

“Or are you a stranger without even a name,
Forever enshrined behind some glass pane,
In an old photograph, torn and tattered and stained,
And fading to yellow in a brown leather frame?”

“Green Fields of France” Eric Bogle 1975

“Reading” British Great War Photographs: A Basic Introduction

The Great War of 1914-18 was the first major conflict where photography was available to almost everyone. Whilst there are photographic records of the Crimea, American Civil War and Boer War, by the First World War photography was commonplace. The Great War also saw almost universal mobilization and the creation of massed armies as men volunteered or were conscripted in their millions. As a consequence of these two facts, huge numbers of photographs of this war exist. Unfortunately, who and what is recorded on many of these photographs is often unknown. While official and even press photographs are usually well documented, the same is not true for private pictures. Sometimes identities, dates, places are written on the reverse of such photographs, but frequently this is not the case. Frustratingly, sometimes there are cryptic clues; “Dad”, “Frank and his pals” or “Tommy – killed in the war” the exact meaning of which was clear to the original author but is now lost. There is a message to the “digital” present here!

Frequently families are in possession of photographs whose identity is unclear but which can, on the basis of other information, be narrowed down to a couple of individuals. Alternatively the identity may be known, but little or nothing is known about the individual’s involvement in the Great War and this is the source of interest. In these cases, knowing a little something about what you are looking at can be very helpful in gaining as much information as possible from the pictures.

One thing should be stressed at the outset; one cannot always glean very much information from a picture. Sometimes evidence is ambiguous or unclear, sometimes it is simply absent. Sometimes all that can be repeated are the words on so many Great War headstones – “A Soldier of the Great War”. Some photographs simply do not contain sufficient information in the way of uniform, insignia, equipment or context to allow an observer, ninety of more years after the event, to elicit anything more. To some extent this is an inevitable consequence of the subject matter. It is in the nature of uniforms that they conceal distinctions – they are by definition, uniform! Many however, do contain information and clues. With a little experience and knowing what sorts of things to look for, additional information can be gleaned. This is information which may be useful to a family historian or anyone else simply interested in understanding what he or she is looking at.

What follows here is by no means comprehensive. This guide is intended merely as a starting point for those interested in “reading” British Great War era photographs. Volumes have, and will continue to be, written on the nuances and variations of uniforms and equipment. A basic introduction is all that is attempted here. This guide is also partial in its coverage. It examines exclusively British photographs. A few comparative examples of non-British pictures are included at the end for comparative purposes. As a result of the author’s own interests, there is probably also an over-representation of Scots uniforms

included. All the photographs used here are in the possession of the author. Where anything is known of the individual pictured it is included, if nothing is known then the descriptive title will reflect this.

When examining a photograph the questions we are asking are straightforward and usually follow a simple pattern: **What? When? Where? Who?** Although the questions are straightforward – the answers seldom are.

1) **What are we looking at?** This is the big question which contains a number of subsidiary questions

a) Is the unit (Corps or Branch of Service, Regiment or Battalion) definitively identifiable? cap badges, shoulder titles and unique items of dress are the best clues here.

b) If the unit is not definitively identifiable are there clues as to the role of the individual? Spurs and a riding crop would suggest a mounted role, goggles perhaps a driver or pilot, certain patterns of equipment are associated with particular roles.

2) **Can the photograph be dated?** In the absence of specific information, dates can sometimes be inferred from uniforms and equipment. Certain patterns of arms, equipment or uniforms have known introduction dates so their presence in photographs indicates that the picture cannot have been taken before that date. One simple example would be Brodie Helmets ("Tin Hats.") For all practical purposes, British helmets were not introduced until mid 1916 and therefore, any photographs showing such helmets can be reliably dated after that time. The same is true with gasmask (early 1915). It is important to note that it is far harder to put a "must be before" limit on photographs on the basis of observed equipment because equipment and items of uniform frequently remained in use long after they had officially been superseded. The presence of apparently obsolete equipment can itself be a clue to the first question: What are we looking at? Second Line and training units for example, frequently used obsolete equipment and more distant theatres often lagged behind in receiving the newest equipment. Even in front line units there was a considerable lag time involved in changeover.

3) **Can the location of the photograph be established?** This is often very difficult. Sometimes there are uniquely identifiable features (a known building or geographic formation for example) but with studio portraits, which make up the majority of the surviving pictures, these are not usually present. Thankfully however studios often stamped or imprinted their name on the photographs and this is obviously helpful! It is always worth examining the rear of a photograph for this reason. Often Great War photographs have a "postcard" back – does this say "postcard" or "*carte postale*" – there was a thriving industry of photographers in popular leave locations behind the lines in France and Flanders. Are the photographer and his business address listed on the reverse? Sometimes the picture may even have been posted and bear a postmark (although they were often sent in envelopes) – these can be useful, but may also be a little misleading if relied on too closely. Once again, a postmark can only determine that the picture was taken before that date it cannot reveal where or when the picture was taken, as it may have been carried around for weeks, months or years prior to posting. Types of clothing pictured (as well as the ornamentation in

the studio if a studio shot) can sometimes be helpful, clearly khaki drill uniforms and pith helmets are more likely to be seen in India than Siberia.

4) **Who is in the photograph?** Unless there is other information available (it is a recognizable individual(s) etc), who is shown in a photograph cannot usually be established from just the photograph alone. If however other information is known: Great Granddad Fred was in the Artillery, Great Uncle William was in the Seaforth Highlanders, then an examination of the above questions may allow the identity to be determined. In most circumstances the uniform worn by an artilleryman will be distinct from that worn by a Seaforth Highlander but there are exceptions to even this. For example; wearing a helmet, a member of the Seaforth's transport section (wearing trows) may well be indistinguishable from an artilleryman). Even if there are clear uniform identifiers these identifications should usually be treated as somewhat tentative. Absent the ability to compare to other pictures, it could for example, be Great Uncle William's pal (also a Seaforth), a photograph of whom has been mixed in with family pictures.

It is unlikely that any one single observation will "tell all" about a picture. It is usually a matter of identifying as many small components as possible. Even then, as noted at the outset, some things will remain mysterious.

Some suggestions and examples: Upon obtaining a picture...

1) Turn it over and examine the back. Is there a photographer's mark? Does the picture have a postcard back? Are there any annotations? If there are annotations do they appear contemporary with the picture, typically pencil or fountain (ink) pen, or do they appear to have been added later (Ballpoint for example). Later additions need not be totally discarded but they should be treated with some circumspection.

