

The First British Naval Uniforms

Text and drawings by
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Lawrence Keeble is a frequent contributor to Tradition Magazine, the well-known British monthly journal dedicated to military dress history. It may come as a surprise to many readers that the British Navy officer had no uniform before 1748 (the seaman not until 1857!). Here is a summary of how officers' dress began.



In 1740, the composer Thomas Arne wrote an air for the play *Alfred* by James Thomson, the refrain of which went:

Rule, Britannia Britannia, rule the waves!
Britons never never shall be slaves!

For the next two hundred years this simplicism was to work an evocative spell in all British and some non-British hearts; almost at once it became a species of Sacred Command, with many able and willing executants in the Sea Service. But it was not until 1745 that the Officers' Club, formed to advance its sea-going members' interests, petitioned George II to grant them what other navies already possessed: the privilege of distinctive dress. The King, legend and tradition will have it, was asked to choose between variations of blue and red, and chose blue with white facings after a glimpse of the Duchess of Bedford attired for riding in a habit of these colours. Whatever its motivations, the decision was momentous: the time was to come when every maritime nation would dress its navy in attire based on it, i.e. fundamentally on the British style and colours.

In the eighteenth century, Britain's navy was commanded by two kinds of professional sea officers: first, those responsible for maintaining a ship to a proper standard of performance, rig, equipment, weapons and stores, meaning the master, boatswain, gunner, carpenter, sail-maker, master-at-arms, cook, purser, surgeon and chaplain (the last three were not "executive" but "civilian", though all were ap-

pointed on a permanent footing by Warrant from the Admiralty). Neither they nor their subordinates were to be given distinctive dress until much later (the seamen-ratings not officially until 1857). The second kind was the "military" fighting officer, whose duty was to direct the ship and her company as a weapon of war.

The ranks of the Royal Navy were: three Flag-Officers — Admiral, Vice Admiral and Rear Admiral; Captain (over three years post), Captain (under three years post); Master-and-Commander (not to be confused with warrant rank "Master"); and Lieutenant. Although holding no commission, Midshipmen were included in the Dress Order of 1748 and all thereafter.

But rank was not the same as "post". In all ships-of-the-line (vessels of 60 to 100 guns, fit to lie in the line of battle) and in frigates (smaller ships of 30 to 40 guns employed for scouting and communication), the *post* of commanding officer was filled by a man who held the title of "Captain, R.N." but this officer was not necessarily a Captain, R.N. by *rank* merely because he was "*the captain*" of a ship; officers of lower rank could be appointed to command certain types of ships. Moreover, a King's Commission authorised its holder to occupy one particular *post* and no other: the "general Commission" to hold *rank* as an Officer of the Royal Navy came much later, in 1860. Many vessels — sloops, bomb-ketches, cutters and the like — were too small for the services of a ranking Captain. In large ships, sailing and navigation was the master's duty, but he was not carried in small vessels. The rank "Master-and-Commander", intermediate between Captain and Lieutenant, was created for certain Commission officers skilled in navigation, to qualify them for these lesser commands. At a later date, when warrant masters were sent into small ships, the cumbersome rank-name was shortened to "Commander".

The Lieutenant, literally, was the captain's deputy, but the increasing size of ships and crews and the complexity of their organization required the services of ever more lieutenants. The senior Lieutenant was Second-in-Command — "first" of a group, with lower grades of Second, Third and so on: but these were distinctions of *post* in the ship, not of rank in the Navy. A Lieutenant could be promoted to Captain without passing through Commander's rank and, like the latter, could also assume command of small vessels. Midshipmen, traditionally youths drawn from all the middle classes, had become what they were to remain: officer-trainees, usually proteges of Captains or Admirals. But by the order of 1748, "Persons acting as Midshipmen should likewise have a uniform cloathing in order to distinguish their Class to be in the Rank of Gentlemen."

The Flag-Officer group subdivided into nine



Fig. 1 — Captain (over three years' post).

stages of seniority. The Dutch wars of the late seventeenth century had gathered English sea forces into one huge fleet in home waters, tactically disposed in three squadrons: the Centre (red ensigns), Van (white ensigns), Rear (blue ensigns) — the Chief Command being exercised from the Centre, or Red Squadron. Next in command was the Admiral of the White, third the Admiral of the Blue. Each Squadron was a fleet in itself, with centre, van and rear divisions in charge respectively of Admiral, Vice, and Rear-Admiral. Hence nine Flag-Officers were present, their status defined by their tactical positions, a Vice-Admiral of the White being senior to his colleague of the Blue. There was no post called "Admiral of the Red" — the officer commanding the Centre was also the "Admiral of the Fleet".

