



Uniforms on display
in the camouflage lab.
Bryan Bedder/The Daily

\$5B CAMO SNAFU

Army ditches failed combat uniform that put a target on grunts' backs for 8 years

By Erik German



The camouflage lab at the Natick Soldier Center in Natick, Mass., where most of the armed forces camouflage patterns are made. *Bryan Bedder/The Daily*

NATICK, Mass. — The Army is changing clothes.

Over the next year, America’s largest fighting force is swapping its camouflage pattern. The move is a quiet admission that the last uniform — a pixelated design that debuted in 2004 at a cost of \$5 billion — was a colossal mistake.

Soldiers have roundly criticized the gray-green uniform for standing out almost everywhere it’s been worn. Industry insiders have called the financial mess surrounding the pattern a “fiasco.”

As Army researchers work furiously on a newer, better camouflage, it’s natural to ask what went wrong and how they’ll avoid the same missteps this time around. In a candid interview with *The Daily*, several of those researchers said Army brass interfered in the selection process during the last round, letting looks and politics get in the way of science.

“It got into political hands before the soldiers ever got the uniforms,” said Cheryl Stewardson,

a textile technologist at the Army research center in Natick, Mass., where most of the armed forces camouflage patterns are made.

The researchers say that science is carrying the day this time, as they run four patterns through a rigorous battery of tests. The goal is to give soldiers different patterns suitable for different environments, plus a single neutral pattern — matching the whole family — to be used on more expensive body armor and other gear. The selection will involve hundreds of computer trials as well on-the-ground testing at half a dozen locations around the world.

But until the new pattern is put in the field — a move that’s still a year or more away — soldiers in Afghanistan have been given a temporary fix: a greenish, blended replacement called MultiCam. The changeover came only after several non-commissioned officers complained to late Pennsylvania Rep. John Murtha, and he took up the cause in 2009. Outside of Afghanistan, the rest of the Army is still stuck



with the gray Universal Camouflage Pattern, or UCP. And some soldiers truly hate it.

“Essentially, the Army designed a universal uniform that universally failed in every environment,” said an Army specialist who served two tours in Iraq, wearing UCP in Baghdad and the deserts outside Basra. “The only time I have ever seen it work well was in a gravel pit.”

The specialist asked that his name be withheld because he wasn’t authorized to speak to the press.

“As a cavalry scout, it is my job to stay hidden. Wearing a uniform that stands out this badly makes it hard to do our job effectively,” he said. “If we can see our own guys across a distance because of it, then so can our enemy.”

The fact that the government spent \$5 billion on a camouflage design that actually made its soldiers more visible — and then took eight years to correct the problem — has also left people in the camouflage industry incensed. The total cost comes from the Army itself and includes the price of developing the pattern and producing it for the entire service branch.

“You’ve got to look back and say what a huge

waste of money that was,” said Lawrence Holsworth, marketing director of a camouflage company called Hyde Definition and the editor of Strike-Hold!, a website that tracks military gear. “UCP was such a fiasco.”

The Army’s camouflage researchers say the story of the universal pattern’s origins begins when they helped develop a similarly pixelated camouflage now worn by the Marine Corps. That pattern, known as MARPAT, first appeared in 2002 after being selected from among dozens of candidates and receiving plenty of input from Marines on the ground at the sniper school in Quantico, Va. The Marines even found one of the baseline colors themselves, an earth tone now called Coyote Brown.

“They went to Home Depot, looked at paint swatches, and said, ‘We want that color,’ ” said Anabelle Dugas, a textile technologist at Natick who helped develop the pattern. That particular hue, she added, was part of a paint series then sold by Ralph Lauren.

Around the same time, the Army was on the hunt for a new camouflage pattern that could solve glaring logistical problem on the ground in

CAMOUFLAGE TIMELINE

Proving that there’s more than one way to blend in, the Army has gone through several camouflage patterns in past three decades:



WOODLAND CAMOUFLAGE 1980s

This classic pattern was used by all branches of the service.



SIX-COLOR DESERT 1990s

Dubbed the “chocolate chips” pattern by soldiers, this camouflage was worn by soldiers in the first Gulf War.



Iraq. Without enough desert-specific gear to go around, soldiers were going to war in three-color desert fatigues but strapping dark green vests and gear harness over their chests. At rifle distances, the problem posed by the dark gear over light clothing was as obvious as it was distressing.

Kristine Isherwood, a mechanical engineer on Natick's camouflage team, said simply, "It shows where to shoot."

The Army researchers rushed to put new camouflages to the test — several in-house designs and a precursor of MultiCam developed by an outside company. The plan was to spend two years testing patterns and color schemes from different angles and distances and in different environments. The Army published results of the trials in 2004, declaring a tan, brushstroke pattern called Desert Brush the winner — but that design never saw the light of day.

The problem, the researchers said, was an oddly named branch of the Army in charge of equipping soldiers with gear — Program Executive Office Soldier — had suddenly ordered Natick's camouflage team to pick a pattern long be-

fore trials were finished.

"They jumped the gun," said James Fairney, an electrical engineer on Natick's camouflage team.

Researchers said they received a puzzling order: Take the winning colors and create a pixilated pattern. Researchers were ordered to "basically put it in the Marine Corps pattern," Fairney said.

For a decision that could ultimately affect more than a million soldiers in the Army, reserves and National Guard, the sudden shift from Program Executive Office Soldier was a head-scratcher. The consensus among the researchers was the Army brass had watched the Marine Corps don their new uniforms and caught a case of pixilated camouflage envy.

"It was trendy," Stewardson said. "If it's good enough for the Marines, why shouldn't the Army have that same cool new look?"

The brigadier general ultimately responsible for the decision, James Moran, who retired from the Army after leaving Program Executive Office Soldier, has not responded to messages seeking comment.



THREE-COLOR DESERT
2003

First introduced in 1992, the Army's Desert Combat Uniform saw wide use in the 2003 war in Iraq.



UNIVERSAL CAMOUFLAGE PATTERN
2004

Introduced in 2004, it saw action in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to becoming the pattern worn by Army personnel all over the world.



MULTICAM
2010

A commercially developed pattern given to ground troops in Afghanistan after soldiers complained that Universal Camouflage Pattern performed poorly in combat.



BLENDING IN

Six other camouflage patterns that soldiers have worn to hide from the enemy

- 1 WOODLANDS
- 2 ARID
- 3 UCP
- 4 BROOKWOOD
- 5 KRYPTEK HIGHLANDER
- 6 MULTICAM

SWIPE TO SEE ENVIRONMENTS



Arnold H. Drapkin/Landov

It's worth noting that, flawed as it was, the universal pattern did solve the problem of mismatched gear, said Eric Graves, editor of the military gear publication Soldier Systems Daily, adding that the pattern also gave soldiers a new-looking uniform that clearly identified the

Army brand.
 "Brand identity trumped camouflage utility," Graves said. "That's what this really comes down to: 'We can't allow the Marine Corps to look more cool than the Army.'" ■
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