2) Back to the image. Are there any visible unit identifiers? Cap Badges are the most obvious and if clear, can be conclusive. Unfortunately these are often partially obscured, blurred or subject to reflection making identification difficult. Even if the badge is relatively clear there are often several units who have badges that are very similar. It is not always possible to distinguish between them. Are shoulder insignia visible? These, given their location are often hard or impossible to read. If they are visible then these too can be diagnostic (down even to the Battalion) Are there distinctive items of dress? In Scots regiments for example Sporrans and Kilts often allow the identification of the unit involved.

3) What are the basic features of the uniform represented? Headgear (if present) comes in various styles and can be a useful clue both to unit identity and to dating. Service Dress Tunics and Trousers too can vary slightly and give an indication as to date. Insignia are used to display both rank (usually on upper sleeves for NCOs and on cuffs (or later epaulettes) for officers. In addition, efficiency, trade or specialist badges, good conduct chevrons, wound stripes and long service chevrons were also worn on the lower sleeves. These can be useful in identifying the role of the individual and sometimes in dating the picture, as different insignia were introduced at different times throughout the war.

Are any specialized forms of equipment visible or any patterns indicative of a particular role? Mounted troops (or troops who worked with horses) usually wore 1903 Bandoliers

rather than 1908 or 1914(leather) equipment for example. Does the individual have spurs on? Are the puttees (woolen wraps for the lower leg) wound bottom-up (normal) or top-down (mounted)? Are any weapons visible? These, despite standardization can sometimes provide useful clues.

Sometimes medal ribbons are visible in photographs. Often these are very difficult to distinguish. They can, as with all the other elements mentioned above help in dating and otherwise identifying photographs. One problem with medal ribbons, which also affects the other aspects of interpreting a photograph from the Great War period, is the manner in which colours are represented. Sometimes this is affected by the condition of the photograph (which can fade as a result of light exposure or simply age, or have been damaged through time) and sometimes it is as result of the photographic processes in use at the time. The standard photographic process in the early decades of the Twentieth Century used orthochromatic film which responded to the Blue-Green end of the spectrum but not the Red-Yellow end. More modern panchromatic films (not widespread until the 1930s) respond to both. The effect of this is often to render reds and yellows very darkly in pictures taken with orthochromatic film which can be confusing when attempting to interpret pictures where colour is significant (such as kilt tartans or medal ribbons.)

Gaining maximum insight from these all these factors requires that once one has identified what is being examined, it is also necessary to determine the significance. While some elements of this are commented on both above and below a detailed explication is beyond this short guide. There are numerous detailed guides in print which may be consulted for guidance in this respect. Below are some examples of Great War photographs with annotations regarding various elements of the uniforms which it is hoped will provide a starting point for anyone wishing to learn more from photos they possess or are viewing.

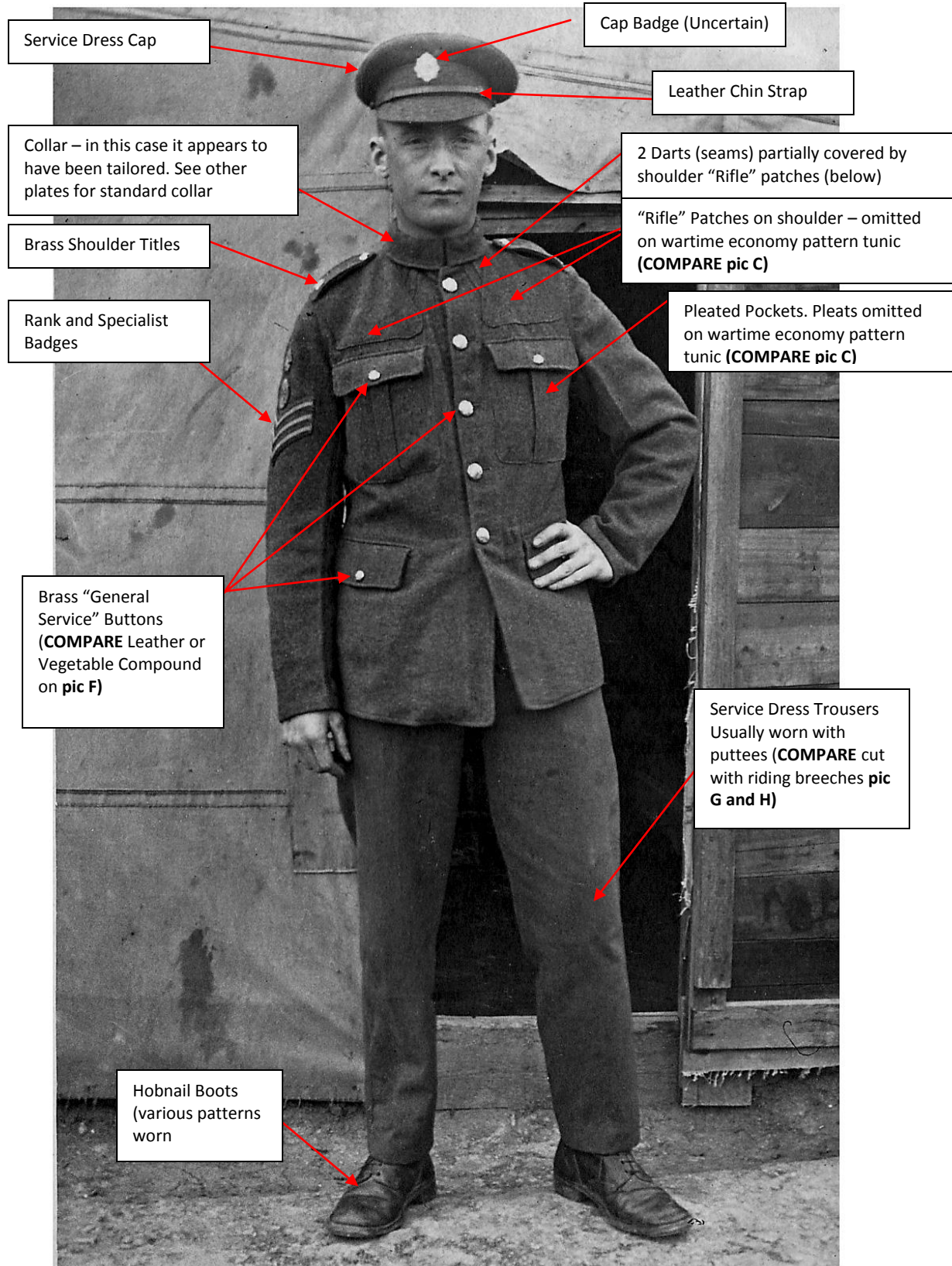
The Plates

The illustrations that follow try to illustrate a number of commonly observed elements in Great War photographs and provide comparative examples.

