British Journal for Military History

Volume 7, Issue 2, July 2021

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 19 July 2021

Citation: Kelsey Power, 'Dress, Identity, and Negotiation by British Prisoners of War in France, 1803-1812', *British Journal for Military History*, 7.2 (2021), pp. 64-82.

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Dress, Identity, and Negotiation by British Prisoners of War in France, 1803-1812

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ABSTRACT
British prisoners of war captured during the Napoleonic Wars were preoccupied with dress. This is unsurprising given clothing's relationship to physical and mental health and to identity. However, the discussion of clothing by prisoners during this period goes beyond the passive engagement with these concepts to a conscious manipulation of how dress could be used, and how it could be 'read' by others. This paper argues that British prisoners of war used their knowledge of dress, and the skills learned during their incarceration, and from their professions, to turn clothing into escape technologies, and a means to assert agency.

Diaries written by British prisoners of war (POWs) captured during the Napoleonic Wars frequently mention their clothing. While the importance of appropriate clothing to the comfort and care of prisoners is self-evident, prisoners could also frequently use clothing for their benefit in other, more creative, ways. Clothing often played a role in escape, and prisoners displayed a surprising amount of ingenuity in their attempts to smuggle tools and money, make rope from scraps of cloth, and use the many skills they had learned adapting to ship-board life to their advantage. The skills necessary to becoming a competent sailor were of great use when it came to planning an escape from captivity in the citadels of France. Sewing, ropemaking, navigation, climbing and handling ropes, and creative problem solving were all useful.

Aside from these concrete manipulations of textile, prisoners also used clothing's ability to obscure or embody identity to disguise or assert their power. The fluidity of these signifiers suited prisoners who could either divert notice of their activities or elicit sympathy and help from their captors or from the local populace. Escaped prisoners passing checkpoints on their way to the coast might assume the dress of a different class, claim a different nationality, or even a different gender. Occasionally,

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i2.1555

these disguises were too convincing, and prisoners had difficulty in providing credible evidence of their true identity. Successfully pulling off these escapades required paying close attention to dress. Prisoners needed a keen eye for quality, cost, fit, cut, styling, construction, and class, gender, and national markers, when selecting what clothing to purchase, alter, steal, or wear. Examining the manipulations of textiles and other materials by prisoners reveals how prisoners used their knowledge of dress to exert agency during their captivity. This paper argues that prisoners manipulated textiles and other materials both to reproduce or repurpose identity and to facilitate escape. This article aims to explore this three-fold 'manipulation': first, the assertion of identity to manipulate the experience of capture, second, the expert use of seamen's skills to manipulate available textiles into useful objects; and third, the manipulation of identity to assume the guise most useful to the moment.

Prisoners of war during this period have not had their clothing closely examined for meaning. This is due, in part, to the lack of extant examples, and in part to the somewhat unregulated nature of the clothing prisoners were given or were allowed to wear. However, the link between clothing and survival, mental and emotional health, and identity, has been closely examined in the cases of prisoners from later conflicts, and in the case of criminal incarceration. The importance of the Napoleonic period to the development of the treatment of prisoners of war is an important link that has been overlooked in the study of material culture. What prisoners owned or had access to depended both on their social status, namely how connected they were to their banking and personal support systems which determined how much and how regularly they could obtain funds as well as on the location and duration of their imprisonment as these would determine what kind of clothing were regularly issued and how often. Nevertheless, the existing records provide a wonderful variety of perspectives, and accounts from Naval officers (particularly of the midshipman and lieutenant ranks), merchant officers and men, pressed and skilled seamen, and civilian *détenus* are all used for this study.

What items prisoners had with them when they were captured, and what they could acquire was based primarily on class. A distinction existed between officers in the navy and their subordinates, as well as merchant officers, seamen, and *détenus*.[1] The

[1]*Détenus* were British civilians who were living in France when the hostilities reignited in 1803, men between the ages of 18 and 60 were declared prisoners of war based on their eligibility to serve in the militia. This was an attempt by Napoleon to create a new definition of 'civilian' and 'combatant', and which did not sit well with the English government, or those detained. In practice, this group included far more than those formally 'captured' and included men and boys younger and older than the stated age limits, as well as women and girls. Likewise, many of those detained had been resident

accounts written from these diverse perspectives show a wide variety in control over how many of their belongings prisoners were allowed to keep after capture, and how many they could retain during the journey to the depots. Edward Fraser argues that something like half a million prisoners were taken by the French throughout the war. Of these, the number of British were probably less than 12,000.[2] The experience of British prisoners was also significantly different to that of other nations, as they were given special privileges, the main one being parole for officers and gentlemen, as well exclusion from employment in hard labour. In the beginning, officers and *détenus* were housed primarily in the city and citadel of Verdun. Lower-class prisoners, those who were not officers or gentlemen, were housed in the smaller depots like Valenciennes, Longwy, and Metz, and were kept closely confined.[3] Closely confined meant living in the citadel, whereas gentlemen trusted to give their parole were merely required to attend periodical roll calls and could find their own lodging. Living in the town on parole, as well as having more money to spend, allowed officers and *détenus* some flexibility to purchase their own clothing. The amount of money flowing into Verdun caused the town to flourish, as wealthy prisoners sought to make their confinement more bearable by paying bribes for fewer restrictions. They describe forming social clubs, organising dinners and balls, competing in horseraces, picnicking, establishing language, dancing, and navigation schools, putting on their own theatre productions,

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in France for a considerable amount of time and were surprised to see themselves suddenly classed as British, and enemies of France.

