

At our February general meeting, member Susan Webster will present her collection of knitting and sewing items related to wartime and the military. Here she provides some background information about this field.

They Also Serve who only Sit and Knit

by Susan Webster

Needlework and the military do not sound very compatible, but in fact these two fields of collecting intersect on quite a broad front. Nowadays needlework is usually considered women's work, but men on their own – like servicemen through the ages – often have to fend for themselves, and that includes keeping their gear tidy and smart. And, on the other hand, those still at home have a vigorous interest in the progress of their military, and often demonstrate their support through their handiwork.

A fair bit of social research has been published about knitting to support war efforts and other “worthy” causes¹, and there still is quite a bit of collectable needlework material around at very reasonable prices. And, of course, militaria is itself a huge collecting field.

My own collection covers mostly knitting-military items and printed materials, with a few sewing and general items thrown in. It comprises almost entirely things from English-speaking countries. Hopefully, other ACC members can bring items from other countries and regions.

I've divided my collecting interests into three topics

- Tools used by the military
- Trench art, which includes needlework tools made by servicemen – usually from the detris and debris of service life including battle
- Civilian items relating to support of war efforts and military service personnel – these include many commemoratives of battles, events, ships, etc.

Needlework Tools Used by the Military

The earliest known war-related items we have are pin cushions from the English Civil War 1642-48. Other very early items include bobbins for carrying thread, needle books, and thimbles. We do have earlier written references – US

Figure 1 – A World War I huswif sold through mail order catalogues in the USA. This example was sent by Miss Cornelia Hosford of Shelter Island in New York state, USA, to Buster (presumably a relative) in 1917. The huswif holds military buttons, a cake of wax (to strengthen the thread), thread, scissors and safety pins threaded with smaller buttons. These were stuffed in the arms, while the rest went into the body pouch. The cords around the neck would be pulled tight to hold the equipment safely inside. Cornelia Hosford was born in 1861 and died in the 1940's.



collector Monty Phair² notes “belt-bags” mentioned in writings from the Hundred Years War in the fifteenth century. There was also a sailor’s ditty box in the recovered *Vasa*, a Swedish ship that sank in 1628. And we have a lot of sailors’ scrimshaw work, including needlework tools; but that’s another topic.

Small military sewing kits are known colloquially as housewives or huswifs. These are known from the American Civil war, although they were not officially issued, but rather built up by the servicemen or given to departing combatants by their womenfolk. The US military did issue huswifs in World War I³; and, of course, they were issued by most governments before and during World War II and after.⁴

Many photos and cartoons have been published of soldiers and sailors sewing and knitting. They were probably sewing from necessity and knitting from necessity and/or boredom. Although we have few male knitters today, they were much more common up to and during World War I, when many soldiers and sailors came from non-urban areas. See Figure 2 where a printed needle book shows a knitting soldier during the Napoleonic wars. No knitting needles were issued by any government, to my knowledge.



Figure 2 – German needle book printed around 1820 on silk and cardboard by coloured copperplate engraving. Note that the knitting soldier, sitting casually on a fortress wall, is using only two knotted needles, rather than four. This is one of the earliest references to knotted needles, as the double pointed were much more common.

Trench Art

This is a well-established collecting field, overlapping with other areas of militaria and such specialist fields as my own of needlework tools. Well known Australian antique expert and valuer Alan Carter says trench art includes :

- ✓ War mementos made by soldiers during and after the Great War (1914-1918)

- ✓ Items produced by civilians during both World Wars (1914-1945)
- ✓ Souvenirs produced commercially from discarded war materials during the period between the wars (1918-1939). (Would this include war surplus stores ??)