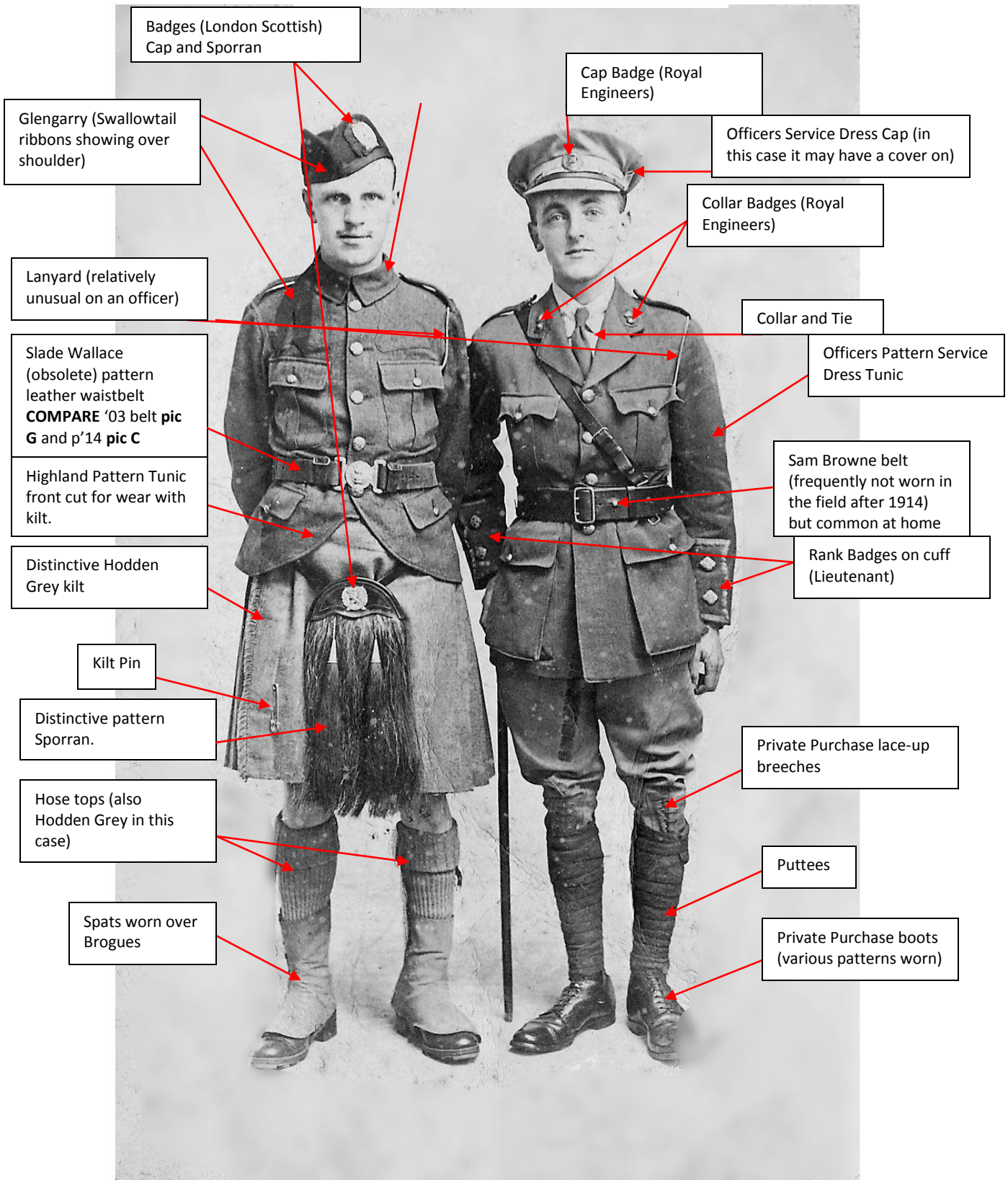
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(Obviously each nation is worthy of detailed study, these representative examples are included for comparative purposes on the most basic level.)

**A] Features of the British 1902
"Service Dress" of the Great War**



B] Comparison: London Scottish Private and Lieutenant Royal Engineers



Badges (London Scottish)
Cap and Sporran

Cap Badge (Royal
Engineers)

Glengarry (Swallowtail
ribbons showing over
shoulder)

Officers Service Dress Cap (in
this case it may have a cover on)

Lanyard (relatively
unusual on an officer)

Collar Badges (Royal
Engineers)

Slade Wallace
(obsolete) pattern
leather waistbelt
**COMPARE '03 belt pic
G and p'14 pic C**

Collar and Tie

Officers Pattern Service
Dress Tunic

Highland Pattern Tunic
front cut for wear with
kilt.

Sam Browne belt
(frequently not worn in
the field after 1914)
but common at home

Distinctive Hodden
Grey kilt

Rank Badges on cuff
(Lieutenant)

Kilt Pin

Distinctive pattern
Sporran.

Private Purchase lace-up
breeches

Hose tops (also
Hodden Grey in this
case)

