

The Army's Last Set of Confusing Chevrons

Lt. Col. William K. Emerson, USA (Ret.)

THE U.S. Army has used chevrons as rank insignia since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Most chevrons are in a "V" or inverted "V" shape, but starting in 1851 and continuing through World War I the Army used many other chevron designs. Except for the specialist chevrons, introduced after the Korean War and still used today, the last of these non-traditional chevrons had disappeared by 1920. The purpose of this article is to briefly examine these last complex and confusing insignia, some of which the Army produced as late as January 1920, but never issued. Photos and descriptions are based upon the examination of a samples book sealed in that year.

As noted, U. S. Army chevrons have not always been of the traditional V shape, as exemplified in Civil War and "old west" movies, or even the inverted Vs with which living veterans are familiar. The Army introduced special chevrons for hospital stewards (a "half chevron") and pioneers (crossed axes) in 1851.¹ In the post-Civil War period, several more special chevrons were authorized, some of which were of the V style, but with added identifying devices such as those for color sergeants (a sphere), and others for drum majors (crossed batons), as well as several that were totally without the traditional Vs.² By early 1902, the Army had thirty-four different chevron designs, most of which were now executed in multiple colors, and some having no V-shaped component of any type. During the ensuing eighteen years the Army added even more chevrons, most bearing stars, wreaths, and other unusual graphic elements.

At the end of 1902, the Army also down-sized its chevrons from the arm-engulfing, point-down, Indian Wars style, to the smaller, point-up devices that typically were about 3 to 3.5 inches wide. Some chevrons before 1920 came to include wheels stylized to look like those from Model Ts, Mercury's winged hat, artillery projectiles, and a wide range of other devices. Many had no V-shaped device at all. During World War I, Congress authorized several additional ranks, even though it created each new rank by making it equivalent to an already existing grade. By 1919, the Army had over seventy different chevron designs because it was the policy to create a chevron for each rank. At the end of World War I, a distinction between rank and grade arose, these terms having been generally interchangeable before that time. Generally, the term "grade" denotes a level of pay, while the word "rank" denotes titular seniority. Even today, two soldiers may have the same pay grade, but wear different chevrons reflective of their differing ranks.

During World War I, Congress extended to the President additional broad powers to expand the Army and modify its organization, and this authority grew as the war went on.³ For example, when the Army created a chemical branch, it also made the rank, pay, and allowances for the new Chemical Service Section the same as for the Medical Department.⁴ Despite this equivalency, the Army authorized the chemical troops their own chevron design in February 1918.⁵ Some chevrons of the Medical Department and of the Chemical Service had Vs and some did not, but they did consistently contain a caduceus or a chemical designation symbol, respectively.

Since the Army stocked many different chevrons, both for the many branches and grades, with one for each rank, inevitably there were supply problems. In 1919 the Army took its first tentative steps to simplify such complexity when it created a universal design for a single arc chevron for all privates first class (Pfc). Until this time, Pfc's had chevrons incorporating the designation of their branch, such as crossed rifles, an engineer castle, and the like. Due to the huge stockpile of existing Pfc chevrons, however, the Army elected to employ the existing stocks of branch-related Pfc chevrons and never actually contracted for and issued the 1919 single arc design.⁶ Even with the return to peacetime and the elimination of the temporary branches, the Army continued to authorize over fifty rank chevron designs.

As the result of the 1919 review, the Army decided to create a completely new set of chevrons that would accomplish several goals. Among these were the recently agreed-to goals that chevrons should add a limited amount of color and that several chevrons should be eliminated by the consolidation of similar grades across the different arms.⁷ As design work started, one proposal was to use an American eagle of the type shown on Quartermaster Corps insignia. In the end, the Army did adopt the American eagle for some chevrons, but decided to use the design identical to that on U.S. Navy chevrons (usually called rates).⁸

The Army ultimately developed an entirely new set of chevrons, created some samples books, and even began mass production preparation for these redesigned enlisted rank insignia. This set was simply an "improvement" and "updated" continuation of nominal 3-inch-wide enlisted rank devices that had been developed in 1902. This group of insignia makes up the Army's last set of "complex" chevrons. Further, one might even refer to this array, approved 6 January 1920, as the last set of "confusing" chevrons.⁹ It was during that year, in fact, that Col. Robert Wyllie, soon to be chief of the army

section responsible for insignia, even admitted that he could not recognize all of the different chevrons.