Carter says collecting trench art is not so popular today, although I would think the growth of respect for our military past and our servicemen (compare, for example, growing attendance at dawn services) will support the popularity of this field of collecting. More recent wars have, unfortunately, provided additional materials in this genre.⁵

One very well known sub-field of trench art is prisoner-of-war items produced for sale to obtain some pocket money. The bone work and straw work items produced by Napoleonic prisoners of war in Britain are highly sought after.⁶ But these efforts to alleviate boredom in the POW camps and obtain some funds didn't end with the 19th century. A recent episode of *The Antiques Roadshow* included a ship-in-a-bottle produced in the 1940's by a German POW in Britain. Two examples of World War I trench art are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Trench art :

Right, above, a man-sized knitting sheath with a cut-off cartridge casing as the metal cap or ferrule to protect the hole into which the needle is inserted. The cartridge casing is stamped "Normal Powder No 12"

Right, below, a sweetheart pin cushion from the Royal Kent West regiment. Heart-shaped pin cushions were a very common memento sent home. As with this one, they often incorporate the name of the soldier's unit – here the insignia, including the Invicta horse, appears to be cut from a piece of the letterhead of the regiment, which is also known as "Queen's Own". During World War I it was the King's Own.





Civilian Items

There are two reasons for development and promotion of civilian support for the military and wartime efforts – beyond the real need of any government for assistance in producing supplies. Firstly, governments always want to mobilise and maintain civilian support for the war effort. Secondly, most of the population wants to support the war effort – or at least to support our soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women. Think of the Iraqi invasion – the majority of Australian population had doubts about the invasion, but all supported the efforts of our troops.

Social organisations like Red Cross led the support effort in all countries through a variety of needlework aids and many, many knitting pattern booklets.

Sometimes these items served a dual purpose. The *Red Cross Knitting Recorder*, bought from South Australia, says on the back: “Do try and sell as many of these Knitting Recorders as you can – you are helping the Red Cross.” So the item was used to help produce clothing for the troops and also to raise funds.

Other, specific-purpose groups providing items to help us support the combatants were the Australian Comforts Fund, Missions to Seamen, and the Merchant Navy Comforts Service.

The press also contributed to the movement to knit to support the troops. Examples I have include a *Life* magazine cover and article dated November, 1941, a *Modern Priscilla* double page spread during World War 1, a *Australian Home Journal* supplement and a copy of W.H. Comstock Company’s 1943 *Almanac*. This Canadian firm seems to have been a purveyor of patent medicines – Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills and Dead Shot Worm Candy are in the almanac – and it has many “homey” touches, like a punched hole to hang the booklet on a string (in the loo?)

And, of course, almost all yarn manufacturers or retailers included service patterns in their leaflets. Mlle Reigo – one of the pioneers of printed knitting patterns, a knitting tool inventor, and proprietress of a haberdashery outlet in London – jumped on the bandwagon with a booklet *Comforts for the Crimea* published in 1854. I’ve never seen this volume, but I do have material from Patons, Clark’s, and Columbia.

In many publications, it is hard to ignore the commercial interest at the heart of the war support message. Chatwick Red Heart’s *Knit for Victory* booklet says : “What better way could you show your patriotism and loyalty than by knitting... cargoes of sturdy garments... from cheery warm wools like these.”

Other publications made a plea for understanding of their war-related difficulties. As the Sun-glo booklet says :
 “Serving Australia... ..Serving You The bulk of our production is now requisitioned for the Defence Department
 We are, of course, still manufacturing these wools for your knitting requirements.... In serving Australia first, we are
 also serving you.”

