

## U.S. Navy Supply Corps Shoulder Insignia

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The history of the Navy Supply Corps Officer ancestors' uniforms reaches back to the Revolutionary War's Continental Navy Pursers (1775-1783) who had no official uniform. If they did wear a dark blue jacket, breeches, naval buttons, a three-corner hat and a sword, cutlass, or dirk like other Continental Navy and British Officers, they were not allowed to wear epaulettes on their shoulders. Only Navy Line officers wore shoulder epaulettes, even if they were not officially authorized by the Continental Congress. Of course, Captain John Paul Jones wore epaulettes. He wore one on each shoulder as a Commodore in charge of a squadron. While in France, John Adams made a diary entry on 13 May 1779 about Captain Jones being ambitious and intriguing, and wearing two epaulettes on his uniform, which were not approved. Mr. Adams noted that Captain Jones' Navy and Marine Officers wore irregular uniforms, too. This would include Captain Jones' trusted Purser.

Congress established the new United States Navy in 1794 under President George Washington, and Pursers were still not authorized to wear shoulder insignia on their uniforms. In 1847, the relative rank of senior Pursers regarding Line officers changed, and a Secretary of the Navy uniform change authorized Pursers to finally wear shoulder straps and epaulettes.

In general, shoulder straps were about 1- 1 1/2 inches wide by 4 inches long and made by hand in small quantities in the early years of Pursers. As time went on through the Civil War and after, manufacturers could make larger batches of straps. Straps were attached to each shoulder fore and aft with string ties, pins, hooks, clamps, or they were sewn on. Epaulettes

were much larger and heavier gold bullion insignia worn horizontally on the shoulder, usually with a metal securing device, and worn on dress uniforms. Variations in straps and epaulettes were common among makers primarily in the US, but also Great Britain, France, and sometimes Asia, and not always exacting to regulation.

From 1847-1852 Pursers wore straps and epaulettes with silver Old English style letters "PD" on them, which stood for "Purser Department." On the left in Image 1 is an example of a Purser Department shoulder strap. In September 1852, a Navy General Order changed the PD to a silver sprig of three oak leaves with two acorns on the same side of the stem, like the oak leaf insignia Supply Corps Officers wear today. An example of Purser epaulettes with the oak leaf in the center of a solid gold crescent is on the right in Image 1. Originally, the epaulettes shown only had the silver oak leaf in the center from 1852 until 1869, but in this case the officer got promoted, and probably added two silver-embroidered oak leaf rank insignia on each epaulette around 1869. The early Purser epaulettes had a "metal" oak leaf, which eventually gave way to embroidered

oak leaf insignia. Included in Image 1 is an embroidered sew on PD round cap badge worn 1847-1852, and an Oak Leaf and Wreath round cap badge worn 1852-1863.

In 1860, just prior to the Civil War, Congress approved and changed the title of Purser to Paymaster. According to regulation, Paymaster shoulder straps had a silver-embroidered oak leaf with two acorns in the center of the strap, and although epaulettes were not authorized during the Civil War, they were sometimes worn in any case. Image 2 shows examples from left to right of a Civil War 1861 to 1863 strap for an Assistant Paymaster who had not earned their oak leaf yet;

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Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

an 1864 Assistant Paymaster's straps with a silver oak leaf between gold bars; and a senior Confederate Navy Paymaster strap with olive leaves on a dark green cloth background. A Paymaster's Oak Leaf and Wreath round cap badge of the newer 1863-1867 Civil War style are in the lower left of Image 2. Navy Uniform Regulations in 1866 changed the officer cap badge to the standard eagle on a shield over crossed anchors. The cap badges were always embroidered until the 1930's when metal cap badges were introduced, and the eagle's head still faced to its left. In 1941, the cap badge was sometimes embroidered, but usually metal, with the eagle's head facing to its right as it is today.

After the Civil War, Paymasters, including those of the Pay Corps that the Congress established in 1870, continued to wear an embroidered silver oak leaf on their shoulder straps and epaulettes. Navy uniform regulations added a third acorn in 1886 and changed the color of the oak leaf to gold for Assistant Paymasters. Image 3, from left to right, shows an example of a 1886-1889 Passed Assistant Paymaster strap with two silver bars; a New Jersey Naval Militia shoulder strap for a Lieutenant Junior Grade officer from the early 1900s; a 2-star rear admiral strap worn by Pay Corps Rear Admiral Eustace Rogers, the Chief, Bureau of Supplies and Accounts and Paymaster General from 1906-1910; an Assistant Paymaster epaulette from the period 1869-1883; and Pay Inspector epaulettes from the 1890s on the far right. Also shown in Image 3, is a circa 1890 officer's round cap.

