It’s New, It’s Blue, It’s the PHS ODU!
Almost Everything You Need to Know About The New Operational Dress Uniform (ODU), But Were Afraid To Ask! – Revised April 18, 2014

As you probably know by now (and if you don’t, you should!), the long awaited PHS Operational Duty Uniform or “ODU” was officially authorized for purchase and wear in September 2012 with the publication of PPM 12-002 – “Replacement of the Battle Dress Uniform (BDU).” This change had been long awaited because of the increasing difficulty of finding the components of the Woodland BDU (note that the date of PPM 12-002 is 09 March 2012 but was not released until September 2012 as a result of several additional last minute delays). In June 2013 this was modified by POM 13-004 “Extension of Phase-in of the Operational Dress Uniform (ODU)” which changed the effective date for the mandatory phase-in time of the ODU from 1 September 2013 to 1 January 2015. Note that is provides an additional 16 months to acquire all necessary components for the new PHS ODU.

As one of the officers permitted to purchase the ODU early, I have had the opportunity to try out the uniform early and have been wearing the uniform weekly since it was authorized in September 2012. What follows is a description of most of the components that make up the new ODU along with some of my personal observations and comments about the uniform and the changes that have been made.

There were several options that had been debated in recent years as a replacement for the PHS BDU to include the Navy’s NWU Type I and NWU Type III as well as a modified version of the Coast Guard ODU which was ultimately selected as the new PHS working uniform. There were, of course, pros and cons to each option considered but we now have a uniform in place going forward. There are a few key points officers need to be aware of with this uniform transition:

- The BDU is no longer a required uniform for officers effective 1 September 2012.
- Effective 1 January 2015, the BDU will no longer be authorized for wear by Commissioned Corps officers.
- Also effective 1 January 2015, the new PHS ODU will become a required uniform for officers to own.
- Between 1 September 2012 and 31 December 2014, both the BDU and the ODU are authorized for wear when the situation calls for a working uniform as defined in the Uniform of the Day memorandum and Section 3 of PPM 12-002.

Personal Observation: The language in PPM 12-002 could suggest that neither uniform is a “required uniform” between 1 September 2012 and 31 December 2014. In my opinion this should not be taken as relieving the officer of the requirement to have one or the other available. In order to be fully prepared for deployment, officers still need to have either the BDU or the ODU available during the transition period.

- Mixing of BDU and ODU uniform components (shirt, trousers, caps, insignia) is not authorized at any time during this transition.
• Non-uniform items that are woodland camouflage pattern, olive drab or black (such as the GI Duffel bag, backpacks, ALICE packs) will remain authorized with either uniform as long as they are serviceable. But new or replacement items must be black in color.

Personal Observation: This last change is a bit interesting as I do not know of an official government source for the GI duffel that is black in color (there may be one, but it is not common knowledge as far as I know!). There are similar commercial versions available that are black but they typically are not made of the same material as the true GI duffel bag and, as a result, may not hold up as well. While it makes sense to transition personal bags and packs to black, it may not be as practical for the GI duffel. For example, the Coast Guard, to my knowledge, continues to authorize use of the olive drab green duffel bag for its personnel and perhaps the PHS should consider doing the same.

**How to Order the New ODU**

Accompanying PPM 12-002 is POM 12-009 entitled “Ordering the ODU.” This highlights one of the primary differences between the BDU and the new ODU. We are no longer able to order the majority of our uniform components using the Navy and Marine Corps Uniform Support Center (also known as “Navy-Nex”) because several of the key components of the new ODU are not available from it. Instead officers need to carefully review POM 12-009 in order to familiarize themselves with how to place orders using the Coast Guard Uniform Distribution Center (CG UDC) website or by calling CG UDC at 1-800-874-6841. The key first step is ensuring that you are properly registered to place orders through the CG UDC. Until you have successfully registered, you will not be able to access the online catalog and place a uniform order. A PDF available on the CCMIS home page also provides some useful guidance on how to register for the CG UDC. Until recently the Officer Device Supply Center was an option for some uniform components to include the new blue ODU Command Ball Cap and the blue ODU t-shirt in moisture wicking material. Unfortunately this uniquely PHS uniform store closed in the fall of 2013.

Personal Observation: Be advised that the CG UDC may require some time to get completely up to speed with the additional volume of orders from PHS officers. This is part of the reason why the deadline for phase-in of the ODU has been extended. Many items are already on back order and others are not yet available on the website at all. A number of items that can be worn by PHS officers with the ODU are found under tabs other than the tab marked “NOAA CORPS AND PHS UNIFORMS” (PHS collar device, belts, parkas, and sun or “boonie” hats for example). Sizes indicated on some items also seem to be less than entirely accurate. I have already had to return one item because the size marked was not accurate and one item I ordered had to be returned because of a defect.