[2]Edward Fraser, Napoleon the Gaoler: Personal Experiences and Adventures of British Sailors and Soldiers During the Great Captivity, (London: Methven and Company Ltd., 1914), p. 1.

[3]Michael Lewis, *Napoleon and His British Captives,* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1962); Élodie Duché, 'Charitable Connections: Transnational Financial Networks and Relief for British Prisoners of War in Napoleonic France, 1803-1814,' *Napoleonica La Revue* 21, 3 (2014), pp. 74-117 (p.74); Elodie Duché, 'A Passage to Imprisonment: The British Prisoners of War in Verdun Under the First French Empire', PhD Thesis, (University of Warwick, 2014), https://pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/record=b2753731~S1. Accessed 21 June 2021; Clive J. Lloyd, *The History of the Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War 1756-1816: Hulk, Depot and Parole,* (Woodbridge: Antique Collector's Club Ltd., 2007); Renaud Morieux, *The Society of Prisoners: Anglo-French Wars and Incarceration in the Eighteenth Century,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Renaud Morieux, 'French Prisoners of War, Conflicts of Honour, and Social Inversions in England, 1744-1783,' *The Historical Journal* 56, 1 (2013), pp. 55–88,; John Goldworth Alger, *Napoleon's British Visitors and Captives. 1801-1815,* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, Ltd., 1904); Edward Fraser, *Napoleon the Gaoler: Personal Experiences and Adventures of British Sailors and Soldiers During the Great Captivity,* (London: Methven and Company Ltd., 1914).

and shopping. In effect, creating a community that had all the pastimes and many of the freedoms that were available in London.

Lower-class prisoners were more restricted, as well as less affluent. While they could be granted permission to travel to town from the citadel in order to purchase food, clothing, or other goods, access was dependent on the good behaviour of all the prisoners and the whims of the Commandant. Regulations meant they could expect a regular issue of clothing provided by the French, that according to John Tregerthen Short, a merchant sailor from Cornwall, consisted 'of a grey jacket and trousers and a straw hat.' A journal written by an unknown Scottish seaman describes the clothing served out, the quality, and the frequency with which it was received. This sailor complains that he had 'been upwards of five years a prisoner and have only had two shuits of clothes viz. two Jackets, two waistcoats, three pars of pantelouns two pair of shooes three shirts and an hatt which is all I have had in five years and in that time I have travelled upwards of one Thousand one hundred miles.'[4] The rest of his account is punctuated with similar complaints, for example, he comments in 1809 that he had received but 'two pairs of shoes this four years, which is verrey little.'[5]

It was vital to retain as many of one's belongings as possible when captured, and to then maintain them over the course of several years of what was often daily wear. Uniforms were designed for life at sea, and personal narratives frequently decry their deterioration over long marches to prison depots on land. Shoes quickly wore out, leaving prisoners to march barefoot unless they 'jerry-rigged' something, or acquired another pair.[6] If prisoners were blessed to have more than one suit of clothing, they might be tempted to gamble or trade it away for alcohol.[7] Accusations flew back and forth between France and England about this problem of insufficiently clothed or naked POWs, both to shame the enemy nation into charitable assistance, and to show that the incarcerated prisoners were so poorly behaved as to deserve none.[8] Both

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[4]National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK, (hereinafter NMM) JOD/224/1, p. 58.
[5]NMM JOD/224/1, p. 37.
[6]Peter Gordon, *Narrative of the Imprisonment and Escape of Peter Gordon,* (London: Josiah Conder, 1816), p. 131.
[7]Élodie Duché, 'Charitable Connections: Transnational Financial Networks and Relief for British Prisoners of War in Napoleonic France, 1803-1814,' *Napoleonica La Revue* 21, no. 3 (2014); Paul Chamberlain, *Hell Upon Water: Prisoners of War in Britain 1793-1815*, 1st ed., (Stroud: The History Press, Spellmount Publishers Ltd., 2008).
[8]For an example of such accusations, consider 'The Statesman', the London newspaper, which on 19 March 1812 published a letter by an anonymous French prisoner accusing the Transport Board of inadequately providing for the prisoners in its care and embezzling the funds meant for their benefit. The letter resulted in a libel case prosecuted against the owner of 'The Statesman', which is covered in the 10

governments had some motivations in protecting the belongings of newly captured POWs, since it could save them the expense of a new suit of clothes later. These factors all mean that establishing an 'average' prisoner's clothing is next to impossible. Unlike in later wars, the concentration camp, or within the penal system, the prisoner of war during the Napoleonic period did not wear a widely recognised uniform. There were some attempts at establishing a prisoner's uniform. At Valenciennes, prisoners were issued numbers and asked to wear tin badges on their grey prison clothes, and were barred from dyeing or altering their clothing.[9]

Work on the uniforms of military prisoners of war has been more concentrated on later periods and concerned with these uniforms as networks of control or resistance. The lack of a recognisable POW uniform for this period complicates the research, by making generalised discussions difficult. However, it also clearly shows the lack of a concerted project of dehumanisation like that developed in later conflicts or in other theatres.[10] The concept of prison clothing as an axis of power is discussed in Juliet Ash's 'Dress Behind Bars', where she considers the prison uniform as 'embodied punishment'. Lacking a uniform, and thus a physical symbol of the loss of identity as active, unconfined, and successful military men means that the gradations of humiliation or dishonouring of captured soldiers and sailors are subtler, even if their implications were quite clear to contemporaries. Therefore, what seem like outsized reactions to comparatively small humiliations require close study. These reactions fit into the broader framework of honour culture and indicate that more was at stake than is readily visible, and that prisoners could exert their influence in different ways. Even when these articles of dress were not crucial to survival, they were crucial to the structure of social hierarchies and to the customs of war.

