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# **National College of Art and Design**

*Faculty of Design*

**DEPARTMENT OF FASHION AND TEXTILES**

## **COMBAT PANTS**

*An examination of Combat Pants from their origins  
in the 1850's to their role in street culture to-day.*

By

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*Mr. David Gannon, Manager of Army Bargains*

*Quartermaster J. Brennan, 19th Batt. F.C.A.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of this thesis is combat pants, also known as army fatigues, army pants, working trousers, khakis and army bags. Combats were once the preserve of the military - a plain, practical garment, worn in combat (hence the name.) They have, however, crossed over to the civilian market and become mainstream, with a current popularity which can be compared to that of denim jeans! In fact, they have become a highly acceptable alternative to denim jeans, with an equally vast array of brand names, colours, prints and shapes now available. I have been wearing combats for the past eight years. When I started wearing them in rural Ireland, it was regarded as very odd for a girl, and my mother was pitied. Combats are now commonplace, at least in cities.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the history of these trousers, and their incredible growth in popularity. I plan to trace the history of combat pants from their first appearance in the 1850's. I will also look at the manner in which they are worn today, by whom they are worn,





and the image which the wearer intends to project. I will include my personal experience - from the perspective of a young female, living in a small town in the North West of Ireland. Little has been written about actual combat pants. Much of the history and research which is available concentrates either on the camouflage prints of the clothing, or, where structure is mentioned, the more solid shapes of the formal dress of the army such as great coats and caps, are popular subject matter.

In recent years, some periodicals have featured articles which have looked briefly at the subject. To a large degree though, combat pants, in anything close to their original form, have remained a streetstyle phenomenon, and so have not received the coverage of a high fashion item of clothing.

I have used the articles written in magazines like *FACE*, *iD* and *VOGUE*, and have also conducted interviews with wholesalers, retailers, and wearers of combat pants, which were very useful.



## CHAPTER 1

A history of combat pants; their origins  
and their uses and development in the military.

Where did combat pants originate, and when did they become available to the general public? The fabric that developed into combat gear as we know it today was developed in Britain, where the fabric mills sold it to the army as a uniform for their overseas soldiers in Africa and Asia. To begin with, this fabric consisted of a combination of cotton, linen and worsted wool. Of course this proved much too heavy for the British troops in the hot countries where they were posted. After hearing this complaint, the mills began to replace the wool with a lighter cotton twill, which was a vast improvement. This was worn during the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857-1858, and proved to be a great success, as it blended well with the surroundings and was also quite durable. Eventually, due to this success, the Manchester Mills began exporting the fabric to China for use in military dress also.

Khaki pants were introduced as a component of American military uniforms in 1898, and continued in use right up to the late 1960's. For approximately another five years, they remained as part of the army's dress uniform, and were then discontinued entirely. (Icon, June 1997, p. 32). An 8.2 ounce twill had been used in these fatigues, but this fabric was then replaced with polyblend fabrics, because of the advantages of extra durability, and being easier to care for. The name khakis, which is what they were first known



by, comes from Urdu, which is a dialect of Hindustani which is spoken in Afghanistan. The meaning of the word itself is dust-coloured. The reason why there is so much conflict over the exact colour of khaki lies therein; it is as varied as the colour of dust! One of the huge attractions of khakis as civilian clothing, as well as for military outfitting, is that they blend so well with the dirt, that even when they are filthy dirty, this is often quite unnoticeable.

Khakis and the more refined chinos began as one and the same thing! (Icon, June 1997, p. 32). This came about because, as I have mentioned, the Chinese bought twill from the mills of Britain. They made some profit from the surplus fabric by selling it to the Americans living in the Philippines, who used it to make their own trousers. They then named these pants chinos, which, at that time, was a derogatory name for the Chinese people. So the original chinos could be said to be the first army surplus!

By the time the First World War began in 1914, the majority of nations had adopted the dust-coloured fatigues, because of their obvious advantages of blending the wearer with the background.

Khaki continued to be used for most uniforms until the end of the Second World War, by which time camouflage patterns had been developed. (Stephens 1992, p. 38).

Camouflage is now the standard combat uniform, and the plain khaki colour is generally kept for formal wear. Camouflage has been developed to a great extent since the





Second World War. There is a huge range of camouflage prints and designs available today. Some have only been tested, and some have never been printed at all. There are many specialised prints that have been used which the average civilian may never have seen, as they have been developed for very specific terrain.

These special prints include such examples as the US Tree Bark Civy Hunting Cam (fig. 1), which is a chocolate brown and pale grey, with outlining areas of black. It is a vertical pattern and was designed specifically for woodland hunting and combat. The US Light Tiger Stripe (fig. 2), is another dedicated pattern, designed specifically for jungle terrain, and helps to break up the outline of the figure in that terrain, using very dark stripes on a relatively pale background of beige and grey-green. There are many other examples of these rarely seen patterns, such as the Luftwaffe Splinter Pattern from World War Two (fig. 3), and the German Waffen SS Oak Leaf Spring (fig. 4). (Combat and Militaria, October 1993, p. 43)

All camouflage designs and prints can basically be divided into two categories. The first is a type of design known as disruptive pattern which, if it works successfully, should break up the shape of the body so that the attacker cannot focus on the figure. The other type of camouflage print is known as a blending pattern, which as one can deduce from the name, essentially tries to blend the wearer into the background or terrain in which they are situated. This in effect is attempting to make the wearer invisible.