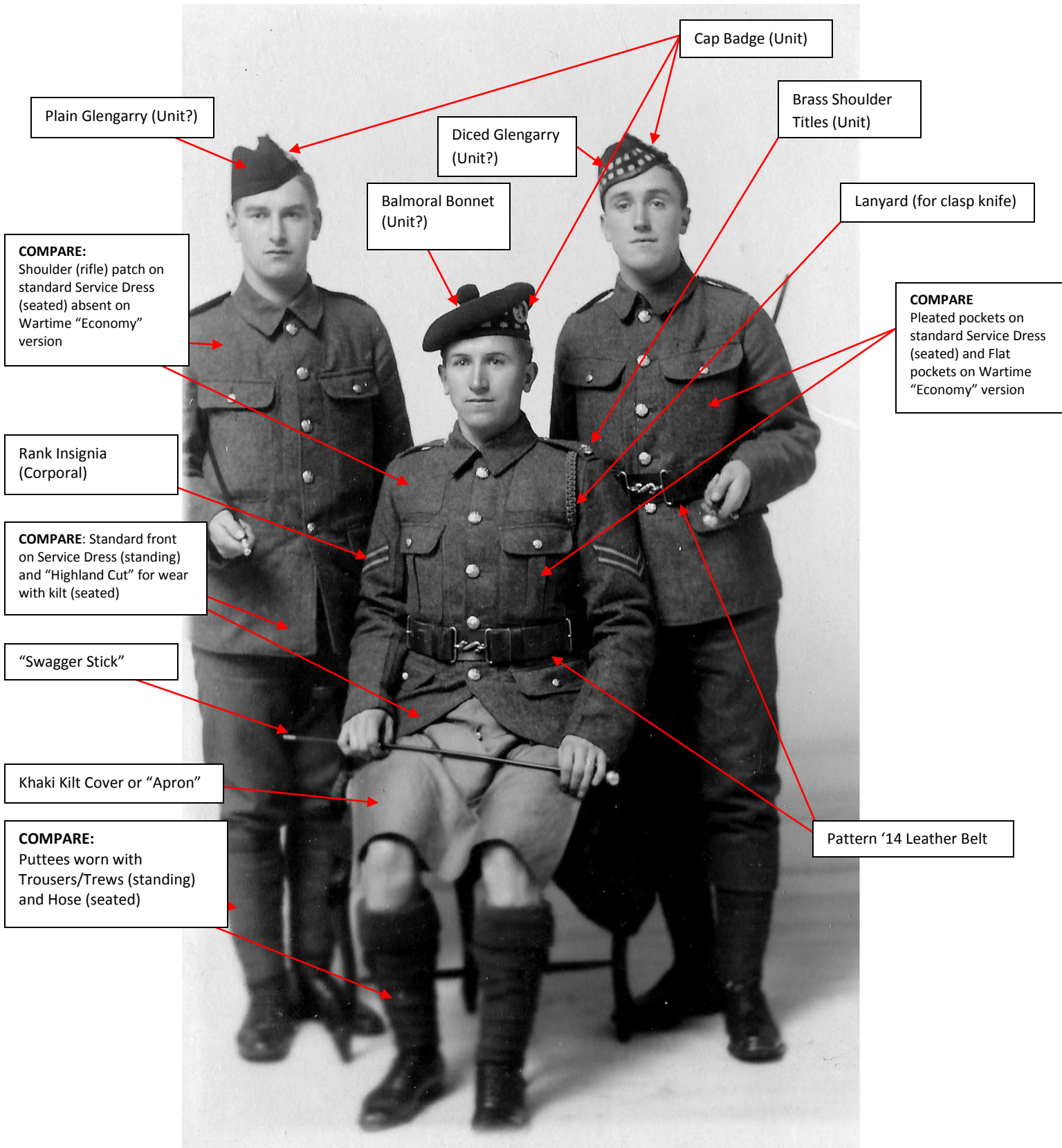
Puttees

Spats worn over
Brogues

Private Purchase boots
(various patterns worn)