August 1812, 17 September 1812, 20 November 1812, and 12 December 1812 editions of the same newspaper. These accusations, especially when they were in the public eye, were taken very seriously.

[9]NMM JOD/224/1, p. 105; NMM JOD/224/1. 'This day the Commandant put severals in the Cashot for getting their prison clothes dyed, and one man lost his general permission by it.' (pp. 84-85) and 'This day the Commandant commenced serving out shoes and shirts by the prison books to all the prisoners in his depot. He has likewise stuck up an order informing the prisoners that if any of them sell or alter what is served out to them, they are to be tried by the military laws &c.' (p. 85).

[10]Lloyd, *History of the Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War*, Standards of care varied wildly, Clive's survey work on the lives of prisoners during the period gives an excellent picture but comparing Napoleon's slaughter of Turkish prisoners during the Egypt campaign, and British descriptions of starving or chained Spanish prisoners show that the British experience was far from universal.

Clothing has been well established as a tool for the outward manifestation of inner beliefs about identity. Multiple masculine ideals existed in tandem with each other, as well as changed over the course of the eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.[11] Joanne Begiato shows that these bodily ideals variously valued grace, dexterity, and physical power, as she traces the relationship of these forms to morality and manner. Karen Harvey, likewise, argues for the importance of sensibility, emotionality, and politeness to the ideal male comportment. These modes were often expressed through fashion.[12] Excellent scholarship has, likewise, been done on the gendered problems of crossdressing, with the primary focus on the interplay between this act and sexuality.[13] Articles, like that by Rachamimov, analyse the importance of gender, emasculation, and cross-dressing in the prisoner of war camp setting.[14] However, this

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[11]Joanne Begiato, 'Between Poise and Power: Embodied Manliness in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Culture,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (2016), pp. 125–47 Karen Harvey, 'The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800,' *Journal of British Studies* 44, 2 (2005), pp. 296–311; Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, 'Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities,' *Sociology Compass* 8, (2014), pp. 246–58; Ben Griffin, 'Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem,' *Gender & History* 30, 2 (2018), pp. 1–24.

[12]Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Michèle Cohen, ''Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830,' *Journal of British Studies* 44, 2 (2005), pp. 312–29; Katherine Aaslestad, Karen Hagemann, and Judith A. Miller, 'Introduction: Gender, War and the Nation in the Period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars- European Perspectives,' *European History Quarterly* 37, 4 (2007), pp. 501–6,; Joane Nagel, 'Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, 2 (1998), pp. 242–69.

[13]Leslie J. Jansen, 'When the Clothes Do Not Make the Man: Female Masculinity and Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century British Literature', PhD Thesis, (University of Maryland, 2006); Pauline Greenhill, ''Neither a Man nor a Maid': Sexualities and Gendered Meanings in Cross-Dressing Ballads,' *The Journal of American Folklore* 108, 428 (1995), pp. 156–77; Ula Lukszo Klein, 'Eighteenth-Century Female Cross-Dressers and Their Beards,' *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16, 4 (2016), pp. 119–43; Marian Füssel, 'Between Dissimulation and Sensation: Female Soldiers in Eighteenth-Century Warfare,' *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, 4 (2018, pp. 527–42.

[14]Alon Rachamimov, 'The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914-1920,' *American Historical Review*, 111, 2 (2006), pp. 362–82.

paper takes a different approach to focus on cross-dressing as a utilitarian act.[15] Indeed, in the case of these prisoners, cross-dressing is a form of imposture rather than a revelation of sexual preference or desired gender presentation.

Because the extant examples of prisoner's clothing from this period are virtually non-existent, the result is that prisoner accounts have become the sole source of information about the specific items prisoners wore, and how they altered them. Luckily, these personal accounts are rich with detail about the unique relationship these prisoners had with their clothing. Nevertheless, crucial details about the material culture of prisoner of war dress were not recorded. Matching objects with similar garments from personal accounts can help to build a picture of the material culture of a group for whom the material culture has not been preserved. Looking at details from the journals and diaries in the context of similar, physical objects can help explain how textiles were experienced by those who wore them. It is important to use these examples even though they are not the same because clothing is so intimately connected to the body.[16] In order to understand the practical problems prisoners faced when manipulating textiles, it is imperative to have a sense of the weight, texture or weave, fit and function of the garments they were working with. The visceral experience of these details used in accord with the accounts can allow the researcher