But don’t delete that link to Navy-Nex just yet! Some items, in particular ODU matching nametapes, are found only on the Navy-Nex website. These items are simply not available on the CG UDC website and it is unclear at this time whether they ever will be. When ordering insignia for the ODU from the Navy-Nex make sure they are ODU specific and not insignia for the blue coverall.

Other items, such as the blue ODU t-shirt and blue 8-point cap, have only recently been added to the CG UDC website and some ranks of
PHS ball caps were unavailable for a period of time (It appears they are now available as of the date of this article). Also be advised that there had been a problem getting new ball caps with the proper size rank insignia. For ranks of CDR and below purchased from Navy-Nex the embroidered rank insignia was larger than it should be. Ball caps from the Nay-Nex website reportedly now have the correct rank insignia size but the color may be slightly different from ball caps purchased from CG UDC (this difference is considered acceptable). Ball caps purchased from CG UDC appear to have the correct rank size. According to the September 2012 issue of the Commissioned Corps Bulletin, the correct size of the embroidered rank should be “slightly larger than the full size metal rank insignia.”

It is no doubt going to take some time to get this all sorted out. Patience is, once again, likely the key to this uniform transition. So remember the unofficial PHS motto - Semper Gumby!

**Components of the ODU**

**ODU Shirt and Trousers:** The ODU, unlike the previous BDU, is available in only one fabric. This fabric is a blue “ripstop” style nylon/cotton fabric similar to the “summer weight” version of the BDU. This reinforced lightweight material is intended to improve durability of the uniform. Because it is relatively lightweight, it doesn’t provide much warmth in cooler weather. Keep that in mind for cold weather deployments. Also, unlike the prior BDU, the ODU does not have front lower pockets. Note that the bottom of the ODU shirt shouldn’t extend below the top of the cargo pocket on the trouser.

ODU sizing recommendations are found in POM 12-009 or the CG UDC website: [http://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg1/udc/ODUUntuckedUniforms.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg1/udc/ODUUntuckedUniforms.asp). My personal suggestions for ordering the uniform include considering adding one size longer to the pants length in order to provide additional length for blousing the trouser leg using boot blousers. Tucking the pant leg inside the boot is not permitted so using a boot blouser outside the boot is necessary. The extra length proves helpful to give a professional appearance and keep the pant leg in place. Also be advised that some officers have reported shrinkage of both the shirt and trousers when washed.

When ordering the ODU from the CG UDC website it is important to go to the link that says “NOAA CORPS AND PHS UNIFORMS” to get the correct uniform shirt and trousers (NOAA also wears the same modified version of the Coast Guard ODU that PHS officers will be wearing). If you receive a uniform with an embroidered seal on the right shirt pocket or on the cargo pockets of the trousers then you have inadvertently received Coast Guard ODU components and will need to exchange the uniform.

Personal Observation: Although PPM 12-002 refers to the uniform top as the “ODU shirt,” the CG UDC refers to it as the “untucked coat” and you may also see the term “blouse” used on Navy-Nex. They all mean the same thing in this case. Because the shirt and trousers are a solid dark blue, special attention must also be paid to keeping the uniform clean. Unlike the blue and grey “aquaflage” pattern of the Navy’s primary working uniform, the NWU Type I, which was designed in part to make stains less apparent, the PHS ODU seems to show every speck of dust and dirt quite easily. As a result it is
important that officers be aware of their appearance to the extent that is practical in a given environment.

**Belt and Buckle:** Unlike the BDU the required belt for the ODU is the basic riggers belt. The riggers belt is a 1 ¾ inch wide black belt with a black metal loop-shaped buckle. Some riggers belts may also have Velcro® to help fasten it and a second metal loop that additional equipment can be clipped to. Of note, the Coast Guard specifically indicates the riggers belt should be passed through the belts loops from the right (the opposite of the typical male direction) for all officers. PPM 12-002 follows this guidance with slightly different language, indicating the belt tip should extend to the wearers left. The standard 1 ¼ inch black belt now worn with the BDU may still be worn with the ODU as an optional item. The standard belt does not have a specific direction for wear proscribed for it. The riggers belt is available on the CG UDC website under a separate tab (“Belts, Buckles, Ties, Scarves & Gloves” tab) from the PHS ODU and comes in only one length so it will need to be cut to the appropriate size. To avoid the cut end of the belt from fraying, the tip should be singed after it is cut to size.

Personal Observation: While, in theory, the standard belt could be restricted from wear by the authorized uniform authority, in practice, that seems unlikely to happen. Officers who have never owned the BDU and the 1 ¼ inch black belt may wish to get the riggers belt as it is more substantial for supporting additional gear that you might wear while on a deployment. As to why the belt has specific instructions for the direction it should be worn, your guess is as good as mine!

