pockets, to ease access and extraction of items carried therein, caused problems when troops sowed on nametapes and badges as the result looked far from smart.

Nutria field dress quickly became known as “browns” and was worn until the early 1990s when it increasingly became used as working dress and for ceremonial purposes. “This led to nutria field uniform items being made or altered to fit better. These alternatives have destroyed the loose fit which is an essential part of any combat uniform design,” the SANMMH says.

The uniform consisted of combat trousers, a several types of combat jacket, long and short-sleeved shirts, worn open at the collar, a sun hat and boots with drab veld socks. This was worn with a helmet, beret or service cap. In field conditions the very practical sun hat was the most common headgear.

#### Paratrooper Jump Smock, Pattern 1988

The Pattern 1988 Paratrooper Jump Smock was developed for wear during field operations and parachuting. The shoulders, elbows, crotch strap and lower portions of the pockets were reinforced with canvas to protect the wearer from friction caused by parachute harnesses while jumping. “The jump smock has hardly ever been used for its intended purpose. It is now worn as part of the paratroopers’ ‘step-out dress’.”

#### Project Abund

The current combat dress was introduced in July 1993 as part of Project Abund, which aimed to provide soldiers better protection in all weather conditions. A second pattern, which migrated rank insignia from shoulder straps and arm patches to the collar, followed in January 1998.

Then-Chief of the SA Army, LTG Georg Meiring announced the introduction of the camouflage uniform per statement on July 2, 1993. “It is with pleasure that I can today announce that the SA Army is exchanging its old and well-known nutria field dress – commonly known as “browns” for a new high-tech camouflage uniform. This was not a sudden decision. As early as 1988 we recognised that the nutria uniform, as well as a number of other items of equipment, would have to be restudied in terms of costs, effectiveness, operational suitability and terrain.” He continued: “The development of the nutria field dress was started in 1964 [prior to which the SADF and UDF had worn various patterns of British-style battledress] and the first nutria uniforms were issued in 1971. This uniform was designed primarily for use in operations in the then South West Africa and Angola. In that terrain and under those conditions it served us well. Approval was first given to investigate the possibility of a camouflage uniform early in the 1980s, but it was only in 1988 that the Army decided it would need a uniform suitable for the unique conditions in South Africa itself.”

This decision may have been influenced by the then global trend towards camouflage (the US military adopted “woodland” camouflage in 1983 in place of its plain green Vietnam-era fatigues; the British adopted a disruptive pattern material [DPM] uniform slightly earlier; the Germans, Russians and French followed suit in the early 1990s). The decision may have been further influenced by the SA Police (SAP) adopting a camouflage uniform for its counterinsurgency units in the late 1970s – the Special Task Force still wears it today – and the adoption of camouflage by the Transkei (TDF) and Ciskei defence forces (CDF). The SADF’s Special Forces also wore camouflage in the early 1980s – reminiscent of the SAP’s – while the only SA Army unit allowed camouflage was the Namibia-based 32 Battalion. It wore a camouflage beret (SAP-style) with its nutria uniform in base and wore an attractive Franco-Portuguese-style “lizard *tenue*” on missions in Angola. The TDF uniform was similar to that of the SAP, primarily green with brown over sand. The CDF uniform was black and dark brown over standard SADF nutria. The Venda Defence Force wore SADF browns and the Bophuthatswana Defence Force wore pale green fatigues.

Meiring explained in his 1993 statement that the Abund uniform had to be designed along the following criteria: It had to be:

- Cost effective,
- An improvement on the nutria uniform,
- Technologically advanced,
- Practical and easy to maintain,
- In line with international trends,
- and afford better protection in the field.

The pattern selected as a result of research conducted by the SA Bureau of Standards and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research consisted of a base and four colours. The pattern, itself, repeats every 101cm in length and 150cm in width. The colours are:

Colour component	Colour name	SABS CKS129 colour number
Base	Thatch Beige	4c
Camouflage	Essen Green	162c
	Pine Green	163c
	Kalahari Brown	144c
	Bark Brown	170c

The Minister of Defence approved the design project on February 18, 1991 and the SA Army General Staff approved the pattern as well as the colour scheme on May 25, 1992. The scheme was published in Government Gazette 14929 on June 28, 1993 as SADF Government Notice 1169.