By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, fleets had become smaller and more numerous, acting separately over wider areas; but the Flag List still allowed for only nine Admirals, in the former sense of appointments to one fleet (although more Captains were being promoted in rank). By this association of rank with non-existent posts, and the concept of seniority which this implied, a Rear-Admiral of the Blue might have to spend the next

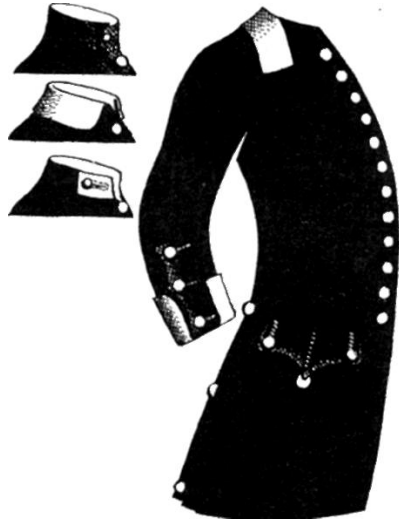


Fig. 2—Midshipman's all-purpose coat. Collars of 1748, 1758, 1767.

thirty years of his life climbing the nine rank-steps of the List. The farce finally ended in 1864, when the three-colour system of squadronal seniority was abandoned, but in 1815 there were two hundred and twenty Flag-Officers in the Royal Navy!

Lastly, the "Commodore". This was a post, never a rank. When two or more ships acted in concert without benefit of a flag officer, the senior Captain could be appointed Commodore to underline his authority. This entitled him to fly a penant at his masthead, but not to wear a distinctive dress: he reverted to normal status when his special duty was over.

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By an Order dated April 13th, 1748, the Admiralty announced that henceforth a "uniform cloathing" was to be worn by flag officers, Captains, Commanders, Lieutenants and Midshipmen of His Majesty's Navy. Before this date, sea-officers had pleased themselves about the colour and cut of their clothes: portraits and literary references suggest a preference for red, grey, blue, or brown, with gold or silver lace

and the universal three-cornered hat. Military coats were sometimes worn, and buff or matching waistcoats and breeches. This garb in no way differed from that of all middle and upper-class European males, being an evolved form — shorter and fuller skirted — of the late seventeenth-century "Persian Vest." Its military undress version had an embryonic collar and wide lapels for buttoning over the chest if desired (see Fig. 1). The under or "waist" coat was sleeved but cuffless, with a hemline at mid-thigh.

Nothing could more extravagantly epitomise the freedom enjoyed in dress than Hogarth's celebrated picture at Greenwich of Captain Lord George Graham in his cabin (painted about 1754). His lordship wears a grey coat lined blue, grey breeches, and white waistcoat with very wide gold lace. A red cloak edged with thick grey fur lies nonchalantly about his shoulders and, in the absence of his wig — temporarily consigned for safe-keeping to the head of his pet dog — he sports a blue velvet cap, and smokes a long pipe.

Excepting Midshipmen, every officer was now to supply himself with two uniforms: a dress "sute" for formal wear, and a "frock" for more ordinary occasions, with appropriate waistcoats. The Order said nothing about breeches, hats, or swords. Sealed patterns of the coats were lodged at the London office and Plymouth Dockyard, for officers' guidance, but no patterns were sent to ships abroad, nor can a verbal description be traced. A covering letter instructed Commanders to follow the pattern suit for junior Captains "as it varies only in the manner of the lacing", but no details were vouchsafed, nor was any pattern for the "frock" for this rank, so far as we know. By happy chance, the two main sources of our knowledge are complementary. The Dockyard patterns for Midshipmen and Lieutenants, with waistcoats for both grades of Captain, are now in

