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## Unraveling the Story: Art Holmes' War Correspondent Uniform

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War correspondents have, and continue to risk their own personal safety in order to capture a story and communicate news. The first war correspondents from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Art Holmes and Robert Bowman, shipped out from Halifax in late 1939, and for the duration of the war vested themselves in standard military attire. Identical to that of the soldiers on the front whose stories they were capturing, Holmes and Bowman were given military uniforms. Although correspondents were neither soldiers nor members of the armed forces, they were given military priority and respect by association of what this uniform signified.



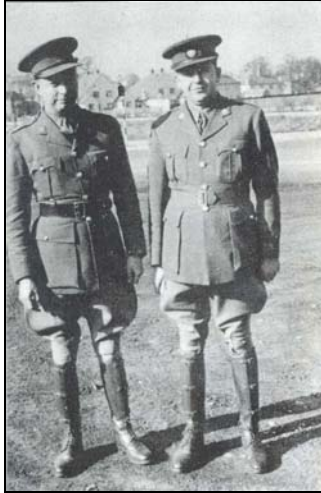
*Figure 1. Art Holmes uniform, Image courtesy of CBC Museum.*

With consideration of the intimate linkage of this piece and the history of journalism, Holmes' uniform functions both literally and semiologically as a story telling medium. Holmes wore this in order that he could correspond, or literally act as a medium between the front lines and those at home in Canada. As such, this object functions semiologically in a true Marshall McLuhan "the medium is the message" sense. As the medium of transmission (what he wore in order to do this work), Holmes and all extensions of Holmes (the uniform) are in fact the very message that it sought to portray- the stories of the front, the troops, and the war. Holmes was wearing the stories that he was transmitting.

As a material culture artefact, this uniform is telling not only of the Second World War, but also the history of war correspondence and early methods of journalism, as well as association to the technologies that made such correspondences possible. Because the uniform was the same as the military, this object also makes valuable links to the correlation between journalists and members of the armed forces. These analyses will illustrate how this artefact, worn by the person who was recording history, is in fact, a significant piece of that history itself.

## I. The Man under the Clothes

The uniform, now is part of the CBC Museum permanent collection, originally was worn by one of the first sound engineers at CBC. Arthur Holmes had several years experience at the corporation, before being shipped out to cover the war. Upon arrival in England, Holmes and Bowman were immediately outfitted in military garb, which became standard attire for all correspondents.



*Figure 2 (left). Art Holmes and Bob Bowman, 1941 Image courtesy of CBC Museum*



*Figure 3 (right). Big Betsy. Image courtesy of CBC Museum.*

When they began their work, Holmes realized that they would need a mobile unit for the recording equipment, and soon returned to Canada to find a van that could be equipped for their needs. He returned instead with Betsy, a four-wheel-drive army truck with three recording turntables, amplifiers, microphones and power source. She travelled thousands miles per month, and created innumerable recordings during the duration of the war.

One of Betsy's most audacious roles was to protect Holmes and all the recording equipment in the midst of the London Blitz. When the bombs started falling on London in 1940, Holmes habitually risked his life to make recordings of the sounds. These discs were relayed back to Canada via BBC studios in London and a transatlantic cable. War sounds had never been recorded before and Holmes became fixated with capturing the perfect sound, a feat that wasn't easy recording with a sensitive needle in the midst of thunderous explosions. Holmes' fanatical behaviour justly earned him the nickname "The Bomb Chaser". It also produced the best collection of war sound recordings ever made.

In addition to these extraordinary recordings, Holmes and Bowman more regularly recorded news reports about the war, and conducted interviews with soldiers, particularly in the program "With the Troops in England", which contained a segment called "Messages Home". Soldiers took turns using the radio to communicate to their loved ones back in Canada providing a lifeline of hope through the new technological medium of radio.

## II. The Style of the Uniform

The uniforms of the Canadian Forces during WWII were not designed for this war. Rather, the design is much older and originated in a British style. An earlier version of this design was first introduced during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), when the khaki first became the

standard colour for military uniforms. Prior to this, and also the first Boer War (1880-81) British forces vested themselves in the very regal Redcoat Battle dress. Military uniform history has long demonstrated the nobility and honour inextricably bound serving one's country, and the Redcoat uniform certainly exemplified this. Bright colours and extravagant components of uniforms tacitly commanded respect and large appendages could make one appear taller or bigger, serving to intimidate. During the first Boer War the bright colour of the redcoat attire functioned as a bull's-eye for the Boers, who were not uniformed. Vested in earth-toned everyday clothing, the Boer's farming clothes served as camouflage, while the Redcoats drew attention to themselves and could not easily hide.

