

# Feature



## Vorkosigan Militaria Christofer Bertani\*

*A historical costumer with an interest in sci-fi literature tackles the uniform of a book character by an author who is notorious for her lack of costume descriptions.*

Science-Fiction author Lois McMaster Bujold has been the bane of costumers. She writes fantastic books set in amazing worlds, but until recently, was very vague about what the people in her books wore.

I have for a long time been an avid fan of her Miles Vorkosigan books. Besides being excellent stories, her protagonist is short, and as I'm only 5'4", a character close to my size, let alone a hero, is rare. Miles Vorkosigan is the eldest son of a nobleman of the planet Barrayar, a planet that until a couple of generations ago had been isolated for centuries, and had during that time regressed into "barbarism", at least relative

### Editors Note

Illustrator Larry Dixon discussed working with Lois McMaster Bujold, and how he got her to describe Miles Vorkosigan, in the February 2011 issue ("Costuming by the Book: The Fantasy Writers' Perspective", [VC Vol 9 Issue 1](#), see page 45)



to the rest of humanity. The original colonists were of Russian, Greek, French, and British extraction. Each of the noble houses, the Counts, has a distinctive livery in a particular set of colors.

Sometime in 2001 or early 2002, I decided I wanted to make a suit of Vorkosigan House livery. I'd previously done a Barrayaran uniform: the undress greens that Miles wore during his military career, and a less successful attempt at a Miles-esque grey civilian suit appropriate for Miles to wear in his later career as Imperial Auditor, so I was clearly going to need to make Miles' house livery: the suit for the eldest son of the Count Vorkosigan.

While the Vorkosigan house livery is mentioned many times in the books, the actual description in the text can be reduced to this: the uniform is brown and silver; it is the same uniform for family and retainers, differing only in the quantity of decoration; the collar and sleeves bear the Vorkosigan badge; it is worn with brown riding boots.

Since the heir's house livery is one of several uniforms on a spectrum from the count to the lowliest retainer, I needed to figure out (roughly) what the other uniforms would look like. Miles, as the heir, wears the penultimately decorated uniform; only the Count's would be fancier. Also, there would probably be another uniform for younger

sons, and of course, for several grades of retainer.

To design the uniform, I turned to history, because the Vor were traditionally cavalymen with a very old-world feel (In my mind Vorbarr Sultana, the capital city, looks like something out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of a century ago) and also because hussar regiments had egregious braiding raised to a high art form.

After perusing pictures of World War I German uniforms (particularly [kaisersbunker.com](http://kaisersbunker.com) and [derrittmeister.com](http://derrittmeister.com); both include detailed close-ups, often of the lining and such details) as well as books such as the British Army *Dress Regulations of the Army, 1900*.

I decided on a tunic with a high collar, that closed up the front with hooks and eyes (so I could run braid down the front, like a WWI German *koller* tunic, worn by a branch of the cavalry), and riding breeches of a sort of rounded Cossack shape, rather than the more angular German breeches to give it a more Russian appearance. The hook-and-eye closure also let me dispense with buttons, something I wanted to do to give the uniform a little bit more of a science-fiction feel.

The suit is made of suit-weight wool, lightly interfaced with hair cloth, and lined in silk of a matching brown shade. Flat, half-inch wide silver braid was used for the main parts of the braiding, which was itself decorated with quarter-inch soutache cord (russia braid).



The breeches button at the cuffs to fit in the boots. The rounded Cossack-style shape is clearly seen.



Front of coat.

The epaulettes and aiguillette are formerly of the East German *Volksarmee*, which went out of business in 1991 and sold off their entire supply at very low prices. Unfortunately, as the supply has dried up, it has become harder to find things like this, and the prices have also gone up. It would have been a lot more expensive to make this costume today than it was ten years ago. The epaulettes were originally for a major of the transport services. They were carefully taken apart and the blue felt backing replaced by the same brown wool as I used for the suit.

The uniform heavily features the Vorkosigan badge, and I wanted to integrate

the badge (three mountains, a maple leaf) into the uniform, rather than have it represented by patches sewn on at the last step, as they would be had I embroidered separate badges. The back of the jacket features the Vorkosigan maple leaf motif in a very hussar-style decoration, with the curved braiding following the seams on the back.



Back of coat.