Congress intervened in the spring of 1920, however, and simplified the U.S. Army's enlisted personnel pay structure by creating just seven enlisted pay grades.¹⁰ In response, the Army next designed chevrons of the general style still used today, which reflect pay grades and do not show any branch or specialty, other than a diamond for first sergeants.¹¹ This ended the 1920 chevron redesign project, and those designs unique to the 1920 set are not particularly well known among collectors. While the large samples book contains many enlisted rank chevrons, it also contains fifteen coast artillery insignia such as ratings, three "war and service" chevrons, as well as a discharge chevron.

The ten-page chevron samples book measures 11.5 x 18 inches. Each page is of a lightweight, high-quality cardboard very much like the stock used to make heavy posters. The pages are punched on one edge and held together with the then-common red document tape. The lower tie also affixes the seal and tag. (See FIGs 1 and 3A) The tag itself is of thin white oilcloth, with the remains of a Quartermaster Corps seal on one side and an inscription and signature on the other. The lack of deterioration of the pages attests to the low-acid stock used.

Before book assembly, each page was typewritten with the chevron sequence number and the rank title, both placed immediately below each insignia. At some point in the book's

history, someone used a black laundry-marking pen to boldly repeat next to each chevron its sequence number typewritten below. The insignia themselves are generally in good condition, although a few have moth larva damage fortunately limited to the outer 1/8 inch, or less, of its edging.

The Army accomplished its objective of adding some color with green embroidered wreaths, white stars, and yellow musician lyres. (FIG 2) The five sparks commonly used at this time to designate association with electricity are also embroidered in white, as are the American eagles modeled after those used by the Navy. Branch-associated devices are in the primary branch color: caducei in maroon, crossed key and swords in buff, transportation wheels are red, some artillery devices in red, and the one ordnance insignia has a black bomb with two-tone red flames. Except for these colorful exceptions, most chevrons were entirely olive drab.

Many rank chevrons in this set are nominally 3.4 inches wide, both those of the traditional style and those with wreaths, while the circular devices are 2.6 inches in diameter. The samples book's last page has more miscellaneous insignia, including the badge for excellence in coast artillery practice, a red numeral "1" on a 1.9 inch disk, and service and discharge chevrons, each of which are 2.9 inches wide. Another difference between these January 1920 chevrons and previous versions is the material. Until this time, the Army called for chevrons to be made from woven wool. These chevrons have, for the first time, a background of heavy felt.