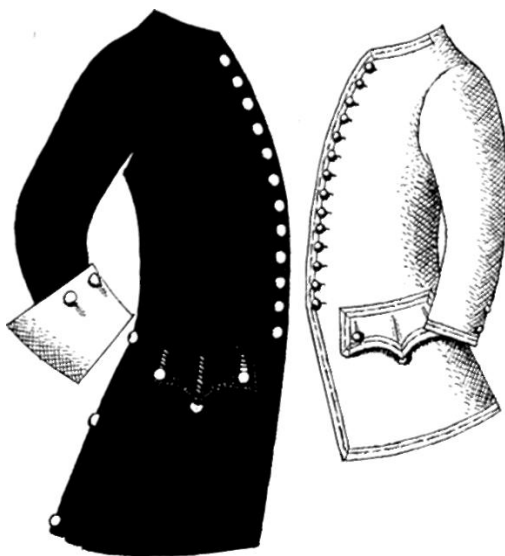
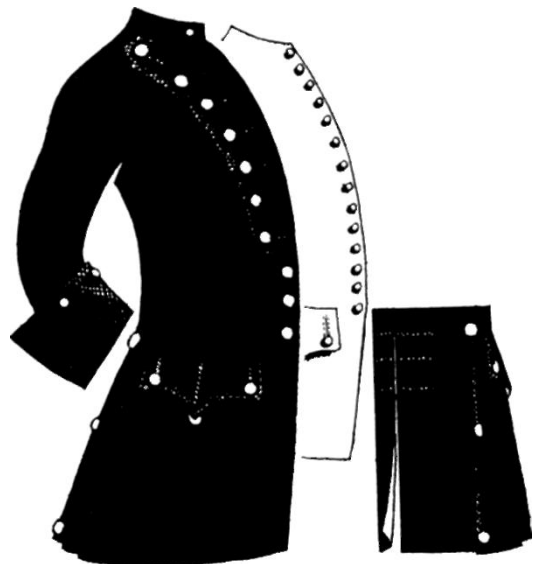


Fig. 3—Lieutenant's suit (left) and frock (right).



the Museum at Greenwich. A letter to London in 1780 reports the theft of the Captains' and flag-officers' patterns, but an Admiral's dress coat in the Scottish United Services Museum confirms contemporary paintings. With these and with the many portraits of Captains, our information would be complete but for the back and pocket lacing on flag-officers' uniforms, the Captains' back lacing on both uniforms, and the Commanders' dress.

The pattern coats are of fairly dark blue cloth, lined white. Portraits show a lighter blue, perhaps as a result of colour-loss in the exposed pigments or, no less plausible, of uncleanable penetrations of atmospheric soot in the surviving cloth specimens. This "navy blue" was to become darker still, a near black. The waistcoats, now yellowed with age, were originally white kerseymere. The lace was gold throughout and came in two patterns; flag-officers' were gold-embroidered. The frock was versatile, fitted inside the front edges with a buttoned flap for closing together, and when extra protection was sought, the lapels could be crossed over the chest. Buttons on suits other than flag-officers', and including the Midshipman's one-purpose coat, were convex, made of wood faced with brass, and quite plain (Figs. 12 a, b). Frocks of Captains and lesser ranks had slightly convex solid brass buttons, with an incised Tudor rose design (Fig. 12c), but for flag-officers the ornament was a small floral device within a circle, enclosed by an octagonal border figured with a centre row of small beads (Fig. 7). Suit buttons for flag-officers appear to be similar. A smaller size of each button was used on waistcoats and, in the case of the frocks, on collars.

The following notes on the accompanying drawings may be useful to the reader:

MIDSHIPMAN — All-purpose uniform (Fig. 2): Blue coat, single-breasted; 12 buttons front, black stitched holes; wide turnback of white lining at neck, small button right for turning-up and closing over throat. (On the pattern, this turnback is detached from the neckline in the front segment, either from intention or age.) Small cuffs turned-up white, with blue sash (lined white on reverse) with three buttons and black holes.

Pocket-flaps of this and both lieutenants' coats are identical. Outer buttons are practical; the middle one is below the point, its hole a dummy. Side-skirts divide from the tail in a plait, the tail is divided up the centre. The back has six buttons: one at the top of each plait, two on the outer edge of each half of the tail for fastening to the side-skirt. Of these the lowermost is at the hem, the second slightly higher than midway. Three rows of plain black button-hole stitching traverse the upper 5 in. of the tail, either side of the slit. Skirts and tail are amply folded at

