

Feature



An Able Seaman Kevin Roche*

A themed costume party and a chance discovery of a rare photo inspired an award-winning historic masquerade entry.

This is the uniform ca. 1912 for an able seaman posted on a White Star Line passenger liner, more specifically the *RMS Titanic*. The project was started as a costume to wear to a *Titanic*-themed party I was helping to host in February 2010. I had seen reproduction White Star Line sailor's caps for sale, and thought that a seaman's uniform would be fun to wear as a host.

I discovered that, while many photos of officers (and documentation of designs for officers) confirm the resemblance of their uniforms to that of the Royal Navy, there are far fewer photos of uniformed crew.

Editors Note

"White Star Line Able Seaman's Uniform," created by Kevin Roche, won Best in Master Division for documentation and was honored for excellence in tailoring at the Costume-Con 28 Historical Masquerade. This article is based on the award-winning documentation that Kevin submitted to support his entry.



Seaman on deck of the Titanic

Eventually I found this photo of a seaman on deck taken by Fr. Frank Browne during the first leg of the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage, so I felt more confident in my belief that uniformed merchant navy seamen's uniforms were also based on the Royal Navy uniforms of the time, in this case the Class II "square rig" ratings uniform. This photo also confirmed that they were wearing the blue (winter) uniform.



A RRCNVR seaman. He is wearing a white cover on his cap.

I chose to simply build a Royal Navy Class II uniform sans ratings or other markings; my reference photos are actually of extant vintage Royal Canadian Navy uniform pieces available at the [Canadian Military Police Virtual Museum](http://www.cmpvm.com) (CMPVM).



White Star able seaman's Uniform. Photo by Andy Trembley

The uniform comprises:

- Flat cloth cap with embroidered tally
- Jumper with square collar
- Bellbottom trousers
- Blue denim collar with three stripes
- Black silk handkerchief
- White wool flannel (undershirt) with denim collar edge
- Black Leather half-boots

In a strictly accurate rendition, the cap, jumper, trousers and flannel would all have been made of wool (“blue wool serge” for the jumper and trousers). As I am allergic to wool, I used a navy blue cotton blend twill for the cap, jumper and trousers, and a fine woven cotton for the undershirt.



Detail of vintage naval fall-front trousers

My trousers are actually based on the US Navy 13-button fall front trousers; I was able to obtain a custom-graded pattern for them from [Tamara Schirmacher](#). These required only minor fitting and modification

(notably in button placement) to look like the 1912 British trousers. Seams in my trousers are either flat-felled or finished on a serger.



An RCN rating's cap

The pattern for my cap was drafted from scratch based on photos of both vintage garments and reproductions, and constructed based on examination of an RAF billed cap that I own. The stiffening in the edge of the cap is achieved by the simple expedient of French seaming two layers of twill, two layers of hair interfacing and two layers of lining.

I later found photos of the inside of period Royal Navy caps and discovered minor differences in the lining construction. The White Star Lines tally was machine embroidered for me by Judith Richardson; I have tied it to resemble bows in use by seamen of the period.

The square-collared jumper was patterned from scratch based on photos of extant vintage garments at the Canadian Military Police Virtual Museum. Note that

the pre WWI jumper is a very different pattern from the WWII style middies commonly found in surplus stores, with a three-piece front.



Vintage blue serge jumper

I used the armscye and sleeve from Simplicity Pattern 1234 to speed patterning, but the rest of the pattern was deduced by examining the construction details visible in the photos and from descriptions of vintage garments, including the drill interior pocket and cuff linings. The twill tape in the center front of the jumper is for securing a bight of the silk handkerchief at the proper position (a distinct difference between US and British uniforms).

Based on the detail photos on the CMPVM site, (and the construction of some vintage uniform pieces I own), it appeared that the seams the jumper are either flat-felled or French-seamed. I constructed my jumper accordingly.



Details of the vintage jumper front (above), back and collar (below)



Note the extra stitching line on the right side of the photo (the left breast of the jumper). That is where an inner pocket made of cotton drill is attached. The sleeve cuffs are also lined with drill.

The separate denim seaman's collar was patterned from scratch based on photos of extant vintage garments at the CMPVM, with the size deduced from the width of the square collar on the jumper. While the RN was apparently using wavy braid at this time, the crewman in Fr. Browne's photo

appeared to have straight braid on his collar, so I did the same.



