

# A Beginners Guide to the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) Uniform

## Service Dress

I thought I'd have a go at putting together something that might help any ladies interested in portraying ATS members. I think this branch of the women's services is the most challenging as the uniform changed a number of times during the war. I thought I'd start with Service Dress as this is probably more widely worn at 1940's events and most widely incorrect. This is not a comprehensive guide hence the title and I'm sure someone else could do better but I hope it's helpful. Anyway here goes.

Decide what you want.

Do you want a uniform to wear at Forties dances?

Do you want a uniform to complement your partner's at 1940's weekends?

Do you wish to be part of a living history group or display or portray the ATS accurately for the education of others?

All of them are legitimate reasons to put on a uniform but some require more attention to detail than others. Any living history portrayal should be as near to the real thing as absolutely possible, but for all of them it is worth remembering that by wearing the uniform you are (whether intentional or not) representing those ladies who served their country (and in some cases died for their country) during World War 2. Therefore there are many people who find it disrespectful when they see a bodged job. You don't have to be perfect but with a little research you can get quite near to the real thing.

A word of warning. Once in uniform be prepared for any number of comments, criticism and in some cases unwanted and unsolicited attention. People will take photographs of you – by the hundreds. So if you don't like having your picture taken, don't wear a uniform. Others will be downright rude. Even if you are wearing an authentic wartime uniform there will always be someone who 'thinks' they know better and will try to pull holes in it. I was wearing my 1943 dated subaltern's uniform at Pickering last year when a bloke (dressed in jeans and a t-shirt I hasten to add) after studying me for several minutes, came over and told me my pips were upside down! They may well have been but if they were they had been upside down for nearly 70 years! Back to the uniform. The main thing is do your research well and aim to be as authentic as your budget will allow (easier than you might think if you are handy with a needle and thread). Be prepared for criticism and learn how to shrug it off when it comes.

OK, now for your options.

### ORIGINAL UNIFORM

Obviously the best option if you wish to do some serious re-enacting. They come up quite frequently on e-Bay and can be found at militaria fairs/shops, 1940's events and some vintage/antique shops etc. Problem is they can be VERY expensive and the bigger the size you need the more expensive they are. Some people will tell you this is because everyone was smaller in the 1940's. Well, that's not exactly true. Yes people were generally smaller but women were not necessarily all a size 8. The problem is that proportionally there are a greater number of bigger built and taller ladies today than there were 70 years ago so everyone is looking out for the same stuff.

To give you an idea of price. I bought my officer's SD uniform for £150. A bargain! But then I'm 5 feet 3 inches tall with a bust measurement of 33 inches and a waist of 26. Not exactly your average

British female. The cheapest I've seen anything in a larger size recently is £220 and that was a year ago, the most expensive was £385. So if you want original you have to be prepared to pay.

Things to look out for:-

- a. A lot of original stuff can be quite badly moth eaten. If you can see the uniform check for this (and remember moth larvae might still be active).
- b. Check the seam stitching. Old cotton may have rotted if the uniform has been kept somewhere damp and can literally fall apart when worn.
- c. Always try it on if you can. If not get accurate measurements from the dealer. 1940's sizing is more exact than modern day. That is to say if the label reads 30 inch waist that is *exactly* what it measures. They're not like modern off-the-peg clothes which purport to be a 30 inch waist but are really more like 33 inch because that way we all feel thinner than we really are!
- d. Understand the sizing. Sizing is given by the label inside the uniform. For example a size 6 jacket is made for someone 5'3" to 5'5" tall. The bust measurement pretends to be 35 to 36 inches but if you have this bust measurement but not also thin then the jacket won't fit you. If you can't try it on get the shoulder to shoulder measurement to give you a better idea of fit. You can always compare this with one of your own jackets before buying.
- e. Another point to remember is that officers' uniforms were all tailor made and not off-the-peg. This means they come in all weird and wonderful sizes. So to make the point again try it on and if you can't, get as many measurements as you need before taking the plunge. Remember this thing is going to cost you some serious hard earned dosh so you need to make sure it will fit.
- f. Skirts are easier as they are easier to take up if too long and most people know their waist size. However don't get one too short. Uniform skirt lengths altered a little during the war. They started at 3 inch below the knee rising to 1 to 2 inch below the knee as material became scarcer. BUT, God forbid, they were NEVER worn above the knee. Not in the British Army. Oh no!
- g. Watch out for dodgy combinations. Other Ranks (ORs) uniforms may have shown colour variations between jacket and skirt but they would NEVER have been made from different material.
- h. Officers' uniforms were made from fine baratheia wool. ORs were khaki serge but of better quality than the men's kit.