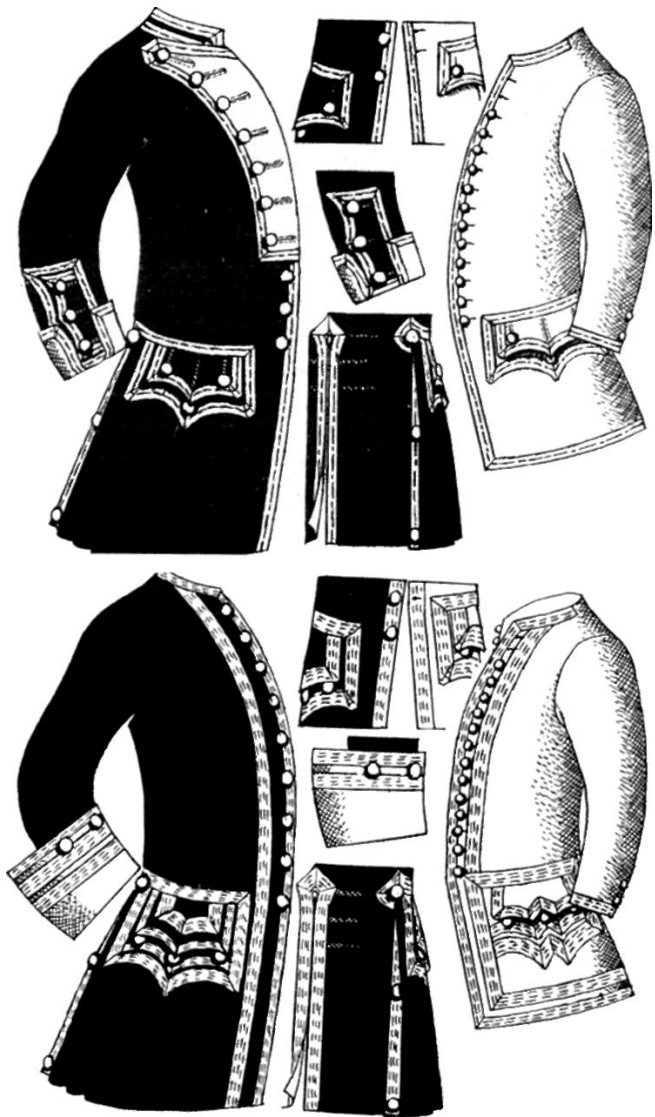


Fig. 4 — Captain's (over three years) frock (top) and suit (bottom). Three center inserts show modifications for under three years' post.

the plaits; this tailoring was, of course, standard for most coats of the time.

LIEUTENANT — Undress Frock (Fig. 3): Blue coat; short lapels faced blue, tops wide and triangle-pointed, tapering to waist, seven buttons aside with black holes (top hole sloped down); three single buttons below lapel, right front, black holes left front. Low collar (about 1 in.), small button right (missing on pattern, but shown in portrait); large blue round cuffs (about 6 in. deep in front, 8 in. at back), three *small* buttons and holes. Waistcoat plain white, small buttons (also for MIDSHIPMAN, but convex plain buttons).

Dress Suit: Blue coat, single-breasted, 11 buttons front, black holes; no collar; large round white cuffs, three full-size buttons, white stitched waistcoat white, gold-laced neck, front, pocket-flaps and hem as shown. 14 small buttons front, three to pocket.

MASTER-AND-COMMANDER — Undress Frock (Fig. 4?): Conjectural. Probably same as CAPTAIN