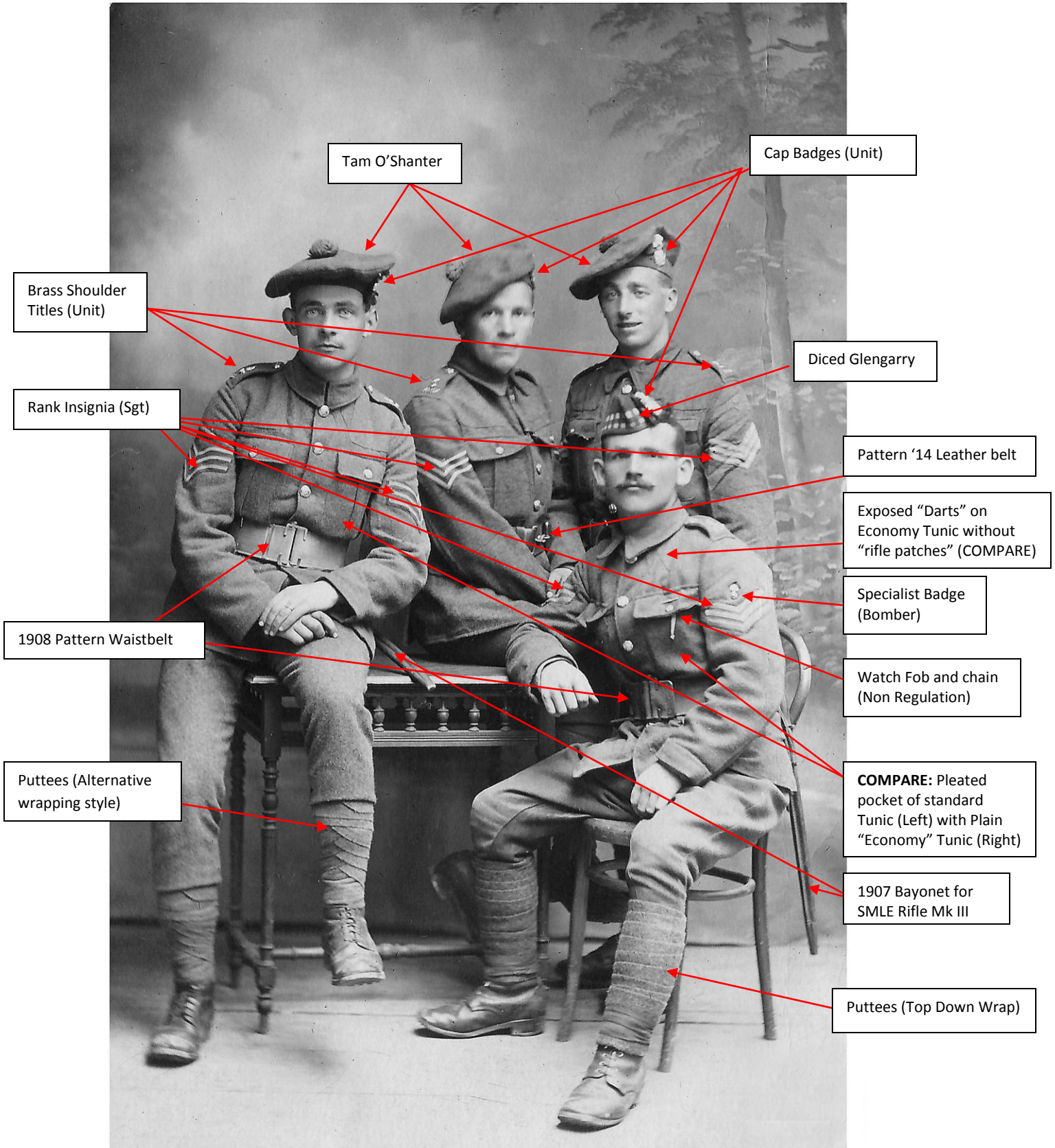
C] Corporal and Privates

Studio Portrait



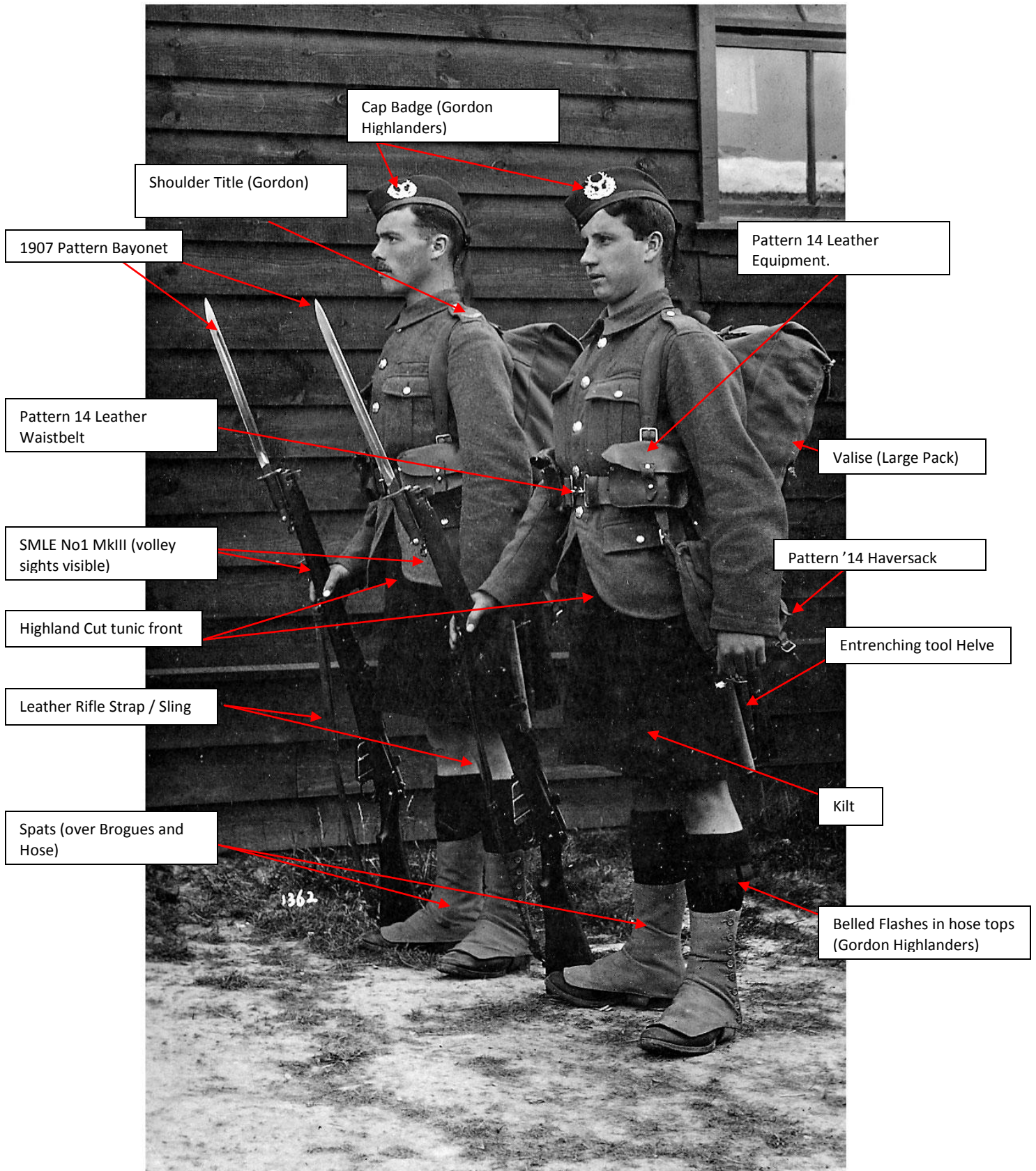
D] Sergeants: Royal Scots Fusiliers

Taken in France



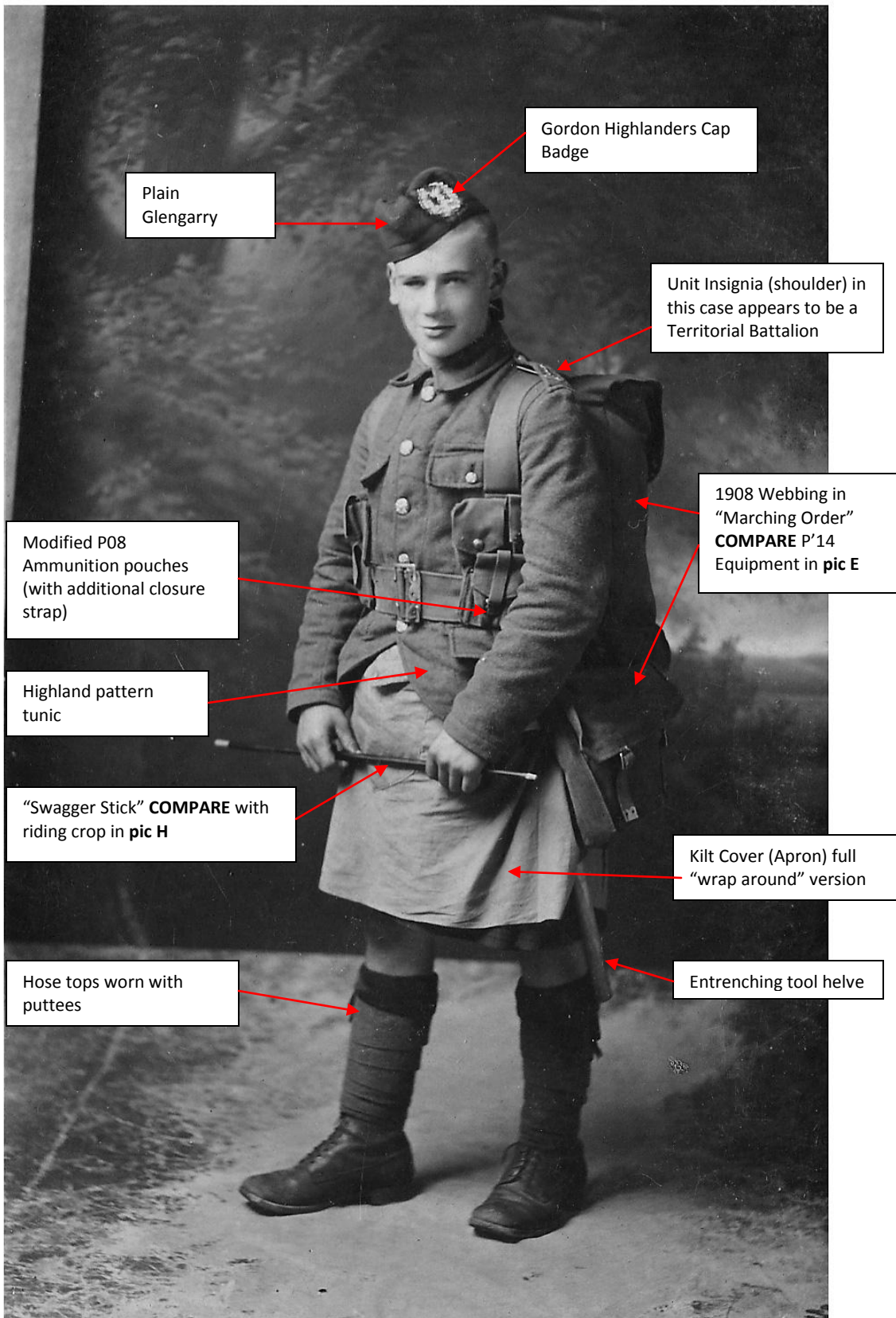