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[15]For more on the practice of imposture see: Natalie Zemon Davis, 'From Prodigious to Heinous: Simon Goulart and the Reframing of Imposture,' in *L'Histoire Grande Ouverte: Hommages a Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie,* (Paris: Fayard, n.d.), pp. 274–83; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Remaking Impostors: From Martin Guerre to Somersby,' *Hayes Robinson Lecture Series,* (London: Royal Holloway, University of London, 1997); Jennine Hurl-Eamon, 'The Westminster Imposters: Impersonating Law Enforcement in Early Eighteenth-Century London,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, 3 (2005), pp. 461–83; Füssel, 'Between Dissimulation and Sensation: Female Soldiers in Eighteenth-Century Warfare'; Judith Surkis, 'Carnival Balls and Penal Codes: Body Politics in July Monarchy France,' *History of the Present* 1, 1 (2011), pp. 59–83; Patricia Fumerton, 'Making Vagrancy (In)Visible: The Economics of Disguise in Early Modern Rogue Pamphlets,' *English Literary Renaissance* 33, 2 (2003), pp. 211–27; Gary R. Dyer, 'Reading as a Criminal in Early Nineteenth-Century Fiction,' *The Wordsworth Circle* 35, no. 3 (2004), pp. 141–46; James H. Johnson, 'The Face of Imposture in Postrevolutionary France,' *French Historical Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012), pp. 291–320; 'Military Imposture and Social Mischief,' *Bristol Selected Pamphlets, 1897* (Bristol: University of Bristol Library, 1897); John M. Steadman, 'Satan's Metamorphoses and the Heroic Convention of the Ignoble Disguise,' *The Modern Language Review* 52, 1 (1957), pp. 81–85; Amy Milka, 'Impostors: Performance, Emotion and Genteel Criminality in Late Eighteenth-Century England,' *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 1, 2 (2017), pp. 81–107.
[16]Karen Harvey, 'Men of Parts: Masculine Embodiment and the Male Leg in Eighteenth-Century England,' *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. October (2015), pp. 797–821, p. 820.

to 'read' the object and imagine the steps actually required to alter a garment for new use. For instance, replacing a button on a waistcoat with a coin might include matching the size and weight of the coin to the button, or increasing the size of the buttonhole so that the apparel remained fully functional. The skill required for sewing something into the lining or the seams of a shirt or coat becomes more apparent when fit is considered. Prisoners often had to use pieces cut from other cloth or hang them from tapes securely attach these objects, and the increased bulkiness or weight would need to be considered so that the lines or fit of the attire did not become noticeably distorted. These objects provide all manner of supplemental information, like how men interacted with the clothing they wore in their profession on a daily basis, the most common areas of wear, reinforcement, alterations for comfort, standards of dress and undress, and finally evidence of their habitual level of interaction with altering or repairing clothing.

Capture and Search

Prisoners were, in many ways, most vulnerable at the point when they were captured. Their change in status had to be symbolically reinforced by observing the familiar traditions. These rituals made it clear where the power to command had been relinquished and revolved around recognition respect, or the acknowledgement that one's enemy was just as honourable and deserving of respect as oneself.[17] However, multiple accounts, like those of George Richard Casse or Peter Gordon, show that despite laws to the contrary, stealing clothing from prisoners of war frequently occurred. Casse describes the experience of the captain of the merchant vessel on which he had bought passage: Immediately after being captured, 'they were greeted with great indignity on board the privateer; the men being allowed to strip the captain's coat from his back and rifle his pockets with impunity.'[18]

Peter Gordon, who was second mate, and also on board a merchant ship, had his clothing similarly inspected.[19] Privateers came aboard and began inspecting the goods under the pretext of seizing them for the customs-house.[20] On-board searches took place under the cover of looking for British manufactured goods. As an embargo had been placed on their import, British prisoners and merchantmen were particularly susceptible to having their clothing seized on the pretence that it had been made in

[17]Stephen Darwall, *Honor, History & Relationship,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[18]George Richard Casse, *Authentic Narrative of the Sufferings of George Richard Casse as a Prisoner of France During the Late War; And of His Escape to the Allied Army near Clermont: With Some Particulars of His Apprenticeship at Sea,* (London: J. Mason, 1828), p. 36.

[19]Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape*, pp. 13-15.

[20]Ibid., pp. 18-19.

England.[21] Since most of an Englishman's goods came from his country of origin, in practice, this often meant that the best or newest objects were confiscated. Gordon describes how he and his companions were searched upon capture.

> We were searched at the customhouse for papers and for British manufactured goods; they were strongly inclined to seize a pair of cotton stockings from the mate, but as they were marked and had been washed, he was permitted to keep them .[22] … Vigilant as the French Government is, in endeavouring to prevent the circulation of British manufactured goods, I do not believe it would countenance the depriving of a prisoner of a few new clothes which might be in his possession; I rather consider it a robbery committed by the custom-house officers, and applied to their own use.[23]

The success of prisoner's attempts to exert control over stolen property, and thus their French captors, varied. Several prisoners marked the difference in conduct and behaviour of French officers of the old regime, who were often persuaded to honour the POW conventions, and the new officers, who were considered very unreliable.[24] Donat Henchy O'Brien, lieutenant of the *Warrior*, describes a leather trunk containing his 'shift of linen' which disappeared after being unloaded from the vessel by one of

[21]Smuggling cotton into France occurred frequently throughout the French Wars, with a similar smuggling trade going in the other direction with silk goods. Michael M. Edwards, *The Growth of the British Cotton Trade, 1780-1815,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), p. 49. Captain Frederick Hoffman makes note during his stay in Cambrai that some of the prisoners were employed in making dimity, a lightweight cotton fabric. Frederick Hoffman, *A Sailor of King George: The Journals of Captain Frederick Hoffman R.N. 1793-1814*, n.d. [e-reader version], 'End of Captivity'.

[22]This refers to the common practice of sewing one's initials or other identifying marks into linens and cottons. White goods in particular needed to be washed frequently as their whiteness was regarded as an indication of wealth and privilege, and as they were often made to the same or similar patterns. As such they needed to have some form of differentiation for when they were sent out to the laundry. For how marked linen was used to identify escaped prisoners see: John Tregerthen Short, *Prisoners of War in France from 1804-1814, Being the Adventures of John Tregerthen Short and Thomas Williams of St. Ives, Cornwall, with an Introduction by Sir Edward Hain*, ed. Sir Edward Hain, n.d. p. 93; Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape*, p. 141.