fig 1

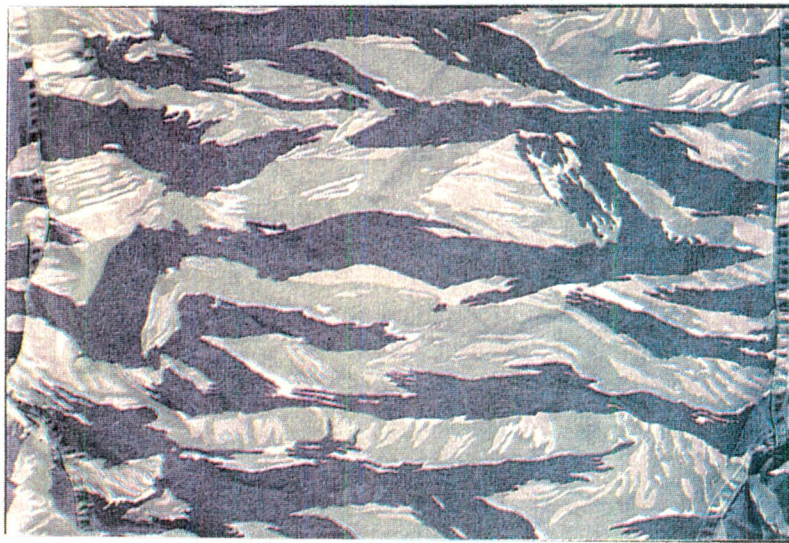


fig 2

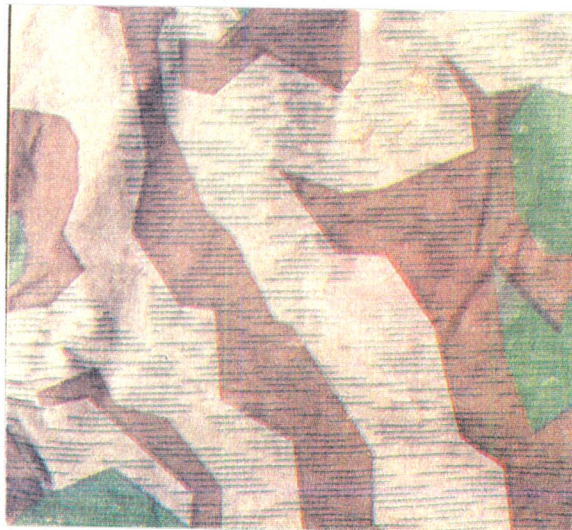
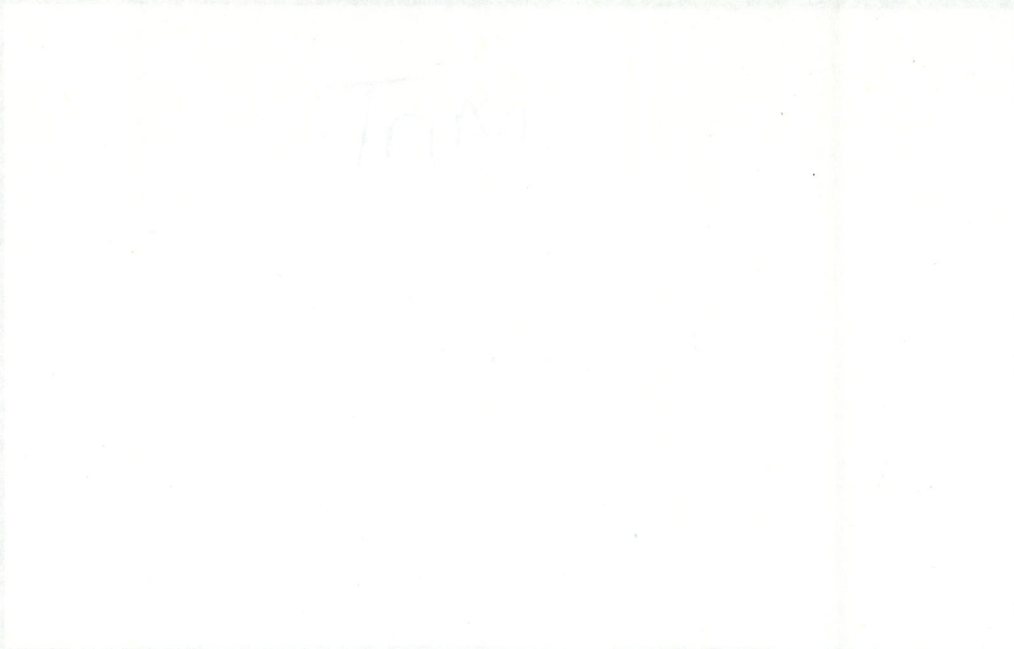


fig 3





Today, military designers are working towards designing camouflage print which will work equally well in a variety of situations. This of course will have to be a disruptive pattern, as the wearer could not blend into different coloured backgrounds in one suit. This has been the focus of design teams for some time now. In fact, the first multi-purpose print was one which was worn by the Luftwaffe in World War Two - the Splinter Pattern.

Many consider this to be the first disruptive camouflage pattern: it consisted of a light grey-green background with jagged splinters of chocolate and dull apple green, whilst some of the splinters were also lined with white. The pattern worked well, due to the jagged multi-directional splinters of different colour which actually distracted the eye away from a regular shape. The white lines enhanced the effect by giving the impression of a non-solid object with light streaming through it.  
(Combat and Militaria, October 1993, p. 43).

This pattern worked equally well in an urban or a country setting. Taking some ideas from this, and also developing it further, the American military now have their own multi-purpose print which they use widely. It is called the ASAT; All Season, All Terrain, (fig. 5). Again, this is a disruptive pattern of brown and dark grey on a pale grey background. Although to the untrained eye, it may be difficult to imagine that camouflage prints are terribly effective, according to one soldier;

As well as being a physical covering, camouflage clothing also promotes to some extent a state of mind....wearing cam clothing makes you feel more aggressive and effective. You start to feel more at ease and become part of your surroundings.  
(Combat and Militaria, October 1993, p. 44).





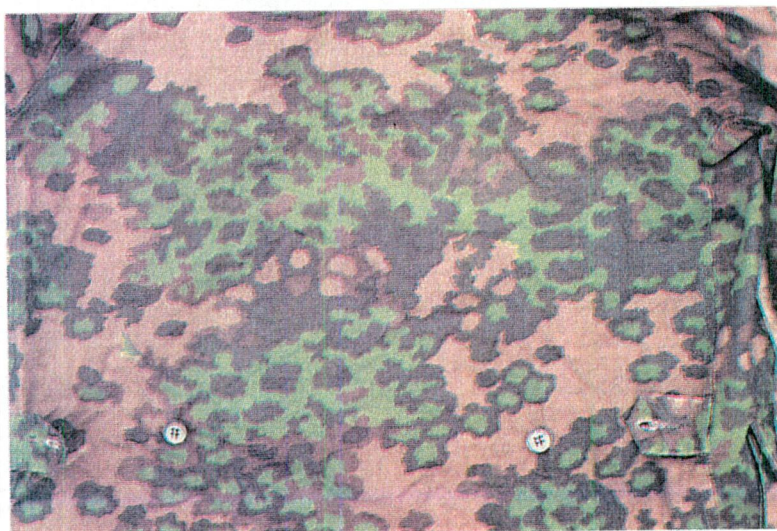
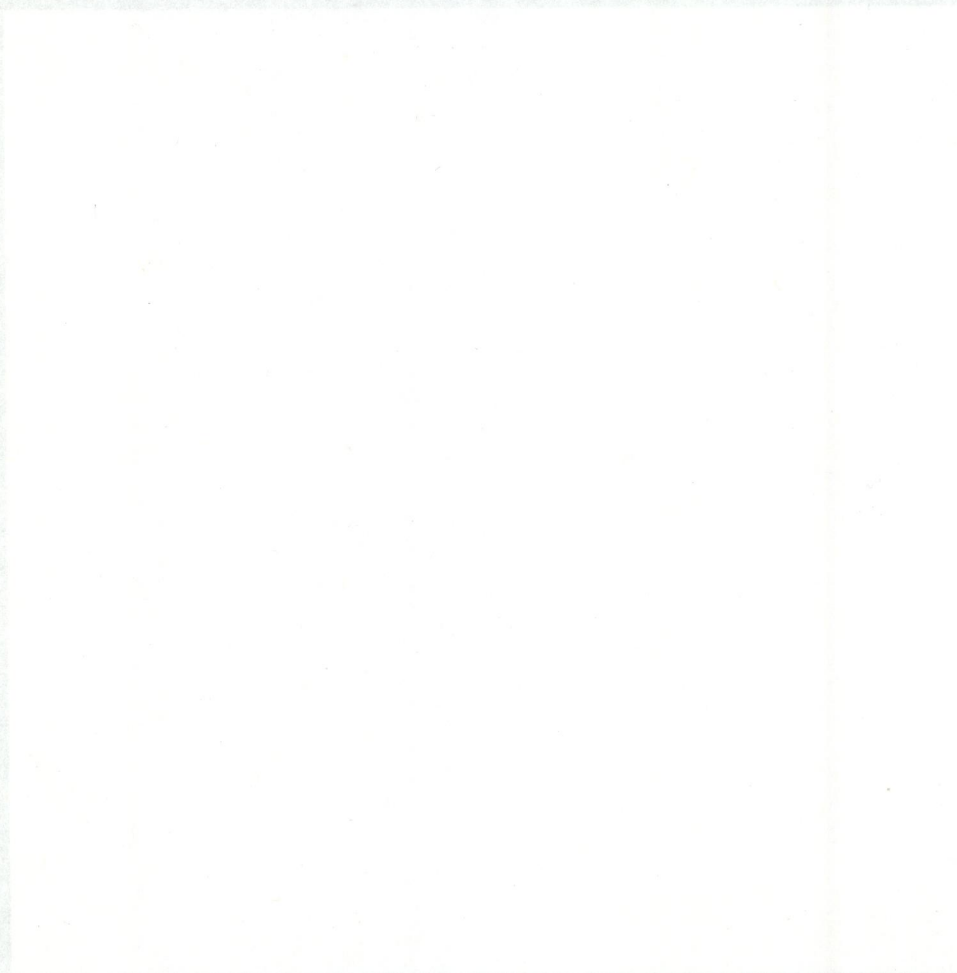


fig 4



fig 5





I believe that, like many trends, army surplus became fashionable in America, which then influenced Europe. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, many American soldiers returned home and went back to College, or went to College for the first time. As there were still shortages in clothing, many veterans wore their khakis to College. This quickly got the attention of other students, who then demanded army surplus gear to be made available to them. (Icon, June 1997, p. 32).