The simple alteration of colour in the British Army uniforms had a dramatic effect on not only the aesthetic, but also the function of the military uniform. As these new uniforms did not reveal location as explicitly as the earlier styles, khaki uniforms now acted as camouflage in addition to identifying the wearer as a member of the British service.

Although nearly 60 years later, the cut and style of Holmes' uniform has hardly changed at all from this initial alteration. While the style is arguably outdated, the notion of an old model of clothing seems suitable considering the timeless nature of battle and of war. The military uniform as symbol for war is as old as the archetype itself. Varying only with culture, historic period, and technology, military uniforms are immediately identifiable.

### III. Details of the Uniform

The various patches and buttons also have symbolic value, which can be "read" by those who know the lexicon and syntax. These elements of the uniform are such that immediately demonstrate hierarchy, so that personnel can identify one another, and determine superiors and subordinates by mere sight.

**Buttons:** There are ten buttons on the uniform, each bearing an identical crest. Pressed on the face of each button is a crowned loop enclosing a maple leaf with the word "CANADA" above the crown. On the circle is written "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*", which is the motto of the Order of the Garter, the oldest and most important of the orders of knighthood in Great Britain. The head of the organization is the sovereign, and the garter and motto also appear on the royal coat of arms of Great Britain. This French expression can be translated as 'shamed be the person who thinks evil of it'. The story behind the saying originates in the fourteenth century, when Edward III was dancing with the Countess of Salisbury, and her garter fell off. In response to the reaction of those watching, Edward allegedly said "Honi soit qui mal y pense," and tied the garter around his own leg. The phrase later became the motto of the order, which Edward founded in 1348.



Figure 4. Button detail. Image courtesy of CBC Museum collection.



In addition to demonstrating a clear loyalty and allegiance to the crown, this crest provides a link between the notions of chivalry and knighthood, and what is expected or associated with a soldier of the Canadian or British forces.

**Shoulder Flash:** The only visual icon that indicated that Holmes was not a soldier, but rather a war correspondent, was the shoulder flash that reads “Canada War Correspondent”. Made of cotton fabric, shoulder flashes were regulation wear 1½ inches below the shoulder seam, and usually indicated “Canada”. Initially only for soldiers serving overseas, these icons became a norm for all soldiers serving in the Active or Reserve Army by 1943.



*Figure 5. Shoulder Flash detail. Image courtesy of CBC Museum collection.*

**Ribbon Bar:** On everyday wear with the uniform, full medals were not worn, but a piece of the ribbon was attached to a backing to make a "ribbon bar". The medals represented on the bar, from left to right are: 1939 - 1945 Star, Italy Star, France & Germany Star, Defence Medal. The first three medals were awarded for serving during the conflict and on the Italian and North-west Europe military campaigns. The last medal was awarded for serving over 6 months in the United Kingdom.



*Figure 6. Ribbon bar detail. Image courtesy of CBC Museum collection.*

**Patch:** Distinguishing patches such as these were used to identify the higher formation of the wearer (e.g. Brigade, Division, Corps, Army). They were worn below the shoulder flash, and this particular patch indicates the wearer would have belonged to the First Canadian Army. This is a very broad unit, as Armies consisted of 50,000 or more soldiers. Typically commanded by a lieutenant general or higher, an army combines two or more corps. As Holmes was not an actual soldier, this uniform does not contain patches that would have indicated divisional patch such as “infantry”, “armoured cavalry”, or “armoured division” status.



*Figure 7. Patch detail. Image courtesy of CBC Museum collection.*

With Betsy it seems natural that we could associate Holmes' position with the armoured division, those of tanks. However, this paper suggests that Holmes would have belonged to the infantry instead. Traditionally, the infantry were divided from the cavalry by lack of horses, as these troops proceeded on foot. "Infantry" was actually a derogatory term used by the cavalry for what they felt were lesser soldiers than themselves. The term stems from the Greek words "in" and "fans"- literally "without speaking". The cavalry were in effect calling the foot soldiers 'children'. It seems appropriate to me that Holmes lacked a horse, did not bear arms, and did not do the actual reporting or "speaking" for the correspondences he engineered. Rather, he was responsible not to speak, but rather to transmit the words of others. His own voice was never heard, but his actions had invaluable results. It was because of him that the war stories were told, even though he never spoke a word.

#### **IV. Uniform as Storytelling Medium**

Various constituents of and the whole equation of the symbols in the uniform clearly communicate a message to those who understand the language of this piece of clothing. In addition, when placed in a historical perspective, the uniform also serves to communicate much greater ideologies than just those specific to the military. This artefact is also revealing about the cultural values and boundaries of the society, and as well as intimately linked to the technological progressions of the period.