E] 10th Gordon Highlanders

Recruits circa 1915



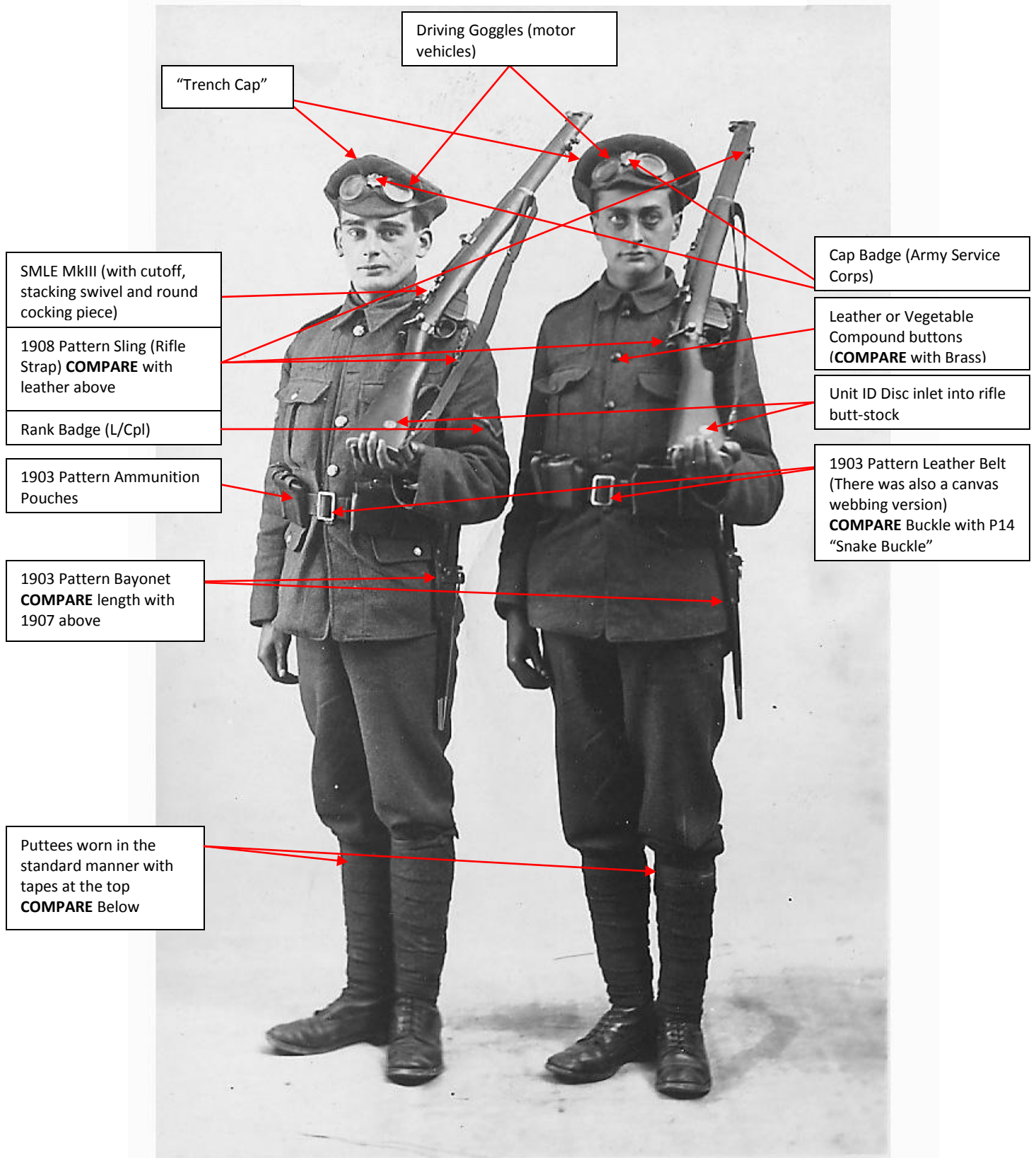
F] Gordon Highlanders

Young Recruit, circa 1918



G] Army Service Corps (Motor Transport)