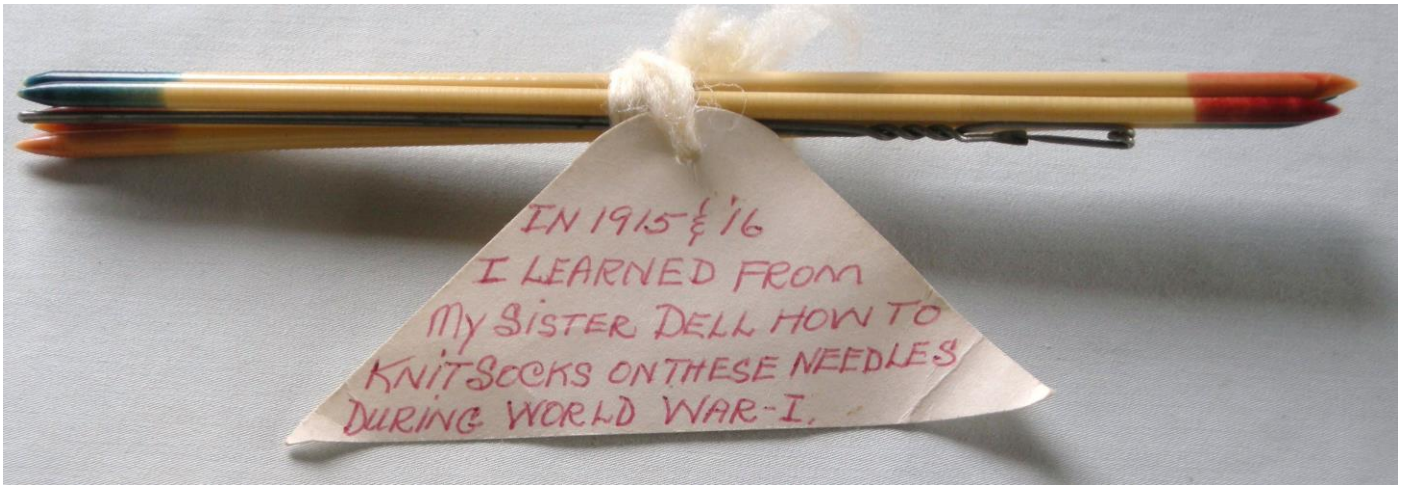


Figure 4 - “Patriotic” red-white-and-blue knitting needles, probably produced by Fleischer during World War I, purchased on Ebay in 2008.

Other suppliers also used patriotic themes including, in the US, many red-white-blue items. My collection includes needles from Fleischers (a WWI era producer of knitting needles and yarn), and a large number of items from C.J. Bates, specialists in knitting needles and other needlework tools.

There were also a number of branded and unbranded “patriotic” tools or gadgets, sometimes of questionable taste, but understandable, I guess, in the wartime environment.



Figure 5 – “Patriotic” point protectors for double-pointed knitting needles.

- On the left, two sets from J.C. Bates’ red-white-and-blue patriotic range –a pair of chevrons (unbranded) and a tubular pair with four r/w/b branded needles inside.
- Also three sets with a verse (this seems to be an American idiosyncrasy). Firstly, in the centre, an anti-Japanese -- a slant-eyed wooden pair with cork inserts to hold the needles. The card reads: “Here’s a corking place/For your needles to fit,/When you make up your mind/You don’t want to knit.” Top, painted wooden heads whose card reads : “Knobs for Needy Knitters – There’s much to be knit to keep our boys fit – Uncle Sam says we must each do our bit – So at once we should arm with needles and yarn. – And these,

to keep points from jabbing and harm”. Bottom right, painted metal head and shoes with the verse reading “Your knitting needles/You may lose/Unless I tuck them in my shoes”

From this point, my collection becomes more eclectic - but how could I pass up such items as

- a pin cushion made from fabric from the coat of an American Revolutionary War soldier

- a knitting bag labelled “bundles for Britain”
- Factory-sized spools of thread from a Castlemaine factory that made uniforms -- forgotten in a storeroom for 60 years,
- And – my favourite – an unfinished bandage – not quite a needlework tool, but definitely supporting the war effort!

¹ See *No Idle Hands* by Anne MacDonald for US details or *The Loving Stitch* by Heather Nicholson about New Zealand.

² See Monty Phair’s article in the Thimble Collectors International *Bulletin*, “The Military Sewing Kit”, Summer, 2000 issue.

³ See the photo on page 25 of Christina Bertrand’s *Notions of War*, published by Thimble Collectors International in 1991.

⁴ One current member of the Needlework Tool Collectors Society of Australia remembers that her Jewish family in Germany during the 1930’s ran a factory which produced huswifs for the German military.

⁵ See, for example, Nicholas Saunders’ *Trench Art*, p 5, which shows a recent reproduction (!) of an original Huey helicopter made from Vietnamese Coca Cola cans during that war.

⁶ See *The Arts and Crafts of Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War 1756-1816* by Clive Lloyd or visit the Norman Cross Museum in Peterborough, UK.