It is worth noting and knowing that the ATS uniform changed, more than once, during the war. Early patterns were a female version of the male SD but tailored to fit a more feminine shape. However, this was redesigned to first of all look more flattering and secondly to save on material as the war progressed. Despite what some people might say by 1945 it was possible to see ATS members wearing any one of three different uniform styles and combinations thereof. You didn't get a new uniform in those days just because the pattern changed. You had to wear it out (unless you were an officer and could afford to buy a new one). As a result it was possible to see ladies of the same unit wearing slightly different SDs depending upon when they joined up. In some respects this makes

things a little easier, but be prepared for questions from those know-it-alls who are out to prove you've got it wrong!

### REPRODUCTION UNIFORM

Now this is a mine field! They range from absolutely appalling, i.e. modern uniform with no changes made to even attempt to look like the real thing, to reasonably OK – modern uniforms re-tailored and badged correctly – to spot on – tailor made from vintage material to an old uniform pattern and badged correctly.

Obviously which you go for depends not only on your budget (all important as a tailor made uniform is going to set you back a nice sum) but also how seriously into re-enacting you are or want to be. In my opinion (for what it's worth and it is only MY opinion) if you are not prepared to put the effort in, do the research and at least look technically correct, then you shouldn't even consider wearing a uniform. There's lots of information out there to help (see list at end), so really there's not much excuse. If time is an excuse then forget it. Go to your event in a nice tea dress and hat. Nothing wrong with that.

If you want to look the part but can't afford the prices being asked by dealers (and some ask a lot for rubbish) consider re-tailoring your own. It's not as hard as you might think although you will probably have to still buy the hat. You can buy a new FAD (Future Army Dress) No. 2 uniform or its predecessor from eBay for anything from £15 – 45. Don't pay more, you shouldn't need to. The FAD uniform is better although the colour is a bit brown and it buttons up the female way (original uniforms buttoned up the male way). It comes with a very similar belt to the original and is tailored the same fit. Effectively all you need to do is remove and sew up the pleats in the skirt (don't throw these away you will need them) and unpick the apron pockets (leaving the flap), cut down to size and make breast pockets from them. The skirt pleats make the pocket flaps. Then buy the correct buttons and badges and you're done with a utility pattern uniform. Not perfect, but passable if all you are going to do is promenade or go to dances. Honest it isn't difficult. I did it for my sister's first uniform and I'm no seamstress! OK, it might sound a bit complicated but see photos at the end of this piece, it's easier than it first appears.

If you're more confident with dressmaking you could buy a bloke's jacket (the buttons are correct then) and tailor to fit, and buy two skirts and make a 6 gored version out of them (you can find downloadable patterns for a simple 6 gored skirt on the web). DON'T buy a WRAC uniform. It's too green and the jacket is way too short and tailored completely differently to anything they wore in the war.

Remember, it's all in the detail. Things that add that touch of authenticity are:-

#### JACKET

1. Buttons should be General Service King's crown, brass or khaki plastic NOT staybright and NOT Queen's crown. Plenty of these available on eBay and from militaria dealers. They're not expensive. The plastic ones are harder to find and though the utility uniform came with plastic buttons many ATS members changed them for brass which looked smarter.
2. Early war officer's uniforms had external apron pockets the same as the men's uniform. Later in the war these pockets disappeared leaving only flaps but the breast pocket pleats remained.

3. Other ranks uniforms went through 3 iterations and rather than describe them in detail I would advise purchasing or borrowing the brilliant book by Martin Brayley and Richard Ingram (see reference list at end).

#### SKIRT

1. If you're buying a readymade uniform make sure the skirt goes with the jacket. Later uniforms had 6 gores skirts but the very early pattern only had 2.
2. If possible you should aim to get a skirt with a side fastening. The originals fastened with a button and hooks and eyes although some officers skirts had side zips as they were private purchase.

#### BELT

1. Other ranks belt was made of cloth with a brass buckle (the new FAD uniform comes with a very similar one) although the earliest uniform didn't have a belt at all.
2. Officers had the option of buying a Sam Browne leather belt, but it was worn without the cross strap. The cross strap is for the officer's sword and the ATS did not have swords. You don't need a Sam Browne. Officers wore the cloth belt as well post 1941.

#### BADGING

Do your research here very carefully, especially for Divisional/Command badges. This is very easy to get wrong and there are hundreds of EXPERTS dying for you to do just that! Unless in really good condition don't buy original cloth badges. They cost quite a bit more than repros and at the end of the day you are supposed to be living in WW2 so you would have nice, clean and relatively new badges. Not tatty 70 year old ones. Leave the originals to collectors.

