

New Changes for the Military Police Brassard

By Mr. Andy Watson

The brassard, the ever-present symbol of the military police Soldier, has gone through many changes. In keeping with uniform styles adapted for practical use in different climates, the newest official version of the brassard has a hook-and-loop backing and is foliage-green, rectangular-shaped, and embroidered. Lettering consists of “MP” for military police or “CID” for Criminal Investigation Division. Both sets of letters are sewn with black thread. Unlike other recent patterns, the brassard will not wrinkle in extreme temperature ranges and will retain its visibility.

Origins

A symbol for instant recognition, the brassard (armband), comes from the French term for medieval armor. The metal covering for the arm was often referred to as the *brassart* or *brassard*. As armies advanced in technology and no longer used armor, newer symbols such as cloth ribbons or sashes retained the same name. By the late 19th Century, the brassard was made with cloth. In 1892, the U.S. Army officially adopted a brassard with a red cross for all privates in the Hospital Corps. During the Spanish-American War, use of the brassard by medical personnel expanded—other troops also favored brassards to denote their occupations. However, the use of the brassard by military police did not occur until years later.

After successful campaigns during the war in the Philippines, Army leadership began to realize the emerging importance of provost troops. By 1900, although not permanent, Soldiers performing policing tasks were termed “military police.” Later, they would have a new symbol of identification and distinction, first officially mentioned in U.S. Army Field Service regulations.¹

“Officers and enlisted men, when actually performing the duty of military police, will wear a blue brassard on the left arm, half way between the elbow and shoulder, bearing the letters ‘MP’ in white.”

World War I

As the Army expanded to meet the demands of combat during World War I, the role of military police also increased. Military police were needed for law enforcement operations, including a new mission—circulation control. Wearing the brassard on duty gave Soldiers a symbol of authority. The brassard was also more visible to motorized traffic in an age before reflective clothing. The negatives of brassard wear included harmful attention by unsavory Soldiers, snipers, and artillery observers.

Evolution of the Military Police Brassard



Prominent letters and periods in the abbreviation appear on this World War I brassard.



A World War I Soldier wears a military police brassard consisting of a black or dark blue band with red letters.



Shown is a World War I era provost guard brassard with white letters over a narrow red band.



As the Military Police Corps grew to more than 200,000 during World War II, so did the need for brassards. A defense seamstress shows a few of the brassards she made for the war effort.



Shown is a custom-made brassard for the China-Burma-India theater during World War II. The band is silk, and the insignia is embroidered.



A 1st Division military police Soldier awaits embarkation shortly before the Normandy Invasion, June 1944.

While many units adopted a standard dark blue, rectangular cloth with the letters “MP” in white, there were variations. Red cloth with white letters and alternate abbreviations were also used, including “PG” for provost guard, “PM” for provost marshal, and “APM” for assistant provost marshal. Letters were solid or outlined and were usually created by local manufacturers (in France or the United States). The brassards were generally wrapped around the arm and pinned to the sleeve, although buttons and elastic bands were also used. In Europe, some military police brassards began featuring red letters on a black or dark blue band. This style closely resembled the British military police brassards of the time and may have been adopted for easy recognition by Allied forces or due to their availability. Despite similarities, U.S. military police wore brassards on their left arms while British military police wore them on the right, allowing for better visibility in traffic control and identification of military police riding in vehicles. Keep in mind that the two countries drive on opposite sides of the road, thus the brassard placement is reversed. Consequently, regulations for the red-lettered brassard soon appeared.

“Members of the MP, when actually performing the duties of military police, will wear a blue brassard on the left arm, halfway between the elbow and shoulder, with the letters ‘MP’ in red.”²

Some units adopted the red lettering; others continued to use white. Unlike the military police of the time, Soldiers in the Criminal Investigation Division were not to wear the brassard unless specifically ordered.

World War II

Although there had been many variations, an age of consistency for the brassard began in the 1930s. With the adoption of the Military Police Corps as a separate Army branch in 1941, earlier symbols such as the brassard gained new importance. Although used temporarily between World War I and World War II, the dark blue rectangular band with white felt letters was adopted as the standard. Whether made from wool, felt, or other material or fastened with pins, snaps, or crossed-pistol insignia, the new brassard pattern remained in use until the 1960s.

Insignia Change

Beginning in the early 1950s, some military police units started to sport a new brassard. The shape was different from the rectangle and featured a raised portion that allowed the unit shoulder sleeve insignia or patch to fit above the lettering. The earliest examples of this design date back to 1951. However, recognition of this change did not come until October 1963.³ A proliferation of designs and material used for brassards soon followed. From the early 1960s through 2004, brassards mirrored the almost countless variations of unit patches in the Army.

Environmental conditions also changed the favored material for use in brassards. Military police serving worldwide have contended with the cold of Europe and Alaska, the heat of

Vietnam and Iraq, and both extremes in Korea and Afghanistan. Brassards made of vinyl, canvas, leather, and other materials have been worn, with some standing up to the temperature extremes better than others. Some brassards even had clear plastic sewn over the unit patch to combat rough use. With unit esprit de corps and recognition on the line, the “coolness” factor could not be ignored.

2004–2007

The U.S. Army adopted the Army Combat Uniform (ACU) in 2004, prompting a change for the brassard. The ACU relies on hook-and-loop attachments for unit patches. Similarly, the new design for the brassard would also rely on the hook and loop for attachment. The brassard was reduced in size, reverted to the rectangular shape, and placed above the unit patch. At first, these interim brassards were made of vinyl and used reflective material. The brassards are still in use today, but do not withstand temperature extremes very well or, in many cases, do not fit the patch area. It has been recommended that the use of vinyl brassards be discontinued in favor of the embroidered patch design. Finally, the newest embroidered version of the brassard is an all-area item, allowing wear in both field and garrison areas. Brassards that have colors reversed for the designation of garrison and field locations are now obsolete.

Endnotes:

¹Army Field Service Regulations, U.S. Army, 1914.

²Provost Marshal General’s Department Regulation, American Expeditionary Forces, 9 December 1917.

³Army Regulation 670-1, *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia*, October 1963.

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Shown is an example of an early version of the brassard that allowed for a unit patch. This patch is from the Military Police Highway Patrol in Germany in the 1950s.



This brassard can be read like a road map, with the name, unit, position, and English and Korean text all prominently featured.

The newer version of the brassard, made of reflective vinyl material, can warp in extreme climates.



Shown is the newest, officially approved, embroidered military police brassard.