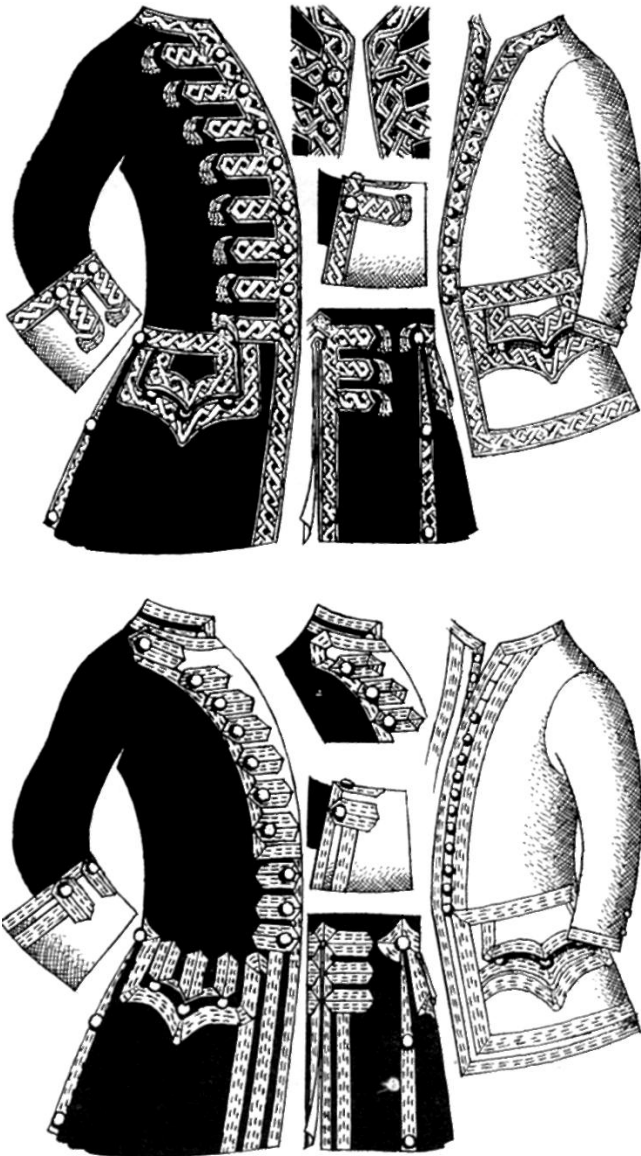


Fig. 5 — Flag Officer's (all grades) suit (top) and frock (bottom).

(under three years) but blue lapels, as in later Orders. Logic would suggest lapels of the lower rank with the cuffs and lace of the higher. An alternative would be to add CAPTAIN'S lace to a LIEUTENANT'S coat, but subsequent uniform does not support this.

Dress Suit: even less certain; possible distinctions from CAPTAIN (under three years) could be: (i) narrow lace throughout, (ii) one row wide lace on cuffs, one row on flaps but not surrounding pocket, or (iii) some combination of these.

CAPTAIN — Frock (under three years Post) (Fig. 4): Blue coat; short tapered lapels faced white, seven buttons, white holes; three buttons below lapel, right front; low collar, small button right; small white cuffs, blue slashes, three buttons; all buttons *below* pocket-flaps; narrow lace, two rows collar, one row lapels (back and front), front coat-edges to hem only, cuffs and slashes, flaps and skirt-seams. By inference from later practice, the seam lace ran round the top

rear buttons and down to hem of skirts, and tail-slit was laced both edges as shown. Waistcoat same as LIEUTENANT'S Dress.

Frock (over three years Post) (Fig. 4): same as above, but additional row framing slashes and pockets of coat and waistcoat.

Reynolds' portrait of Alexander Hood, later Lord Bridport, very clearly shows the junior CAPTAIN'S frock, and a popular mode of wearing it with crossed lapels. There is some confusion about the frock lacking distinction between the two Captain's grades. Dudley Jarret reproduces a Gainsborough portrait of Howe to illustrate a senior Captain. This shows white lapels and *one* row of lace on cuff-slashes and pocket-flaps. But this is also true of the Hood portrait and of an unnamed Captain, both of which are described by the Museum authorities as "Captain (under three years)". It is worth while to refer to yet another Reynolds' portrait at Greenwich, of his friend Keppel as a Captain. Although representing him landing in France after his ship had run aground in 1747, the portrait was painted 1753-4. Keppel had been an advocate for a naval uniform. He is shown wearing a frock remarkably like the one adopted; the position of the arms obscures the lace on the cuff-slashes, but the waistcoat pockets are double-laced. It is not known whether Reynolds, who painted Keppel many times, used the new official uniform as a model, or the pre-1748 unofficial version worn by his subject on the occasion depicted. By 1774, senior Captains were wearing this additional lace framing the slashes and flaps: in the writer's view this was probably the case always, and he has so drawn it.

Dress Suit (under three years): blue coat, single-breasted, 9-11 buttons; large round white cuffs, three buttons; no collar; wide lace down front edges, one row; one row narrow lace round neck; wide lace two rows cuffs, one row flaps, pocket-frames and skirt-seams. Doubtless the back lace conformed to the manner of the frock. Waistcoat white, wide lace one row neck, front edges, hem, flaps and frames, 14 buttons front.

Dress Suit (over three years Post): as above, but fronts, cuffs, and flaps edged with additional one row narrow lace, and one row of the same lengthways between wide pocket-frame lace and lower edge of flaps. Back lacing assumed as above.