In 1899, shoulder marks which we call shoulder boards today, replaced shoulder straps for all officers except admirals

and the state Naval Militias. Both wore the older style shoulder straps until 1912. Image 4, from left to right, shows a few examples of shoulder marks from 1899-1918 starting with a Pay Corps Lieutenant, Ensign, and Naval Militia Ensign with the broken white cloth. The Naval Militia was the forerunner of the Navy Reserve. Navy Staff Corps officers wore different color cloth on their shoulder marks and around their blue uniform gold sleeve stripes. The Pay Corps cloth color was white as shown. As with the history of the Navy, metal insignia on cloth shoulder straps replaced all old-style shoulder straps and marks from mid-1912 for officers until about mid-1913. On the right in Image 4 is an example of a Pay Director Captain's cloth strap with a silver eagle and oak leaf, while a warrant Paymaster's Clerk would just wear the metal gold oak leaf shown on a cloth strap. Navy warrant officer metal rank insignia with the blue break did not come into use until 1951. There is a WW1 era cap insignia in Image 4 below the shoulder marks.

In 1919 and the establishment of the Navy Supply Corps, our shoulder boards began to look like our modern insignia with a few exceptions. Examples from left to right in Image 5 show circa 1919 Supply Corps ensign flat shoulder boards where the oak leaf is gold; WW2 Lieutenant Junior Grade gray shoulder boards worn from 1943-1946; WW2 gray Chief Pay Clerk's shoulder boards without acorns; and a WW2 Pay Clerk's shoulder boards without acorns. Two versions of the pre-WW2 officer's cap insignia are shown to the far left in Image 5, and at the far right is an embroidered WW2 cap insignia with the eagle's head facing right like today.

Finally, we enter the era of the modern Supply Corps shoulder insignia. Examples shown in Image 6 from left to right

*Navy uniform regulations added a third acorn in 1886.*



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

include a man's shoulder board with an unusual gold "metal" oak leaf from the late 1940s, instead of the common embroidered oak leaf; women's Lieu-tenant Junior Grade sew on shoulder boards from the 1980s which are a bit smaller than the men's board; a set of soft shoulder boards worn by men and women; and post-WW2 Rear Admiral two-star shoulder boards. Image 6 also shows a women's Commander or Captain embroidered officer cap insignia for a "bucket" hat, now retired since 2018, and a subdued officer garrison cap insignia.

One day in late 1981, RADM Donald Wilson was in his office at the Navy Exchange Command in Brooklyn, NY. There were boxes and stacks of shoulder boards, aiguillettes, collar devices, and more from all different manufacturers, new and used, surrounding his desk. Most came from the office storage closet and were searched before officer promotion ceremonies. We were talking and he handed me a set of two-star Supply Corps boards and said, "You'll

never see this again". He told me he was the very last U.S. Navy Captain promoted directly to two-star. Captains would be promoted to one-star Commodore in the future. I was his aide and a lieutenant at the time, so I put the boards away. Now, after thinking more about it, he did predict the future. S. Mars, Inc. of New York made the shoulder

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boards, and the company had long been out of business by 1981. These were not the boards he wore, but they were from him.

The first female Supply Corps Officers were WW2 WAVES that attended one of the Naval Reserve Midshipmen's Schools beginning in 1942. Female midshipmen were commissioned after

"indoctrination" training, and some went on to study supplies and accounts as Supply Corps Officers. They wore blues, whites, and striped cord uniforms, with officer sleeve stripes and metal rank and oak leaf insignia. Only female officers in the Navy Nurse Corps from 1942-1948 wore shoulder boards. It was not until 1978 that all female Navy officers had uniforms with shoulder boards, including female Supply Corps Officers.

Numerous Navy Uniform Regulations changed shoulder boards for male and female officers since the beginning of the Supply Corps in 1919. Just a few of the changes involved: flat to curved, board size, stripe size, strap on, slip on, sew on varieties, color, button design, hard and soft, fabric types, natural and synthetic threads, oak leaf design and color, square or crimped board ends, and so on. In any case, changes are the Navy's way.

Our distinctive uniform shoulder insignia with the letters PD, white cloth around gold stripes, and the three-sprig oak leaf design are an important part of Navy Supply Corps history. 