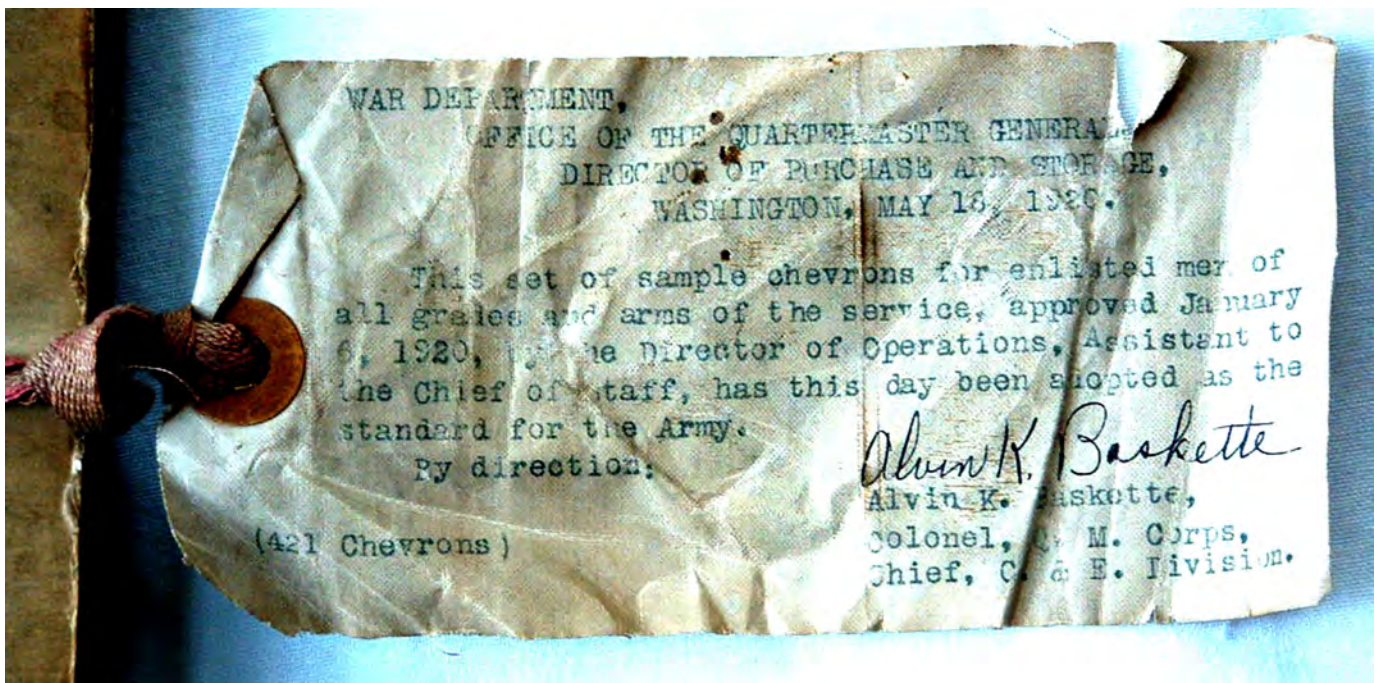


FIG 1. Samples book tag.



FIG 2. Closeup of chevrons 53 and 54.

In creating the samples book the Quartermaster Corps included some chevrons more than once, demonstrating the identical pattern being authorized for a particular specialty unit type across different branches. The first of the duplicate chevrons displays a white star above five white sparks and a green wreath, this design appearing for: #34, master electrician, Coast Artillery Corps; #54, master signal electrician, Signal Corps; and #62, master signal electrician, Air Service. The second duplicated pattern displays a white star and eagle above a red wheel within a green wreath, and appears for #51, master engineer senior grade, Corps of Engineers; #61, master engineer senior grade, Tank Corps; and #63, master engineer senior grade, Transportation Corps. A similar set, but consisting of only two chevrons, #52, master engineer junior grade, Corps of Engineers, and #64, master engineer junior grade, Transportation Corps was issued. The Tank Corps was not authorized a master engineer junior grade. The remaining two duplicate pairs of chevrons display crossed keys and sword for the Quartermaster Corps. Those with stars are #57 for quartermaster sergeants senior grade, Quartermaster Corps and #65 for the Motor Transport Corps. Identically patterned chevrons, minus the star are presented as #58, for

quartermaster sergeant junior grade, Quartermaster Corps, and #66, quartermaster sergeant junior grade, Motor Transport Corps. Thus, while the book contains seventy-six chevrons, it presents only sixty-nine different designs.

Several pages of illustrations taken from the samples book are shown in the accompanying illustrations. Comments are in order relating to a number of these chevrons. The first page displays the most senior rank devices. (FIGs 3A & 3B) Chevon #1 was for regimental sergeants major and the corresponding coast artillery rank, sergeant major senior grade. Chevon #3 was for cavalry squadron sergeants major, coast artillery sergeants major junior grade, and for battalion sergeants major. Chevon #4 similarly carries a dual designation for battalion and squadron supply sergeants. At the lower right is the first of the brightly colored chevrons, that for enlisted bandleader, and includes a white star, yellow lyre, and a green wreath.

The samples book's second page begins with the assistant bandleader chevron, which is similar to #6 on the preceding page, but without the white star. (FIG 4) Page three's chevon #13 includes the yellow lyre device for band sergeant. (FIG 5) Also of interest is chevon #15 for a motor sergeant, which features a twelve-spoke wheel with tire. This contemporary 1920s automobile wheel is the device used to denote motor vehicle affiliation and is also to be seen on page four in chevrons #22 for chauffeur first class, #23 for chauffeur, and #24 for assistant chauffeur. (FIG 6) That same page begins with a band corporal's chevron with yellow lyre, and also displays the then recently adopted universal "private first class all arms" chevron, which is also titled for "deckhands, Army Mine Planter Service." A lance corporal chevron is also shown on this page, but this insignia was only to be used by the U.S. Military Academy band due to a legal requirement that no change would be made to the band without specific authorization by Congress.

The last page of the samples book presents the gold "wound and war service" chevron, #73, with its V being made of gold metallic lace. (FIG 12) For each six months of overseas service during wartime, a soldier could wear one such bar on the lower half of the left sleeve. Each wound suffered during such overseas wartime service was to be recognized by a similar chevron on the lower right sleeve. Chevon #74, with its V being made of only blue felt, was awarded for less than six months of overseas service during wartime. Notably, regulations limited a soldier to receiving only one blue war service chevron and, furthermore, he was not to wear the blue chevron with any of the gold or silver war service chevrons, the Army leadership thus emphasizing that this was the lowest of the awards. To further clarify, #75 is the silver war service chevron, which was awarded for each six months of service in the United States during wartime, and was prescribed to be worn on the lower left sleeve. Regulations did not allow the silver war service chevron to be worn with either the blue or gold service insignia.¹² The silver service chevron was considered a higher award than the blue service chevron but lower than the six-month gold service mark. The last insignia

text continues on page 233



FIG 3A. Page one of the sample book. Because of the reduction in size and condition of the mounting cardboard, this page is repeated opposite, with the chevron images extracted from the pages, while keeping them in the same order as they appear on the page, with readable labels applied. Pages 2 through 10 follow in the same reconstructed format.



1. REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJOR AND SERGEANT MAJOR SENIOR GRADE.



4. BATTALION AND SQUADRON SUPPLY SERGEANT.



2. REGIMENTAL SUPPLY SERGEANT.



5. SERGEANT FIRST CLASS.



3. BATTALION AND SQUADRON SERGEANT MAJOR AND SERGEANT MAJOR JUNIOR GRADE.



6. BAND LEADER ENLISTED.

FIG 3B. Reconstructed page 1.



7. ASSISTANT BAND LEADER.



10. SUPPLY SERGEANT.



8. FIRST SERGEANT.



11. MESS SERGEANT.



9. COLOR SERGEANT.



12. STABLE SERGEANT.

FIG 4. Reconstructed page 2.



13. BAND SERGEANT.



16. SERGEANT.



14. SERGEANT BUGLER.



17. CORPORAL.



15. MOTOR SERGEANT.



18. CORPORAL BUGLER.

FIG 5. Reconstructed page 3.



19. BAND CORPORAL.



20. LANCE CORPORAL.



21. PRIVATE FIRST CLASS ALL ARMS
AND DECKHAND MINE PLANTER SERVICE.



22. CHAUFFEUR FIRST CLASS.



23. CHAUFFEUR.



24. ASSISTANT CHAUFFEUR.



25. BUGLER FIRST CLASS.



26. BUGLER.



27. CHIEF MECHANIC.

FIG 6. Reconstructed page 4.



28. MECHANIC.



29. SADDLER.



30. HORSESHOER.



31. COOK
ALL ARMS OF SERVICE INCLUDING
MINE PLANTER SERVICE.



32. WAGONER.



33. MUSICIAN FIRST, SECOND, AND
THIRD CLASS.



34. MASTER ELECTRICIAN C.A.C.



35. ENGINEER C.A.C.



36. ASSISTANT ENGINEER C.A.C.
OILER MINE PLANTER SERVICE.

FIG 7. Reconstructed page 5.



37. ELECTRICIAN SERGEANT FIRST CLASS C.A.C.



40. RADIO SERGEANT C.A.C.



38. ELECTRICAL SERGEANT SECOND CLASS C.A.C.



41. MASTER GUNNER C.A.C.



42. CASEMATE ELECTRICIAN C.A.C.



39. FIREMAN C.A.C.
FIREMAN MINE PLANTER SERVICE.



43. OBSERVER FIRST CLASS C.A.C.

FIG 8. Reconstructed page 6.



44. OBSERVER SECOND CLASS C.A.C.



49. GUN COMMANDER C.A.C.



45. PLOTTER C.A.C.



50. GUN POINTER C.A.C.



46. COXSWAIN C.A.C.



51. MASTER ENGINEER SENIOR GRADE
CORPS OF ENGINEERS.



47. CHIEF PLANTER C.A.C.



52. MASTER ENGINEER JUNIOR GRADE
CORPS OF ENGINEERS.



48. CHIEF LOADER C.A.C.

FIG 9. Reconstructed page 7.



53. ORDNANCE SERGEANT.



57. QUARTERMASTER SERGEANT SENIOR GRADE
QUARTERMASTER CORPS.



54. MASTER SIGNAL ELECTRICIAN
SIGNAL CORPS.



58. QUARTERMASTER SERGEANT JR. GR.
QUARTERMASTER CORPS.



55. MASTER HOSPITAL SERGEANT.



56. HOSPITAL SERGEANT.



59. DRUM MAJOR.

FIG 10. Reconstructed page 8.



60. SERGEANT OF FIELD MUSIC.



63. MASTER ENGINEER SENIOR GRADE
TRANSPORTATION CORPS.



64. MASTER ENGINEER JUNIOR GRADE
TRANSPORTATION CORPS.



61. MASTER ENGINEER SENIOR GRADE
TANKS CORPS.



65. QUARTERMASTER SERGEANT SR. GR.
MOTOR TRANSPORT CORPS.



62. MASTER SIGNAL ELECTRICIAN
AIR SERVICE.



66. QUARTERMASTER SERGEANT JR. GR.
MOTOR TRANSPORT CORPS.

FIG 11. Reconstructed page 9.