FLAG-OFFICER — Frock (all grades) (Fig. 5): Blue coat with short lapels faced white, seven buttons; three single buttons below; low collar, one button; large round white cuffs, three buttons. Laced two rows collar, one row lapels, pointed lace holes (back and front). Cuffs laced one row top, one row below joining outer laced holes. Widths as drawn. Skirt and pocket lace not clear — this and back lace inferred from "one-purpose" dress of 1767, a modifi-

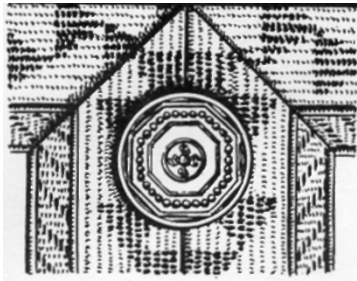


Fig. 6—Narrow lace for Captain's suit and flag officer's frock.

Fig. 7—Button for flag officer's frock, perhaps also for suit.

Fig. 8—Breast embroidery of gold thread for flag officer's suit (see Fig. 5).

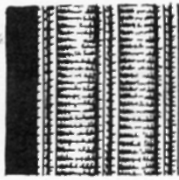
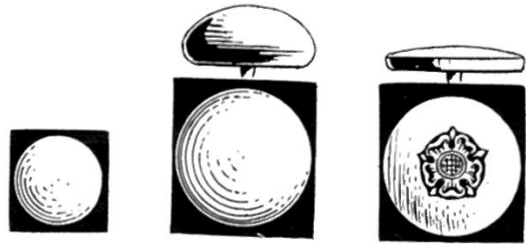


Fig. 9—Gold lace thread for Commander's and Captain's frock waistcoats and for Lieutenant's suit waistcoats.

Fig. 10—Wide gold lace for Captain's suit, flag officer's frock.



Fig. 11—Lapel and hat of, presumably, a Commander.



Figs. 12 a, b, c — From l. to r.: small general button, all-purpose where not essential to decor; wood covered with brass and all-brass. Frock button, to Captain; wood faced with brass. Suit button, to Captain, wood faced with brass ornamented with an embossed Tudor rose. See Fig. 7.

Knots: with suit, a gilt or silver-hilted small sword, either *colichemarde* or triangle-bladed; with frock, a fighting sword, either double-edged military type, or shorter one-edged curved cutlass-type, both with round pommel and curved guard. Probably always in leather shoulder-belt (oblique frog-suspension) as suggested by the Serres plates of 1777, sometimes worn over the waistcoat or even over the coat in undress. Black leather scabbards, brass, gilt or silver (small-sword) mounts, blue and gold cord-and-tassel swordknots, usually for dress wear only. *Gloves:* white or light buff skin, usually for dress wear only.

cation of this suit. Waistcoat white, laced as shown.

Dress Suit (all grades): blue coat, single breasted, eight buttons front; large round white cuffs, three buttons; white waistcoat; ornate embroidery on both garments, as shown in drawing. A specimen survives (already cited), and numerous portraits, notably of Anson, after Reynolds, in the National Portrait Gallery, two at Greenwich of the ill-fated Byng by Hudson and an unknown, and of Tyrell also by Hudson. All evidence is consistent and leaves no room for doubt.

It remains to refer briefly to items not covered by the Order. *Breeches:* portraits confirm the adoption of matching blue for these, which fastened with four small buttons below the knee over the white stockings. *Hats:* black, gold-laced for all ranks (probably wide lace for flag-officers) with the usual Hanoverian black silk cockade, button and lace loop. *Neckcloth:* almost always white at this period. *Shoes:* black, with brass or gilt buckles. *Hair and Wigs:* senior officers appear in powdered full-bottomed wigs, younger men in the tie-wig and queue, or their own hair tied in a black bow. *Swords, Belts and*

The rough-and-tumble of sea life and the strong individuality of the age would have delayed adoption of the dress, with evasions of its use, despite the petition to have it granted. We may suppose quaint variations and interpretations to which official attention had to be called until a reasonable conformity was reached. Apart from the slight alteration to the Midshipman's white turnback in 1758, the Order was in force until January 23, 1767, when the suit was abolished and the frock modified to be a dress for all occasions.



Fig. 13—Fighting sword, first half 18th century, with cutlass blade.

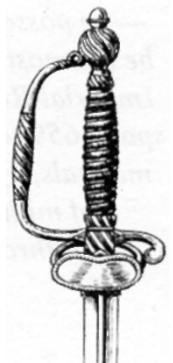


Fig. 14—Dress smallsword, 1755.