

The slouch hat: Trademark of the Australian Army



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Perhaps no other object has been so widely associated with Australian identities as the 'slouch' or 'digger' hat.

Introduced into Australian military service in the second half of the 19th century, the hat was suited to the local climate and the rigours of military use. In later years it was hoisted on mastheads by victorious troops in place of a flag. More recently it has graced women's fashions and adorned the heads of athletes and marching squads.

The slouch hat's mark in history is rooted in Australia's introduction to modern warfare at Gallipoli and the reputation established by the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) on the Western Front. From that time the simple felt hat, with its side turned up, was an emblem of the courage of the Australian digger, and it became a national symbol. Although commonly believed to be uniquely Australian, similar styles of hat were adopted by many other countries, including New Zealand, United States, India and even Germany.

The khaki hat first became part of an Australian military uniform in 1885, when it was chosen for the newly-formed Victorian Mounted Rifles by the commanding officer, Colonel Tom Price. Years later, F.D. Price, his youngest son, a former member of the unit and a veteran of the Boer War, related the origin of the hat to his father's experience in Burma, where native police wore similar head-dress.

The hat featured a high-domed crown and narrow brim. The right side of the brim was turned up and held in position by a cord attached to a hook which protruded from a gilt lion's head boss, fastened high on the side of the crown. It has been suggested that the right side was looped up to cater for the rifle drill of the day and to make it easier for marching troops to perform the 'eyes right' command in parades. The hat included a two-piece buckled chinstrap and a prominent three-plait of puggaree. Intended for insulation, the puggaree was a traditional Indian head-wrap, adapted by the British for head-dress worn in hot, sunny regions.

The colony of New South Wales was next to adopt a felt hat when it chose this style for its mounted troops. A photograph of officers in the NSW Mounted Infantry at their first encampment (April 1889) shows them wearing the hat with a white folded puggaree and a black cock's feather.

In 1890, local military commanders agreed that all their forces, with the exception of garrison artillery (who wore helmets), should adopt a felt hat. New South Wales was first to act when it introduced a felt hat to go with the newly introduced 'brown-coloured uniform' adopted for the NSW Lancers. This was worn with an indented crown looped-up on the left side and decorated with bird feathers. The remaining colonies soon followed suit. Tasmania chose the Victorian style, while Queensland, South Australia, and West Australia followed New South Wales, looping their hats up on the left side. The slouch hat made its first appearance overseas on the heads of troops fighting in the Boer War, and it added much to the mystique of the Australian bushmen. Around the time the first Commonwealth troops arrived in South Africa, the hat began to be more commonly worn with the left side turned up.

The *Defence Act of 1903* combined the colonial defence forces into a single Australian army. The slouch hat became part of the uniform, worn turned up on the left side, and an array of embellishments was introduced. The hat featured a lower and indented crown. The turned-up side was held in position by means of a hook and eye fastener, and badges were backed with a distinctive cloth rosette in the corps or regimental colour. A stripe of the same colour was later added to the new seven-fold puggaree. The chinstrap, reduced in width, was adjusted by means of a sliding buckle.



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The most striking addition by some units was the adornment of the hat with the plumes of various birds, including black cock, eagle, swan and ostrich. The best known of these, however, particularly after the exploits of the Light Horse in the desert campaigns of the First World War, was the emu feather. It is believed that this plumage was first adopted by the Queensland Mounted Infantry at the time of the shearers' strike in 1891.

The introduction of compulsory military training in 1912 brought further changes. The folded puggaree was replaced with a series of coloured woollen bands, each denoting an arm of service. Metal numerals worn on the front of the hat, half an inch above the band, indicated the wearer's unit. Approval could also be obtained to wear other metal badges on the turned-up side. By 1918, these bands were reduced in width and the numerals centred on the front.

With the raising of the 1st AIF in 1914 further standardisation occurred. Plain khaki hat bands were adopted, along with the Commonwealth Pattern ('rising sun') Badge, first introduced in 1904. This badge was worn by all soldiers except those serving with siege artillery units; as members of the permanent artillery, they were allowed to retain their own design.

Some Queensland Light Horse units embarked for overseas service wearing emu plumes, as did the 3rd Light Horse Brigade. When the latter arrived in Egypt there was such a kerfuffle over the right to wear the plume that the Minister of Defence was forced to intervene. He ruled that all light horse regiments could wear the emu plume provided that no cost was charged to the Commonwealth.

Although the white-striped folded puggaree worn by militia light horse units had been replaced by the plain khaki band, AIF light horse units were later allowed to wear the original; evidence of its use can be seen in period photographs. Approval was later rescinded; directions for AIF units to adopt a plain khaki puggaree soon followed.

While training in Egypt in 1915, the 4th Australian Infantry Brigade, commanded by John Monash, won approval to embellish the left side of their hat bands with their newly-granted colour patches. These were later repositioned on the upper tunic sleeves. In early 1916, having taken command of the 3rd Australian Division, Monash secured approval from General Birdwood for his men to wear the brims of their hats flat and the badge fixed to the front. In late 1917, for reasons of conformity throughout the corps, Monash instructed his division to adopt the same style of wearing the hat as the rest of the Australian forces.

The reorganisation of the Australian military forces in 1922 brought further changes. Coloured hat bands returned and the use of metal numerals ceased. Several years later the Light Horse reverted to the folded khaki puggaree, with central white stripe, which they had originally adopted in 1903. The introduction of the voluntary militia force in 1930 meant more change. A new series of regimental badges and colourful puggarees were introduced; they were to be worn with the specially-designed uniform intended to attract recruits.

Following the call for volunteers in 1939, the 'rising sun' badge and plain khaki coloured band were again chosen as the uniform of the 2nd AIF. This woollen band was slowly replaced by a seven-fold puggaree in khaki cotton. From 1940, both styles of bands could be adorned on the right side with a colour patch identifying the wearer's unit.

After the Second World War there were minor changes to the hat and its continued suitability was questioned, but the slouch style was too deeply entrenched to be replaced. Today, similar felt hats are worn by the all Australian services, but only the Australian Army, to which it remains a symbol of distinction and pride, continues to wear the khaki felt hat with its side turned up.

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