## CHAPTER 2

The supply of, and demand for, combat pants for the Irish civilian market.

Not long after this, combats also became available in Britain, and within five years, army surplus stores were opening in Dublin. Millets Camping and Army Surplus has been serving the Irish customer for over thirty years - since the mid 1960's. There are now approximately eight army surplus stores in the capital city. They have also opened in other large cities like Limerick, Galway and Cork. However, the army surplus which is bought by the Irish customer does not come from the Irish military.

According to Quartermaster Brennan of the 19th Battalion of the F.C.A., no Irish Army surplus has ever been sold legally.

In cases where Irish Army clothing is found in army surplus stores, it has been sold to such stores by individuals, and this is done against all military rules.

Quartermaster Brennan explained that all clothing stock belonging to the Irish military is held in storage by the Army until it is issued. In cases where this clothing becomes obsolete, due to changes in design, it is destroyed. The Irish civilian requirements then, for army surplus, are filled by English wholesalers.

One such wholesaler is Mr. Peter Wing, owner of P.G.



Wing Wholesalers. He specialises in all types of army surplus, from war medals and helmet covers, to rucksacks, socks, studded buttons, tracksuits and combats. He has been in this business since 1971, and was kind enough to explain it to me.

Combats are not bought individually or by the number, rather they are bought by the tonne. In some places they are bought and sold through auction. British army surplus is not available for purchase to just any wholesaler. It is all sold by one company, which then shares the profit with the British Government. Mr. Wing purchases his stock at auctions in France and sales in Belgium, Holland and Germany. The sales take place most often in Germany, where they are held weekly. In both Holland and France they take place once a month, and in Belgium, quarterly. Buyers at these sales come from both Europe and the U.S., as there is a demand for combats in the U.S. and the American army has stopped using khaki completely!

Mr. Wing buys equal proportions of khaki and camouflage combats, which would indicate that there is equal demand for both. The best time for his business was between 1986 and 1987, and since then it has been steady. Presumably, this levelling off of the demand is due to the flooding of the market with new manufactured combats .

One of the places which P.G. Wing Wholesalers supply is Army Bargains, Little Mary Street, Dublin 1. According to Mr. Gannon, the manager of Army Bargains, which is situated in a small area with about six other army





surplus stores, business has never been better. He supplies the public with both army surplus and manufactured combats, which come from China, and are usually quite good imitations of the real thing. Altogether, he estimates the sales of combats at seventy-five pairs per week, with approximately two-thirds of that figure referring to the manufactured type. However,

Don't be mislead, the genuine combats sell steadily all year, every year, while the manufactured ones might sell for a few weeks and then go out of fashion when a newer design comes along.  
(Mr. Gannon).

What type of design differences are there in these manufactured combats?

At the moment, the ones that are very popular are the ones called "Ripstock" combats. They're manufactured ones with a nice cut, and they wash very well. The fabric has a raised square pattern which is woven into the cloth. (Gannon interview). (The nice cut to which Mr. Gannon refers is a "comfort" width, straight leg trouser, quite fitted around the waist and hip areas).

Who buys the bulk of these combats? Is it all students?

No, November 1st is the start of the hunting season in Ireland, so we have a lot of guys stocking up on gear before that. Also an awful lot of builders would wear combats because they're such a good working trouser. They're strong, and very good value. (Gannon interview).

Do many girls buy them, or is the majority of the market male?

Well, it would be more guys that buy them, but the amount of girls is definitely going up.  
(Gannon interview).

The market itself must definitely be increasing, as



the supply certainly is - combats in various forms can now be found in practically every shop in Dublin - at prices varying from twelve pounds in army stores to ninety-five pounds in Makullas, a fashionable youth and "streetstyle" shop.





### CHAPTER 3

A young Irish girl in a rural area wearing combat pants; personal experience.

I have been wearing combat pants since the age of fourteen. My first pair, which had to be purchased in Dublin (100 miles from my home town), were olive green, quite faded, with a repair in the rear. I bought them for eight pounds, and wore them for four years, even as they fell apart. By the time I accepted that they really were finished, they had the logos of various bands that I had liked at the time, drawn in permanent marker (mainly black), covering the legs. The buttons in the fly had all fallen off and been replaced one by one, and there was a row of safety pins across the seat, holding such a big hole together that I had to wear a pair of leggings underneath in the name of decency! I live in a small town in North West Ireland, the population of which is about two and a half thousand. As can be imagined, it was not the norm in 1989 for a young girl to wear army surplus in the evenings or at the weekends, while attending a convent school during the day, whose uniform was a skirt of a decent length and knee socks. I was definitely the first girl in my town to have a pair of combats, and I don't recall many boys wearing them either.

I had of course seen them worn by girls on television, and they were beginning to become popular in Dublin, so my wearing them was not an extremely original statement, though at the time I liked to think it was. At that time - the



start of the 1990's, combats were only available from army surplus stores, to the best of my knowledge.

In the following four years they became much more widely available - not only second-hand army surplus combats, but also brand new ones which were manufactured in the East. This meant that they could be bought in smaller cities and towns. It is only in this time that they have been sold in Galway, for instance.

So when I had my first pair, I really did stand out from the crowd at home. I wore them with purple Dr. Marten boots and hooded tops. My hair was long and matted at this time. The look that I wore was something of a mish-mash of images. There was a seventies revival going on, so this was naturally an influence. Bright daisies were drawn on my combats, and tie-dyeing was also a large feature of my wardrobe. It was at this time too that I managed to get away from home long enough to have my nose pierced and have several extra holes added to my left ear. I think that all of this was a way of trying to be heard, as I was a quiet and shy teenager. And it certainly did get me noticed! Not necessarily in a positive way all the time; there were some clubs in the town that I was not allowed into, and of course the nuns in the convent politely asked me to refrain from wearing jewellery on my face.

Reactions were many and varied. My mother was accepting, though not convinced of the aesthetic merit of second-hand soldiers' workwear. My father laughed; it was just another phase. Neither of them could complain though,





as I was spending very little money on this "phase." It was a sin to spend more than ten or fifteen pounds on any one garment as far as I was concerned. My closest sister, who is only eighteen months my junior, was totally embarrassed to be seen with me for about a year. As the trend became more widespread, and combats moved into the highstreet shops, she came around, though to this day, she has never worn a pair herself.

Around the town, reactions were as expected. People my own age generally thought it was cool, although it did take some of them a while - like my sister. A lot of parents disapproved. I believe this was because combats were not really conducive to "ladylike" behaviour. I received disapproving looks and "tuts" from some, and a few people would whisper. Still, I got less reaction than my poor mother. Friends would say to her with sympathy; "Is there nothing you can do with her?" and "Sure, she'll probably grow out of it." They thought she needed reassurance, and some of them really did shudder to think that one of their offspring might turn out like that. But for the most part, people put it down to my being "a bit arty!" Of course combats cannot be blamed entirely for these reactions - piercings also had an effect.

During that time, I built up my collection of combats. I acquired more olive green ones, then ventured to buy a black pair, as I started the obligatory all-black phase that every teenager in the Western Hemisphere must have gone through in the 1980's and 1990's. And then, as combats were



increasing in popularity, they became available in lots of different colours - I was spoilt for choice. I could have purple, blue, navy and orange. Of course there were also the camouflage print ones. These had always been available, along with the olive originals, but now there was more variety in these also. One could choose from the regular camouflage, the white, grey and black of urban camouflage, and after the Gulf War, the new "Desert Storm" camouflage, (fig. 6).

This was all very exciting, and as more and more of my friends, both male and female, began to wear combats, I began to notice the different groups who were wearing them.

There were the punk types, who wore them with black clothing, safety pins, piercings, and other "bondage" items.

There were also skaters and boarders who wore them wider, with other loose garments, to aid movement. And then there were a lot of people like me, who hadn't quite made up their minds who they were.

We cannot forget that combats are also a working man's dream; durable and cheap, with pockets that can hold anything, an adjustable waist, and drawstring ankles. They are also loose enough to wear over another layer if necessary.