Studio Photo



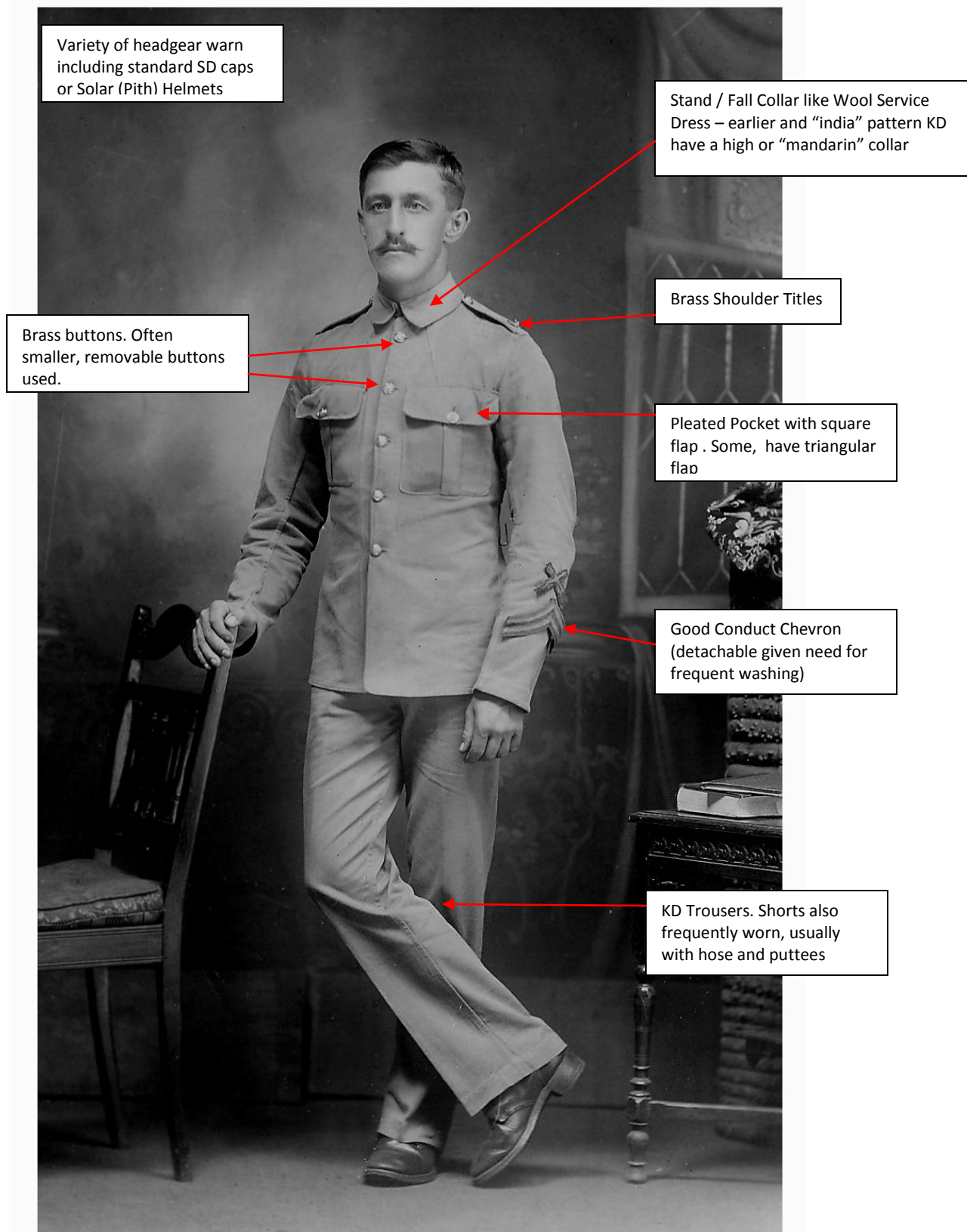
H| Frederick E. Brown
Driver (Royal Engineers)



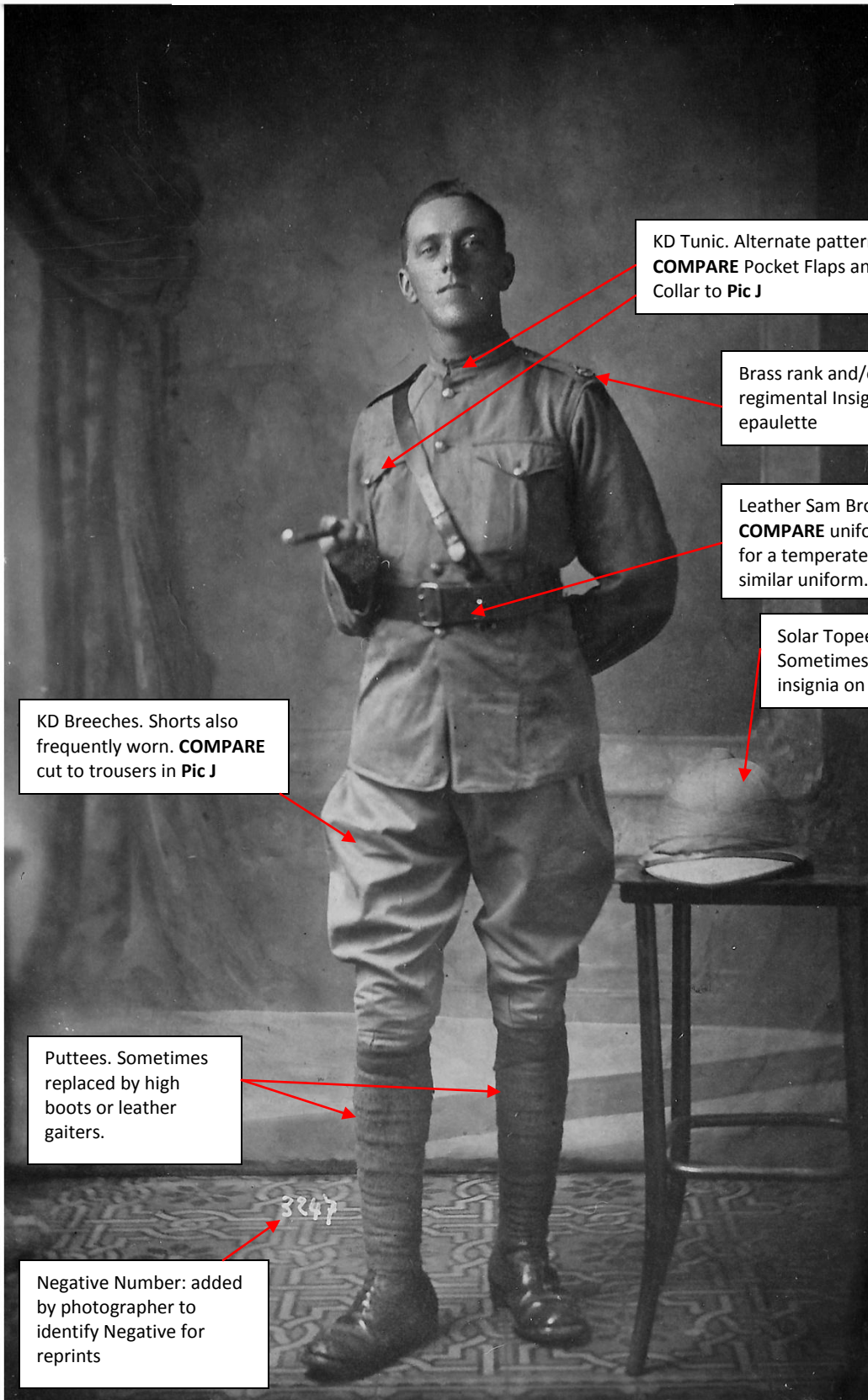
1 | Pte J Leslie #513727
#2 Canadian Army Service Corps
March 10th 1917



J] Khaki Drill (KD - Cotton) Service Dress
(Hot Climates – India Africa etc)



K] KD Service Dress (Officer)
(Hot Climates – India Africa etc)



KD Tunic. Alternate pattern
COMPARE Pocket Flaps and
Collar to **Pic J**

Brass rank and/or
regimental Insignia on
epaulette

Leather Sam Browne Belt
COMPARE uniform in **pic B**
for a temperate version of
similar uniform.