[23]Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape,* p. 19.

[24]Edward Boys, *Narrative of a Captivity and Adventures in France and Flanders: Between the Years 1803 and 1809*, Second, (London: J. F. Dove, 1831), pp. 14-15, p. 19 & pp. 39-40.

the French crewmen.[25] After an appeal to the officers, who were 'excessively hurt at such a piece of villainy being committed by one of their crew', O'Brien managed to recover part of the contents of his missing chest and was assured that the thief was forced to run the gauntlet.[26]

Incidents of stealing held moral as well as economic and physical dangers. Like the men discussed in Anne Little's article about cultural cross-dressing on the American frontier, 'the English had already been bested in one test of masculine worth. But bereft of their clothing, armour, and weapons, they were stripped of all proof of their manhood. What could be more insulting than to see the accoutrements of their masculinity on the bodies of their conquerors?'[27] While the anxieties that fuelled British soldiers fighting Native Americans in the colonies were not what fuelled Naval officers fighting a 'civilised' European enemy, the appropriation of their professional honour in the form of their stolen clothes was still an act designed to humiliate. Thus, John Tregerthen Short's account describing the experience of his cousin James Sincock who had his clothing stolen by the privateers who captured them, and then had the humiliation compounded by having to watch as the thief appeared dressed 'head to foot' in his clothing the next day.[28]

Prisoners were adept at turning these situations to their advantage, either by playing on class affinities, or in turning the tools of their captors against them. They used misdirection and indignation to avoid being searched and were often justified in their faith that these claims to agency would be respected. When their clothing was confiscated, prisoners prevailed upon the traditions of war, and mutual class and national affinities. In short, appeals for better treatment based on a belief in the 'civilised' nature of the enemy were not wholly unsuccessful.

Crafting

Many prisoners experienced a loss of clothing, either through search and seizure, or through its deterioration during the march from the coast to the prison depots. Lower-class prisoners turned to making or altering their clothing, or charity. In order to ease the burden of providing clothes to the prisoners, they were allowed access to

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[25]Donat Henchy O'Brien, *My Adventures During the Late War: Comprising A Narrative of Shipwreck, Captivity, Escapes from French Prisons, Etc. from 1804 to 1827, Vol. 1,* (London: Henry Colburn, 1839), p. 10.

[26]Ibid., pp. 10-11.

[27]Ann M. Little, ''Shoot That Rogue, for He Hath an Englishman's Coat On!': Cultural Cross-Dressing on the New England Frontier, 1620-1760,' *The New England Quarterly* 74, 2 (2001), pp. 238–73, . p. 263.

[28]Short, *Prisoners of War*, p. 26.

cloth to make their own. Some even found employment sewing French army uniforms.[29]

Sewing and mending skills are evident in the existing examples of seaman's clothing. The uniforms in the collections at the National Maritime Museum in London provide a general guideline as to the principles of fit and function, and show that even in these higher quality examples, efforts were made to reuse cloth and fittings, and to repair damage. While some of these repairs might have been carried out by professionals, or to modify the clothing for other wearers, the frequency of repair and the variety of materials, threads, and stitching techniques indicates that some may have been *ad hoc* repairs made by sailors.[30] Techniques like piecing and turning were standard practice in the eighteenth century, and cutting and tailoring methods were designed to conserve expensive textiles. William Story demonstrates some of these considerations when he describes the mending he performed, 'I employed myself in mending stockings, and preparing some thin waistcoats to march in, by attaching old stocking for sleeves, which I found very suitable.'[31] Likewise, Peter Gordon describes the ingenuity of his fellow captives in acquiring materials for clothing, explaining they used the studding sail to make trousers to replace those taken from them upon capture.[32] He later describes refashioning his old pair of trousers into a waistcoat.[33] Prisoners took their knowledge of sewing, gained from repairing their clothing, or repairing sails on board ship, and applied their skill to aiding their escape attempts.

Clothing was not always preserved, but instead torn or cut up to create ropes. French records document an instance of prisoners attempting an escape from Bitche, the punishment depot. They were stopped, ropes made with sheet from their beds were seized, and they were locked away with another prisoner, 'on whom [was] found some string which was going to be used to make a rope for escape'.[34] *Escape from France*, a narrative written by an anonymous prisoner, explains how the author and his friends arranged to purchase cloth for the purported purpose of making shirts and trousers,

[29]Short, *Prisoners of War,* p. 21; NMM JOD/224/1.

[30]NMM D2018.11; UNI0028; UNI 0075; UNI0076; UNI 0077; UNI0081; UNI 0095; UNI103; UNI105; UNI0162; UNI0163; UNI3404.

[31]William Story, *A Journal Kept in France, During a Captivity of More than Nine Years, Commencing the 14th Day of April, 1805, and Ending the 5th Day of May, 1814,* (Sunderland: George Garbutt, 1815), p. 46.

[32]Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape,* p. 35. Duck was often used in sailor's dress, reusing the sail in this way was not uncommon, but it does represent a particularly 'sailorly' type of frugality and ingenuity.

[33]Ibid., p. 40.