To consider how combats are perceived by people who do not wear them, I went back to my mother again. She did not, and does not now feel very strongly about them. Eight years ago, she was not terribly keen on the idea of her little girl wearing them - they were really boys' clothing after





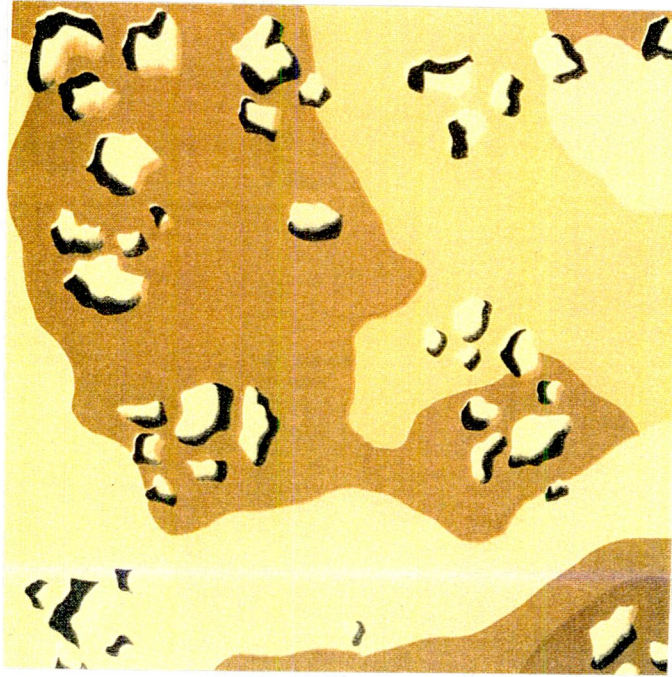
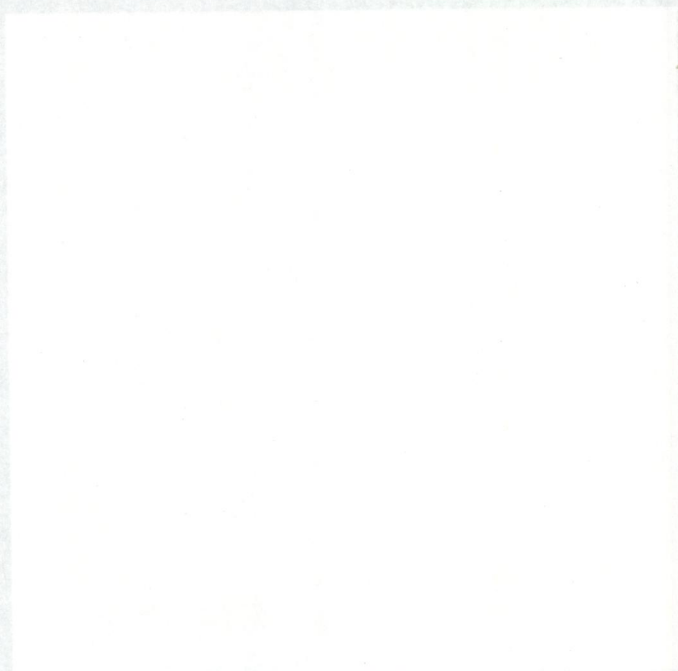


fig 6





all! And so they were at that time in Ireland, I can't argue with that. So the image that I was portraying by wearing them was quite rebellious, at least in the context of rural Ireland. It was probably more "tomboyish" than just wearing jeans, these were definitely boys. Even in Dublin in the early nineties, they were not seen too often. They were not a sensation there - they had been around too long, and while people would probably not turn to look at somebody wearing them, they would still notice a young girl. The difference in my small town was that they would turn and look.

Whatever the reaction may have been in the early nineties, they are now almost as popular as denim jeans. As there is less "pigeonholing" in fashion than there was in the past, it is easier for people to pick and choose what they want to wear now without a set image being attached to that garment. I believe this to be the case with combats. They don't have any real association with any particular image anymore. It is up to the individual to incorporate them into whatever look they wish to achieve. Of course their widespread availability in the highstreet today has aided in this way. Once combats became available in, first, army surplus stores, and then regular clothes shops in new materials imported from the East, and were obviously increasing in popularity, they appeared in all kinds of new fabrics. There were comfortable ones in cottons and linens, in every colour from beige and white through to shocking





pink and black. There were also new designs in any fabrics then being developed, nylons, plastics, satins, reflective fabrics, waterproof fabrics, sheer, opaque, shiny and matt.

New kinds of fastenings were also being used - all original combats had only button fastenings, but now they can be bought with button, zipper, velcro and lace-up fastenings. They have become a very popular piece of clothing to wear clubbing, as we near the end of the nineties.

I think that they are a cross-cultural item of clothing; they are worn a lot in New York by all races and cultures there. Here in Ireland, in our increasingly multi-cultural society, they are widely worn, mainly by an age group of twelve to twenty-five year olds. In any group of young visitors to our country from abroad, they are also growing in popularity.

Combats are a garment which can look equally well on a tall, athletic German man and a petite Japanese girl. In themselves, they do not cause a reaction anymore - they are too common in their various fabrics and colours. And this is making them even more popular, because people want to build their own image to some extent, rather than present a pre-set, pre-designed one.



#### CHAPTER 4

An examination of how combat pants are worn today, and the image that they portray.

To examine the way in which combats are worn today, I will look at images of various people wearing them. I have chosen photographs from popular youth culture magazines, such as FACE and iD. No professional styling has been done on these photos. Except where otherwise stated, they have been taken on the street. They all show young people in the fourteen to twenty-five year age bracket, wearing their own clothing, in their own personal styles.

I have also chosen two advertisements to contrast with the "real" pictures, and to examine the image which professional stylists have put together in these advertisements, using combats.

It is interesting to note the number of manufactured combats in the street photos, compared to the number of real ones. These photos show the wide range of people who wear combats, and indeed, the large range of combats available. We can also see the diversity of styles in which they are worn.



## PHOTO 1

Firstly, I will look at a photograph taken some time ago, in 1993. This is not from a publication, but was taken by myself.

The man in this photo is twenty-two years old. The combats he is wearing are original army surplus, and they are in the urban camouflage print. He wears them with black, twelve-hole high Dr. Marten boots, a plain grey t-shirt, and a black leather jacket.

Does he wear combats a lot? Is this the first pair he has bought, or does he have a collection? Why has he chosen the urban camouflage print? His combat pants do not look at all worn at the knees. They are also very clean - it looks as though he probably put them on clean that morning. He looks quite shy about having his picture taken - he is aware that the photo will be focusing on his dress. This would seem to imply that he is not entirely comfortable wearing combats, and perhaps he is not used to wearing them. Perhaps he has chosen to buy camouflage print because it is still a little unusual at this time - slightly "alternative." He does not seem at all like an aggressive type of person, although he probably thinks himself that he is projecting a "tough" look. Perhaps he feels slightly uncomfortable being photographed in these clothes because he doesn't feel that this image is really his, because he isn't really used to wearing combats.







**PHOTO 1**



**PHOTO 2**





Until recently, a great many of the people who wore army surplus would be very particular about how they wore them, and the authenticity of the combats. So perhaps this man doesn't feel that he is entitled to wear them.

## **PHOTO 2**

This is a more recent photo, taken in 1997. Compared to the previous one, it is obvious that the girl here has a lot more confidence in herself and the way she looks. Although she is wearing no bright colours, she does have an outgoing personality. I am making this assumption, based both on her pose for the photo and her appearance - very short hair and platform boots. She is a student and part-time waitress and is nineteen years old. Her combats are not army surplus, they are manufactured, but there is not much difference between them and the original army combats.

They appear to be made in a good quality fabric, quite strong, and they are also in a colour in which army surplus is available. The pockets are slightly different to army gear, which would not have the buttons clearly visible on the outside, as they are here. Also, the two pleats going in the same direction are an unusual detail. She is wearing quite dull colours with them - a grey t-shirt and a small charcoal sweater. This might at first be taken as a wish on her part not to stand out in the crowd, but I think this can





be ruled out when taking her assured and confident overall appearance into account.