1. Cap Badges – Brass for other ranks (or plastic later in the war), bronze for officers.
2. Collar dogs (collar/lapel badges) only officers wore these and they were smaller versions of the cap badge, again in bronze.
3. Metal shoulder titles – only other ranks wore these. Brass and made of the letters ATS with the T larger than the A and S. Worn on both epaulettes.
4. Cloth shoulder titles – only worn on Battledress uniform so not found on Service Dress. Incidentally the cloth title during the war years actually said Auxiliary Territorial Service; it was not abbreviated to ATS like the metal titles. If you're portraying First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) they did wear cloth titles (written out in full) on the upper arm/shoulder.
5. Command and Divisional badges – ATS were assigned to various different Commands doing all sorts of jobs. You will need to decide which Command you wish to be part of and order the badges accordingly, one for each upper arm. Examples are, Eastern Command (white bulldog on a black rectangle), Northern Command (green apple on a blue diamond), AckAck (anti-aircraft command – black bow and arrow on a red background), Scottish Command (heraldic gold lion on a red and black rectangle), South-eastern Command (tiger on a white circle with a red border), Western Command (yellow cross of St David with a red Lancastrian rose at centre bordered by a red circle on a black rectangle), Southern Command (the southern cross stars on a red and black shield). Unless portraying someone home on leave *don't* badge with overseas commands or divisions.

6. Skills and trade badges – cloth and worn on lower left arm about 4 inches above the cuff.
7. Others – The ATS were attached to many different units and corps in the army. Although not officially recognised this did entitle the ladies to wear the collar dog (lapel badge) of that unit above the left breast pocket. For example, ATS gunners with the Royal Artillery would wear the flaming 'ubique' bomb (brass for ORs and bronze for officers); some ATS were attached to infantry units at regimental depots and might wear the appropriate collar dog belonging to that regiment.

#### LANYARDS

The ATS lanyard is tricolour, brown, green and beech (a rusty orange colour). It should be worn on the left shoulder (although I have seen odd photos with it worn on the right but this was not usual).

ATS attached to the Royal Artillery were allowed to wear the coveted white RA lanyard. This was *always* worn on the right shoulder.

#### CAPS

There were 2 issues of the service dress cap. A number of traders make good copies at prices from £40-£55. Expect to pay silly money for originals. The first issue had a soft peak with obvious stitching on it. The second issue (from 1941 onwards) had a stiff peak and a leather chinstrap. The only real difference between an officer's cap and one for ORs was the quality of the material.

Forage caps (Field Service or side caps) – this was not issued but a private purchase. As it was not part of the official uniform, in theory, it would not be worn on duty. In practice there were instances when the cap was worn while on duty (but never on parade). The ATS forage cap is dark brown with a beech crown and green piping.

ATS attached to the RA could wear the RA dark blue and scarlet cap (see photos at end). Both caps were worn with the normal ATS badge and usually backed with red felt.

#### SHOES

Ah the bane of every re-enactor's life. Original shoes cost an arm and a leg and are often very narrow. There are some reasonable repros available for about £50. Modern army parade shoes are black so no point buying these as the ATS wore brown (dimpled leather). You can occasionally find older brown parade shoes on eBay and also on army surplus websites, but they are getting harder to find.

There was some variation in officers' shoes as these were private purchase and one maker used an ox-blood coloured leather rather than brown. Look for second hand or fork out for a good pair of repros. New officers' brown parade shoes will set you back a minimum of £120 unless you are lucky to find some on sale!

#### STOCKINGS

For ORs I'm afraid it's lisle, most unflattering, and not cheap. I found some cc41 (issued in 1941) stockings at a vintage fair for £10, which is a very good price. The Imperial War Museum sells the same for £26 plus postage and packaging. There are some specialist vintage dealers who have lisle stockings (often made by Funn) but khaki is no longer available. You can get hold of WAAF grey or bronze (mercerised cotton), but that's the nearest. Not quite as authentic as khaki but they look the part.

For officers it's much easier. Silk or rayon, seamed or unseamed. If you're portraying post 1942 you can even get away with nylon. Easy. They did also wear lisle if you prefer the Nora Batty look!!

### SOME DO's and DON'Ts

DO – Polish your buttons and other brasses. There's nothing worse or more unrealistic than tarnished brass buttons. I know it's a chore but it has to be done. You would have been up on a charge if your buttons and shoulder titles didn't gleam brightly. This applies to all ranks and if you have a Sam Browne belt you need to polish that and the brass on it too!

DO – Wear your hair up if long. It might look sexy with forties curls flowing down your back, but no woman in the services would have worn it that way even at a dance. It would not be on or below your collar! (By the way, this also applies to men in uniform... so get a haircut lads!).

DO – Wear make-up. Yes, service women were allowed and actively encouraged to wear make-up as it was thought good for their morale and that of the men they worked with. You can forget political correctness. This is WW2; women were expected to look decorative and make-up made up for the lack of flowing locks!

DON'T – Wear modern accessories such as a handbag, modern army cap or (God forbid!) high heeled shoes.

DON'T – Wear a uniform if it doesn't conform to the wartime pattern. Take the time and effort to buy a good reproduction/original/or make your modern uniform look right.