[34]Archives Nationales de France (hereinafter FNA), F/7/3309.

and instead used the cloth to make rope.[35] These ropes could be concealed, as done by Ellison and his group, by wrapping them around the body under the waistcoat.[36] The alternate style was to conceal the rope under the crown of the hat. Examples of cocked hats show that there was often extra room in the crown, which included a lining that could be resized to fit the head using a draw string.[37]

The case of Alexander Stewart is indicative of just how important the skills learned as a sailor could be to a successful escape. Ropes needed to be long enough to descend multiple citadel walls and strong enough to bear the weight of multiple men. They needed to be constructed such that after each descent the rope could either be snapped or cut and the remaining length used for scaling the next wall. Miscalculations of this distance, a lack of materials, or impatience in making could result in dire consequences. Stewart, a superstitious young man with very little experience at sea, he had been captured after only a few months on board, and he had nearly drowned from falling overboard twice, made his escape attempt from the citadel in Verdun.[38] He and his co-conspirators spent six weeks collecting string and plaiting it into rope at night. During the day, Stewart kept the growing rope coiled under his hat, in constant fear that a gust of wind would blow it off his head. The night of their escape, Stewart was the first over the wall, but the rope was too thin to grip properly, and he had wrapped it around his hand. He slid more than sixty feet to the ground and cut his hand all the way round down to the bone. Stewart's inexperience with ropemaking and handling is not what doomed his escape, but it did nearly cost him his hand.

Sewing was also often employed to hide documents or tools. Covered buttons were a frequent means of concealment for coins, or watch-springs which could be used to cut through the bars.[39] Money was a necessary component of any successful escape plan, and prisoners with access to bank funds needed to convert their assets into tender that could be used along the planned escape route while not drawing the attention of the guards to their preparations. Multiple prisoners describe how they sewed their escape funds into waistcoats or into the seams of their shirts. Seacombe Ellison, captured after an escape attempt with three other prisoners, describes sewing

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[35]Anonymous, *Escape from France: A Narrative of the Harships and Sufferings of Several British Subjects Who Effected Their Escape From Verdun,* (London: Hood and Sharpe, 1811), p. 27.

[36]Seacome Ellison, *Prison Scenes: And Narrative of Escape from France During the Late War,* (Liverpool: D. Marples and Company, 1838), p. 51.

[37]NMM UNI 0074; UNI 0082; UNI 0057; UNI 0059.

[38]Alexander Stewart. *The Life of Alexander Stewart, Prisoner of Napoleon and Preacher of the Gospel, Written by Himself to 1815, Abridged by Dr. Albert Peel in 1874, with a Preface by his Grandson Sir. P. Malcolm Stewart,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947)

[39]NMM UNI5860; REL0725.

five gold louis inside his flannel waistcoat, and one under the arm of his coat.[40] A brief examination of the seam allowance generally allowed for clothing items at this time show that they would have needed to be taken-in to adequately conceal even the smallest coins, so alternative methods like making wallets or pouches with additional fabrics, or suspending them from tapes, or used as replacement button moulds, were easier to achieve. Disguising money as buttons was a common enough ruse, many accounts indicate that if a search of a prisoner was conducted, then the buttons would be closely examined. In recounting his re-capture, Ellison tells of how the guards immediately caught on to the trick:

> One of them observed a button above the common size, and, thinking it looked suspicious, he cut into it, and out dropped a double louis, — which brought a grin upon all their countenances, and a few *sacres* from their tongues. All their knives were instantly in requisition, and the poor buttons were disemboweled in the most cruel and wanton manner: coat buttons, waistcoat buttons, pantaloon buttons, —all were ripped up; their hard hearts spared none, neither large nor small.[41]

Ellison's five gold louis survived the thorough search, which revealed a total of sixty louis hidden about his and his companion's persons. Ellison's experience proves that not only was choosing a unique hiding place important, but that having the sewing skills necessary to disguise the alterations could make a huge difference to success.

Similar to Ellison, Peter Gordon also used his buttons as a means to hide valuable objects. He planned an escape with two others from the depot in Cambrai. He was unusual in that he applied a systematic, and even academic, approach to escape planning.[42] He collected stories of all the escape attempts from the gossip in the depot, as well as looked to literary works like 'The Life and Adventures of Baron von Trenck' for inspiration. After a few months of preparation, his friend, Copeland, was able to obtain a watch spring. Gordon describes how they planned to use the object:

> I carried it to a watch maker, who I thought had the appearance of an honest man, to be made into a saw for cutting iron; he not only immediately consented to make it, but showed me a dozen or two of his own, which he said would answer better than the one I had, being stronger: but in this he was mistaken, as their strength would prevent their being coiled up, and covered like a button,

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[40]Ellison, *Prison Scenes,* p. 64.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape*, p. 113.

> which the other from its pliability admitted of, and in that shape, was intended to be secured to our clothes.[43]

The use of seaman's crafts like sewing and ropemaking helped prisoners to shape their experience of incarceration and manipulate it to their own ends, they took skills learned or honed by their profession or developed during their prison experience and used them to create technologies to get home. They deconstructed their clothing for use as raw material, and they used their sewing and mending skills to reconstruct their garments into effective concealment for other tools like maps, forged passports, saws, files, and coin.

Disguise

When deconstructing clothing was impossible or impractical, disguise was a popular solution. However, assuming a disguise could be a dangerous prospect. British prisoners who were recaptured would drop the ruse in order to regain the privileges accorded to their 'first class prisoner' status. However, the threat of being a suspected spy, or being caught while dressed as a French deserter was not a sufficient downside to outweigh the sheer utility of disguise. These disguises can be divided into a few categories, imposture of a different nationality, imposture of a different class, and finally, imposture of a different gender.