### **PHOTO 3**

This photo was taken in 1993. It is from iD magazine, and was used in an article looking at streetstyle of that time. The boy in the picture is fourteen years old. His pants are not really combats - they are quite similar in fabric and shape, but the signature patch pockets which are to be found on the sides of combats are missing. However, these pants do have large patch pockets at the front of the legs, which would seem to be a reference to combat trousers.

It is very likely that the wearer does also possess some actual combats. A great number of skateboarders wear loose combats for their obvious advantages of durability, ease of movement, and possible lack of expense in the event of their having to be replaced. The rest of this particular boarder's outfit consists of various "sporty" attire - and labels, Stussy, Champion and Vans (not visible in this picture.) This indicates the possibility that these pants were not inexpensive, in fact they may have cost something between eighty and a hundred pounds.





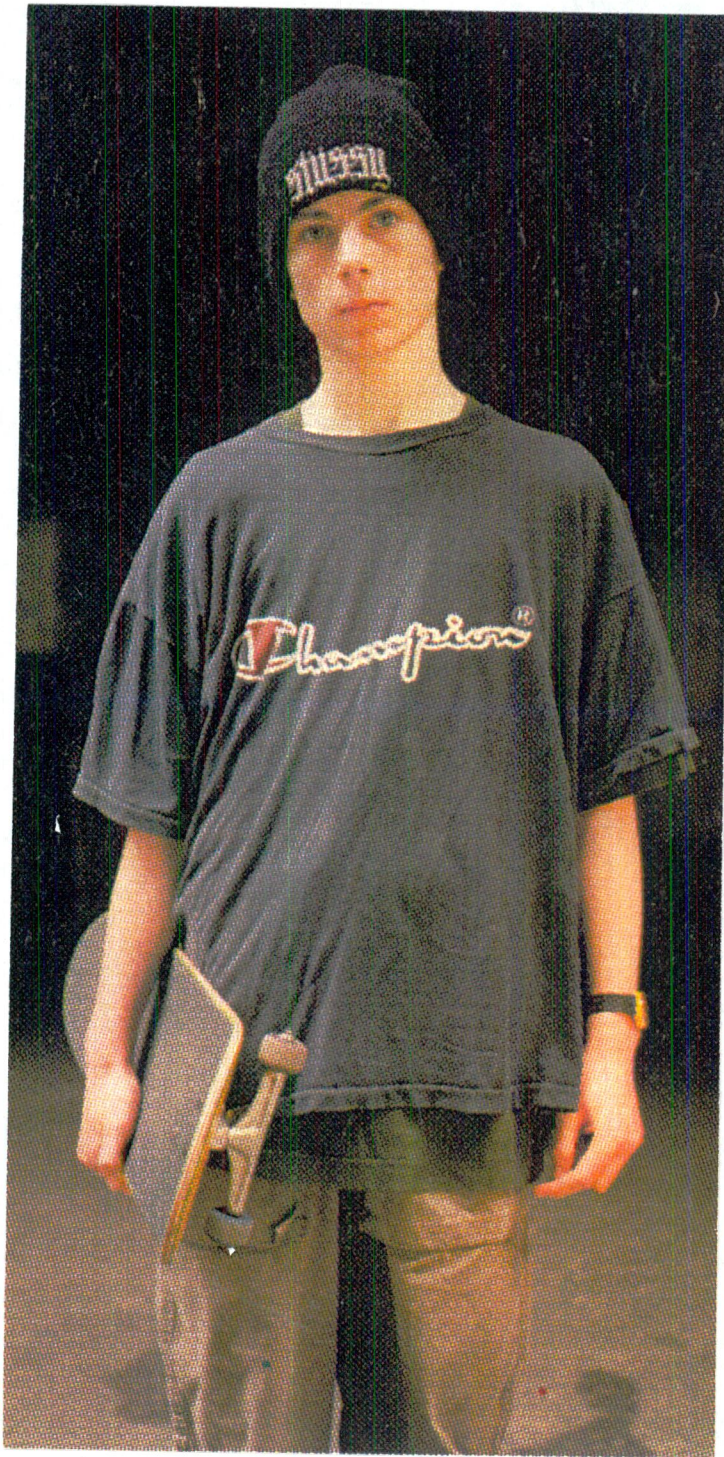


PHOTO 3

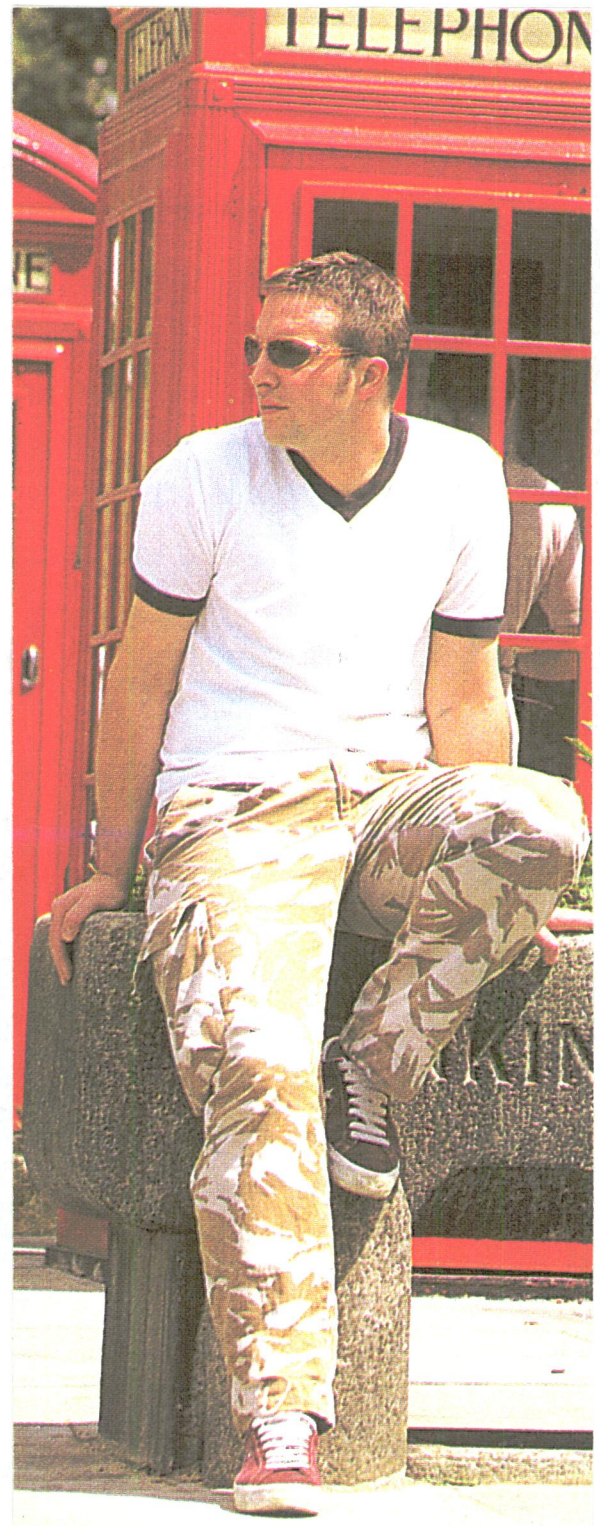


PHOTO 4



From  
3098

## **PHOTO 4**

This photograph was taken in 1996 - not very long after the Gulf War. It was taken in England, and the man pictured is wearing combats featuring the print of the British Gulf War camouflage. They were very fashionable for some time following the war. He has chosen to combine them with a white Levi t-shirt and Levi trainers. His look is clean-cut and casual. It is the type of look which could just as easily be achieved wearing jeans, so why has he chosen combats instead? Perhaps it is for the added comfort that comes naturally from the extra width in the legs. There are also the utilitarian advantages of combats over jeans; their pockets, which can easily hold a keyring, cigarettes and lighter, wallet, penknife, and perhaps a mobile phone! The fabric in these combats is lighter than that of denim jeans, so they can be dried more quickly than jeans. Perhaps that is why his combats look so very clean and freshly washed. Because of the lighter fabric, these pants would also be cooler than denim jeans in the apparent heat in this picture.