DON'T – Badge your uniform with modern badges or one's women just would not wear. The only cap badge, shoulder titles and collar dogs you should have are ATS one's. Do your homework with respect to what unit you wish to be attached to and what Division/Command. Don't give your character skills badges they would not have. Officially women did not carry or fire weapons (although the reality was a little different) so none of them would wear a marksman's badge.

DON'T – Wear medals unless you are portraying someone old enough to have served in one of the women's voluntary services (or nursing services) in WW1 and then you should only wear ribbons for the British war and Victory (WW1) medals. Any WW2 medals were not issued until after the war so they should not be worn. The only other exception is a gallantry award, but I would suggest you only wear one of these if you are depicting someone real who actually received one or you have received one! And remember in the case of gallantry medals NO woman was awarded the VC.

DON'T - Wear tatty old cloth badges. They might be genuine, but remember you are living in WW2 Britain. Your badges would be new and clean.

## PLACES TO GET STUFF

Not exhaustive but some suggestions:-

Original:

Outside of vintage and militaria shows the best places for original kit eBay, various vintage/militaria shops and if you are really lucky car boot sales or house clearances. The down side of eBay is you can't see what you're buying and nowadays everyone seems to be bidding for whatever comes up so the prices can get really silly. Still some bargains to be had occasionally though.

For reproductions kit:

BADGES – Can't get much better than Monty's Locker. Husband and wife team. They have a website but not everything is on it so it's worth calling them direct and asking. Very helpful and knowledgeable.

SHOES – Soldier of Fortune do a reasonable reproduction, but again not on their website so ask.

CAPS – Soldier of Fortune do a reasonably priced forage cap and an early pattern SD cap. Warhorse reproductions also do the latter but I've heard mixed reports about their service. Never used them myself so I can't really comment. ATS and FANY Uniforms make a good SD cap (post 1941 issue) to order. They have a website and sometimes sell on eBay.

STOCKINGS – eBay for silk and nylon seamed, most good department stores and vintage shops. For lisle Laste vintage (they have a web site) and FUNNS. There might even be someone on this forum that sells them by now.

UNIFORM – Ah yes. Well – still waiting on Khaki Devil but should be good when they finally get one in production as they do their homework well. Soldier of Fortune are also supposed to be bringing out a four pocket one this summer Warhorse Reproductions do one but as I said earlier I've heard mixed reports. . Others? Well I think many are expensive for what is essentially a modern uniform re-tailored. ATS and FANY do this but I don't think they're very authentic and expensive for what they are. There's also Replicators in India but they also get very mixed reviews. Other re-enacting suppliers only seem to do men's stuff.

Sorry, none of this is very encouraging. If I was buying from scratch and I couldn't find a decent original (becoming more and more scarce and expensive) I'd wait and see what Khaki Devil and Soldier of Fortune come up with. The alternative? Buy a modern uniform and make your own (carefully researched) alterations. You really don't need to be that competent a seamstress. Honest!

A MUST HAVE –WW2 British Women's Uniforms by Brayley and Ingram available from Amazon, most books stores and book stalls at most 40's weekends. It's a great book for all three services and their nursing arms. There are one or two errors, but nothing that screams at you. Lots of good photographs and much more detail than I've given here.

GOOD LUCK!

## WEB-SITES

ATS Remembered, [www.atsremembered.org.uk](http://www.atsremembered.org.uk)

The Garrison (ATS Section) [www.thegarrison.org.uk](http://www.thegarrison.org.uk) (a serious re-enacting group who specialise in ATS attached to Royal Artillery as searchlight operators, but lots of good info on the Site).

## MAKING YOUR OWN



### FAD No. 2 Dress Uniform Conversion

#### JACKET

Replace buttons with GS  
King's crown brass or  
plastic buttons

Remove external pockets and cut down to  
create breast pocket. Leave pocket flaps in  
place.  
Make breast pocket flap from the pleats in the  
skirt which need to be cut out and the seams  
sewn together.

This jacket is usually supplied with a belt which  
unless you are going to wear a Sam Brown  
(officers only) you will need.

This will unpick and remove





Remove pleats and sew up seams.  
Use removed material to create flap  
for breast pockets

#### THE FINISHED ARTICLE



This is a FAD uniform with breast pockets created from original apron ones and the pleats in the skirt. Colour is a bit too brown and buttons fasten on female side, but otherwise it makes quite a good match.

Shows the belt which is a good match for the original.

This uniform is done as a sergeant attached to Royal Artillery AckAck command. The forage cap is an RA cap with the ATS cap badge. Note white lanyard on the RIGHT not left where the usual ATS lanyard would be worn

Pockets made from lower pockets and flaps from skirt pleats.

Only pocket flaps retained

Skirt pleats removed and sewn up leaves you with a five gored skirt rather than six but not noticeable from the front.