

Knitting and the Military

They Also Serve Who Sit and Knit

Susan Webster

- Knitter coming up to 50 years
- Always interested in history – studied at uni, etc.
- Started to combine the two in about 1990
- Collect all sorts of knitting tools, not just luxury
- More you collect, the more you want to know – this is not a well-documented field
- My special research interest is the period when knitting needles were becoming commercialized – no longer sold as a commodity by weight
- Sold under brand names.
- Have 750+ specimens of individual brand names, 950+ brand names in my database
- Divide knitting tools into several categories, which sometimes overlap
 - Needles
 - Tip guards
 - Yarn holders
 - Other – patterns, books, ephemera
 - * Needle holders
 - * Knitting sheaths and holders
 - * Measures
- Knitting and needlework related to the military and wartime is one sub-collection



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 d'êtres 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.

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.

"Peace in the Land" by **Carl Spitzweg** (February 5, 1808 – September 23, 1885) was a [German romanticist painter](#) and [poet](#). He is considered to be one of the most important artists of the [Biedermeier](#) era.



“The Knitting Sentry”

Carl Spitzweg (February 5, 1808 – September 23, 1885) was a [German romanticist painter](#) and [poet](#). He is considered to be one of the most important artists of the [Biedermeier](#) era.

Among many other works, he painted several which depicted knitting soldiers, all with four double-pointed needles. This one is rather humorous – Spitzweg later developed into a satirical painter and illustrator.

German Needlebook – Knitting Soldier



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 knobbed needles, rather than four. This is one of the earliest references to knobbed needles, as the double pointed were much more common.

This sort of needlebook would sometimes have printed pictures of soldiers on the felt pages to hold the needles – and the needles would be part of the rifle held by each soldier.

Govt-issue WW II Sewing Kit



From the collection of Jan Harris

Ian Forster and his 1950's Huswif



WWI Sewing Kit Bought from a Catalogue



POW Art – Straw Work Sewing Box



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 ??)

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. 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. 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.

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.

Trench Art – Knitting Sheath



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"

Knitting needle point protectors

Button hook

Make ref to own trench art - ring.

“Trench Art” Store-bought Sweetheart Pin Cushion to be Sent Back Home



A sweetheart pin cushion from the Royal Kent West regiment. Heart-shaped pin cushions were a very common memento sent home. This one is store-bought. 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 – WWI and WWII needles

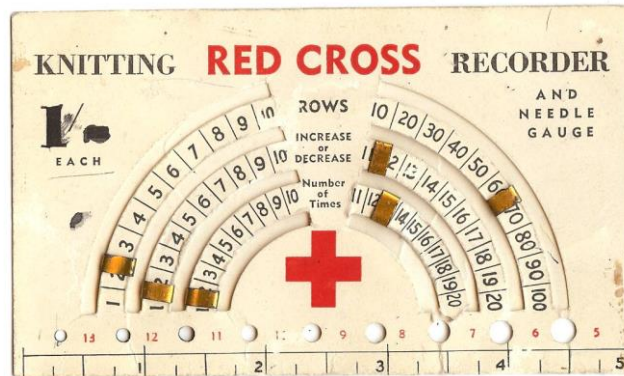


Two reasons for development and promotion of civilian support for the military and wartime efforts – beyond the real need of any government for assistance in producing supplies.

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.

Civilian Items – Red Cross Leads the Way



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.

Life Magazine Jumps on the Knitting Bandwagon - 1941



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?)

Red Cross Article - 1917



RCV – Scarf for Queen Mary



THE VICTORIA SCARF

An initiative of the Gisborne Red Cross unit, the Victoria Scarf was intended as a gift to HM Queen Alexandra in 1915. Red Cross workers across Victoria each knitted a few rows, signing their names on the sheets which were to accompany the scarf to Buckingham Palace. It was intended that 8,000 workers participate in the project, but the scarf was never completed.

- Donated by Miss Betty Ross-Watt (dec.)

Civilian Items – Tip Guards



“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, 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”*

Civilian Items - Bundles for Britain



Civilian Items – “Bundles for America”



Civilian Items – WW I German Knitting Needle Holder



Civilian Items – Unfinished Bandage