## **PHOTO 5**

This photograph was also taken in England, for iD magazine, approximately eighteen months before the previous one (photo 4). It too is from an article on streetstyle.







PHOTO 5





The subject is a twenty-one year old graphic design student. This pair of combats are not original army surplus, they are new and manufactured. The patch pockets on the sides of genuine army surplus combats differ from the ones in this photo, because these ones are stitched flat onto the trousers. There is a pleat at the attached edge in the army ones, to allow for expansion when needed, without distorting the actual trouser leg too much. These pockets are also lacking the closing flap which is always present in genuine army combats. Their authenticity would, I imagine, have been very important to this man some years ago, but as I have mentioned, this issue has become less important in recent years. I don't believe that the gilet he wears is a genuine army one either, it appears to fasten with velcro, which had not yet been used in military clothing. He has combined these military type garments with two sweaters, one plain, one zippered at the front. He has obviously put some thought into his accessories, both hat and pendants, to create his own identity.

## **PHOTO 6**

This is the first of two obviously styled images. We know immediately by looking at this photo that it is a fashion shoot. It does, however, serve to show another variation of the original combat which is available and relatively popular, and still to be seen, though not as





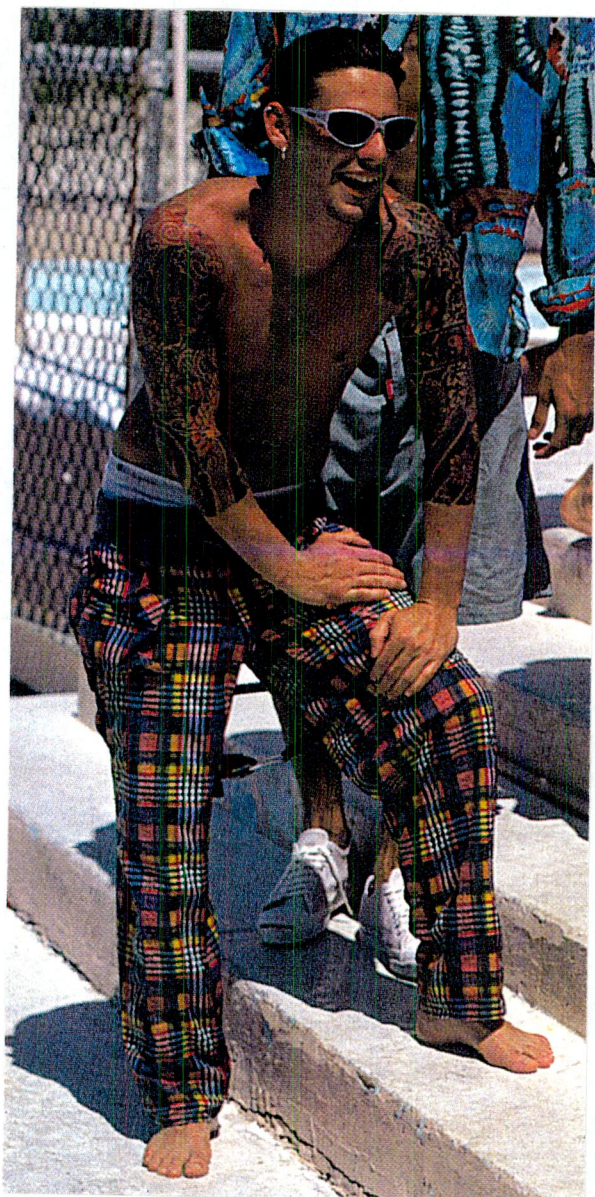


PHOTO 6

PHOTO 7 ↓

## saint etienne

*too young to die*

*singles 1990-1995*

Only Love Can Break Your Heart  
 Kiss And Make Up  
 Nothing Can Stop Us  
 Join Our Club  
 People Get Real  
 Avenue  
 You're In A Bad Way  
 Who Do You Think You Are  
 Hobart Paving  
 I Was Born On Christmas Day  
 Pale Movie  
 Like A Motorway  
 Hug My Soul  
 He's On The Phone

*out now*

cd / lp / mc / video  
 initial quantities of the cd include  
 limited edition bonus cd  
 featuring 9 remixes

*includes the hit single 'He's On The Phone'*







commonly as other more military type prints and fabrics.

The reason for the great lack of popularity of the tartan print is probably precisely that; they are too far removed from the original article. Any other design in which they are available, whether plain or print, still draws attention to the fact that they are (or imitate), army surplus. This is shown either by the camouflage print, be it regular or urban, or else by the plain colours, regardless of the actual shade. Though not directly indicating a military origin, these do not distract from the big pockets, which are what immediately signify combats. This checkered pair, on the other hand, distract the eye completely from any detail on the garment, except for its rather loud pattern. For this reason, these would probably be rejected more than any of the other manufactured combats by true "combat connoisseurs" as blasphemous to the genuine article.

## **PHOTO 7**

St. Etienne. This photo is an advertisement for a band. A lot of thought will have gone into the styling of the photo, the image it will create, and the audience it will attract. As it is an advertisement, we can assume that there is a reason behind choosing combats as part of the image for the band. This pair are quite removed from the army surplus which began the trend. From this picture,







**PHOTO 8**





the only clues we have to ascertain that this is where they did originate, are the large pockets and pocket flaps at the side and the large beltloops. The look, or image, that this group are trying to convey helps us to deduce what it is that this type of casual pants now symbolises; they are very fashionable, a bit clubby, still slightly alternative, but in a very acceptable way. As is always the case with a piece of clothing which begins life as menswear, they are also decidedly attractive on girls.

## **PHOTO 8**

This photo is particularly different from the rest, as it is really not much to do with fashion. Of course it cannot be entirely separated from fashion, as no item can, because it is only available to the public if there is a demand for it. This in turn means that it has some standing in the fashions of the time. However, the reasons behind the wearer's purchasing of this pair of combats has nothing to do with fashion trends. This is the type of customer who does buy quite a lot of army surplus, but who is not really seen on the street, as these combats will only be worn on the building site. They are worn here as workwear. To this builder, it definitely does matter that these combats are original army surplus, rather than manufactured ones, because he is wearing them purely for the functions which





are important to him in his job. The same functions are important to the army, and are therefore built-in features of the garment, such as their strength and durability, ease of movement, looseness allowing for another layer to be worn underneath, the large pockets to carry various bits and pieces, and of course, their inexpensiveness.

Combats are of course part of the trend towards workwear as casual wear at this time in street fashion. They fall into the same category as anything else which could be considered workwear. This encompasses everything which has some utilitarian aspect, such as extra pockets, extra beltloops to which to attach other useful objects, reflective strips, waterproof fabrics, adjustable waists, cuffs and ankles, and detachable arms, legs, hoods and collars.

## **PHOTO 9 & PHOTO 10**

A regular occurrence in the fashion industry is that a trend begins on the street, or in colleges or universities, which eventually becomes a streetstyle. Fashion designers then use influences from these styles in their designs, often altering, enhancing or changing them in some way, before marketing them at the very people from whom they took their influences, and ultimately selling their own designs back to them.