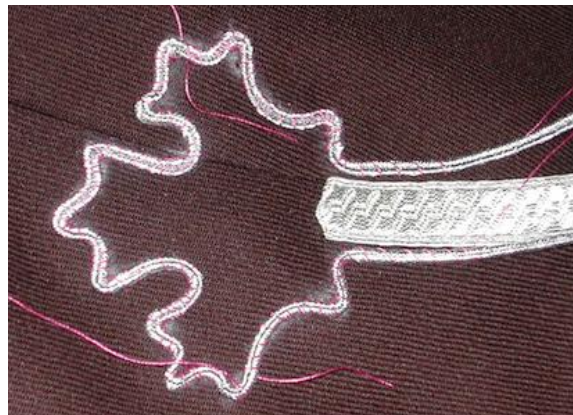
Inspiration here came from the *Dress Regulations of the Army, 1900*, as all twelve British hussar regiments had different variations of this same style. Each section of curved braid has a maple leaf outlined in soutache cord at the top, part of the



The maple leaves on the back are marked out in chalk and basting stitches.

Vorkosigan insignia. These two, plus the two identical maple leaves on the sleeves of the jacket, were the most difficult part of the decoration to execute.

Each leaf has nineteen sharp angles that the cord has to fit, and needed to be sewn down by hand. The system that finally worked for me was to first chalk the outline of the leaf on the fabric, using a paper template to get all four leaves identical. I then had to mark the outline with thread, as



The maple leaves on the back are basted in place with high-contrast thread.

the original chalk didn't survive the handling of the fabric while the braid was being sewed down.

Next, I placed the soutache cord on the fabric, pinning it down through the fabric onto a cardboard backing. This used most of the pins in our house. (Each curve, no matter how short, required at least a pin at each end and one half way along the arc.) With a curved upholstery needle, and more high-contrast (pink) thread, I basted the soutache cord to the fabric, removing the pins as I went, and trying to poke my fingers on the pins as seldom as possible.

Finally I was able to remove the fabric from the cardboard, letting me hand sew the soutache to the fabric using the final silver thread.

After the body of the coat was assembled, I decided it did not have nearly enough silver braid on it! I looked for blank spaces on the front, and added more braid. I outlined the pocket openings with soutache cord. The hardest part here was hiding the ends of the cord.



Detail of the braid at the pockets.

I also needed some more decoration in the upper chest area, where Cossack coats have loops to hold rifle cartridges. This also gave the uniform more of a Russian look.



Detail of the Cossack-style cartridge loops on the upper chest.

The sleeves were heavily braided too. If I ever were to redo this costume, I would add two smaller points on either side of the main point on the wide silver braid on the sleeve - to echo the three mountains of the Vorkosigan badge.



Detail of the sleeve braid, the soutache cord forms a maple leaf and outlines the wider braid.

The braiding I designed would be for the oldest Vorkosigan son, of course. Count Vorkosigan should have something even fancier; I would probably add another row of braid, or put the second row in a zig-zag

pattern (as in the insignia of Polish generals). For younger sons, just one row of wide braid, and for retainers varying rows of soutache cord.

The collar has a very stylized three mountains on it, made from the wide silver braid. I experimented with a number different ideas here, but this one seemed to read the best. It was also one of the last things that got done, when time started to become pressing.



Detail of the collar. The wide braid forms three stylized mountains. The loop in the soutache cord at the front serves to conceal the end of the cord.

There was not enough space to fit a maple leaf on the collar. I eventually found a pair of silver maple leaf pinback earrings, that I intended to add to the collar, but they don't match the integrated look of the rest of the uniform, so they remain unused.

There are two outside and four inside pockets on the jacket. Unfortunately, doing up the hooks and eyes is so troublesome that the inside pockets are nearly useless. Finally, I was never able to find the right riding boots so I have always worn the livery with black boots. The perfect boots, in my mind, would be World War I style English officer's boots, the kind with laces at the ankle, only in chocolate brown.

There are enough details to give it the Russian-influenced look that I was striving for, and the complexity and symmetry of the decoration forced me to learn or invent a number of new techniques. Overall though, I am very pleased with how the uniform turned out. Despite being based on a very minimal description, it has proved easily recognizable by a variety of science fiction fans.

Although I will probably not be doing any more costumes from the Vorkosigan universe, this project has made me consider other from-the-book costumes. Particularly, given my interest in the English Regency/Napoleonic Wars period, I have been taking note of costuming details while reading Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series.

*Christofer Bertani is interested in historical costume re-creation centered around the English Regency/Napoleonic era, particularly uniforms, with a sideline in SF costuming from written sources. His review of a book on military costumes appears in this issue*