Solar Topee (Pith Helmet)
Sometimes worn with unit
insignia on the side / band.

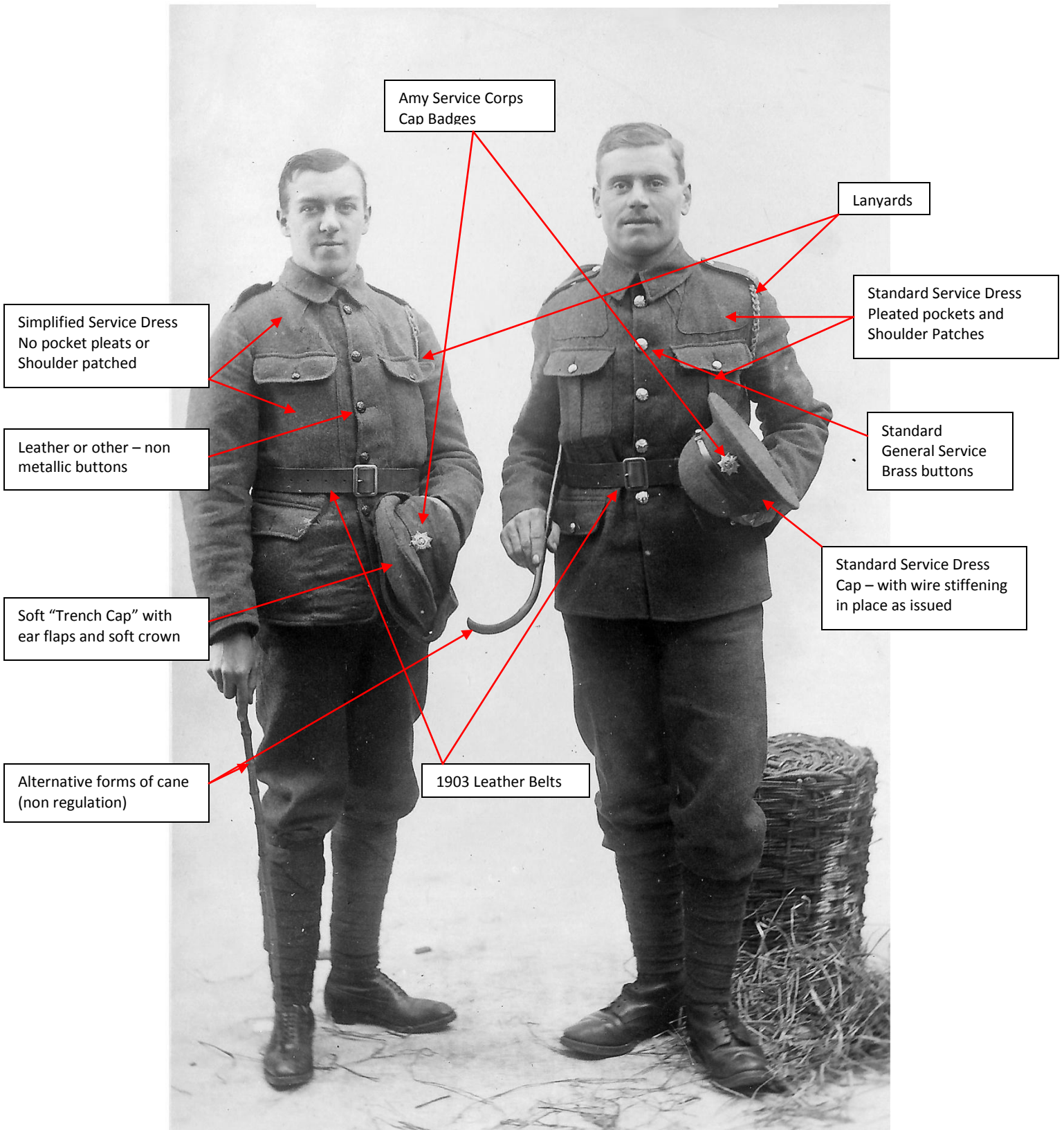
KD Breeches. Shorts also
frequently worn. **COMPARE**
cut to trousers in **Pic J**

Puttees. Sometimes
replaced by high
boots or leather
gaiters.

Negative Number: added
by photographer to
identify Negative for
reprints

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**L] Comparison of uniform variation
within the same unit. ASC Transport**



M] "Hospital Blues"
Convalescent Uniform

Although none is shown here, soldiers were often allowed to retain their regimental headgear and/or cap badges.

Blue (Bright) "Suit" of serge wool material often, although not universally, with white lined lapels. Cut and arrangement of buttons varied

White Shirt

Red Tie. (Note the impact of orthographic film on the colour rendering)



N] "Oddities"



"Kitchener Blues" With the rush to the colours in 1914 supplies of uniforms ran short. As a stop-gap measure some recruits were supplied with dark blue uniforms known colloquially as "Kitchener Blues" These were much disliked and short lived! This picture shows 4 recruits in their uniforms.



Again, as a result of the massive expansion of the army on occasion there were insufficient cap-badges. On these occasions (and in some other circumstances) sometimes a brass General Service tunic button was substituted, as here. In this case it appears to be backed with a circle of darker material



Various patterns of working coveralls were supplied to soldiers. These occasionally show up in photographs. Here is an example of two soldiers (in this instance probably at a pre war camp) wearing these light coloured cotton coveralls.



Collar Insignia were very uncommon on British soldiers during the first world war (although as noted common on Australian and Canadian soldiers) but were very common in the 1930s

POST WAR.

This picture, although it closely resembles the wartime pictures above, was taken in the late 1930s (or possibly even later) As noted above, patterns of dress often continues long after they were officially superseded. In this case the '02 Tunic has persisted after the introduction of battledress uniforms

The real "give away" on this picture is the belt (compare with previous pictures). This Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders is wearing a 1937 pattern web belt that was standard issue in WWII and up through the 1950s.

O: Some International Comparisons



FRENCH



AMERICAN



RUSSIAN



Austro-Hungarian



German