67. FIRST CLASS GUNNER FIELD ARTILLERY AND GUN AND MOTOR CO. C.A.C.



68. SECOND CLASS GUNNER FIELD ARTILLERY AND GUN AND MOTOR CO. C.A.C.



69. FIRST CLASS GUNNER MINE CO. C.A.C.



70. SECOND CLASS GUNNER MINE CO. C.A.C.



71. BADGE FOR EXCELLENCE IN COAST ARTILLERY PRACTICE.



72. EXPERT GUNNER C.A.C.



73. WOUND AND WAR SERVICE.



74. WAR SERVICE.



75. WAR SERVICE.



76. DISCHARGE CHEVRON.

FIG 12. Reconstructed page 10.

in the samples book employs a single point-up V in red, to be worn on the upper left sleeve to signify that a soldier had been discharged.

Artillerymen wore ratings (FIGs 8, 9, & 12) on their sleeve, either directly below their rank chevrons, or if they were privates, where other soldiers wore their rank chevrons. Most ratings were for the Coast Artillery Corps (CAC), but Field Artillery (FA) soldiers also could also earn two.

The samples book also contains examples of the newly authorized ratings of January 1920, these all being circular insignia, often with a red ring around the edge. The recipient ranks and graphic characteristics of some of these ratings may be summarized as follows:

- #42 - Casemate electrician, five white sparks and a red ring
- #43 - Observer first class, a red triangle above a red bar, all within a red ring
- #44 - Observer second class, same as #43, except without the red bar
- #45 - Plotter, red dividers within a red ring
- #46 - Coxswain, a red ship's wheel within a red ring
- #47 - Chief planter, a red sea mine above a red bar, all within a red ring
- #48 - Chief loader, same as #47, except without the red bar
- #49 - Gun commander, a pair of red crossed cannons above a red bar, all within a red ring
- #50 - Gun pointer, same as #49, except without the red bar
- #67 - First-class gunner, FA, including gun and mortar companies, CAC, although in the sample book "mortar" is misspelled "motor," a red vertical projectile above a red bar
- #68 - Second-class gunner, same as in #67, complete with

misspelling, except no red bar

#69 - First-class gunner, mine company, CAC, a red sea mine above a red bar

#70 - Second-class gunner, mine company, CAC, same as #69, except no red bar

#72 - Expert gunner, CAC, a red projectile above a red bar, all within a red ring

The Army never implemented the January 1920 chevrons since, as earlier noted, Congress consolidated enlisted personnel into seven grades. The Army responded by creating a standard chevron set—basically those in effect today, although in 1958 the Army modified the chevrons somewhat to respond to the creation of two additional grades.¹³

Notes

1. War Department, General Orders 53, 1851.
2. Headquarters Army, Adjutant General's Office, GO 38, 1883; HQA, AGO, GO 80, 1899.
3. WD, Bulletin 31, 1917; James E. Hewes, Jr., *From Root to McNamara* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1975), 31–50.
4. WD, GO 2, 1918.
5. WD, Changes 3 to Special Regulations Number 42, February 1918.
6. William K. Emerson, *Chevrons* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 177.
7. Memo for Chief of Staff, Equipment Branch, 9 August 1919, and Memo to Director of Purchases from Chief, Clothing and Equipage Division, 13 August 1919, both on file at the Institute of Heraldry, Fort Belvoir, Virginia.
8. Letter from clothing and equipage division to zone supply officer, Philadelphia, 29 November 1919, on file at the Institute of Heraldry.
9. On tag of sealed samples book.
10. WD, GO 36, 1920.
11. WD, Quartermaster General Drawings CE-5-2-1, 6 August 1920, and CE 50, 16 August 1920.
12. WD, GO 6, 1918; WD GO 53, 1918; WD GO 122, 1918.
13. Emerson, *Chevrons*, 195–199.

Civilian Employees, Camp Hudson, Texas

Lt. Col. Edward S. Milligan, AUS (Ret.)

HERE is an entry from the rolls of Camp Hudson, Texas, where 1st Lt Theodore Fink commanded Company G, 8th Infantry Regiment. Note that G/8 showed one first lieutenant, 4 sergeants, 4 corporals, 2 musicians, and 38 privates present for duty. Twenty-one cavalry horses were also shown on the roll, which listed:

Citizens Employed

David C. Jones Act. Asst. Surgeon since July 7 1857 per authority from HdQs Dept of Texas dated 7 July 1857 at a compensation of \$80

per month.

John Woodland Guide Since May 23d 1857 at a compensation of \$40 per month and one ration per diem.¹

Note

1. Post Returns of Camp Hudson, Texas, for July 1857. Roll 495, Hudson, Fort, Texas, Sept. 1856 – Mar. 1868, National Archives Microfilm Publication, M-617, *U.S. Military Posts 1800–1916*, NAB.