As indicated by both groups being identified by the same uniform, the equivalence of status between the soldiers and the journalists speaks to the weight given to news and media during this time. According to the implicit value given by providing a journalist with a military uniform, it was as important to relate the news on the front back home, as it was to actually be serving one's country in the military. Given that serving one's country is arguably one of the highest honours to bestow, this speaks very favourably to the importance of journalism.

The war itself, as illustrated clearly by the propaganda of the time, demonstrates the very values of Canadian culture and society that the war represented fighting for. These ideologies that the allies fought for are inextricably woven into the uniform that was sported on the battlefield. Holmes' uniform, as both a fragment of and symbol for the war represents the same values. Although specific to Canadian troops and military, the uniformity of all military attire links the universal notion of battle, and those who fight for their country. Uniforms are designed to function in this way- to be an instantly decipherable symbol for something larger than the individual, such as an organization, a team, an occupation, etc. In addition to identifying the wearer with a larger idea, shared value or goal, uniforms also successfully displace the individual, replacing the character with an ideology or association. In the case of this military

uniform, it represents a nationality, loyalty and political statement. The individuality associated with clothing choice, usually one of the most personal statements that one can make, is completely eradicated by a uniform. Instead, another meaning is imposed by association, and the wearer becomes part of a larger affair. The belief systems associated with this textile, and uniforms in general, cause the wearer to be linked with something more universal.

This textile is also telling of the value given to a new pre-war technology: Radio. Before WWII there were no war correspondents in the way that we are now familiar. Canadians received news information from the Canadian Press. Although radio had been in operation for a good many years, radio news as it now exists, did not come into being until 1941. Programming up to this point was instead more entertainment focused. Radio had only recently been regulated at the start of the war, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had only been around for 3 years at this point, and the radio waves were dominated by US programming. Until the war there had been no real demand for CBC news service, as the major newspapers were the principal news sources. When Canada entered the war before the United States, there was a pressing need for news that was distinctly Canadian, and the CBC in particular grew to meet this demand.

With the lives of loved ones at stake, Canadians became completely dependent on radio to provide them with a link to the distant place where the war was taking place. Radio became even further integrated into the lives of all Canadians at this time. Canada was no longer removed from the battlefield, as radio allowed the front lines to be brought right into the living room of all CBC listeners. The program “With the Troops in England” and the “Messages Home” segment in particular, provided this personal connection. Radio provided a vital support to a Canadian public burdened by war. As the Home Front tuned in, radio, Canadian social history and the CBC were changed forever.<sup>1</sup>

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan states: “The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”<sup>2</sup> This textile is both a result of, as well as a catalyst for developments in audio recording technologies. As WWII was the first war that maintained foreign correspondents that communicated via radio, the presence of journalists was completely dependent on the reporting technology that put them there. The improvement of portable technologies allowed reporters like Matthew Halton and engineers like Art Holmes to capture, edit and transmit the stories and sounds directly from the front line.

At this time there existed portable recording units, powered by battery, although archaic by today’s standards. At this time, tape recording had not yet been developed, and instead war correspondents used large and awkward disc recorders, which had to be kept level at all times in order to create a clear recording. These kinds of challenges stimulated the quest for portability in recording technology, and led to major developments in the post-war period.<sup>3</sup> In 1940 the bulky and cumbersome RCA 2701 disc cutter was a state of the art portable unit, but by the end of the decade advances in technology had led to the creation and popularity of the Kudelski II Nagra tape recorder, a much lighter and more compact unit.

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<sup>1</sup> Powley, A.E. *Broadcast from the Front: Canadian Radio Overseas in the Second World War*. (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Powley, A.E. *Broadcast from the Front: Canadian Radio Overseas in the Second World War*. (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd, 1975).

## **Conclusion**

A significant piece of Canadian history, the CBC Museum is proud to hold Art Holmes' War Correspondent Uniform in our permanent collection. Into the fibres of this uniform are embedded innumerable stories of the Second World War, the man who wore it and what he saw, experienced and the news provided to others. In addition to telling these tales, the uniform as a material culture artefact speaks to broader issues, such as the history of military uniforms, the values of Canadian society and is intricately bound to the history of recording and production equipment in Canada. Originally Holmes conveyed messages to Canadians about the war, his uniform was intended to convey messages to his peers, and even today the uniform continues its purpose as messenger as the uniform continues to tell stories to museum visitors about a period of history, a particular activity and the person who wore it.