

THE HISTORY OF THE VFW CAP

By Dan West

My research of the "Overseas Cap" comes mostly from old "Stars & Stripes" news articles. The "Overseas Cap" was "Officially adopted as part of the uniform for officers, soldiers, and other uniformed members of the A.E.F." (American Expeditionary Force) in February of 1918. "When issued the 'overseas cap,' the service member was expected to turn in their regulation hat" (known as the Campaign Hat also known as the Smokey the Bear Hat). This hat is currently worn by Marine Drill Instructors and Army Drill Sergeants.

From what I can tell, the overseas cap was only adopted after American Forces who were serving in the trenches discovered that their campaign hat was ill suited for the terrain and weather, and "liberated" French caps for use in the trenches. The French caps were an early version of the overseas cap and kept a soldier's head warm, dry, and could be worn under a helmet or easily stuffed into a pocket. Soon, entire units had unofficially adopted the headgear and it was not too much longer that the practicality of the overseas cap was made an official part of the uniform while stationed overseas in the combat theater of operations.

Reports in the "Stars & Stripes" show a difference of opinion over the overseas cap as compared to the "Campaign Hat" listing the pro's and con's of each. There were also orders issued to prevent units from decorating their overseas caps with unit crests and ranks of insignia, it seems to have not worked because the Marines totally ignored the orders and put their "Sacred Emblem" the Eagle, Globe and Anchor on the cap. No order from war department was going to change that and Army units followed the example of the Marines.

Soon after, the Army did issue caps with different color piping with each color representing infantry, artillery, etc.

Sometime later, and I have not been able to confirm this, if it is not fact then it should be, a General and one of his Colonels were walking on a stateside base and the General saw several soldiers wearing the overseas cap which was not authorized for wear stateside at the time. He told the Colonel to "Put those soldiers on report and have them remove that cap." The Colonel turned to the General and said "General you tell them, the unit crest in those caps tell me those boys served in the trenches at Chateau Thierry and thank God for them" and thus, America's first decoration for war time service, the overseas cap was born.

I checked with the National VFW, even going to National Headquarters several years ago and researching through the archives to find the first use of the cap and when it was officially adopted. I had several people from National assist me with this and we could not find any mention of the overseas cap being officially adopted at a National Convention. I am sure it exists as the records at National VFW are extensive.

Photographic records show National CIC Hartung (1915-16) wearing an overseas cap that appears to be a military overseas cap as the Cross of Malta is on the wrong side and the letters VFW are not on it and the Post number is in the center of the fold. It appears to be a picture taken later as America did not enter the war until April of 1917 and troops did not arrive in France until late 1917.

Another photograph shows an overseas cap is worn by CIC Carver (1928-29) and this one is a military overseas cap and appears to be an official military photo as he is in his military uniform.

Photographs indicate that sometime in the late 30's, it appears the transformation from the traditional "Barracks Hat" to the "Overseas Cap" was made by the VFW.

The first catalog of the VFW in 1949 has them listed as the official headgear of the VFW as it was "A war veteran's cap and the VFW is a war veteran's organization."

Today, anyone wearing the overseas cap is synonymous with military service which is why almost all the Veteran Service Organizations have adopted it. You can wear a ball cap that says Veteran on it but only the overseas cap advertises Veteran at any angle, front, side and back. It is a unique emblem of patriotic service to America that is easily recognized by all.