Those without the means to change their clothing relied on simple camouflage to arouse the sympathy of the local population. If one had already learned the language, it was possible to pretend to be a deserter from the ranks of the French army, and if one had not learned the language, then pretending to be a neutral American was an option as well. Many prisoners relied on their ability to pass for a different nationality, and they completed their costume by assuming items of national dress. Several prisoners, including Edward Proudfoot Montagu, Alexander Stewart, and the anonymous author of *Escape from France* report how they wore their disguise of French clothing up until they arrived in England. Montagu reported to the admiralty in his French peasant dress, where he was asked to give account of his escape.[44] Peter Gordon also chose to take shelter in a false French identity, writing:

> I passed through one village, when the boys were coming out of school, who hooted me as I went along, some coming forward and crying, Oh! here is a Frenchman! others hallooed after me, 'Are the French coming today?'- Their

[43]Gordon. *Imprisonment and Escape*, p. 110.

[44]Edward Proudfoot Montagu, *The Personal Narrative of the Escape of Edward Proudfoot Montagu, An English Prisoner of War, From the Citadel of Verdun,* (New Market Place: Loyns, printer, Beccles (not for publication), 1849), p. 73.

> abuse pleased me much, as I knew whilst I could pass as a Frenchman, I should not be in any danger in Holland.[45]

When escapees were forced by circumstances to take shelter or food in inns or to cross through checkpoints at borders, they were often mistaken for French conscripts deserting from the army. If a prisoner had a knowledge of the French language at hand, he could reinforce this idea, and there are many examples of the local population helping escapees because they believed they were merely conscripts trying to get home.[46]

For non-officer prisoners who did not have to be concerned about breaking their parole, as they had not been granted it, assuming a new national identity was a means of breaking out of close confinement. Alexander Stewart describes the practice of exchanging names and clothes with others to literally assume their identity in order to escape or get transferred to a more desirable depot.[47] When he heard that prisoners were being transferred, he arranged to switch places with some prisoners who were scheduled to leave but desired to stay where they were. The exchange was made by going out into the yard with another prisoner from his room to wash some clothes. The members of the other room then created a distraction by starting a fight and forcing the guard to intervene. During this scuffle, Stewart traded places with the other man, and completely the ruse by changing his clothes, donning a 'ragged jacket, an old cap' and 'discolour[ing] [his] hair and face with coal dust, which much resembled black lead.'[48]

Thomas Williams, another lower-class prisoner, tried multiple times to escape by changing his name or pretending to be of a different nationality. When French recruiters came to the prison trying to enlist Irishmen to fight in Spain, some 400 or 500 men quickly volunteered. These attempts to enlist the prisoners were occurred frequently, as a few days later a Captain came from Morlaix in an attempt to employ any willing men 'not of England'. Williams, who was listed as English in the prison books, arranged with an American to take his name so that he could enlist, with the intention of using the ruse to exit the citadel and then subsequently escape. The plan worked well enough until the French captain's new recruits were waylaid by the Irishmen recruiting for the Irish troop heading to Spain. These officers immediately claimed that the 'Americans' were instead 'Irish' and belonged in their regiment. When their bullying failed to persuade the Captain to relinquish his crew, the entire group was marched back to the prison.

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[45]Gordon, *Imprisonment and Escape*, p. 210.
[46]Ellison, *Prison Scenes,* p. 66.
[47]Stewart, *Life of Alexander Stewart,* p. 72.
[48]Ibid., p. 73.

Williams tried the same trick again, this time disguising himself as a Dane. He describes this attempt:

> The Danes had made peace with France, and all men belonging to that nation were released from prison; but one of them left a Danish protection with one of the prisoners, and by stratagem he got more printed, and distributed them amongst us. Several of us petitioned Paris, claiming our release as Danes who were then not at war with France, sending our forged protections to Paris for inspection, and very soon an order came for our release. I had sent my name as Thomas Colby, a name I had taken after I came back from the privateer in exchange with a man of that name, in order that I might be with my old mess-mates, and so, when the order came for my release, he, of course, said he was Colby, and I was again disappointed. I tried the plan again in my own name, only making it Williamson instead of Williams. I received a very good report, but they did not let me go.[49]

Taking advantage of class consciousness could also be an effective means of evading notice. *Détenus* were the type of prisoner most likely to take advantage of being of the upper classes. They used their networks of wealthy or aristocratic friends (or friends with aristocratic sympathies) to slip out of France. This method was most effective immediately following the 1803 order that classed these civilians as lawful prisoners in the first place.[50] The longer *détenus* waited, the more difficult escaping could become. Nevertheless, *détenus* disappeared from their captivity at an alarming rate. James Henry Lawrence, who chronicled the plight of his fellow civilian prisoners writes,

> Mr. Brooke, M. P. for Newtown, in Lancashire, having a clever French valet, who had procured a passport for two travelling merchants, and who had packed up

[49]Short, *Prisoners of War,* pp. 79-80.

[50]William Wright, *A Narrative of the Situation and Treatment of the English, Arrested by Order of the French Government at the Commencement of Hostilities with the Transaction On the Arrival of the First Consul at Boulogne, Calais, and Dunkirk, and, Afterwards, Down to the End of July: Containing Some Secret Anecdotes of Bonaparte's Confidential Commandant at Calais, and an Account of the Author's Escape from Thence in a Trunk,* (London: J. Badcock, J. Ginger, J. Asperne, R. Dutton, 1803); James Henry Lawrence, *A Picture of Verdun, Or the English Detained in France; Their Arrestation, Detention at Fontainbleau and Valenciennes, Confinement at Verdun, Incarceration at Bitsche, Amusements, Sufferings, Indulgences Granted to Some, Acts of Extortion and Cruelty Practised on Others, Characters of General and Madame Wirion, List of Those Who Have been Permitted to Leave or Who have Escaped out of France, Occassional Poetry, and Anecdotes of the Principal Detenus,* (London: T. Hookham, Jun. and E. T. Hookham, 1810).