Vintage stripe-trimmed denim collar

I patterned the square-necklined flannel (undershirt) from scratch based on the photos and descriptions on the CMPVM website.



Vintage square-necklined wool flannel (undershirt).

The neckline is edged with a 1/2 inch wide folded denim band. As with the jumper, all the shirt seams were flat-felled.



Detail of the denim edging on vintage undershirt.

The "flannel" is described as being snug-fitting, which was a bit of a challenge in a woven fabric. The CMPVM site also mentions the sides were sometimes slit, which provided the solution in my pattern to achieve a snug fit in the chest and shoulders while having a shirt that could be put on and worn without tearing the seams.



My fitted undershirt

The black silk handkerchief is a 12 inch by 50 inch oblong, folded and pressed as suggested by a photo of a vintage piece.



A period sailor's silk handkerchief

When worn, the ends of the silk are tied or pinned together behind the neck under the collar so a 2" bight is left below the neck opening, to be secured with the twill tape coming from the jumper. The tape would be tied in either a bow or a sailor's knot.. (In contrast, a USN sailor would roll his silk on the diagonal, and the two ends would be brought around front and tied together in a square knot)



Detail of one combatant's boot from "Fight Night: 1897"

Finding photos of ratings' "half boots" was particularly challenging. In addition to Fr. Browne's photo of a Titanic crew member, an 1897 photo of a boxing match aboard the USS Oregon offers a number of hints, especially the shoe visible on one of the seated boxers. I used assorted glimpses there to inform my choice of the "lacers" I purchased to complete my uniform.

References

Canadian Military Police Virtual Museum (CMPVM)

<http://mpmuseum.org/>

Royal Canadian Navy: 1910-1945

<http://mpmuseum.org/rcn1918dregs.html>

Introduction (includes description of kit issued to naval seaman) Ratings' Uniforms 1910 - 1945 Class II Uniform "Square Rig"

http://mpmuseum.org/rcn_uniform_ratings1.html

(source of most the photos of extant vintage garments in this documentation. A complete copy of this webpage is attached in the Additional Information)

British Royal Navy: The History of Rating Uniforms

<http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/training-and-people/rn-life/uniforms-and-badges-of-rank/the-history-of-rating-uniforms/>

Encyclopedia Britannica: White Star Line Officer's Uniform ca. 1912

<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/white-star-line-uniform-1912.html>

While this describes the officers uniforms, it makes it clear that WSL uniforms (as were most merchant navy uniforms) were closely

based on British Royal Navy uniforms

The Royal Navy, 1939-45 by Ian Sumner, pp 47-49

http://books.google.com/books?id=lnr7MkZLGz4C&pg=PA48&lpg=PA48&dq=royal+navy+seaman+silk&source=bl&ots=oZQbtA2qZ&sig=Z7PCaqMunR7yEKtpvHUkdTqkZaw&hl=en&ei=vJ2AS968AovusgP3mNTvAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=7&ved=0CCQQ6AEwBjgK#v=onepage&q&f=false

While this is for WWII era uniforms, Mr Sumner makes it clear that the rating square rig uniform underwent only minor changes from its turn-of-the-century version. It is from here that I found dimensions for the silk handkerchief, which on examination matched the apparent dimensions of the 1912 vintage silk in the CMPVM collection photos.

Titanic images - photographs of the titanic taken by Father Frank Browne

<http://www.titanicphotographs.com/>

In particular, this photograph shows a member of the crew in the distinctive square rig uniform (his shoes are also partly visible):

<http://www.titanicphotographs.com/galleryB.asp?GalleryID=3&ID=224>

Fight Night: 1897

<http://www.shorpy.com/node/8059?size=original>

A boxing match between seamen on the deck of the USS Oregon. While this depicts US Navy sailors in a slightly earlier period, lots of different shoes are visible, which informed my boot shopping.

Additional Photos of Costume

When historical judges consider an entry, they have access to the costume. Here are some photos to give you some idea what the judges had a chance to see.



Front and 3/4 rear view showing the collar, shirt, and hat.



Finished cap.



Under construction; crown from front.



Cap under construction; crown from top.



Fall-front unbuttoned to show facing.



Trousers completely unbuttoned to show facing.

Photos far left by Andy Trembley. Other photos on this page by the author.

Kevin Roche is a sci-fi fantasy costumer with extensive experience entering, judging, and running masquerades. He was the Chair of CostumeCon 26, is currently VP of SiW, and received the International Costumers' Guild [2007 Lifetime Achievement Award](#).