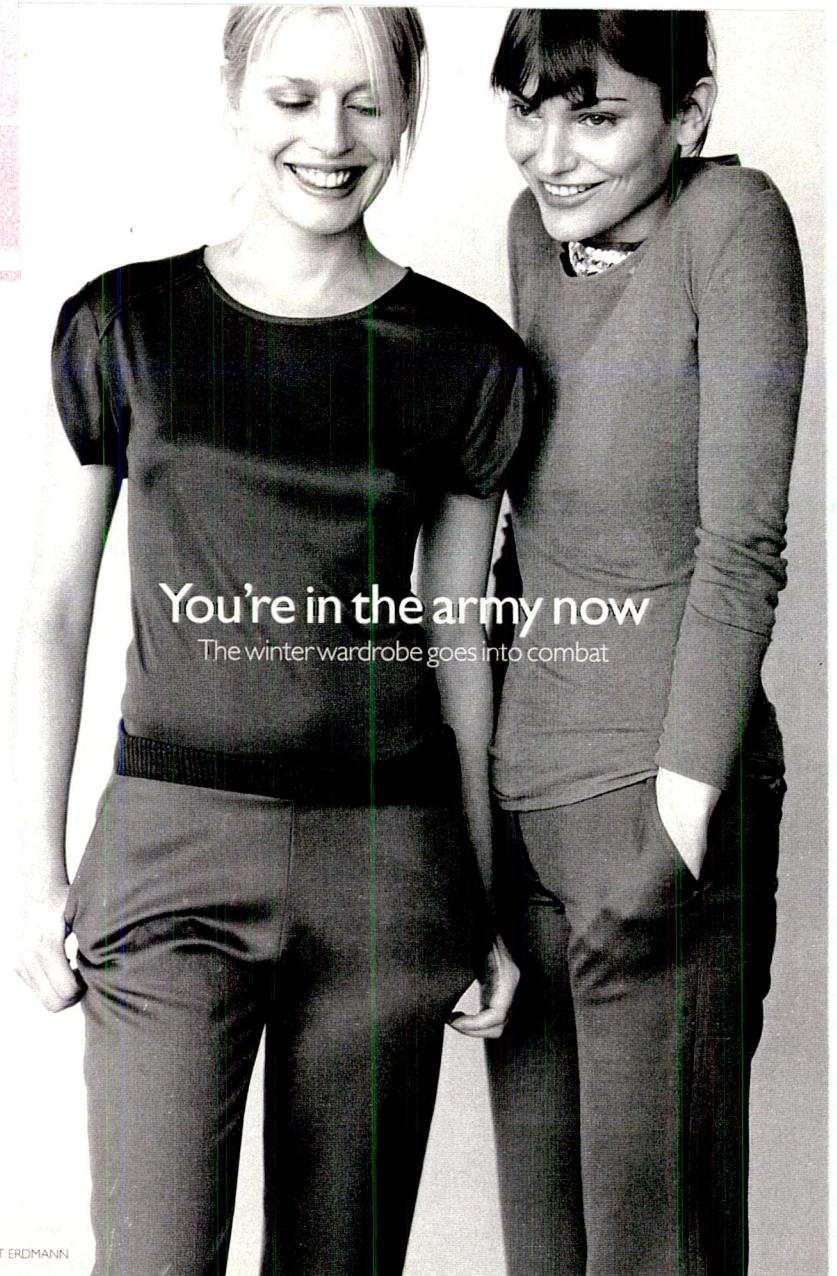
It is not until recently however, that this particular







PHOTO 9

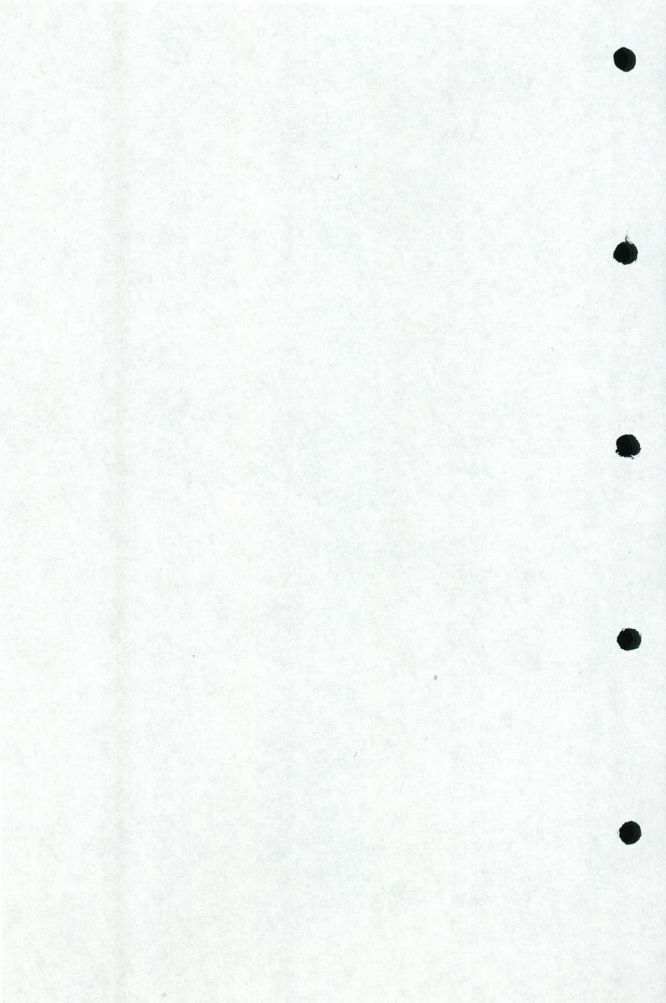
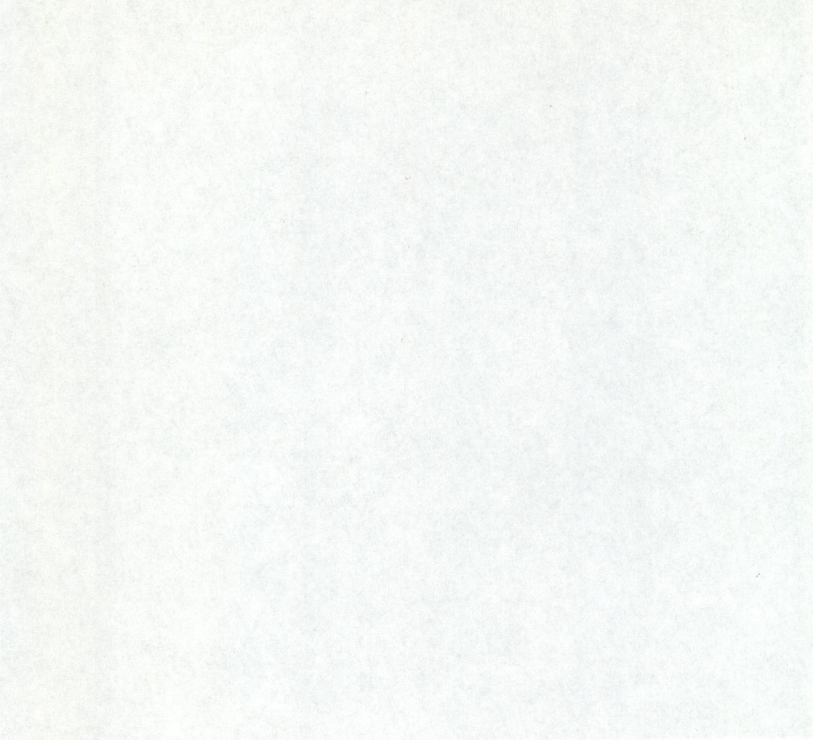


You're in the army now  
The winter wardrobe goes into combat

ROBERT ERDMANN

PHOTO 10





taste for military surplus has reached high fashion. The designs which are influenced by combat gear seem, at times, to have very tenuous links with the genuine article. There are of course the very obviously military greatcoats and other quite soldierly-looking garments. However, there is also a huge number of collections based on a military theme, but with barely a hint of their original influence, except for loose trousers, extra shoulder seams and muted colours (Photos 9 & 10). Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but is bound to be frustrating for those who have been dedicated collectors and wearers of army surplus for many years.



## **CHAPTER 5 AND CONCLUSION**

Why do people wear combats?

Why do people today wear combats? Is there much history attached to the reasons why young people today choose them? Does the fact that they have originated from a military background affect the buyer? Is there a reason why they have increased in popularity in recent years?

It is likely that when combats first started to be worn as civilian clothing, they did have some degree of political significance to the wearers. This would have been in the early 1960's. This was at the time when teenagers were just beginning to be recognised as a distinct part of society, separate from adults and children. Army surplus at this time would have been seen as one of the first anti-fashion styles, along with the likes of the Hell's Angels, who were also intended to shock rather than please.