> all his master's luggage, left a large company with whom he had been dining, and who imagined that he had only returned to his lodgings; meanwhile he passed through the gates in his travelling chaise, and arrived without the least difficulty at Cologne. No escape was conducted with so much coolness and deliberation.[51]

In cases like these, the disguise was less one of clothing, and more one of personality. Relying on other's sense of propriety and a certain minimum level of respect for those of the upper class could be successful if one could afford to pay for the clothes and equipage to support it. Donat Henchy O'Brien also found being well dressed, and therefore of the upper-class, to be an adequate disguise. When confronted with a particularly sharp-eyed French ferryman, O'Brien relied on the cut and quality of his coat to persuade the man that he is no French deserter.[52] These kinds of claims were far outnumbered by those who impersonated the peasantry, however. This was due to the simple fact that peasant's clothing was much easier to obtain. With prisoners already being poorly clothed, dirty from travel, and poorly financed, passing as a peasant did not even require a 'disguise' as such.

Cross-dressing also occurred as a means of evading notice. The presence of women in the depots, either as family, servants, local townspeople, or engaged in the sex trade, made these disguises possible. Edmond Temple, a midshipman who escaped from Verdun in the company of his French mistress, was one of a few who dressed as a woman. He was briefly recaptured during his escape and kept in a local jail. He succeeded in engaging his mistress to obtain women's clothing for him that matched the habitual dress of the wife of another inmate. When she came to visit, he put on his borrowed dress, and walked out the door and past the guard without being questioned.[53] Likewise, Thomas Williams describes the case of five midshipman who were confined at the depot in Verdun, and who climbed over the railings of the prison dressed in women's clothing and with baskets of potatoes, where they blended in perfectly with the French women who came every day to the gates to sell food.[54] Edward Proudfoot Montagu writes in his unpublished narrative of an escape in which a man disguised himself as a washerwoman.[55] In the journal written by the Anonymous Scottish Seaman, he describes how 'an English soldier belonging to the Forty third

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[51] Lawrence, *Picture of Verdun,* p. 35.
[52] O'Brien, *My Adventures,* p. 313.
[53] Edmond Temple, *Memoirs of Myself*, (London: J. Miller, 1816) [e-reader version], pp. 105-107, https://archive.org/details/memoirsofmyself00tempuoft/page/104/mode/2up Accessed 21 June 2021.
[54] Short, *Prisoners of War,* p. 94, 'I had the pleasure of seeing them go over the railings of the prison, some of them dressed in women's clothes.'.
[55] Montagu, *Personal Narrative,* p. 14.

[who] was taken up in Town dressed in women's clothes by one of the Police officers' was sent to the *cachot*.[56] Manipulation of gendered beliefs about who needed to be examined and for what reason were key components in how these disguises worked. The use of female disguise was always brief, and once the moment of its utility passed, it was discarded, sometimes in favour of other disguises. The brevity of its use indicates that these costumes did not constitute clear declarations of gender or sexual preferences, but they did allow prisoners to obtain or assert greater agency by facilitating the transformation from incarcerated person to a freed one.

The advantages of putting off certain forms of dress and putting on others was profoundly circumstantial. Prisoners were conscious that in putting off one's proper clothing and identity, one lost certain protections even while gaining others. Thus, the ability to reassume their habitual identity when desirable, was also a priority. Near the end of his journey, Edmond Temple demonstrates the possible consequences for an escapee's chameleon nature. In the final hurdle of his journey back to England, he was seized and asked to give account by the mayor of Lintz. The mayor was willing to help him get back to England, but was unconvinced, given the state of Temple's clothing, that he is indeed a British gentleman, as he claims. Temple, luckily, still had in his possession a gold watch key engraved with his name, crest, and the date of his being taken prisoner. This item is enough to prove his identity, and satisfied that Temple was indeed worthy of aid, the Mayor allowed Temple to make his way, finally, home.[57] Nevertheless, the prisoners who disguised themselves were not ashamed. When they did so, they were not shy about mentioning it in their accounts, nor of chronicling cases when others engaged in the practice. When they describe it, it is framed as an 'ingenious' or particularly clever ruse.[58]

Despite prison dress' modern history as a means of dehumanisation and disempowerment, prisoners of war during this period bucked this trend by claiming dress as their own and using it to their own ends. They were able to leverage the customs of war to retain their property, leverage their professional skills to make their clothing into useful objects and escape technologies, and finally, their knowledge of classed-, gendered-, and national- dress to create new identities when it suited them. The examination of the clothing of these prisoners gives insight into the embodied experience of imprisonment and self-liberation. The manner in which they discuss these activities indicates that they regarded these manipulations or impostures as empowering. Despite some reservations about the loss of identity meaning a concomitant loss of privileged status as prisoner of war, British, gentleman, or male, the use of imposture itself was part of warfare, and the identities assumed were not a

[56]NMM JOD/224/1, p. 28.
[57]Temple, *Memoirs of Myself*, pp. 110-111.
[58]Montagu, *Personal Narrative*, pp. 14-16.

threat to honour. British sailors were able to use their knowledge of dress, both as object, and as a marker of identity to exert agency during their captivity. Their knowledge of, and control over the physical qualities of their dress allowed them to shape their bodies so that they better fitted their needs, making clothing more comfortable, protective, and concealing.