Meiring added that the uniform not only intended to protect soldiers from the environment but also from observation in visual, infrared, thermal and false-colour spectrums. “For this purpose all the different colours in the South African environment were fed into a computer which then designed a camouflage pattern unique to this country’s terrain. It offers the soldier excellent protection from visual observation because it blends into the surrounding environment.

Meiring explained that the uniform was, in part, adopted as a cost-saving measure. He said the Army had been about to order more nutria uniforms. “It was therefore more cost effective to introduce the uniform now. To have done otherwise would have been financially irresponsible.” At the time, the camouflage uniform cost R72.35 more per set than the nutria uniform, which Meiring adjudged acceptable in light of inflation and the modernity of the newer uniform.

In 1998 the SA Army’s camouflage cloth cost R22 per 50 square metres and a set of clothes cost R1430. A set of clothing consists of two trousers, three shirts, one jacket, one garrison cap, a bush hat and a helmet cover. Soldiers are further issued with one set of thermal underwear, four pairs of socks, one web belt, two PT shorts, two T-shirts and one pair of running shoes.

The design of the uniform was preceded by an anthropometric survey of the military to determine a representative profile of personnel. The developers were then tasked with limiting the number of sizes per clothing item while allowing an acceptable fit. In the end 14 shirt sizes and 48 trouser sizes were determined for men.

Prior to 1984 women wore men’s field dress. The difference between male and female dress lay in the cut and the substitution of the shirts for blouses. Camouflage female field dress was introduced in 1994 and improved on the 1984 Nutria pattern. Neither dress was ever overly popular with women and the Abund dress is now unisex.

Unlike the nutria uniform, the wearing of the Abund camouflage fatigues is restricted by law. SADF Government Notice 1169, published on June 28, 1993 in Government Gazette 14929, restricts the wear of the uniform to members of the SANDF, the Reserves, an auxiliary or a voluntary nursing service in terms of section 114(1)(a) of the Defence Act 44 of 1957. Meiring said this was done as there was (and is) no restriction on the wear of the nutria dress, which from the 1990s onwards came to be worn at social and sporting events. It was also worn by criminals posing as soldiers and brought the military into increasing disrepute. “This field dress was never protected by law. Under the Defence Act it is only a crime to pose as a member of the Army. There was no enforceable law to prevent people from wearing it.” As further protection, uniform garments are marked as belonging to the SA Government and can therefore never be legally sold.

#### Head cover

- Kevlar helmet Loan equipment, controlled item
- Helmet cover, camouflage Loan equipment, controlled item

- Face shield
  - Garrison cap
  - Bush hat
  - Beret
  - Balaclava
- Loan equipment, controlled item

#### Underclothes

- Thermal vest, short-sleeve
- Thermal vet, long-sleeve
- Thermal under-trousers
- Underpants

#### Trousers

- Combat trousers, Abund
  - Rain/cold weather over-trousers
- Loan equipment, controlled item

#### Shirts

- Combat shirt
- Shirt, short-sleeve
- Shirt, long-sleeve

#### Jackets, Cold/Rain weather

- Combat jacket
  - Jacket, cold/rainy weather
  - Lining for jacket, cold/rainy weather
- Loan equipment, controlled item  
Loan equipment, controlled item

#### Working dress

- Overall trousers
- Overall jacket
- Body warmer

#### PT Dress

- Tracksuit trousers
- Tracksuit jacket
- PT shorts, black
- PT vest, black

#### Socks

- Socks, combat
- Socks, long
- Socks, tubular

### Boots

- Boots combat
- Shoes, service dress
- Shoes, PT

### Belts

- Stable belt
- Trouser belt

### Gloves

- Gloves, leather, outer
- Gloves, woollen knit, inner

### Personal equipment

- Whistle
- Whistle lanyard
- ID holder
- Toiletry bag
- Soap dish
- Towels
- Penknife with lanyard
- Knife, fork and spoon set
- Dixie
- Water bottles, 2litre
- Sowing kit
- Rope, 15m x 5mm
- Kit bag
- Ground sheet
- Shelter sheet
- Poncho
- Rain coat

### Combat equipment

- |                          |                                 |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Backpack               | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Carry frame            | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Battle jacket          | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Torch                  | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Spade/Pick             | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Mosquito net           | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Gas stove              | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Mine-markers           | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Thermal camouflage net | Loan equipment, controlled item |
| • Camouflage cream       | Loan equipment, controlled item |



- Sleeping bag Loan equipment, controlled item
- Shelter Loan equipment, controlled item
- Operational attaché case Loan equipment, controlled item