As Julian Robinson states in BODY PACKAGING;-

Student protests against armed conflict and repression became increasingly strident in the 1950's. Confrontations took place on American college campuses as early as 1962, and in Indonesia, student riots had become almost commonplace by the mid-60's. The culmination came in 1968 with the Paris riots, which were so violent it seemed the younger generation had irrevocably renounced all the imposed rules of established authority. With this outburst, clothing as a means of self-expression finally came of age.

At this time then, people were becoming more aware of what their clothing would say about them, and began dressing accordingly. (There was also a wider range of clothing





available which allowed them to say more through dress.) Surely it cannot be true in this case, that dressing oneself in army surplus could have been separate from all political thought. I am not convinced however, that wearing the clothing which the army provided for its soldiers was a very successful anti-war message. This type of clothing was one of the earliest fashions to be a teen rebellion against the dress of their parents, as it began with the birth of the teenager. This image grew during the 1960's and after, and the army surplus wear blended in with the various other second-hand clothing which became an essential part of many young people's wardrobes. All of this was certainly in part influenced by the political feelings of young people at the time. It was also part of the rejection and rebellion against the beliefs and traditions of the previous generation - their parents.

Peasant garments marked a display of solidarity with the poor and the Third World. Afro haircuts were a symbol of black American political consciousness; and the feminist appropriation of male workclothes has its own coherence when placed historically as a sequel to the excesses of the early 1960's sartorial imagery in which woman was cast as helpless yet seductive child, doll, bird, baby, and so on. (Nava, 1992, p. 163).

This however, does not necessarily mean that these particular pieces of clothing hold any specific meaning in their fabric to make them politically persuasive. Rather, it is the political feelings of the wearer, which they bring to their clothing, which makes them so. Mica Nava expresses this thought also:-



...we can attribute no inherent meaning to fashions or to particular styles of masculinity and femininity. Codes are immensely plastic and are constantly being reworked. Whether make-up renders women respectable or deviant, whether muscular bodies are in or out, whether streamlining is good or bad design.....  
(Nava, 1992, p. 164).

Although it may be the case that there are no military implications attached to a civilian wearing army surplus today, this also depends on the wearers and their environment. For one student, Darina Murtagh, (who lives in Co. Down, N. Ireland), combats still do have some attachment to their military origins. According to Ms. Murtagh:-

I have recently bought my first pair of combats, which are plain olive green ones. I would not have considered buying camouflage ones because of the obvious connotations that they would have in Northern Ireland.

When questioned further, Ms. Murtagh added that her wearing army surplus in a camouflage print would look "too military" and might irritate members of the R.U.C.

Army surplus gear became available to the general public during the late 1950's, and it did tie in well with the tendency at that particular time towards young political feelings of anger at the apparant slaughter of young people in war. It also coincided with the ever increasing trend towards second-hand and peasant-style clothing.

I think it is true to say then, that a pair of combat pants bought today would not represent the political feelings of the youth of the 1960's, rather they can be used to communicate whatever the wearer wishes. This, of course, is true for any type of clothing which could be mentioned.





Any item which, when first introduced to the public, was shocking or for some reason unacceptable to adult society, eventually became acceptable due to familiarity. These fashions also became acceptable due to the nature of the fashion industry and the rest of society in their efforts to constantly outdo whatever had been done before, and to capitalise on any street level sartorial expression. And so, in relative terms, that which was shocking in the 1960's is very likely to go almost unnoticed in 1998. It has been the case since the 1960's and before, that students have a particular "look." What affects the way that students dress? Trends in fashion certainly do, although many students would deny this. Politics also, to some extent, though not as much as in the past.

In terms of pricing, the lower the better is the main rule for a lot of students. The warmth that a garment can provide would occasionally have a bearing on a purchase, and similarly, durability may be a factor. It is not specific items of clothing, but a variety of styles which cause students to stand out from other members of the general public. It would not be correct to say that they take more interest in the way they dress than any other group in society. Perhaps it is rather that they try to communicate more with their clothing, or that they try to communicate in a more direct way, using their clothes as one of several media.

In the 1960's and 1970's, this was true of scholars from all disciplines, but today I think it has become more



the domain of art and design students, at least in Ireland.

Students from other disciplines seem to put less imagination into their clothes now.

In the 1960's, the wearing of combat gear as civilian clothing was an ironic statement. Wearing the very clothing in which soldiers were both dying and killing, presented conflicts which could not be ignored. Today, however, Plum Sykes writes:-

Fashion chooses to ignore the ethical conflict implicit in the military look because it's extremely wearable and flattering.  
(Vogue, September 1996, p. 252).

Part of the reason why the military look is becoming so popular amongst women is because of the rise in fashion of the "girl power" ideal. This is the ideal which has brought such icons as Tank Girl (fig. 7) and the Spice Girls (fig. 8) to our attention. This ubiquitous Girl Power cannot but influence fashion. It is yet another example of the fashion industry taking grass root style and selling it back to the public. Tank Girl is one of the early influences on this new brand of girl (or grrrl). Tank Girl is young, rebellious, confident, strong, resourceful, self-reliant, independent, and equally attractive to men and women. All these attributes are highly desirable at the present time, particularly to young and single women. This is not in any way a lack of femininity, however it is a new breed of femininity. Combats happen to express this rather well. For me, they epitomise all of these qualities - they insinuate independence and ambition. Of course, this is





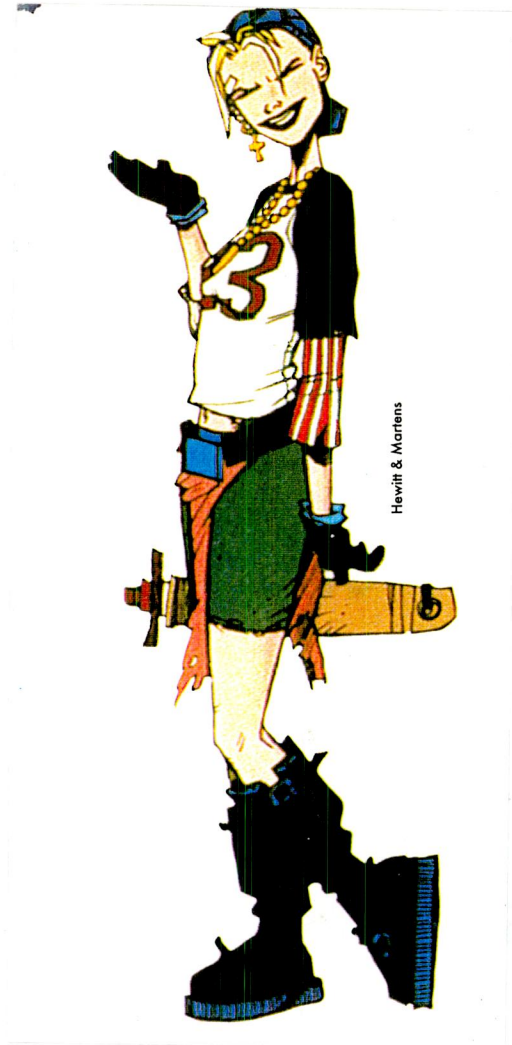


FIG 7



FIG 8

2004  
Jan 2



because those are the sentiments that we choose to give them at this time, and they may change entirely in another five years!

What thought needs to go into wearing combats? In some ways one might say that they are the "new jeans." By this, I mean that most people are realising that they can be worn in the same way as jeans; as much or as little effort and consideration as suits the wearer can go into how they are worn and with what they are worn; they look equally well with a skinny-rib t-shirt, a satin shirt, a big and baggy t-shirt or a big woolly jumper. They are comfortable - more so than jeans - to wear for lounging at home. Also, depending on the wearer's taste, they can be washed every day or worn for weeks. (The drab colours of the originals, at least, hide a multitude.) They are entirely unisex, they look acceptable when patched, and can be worn ironed or creased, crisp and new or old and faded.

Undeniably, there is a style of combat pants on the market today to fit every shape, size and taste, and this is the reason why they will continue to grow in popularity until either everybody owns a pair, or those who don't, want to.





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