**ODU Boots:** Combat boots are the required type of footgear for wear with the ODU. Boots must be black in color but can be either smooth leather or “brushless” (roughed out leather somewhat like suede leather in appearance). In addition, boots may be a combination of black leather and black fabric. A plain or “capped” toe (often called “jump boots”) is authorized. Steel toed boots and boots with a zipper closure are also permitted but note that the boot must have laces as well. Typically a zipper closure would be on the side of the boot but there are also zippers that can be laced into the boot above the tongue. Presumably, this would be acceptable, as well. The “Jungle” boots (black leather with a green fabric upper) and brown brushless boots that were formerly options with the BDU are not authorized with the ODU.
Interestingly, the Black Safety Boot is also listed as a prescribable item with the ODU. Safety boot uppers are roughly ankle high (about half as high as a combat boot) and they are required to have a hard box or safety toe and be water resistant.

Personal Observation: Perhaps there are occasions when one might need to wear a safety boot instead of a combat boot. However, if you want the extra security of a hard box or safety toe and water resistance there are plenty of options in water resistant combat boots with either a steel or composite toe box. My recommendation is to buy a combat boot that can also provide the protection of a safety boot if you want that option rather than spending the money on both. The Navy authorizes only a combat boot with the NWU and the Coast Guard has the “super boot” which they describe as a safety boot but is really equivalent to an 8” high combat boot with a composite safety toe. The ankle high Black Safety Boot seems to be an unnecessary addition to the PHS ODU uniform and if you don’t already have it, I don’t recommend getting one for wear with the ODU.

**Socks:** Just as with the BDU, socks should come above the boot top and can be mid-calf or knee high. Unlike the BDU, only black socks should be worn as olive drab socks are no longer permitted.

Personal Observation: If you are like me and don’t care for all black socks, especially in hot weather, there are two tone boot socks available with the foot portion white or grey and only the visible upper portion in black.

**Undershirt (Navy Blue PHS T-shirt):** The new PHS t-shirt for the ODU is now Navy blue in color. Other than the color they are essentially identical to the black PHS t-shirt. One other difference from the prior t-shirt is that now in addition to the standard cotton t-shirt there is the option for a polyester moisture wicking fabric t-shirt. The moisture wicking fabric version is not authorized for wear on ship board missions or where a fire hazard exists. Another option with the ODU is for wearing a plain Navy blue t-shirt in “tactical” situations. The plain blue t-shirt is available on the CG UDC website under the same tab as the PHS ODU.

Personal Observation: The new blue t-shirt is essentially identical to the prior black t-shirt except for the color of the shirt material. Presumably the intention is to match the blue t-shirt worn by Coast Guard and NOAA. The availability of a moisture wicking fabric t-shirt is a welcome addition for warm weather wear. Unfortunately with the closure of the Officer Device Supply Center there does not appear to be readily available source for them at the time this article was updated. Hopefully that will be corrected soon.

The plain Navy blue t-shirt for wear in tactical situations is a bit curious because, unless one is trying to take cover on the football field at Boise State University, there is nothing particularly “tactical” about the rest of the uniform. It is difficult to see how a plain Navy blue t-shirt is going to help much. The
Plain blue t-shirt is currently available on the CG UDC website under the NOAA CORPS AND PHS UNIFORMS tab where you order the PHS ODU.

**Undergarments:** Standard undergarments are required with the PHS ODU for male and female officers just as they are with every uniform. They are not specifically spelled out in PPM 12-002 but should be similar to those worn with other uniforms. The new blue t-shirt is a required component for all officers and additional undergarments include a brassiere and underpants for female officers and under shorts (boxers or briefs) for male officers. Undergarments in black or Navy blue, should they be available, would presumably be appropriate with the ODU but no specific color is required in PPM 12-002 (or in other uniform instructions other than for wear with white uniforms).

**Headgear:** Standard required headgear for the ODU changes from the Utility 8-point Cap used with the BDU to the Blue Command Ball Cap. The biggest difference from the prior black ball cap, other than color, is that rank is now embroidered on each cap rather than requiring the pin-on metal rank. Officers can acquire them from the CG UDC or Navy-Nex. In addition to the ball cap, there is also a prescribable blue utility 8-point cap that can be worn with the ODU. This cover is similar to the 8-point cap used with the BDU except of course that it is solid blue (the blue of the cap is a little darker than the blue color of the ODU). Like the old BDU ball cap, this one will still use the full size bright metal rank insignia. Sewn on rank insignia is currently not authorized for the PHS (although it seems as though it might be the better option). This cover is currently available on the CG UDC site, but there is not a place holder for it on the Navy-Nex website and it is not clear if it will be available there. A sun or “boonie” cap is also authorized as a prescribable item and is also worn with the full size bright metal rank insignia. It can be found on the CG UDC website. Typically it would be worn only when authorized by the Officer in Charge/Local Uniform Authority.

Personal Observation: The use of full size bright metal rank pins on the black ball cap always posed something of a hazard to the wearer. The change to embroidered rank alleviates this issue although it means a new cap is required with every promotion. That is a small price to pay in my estimation. Use of pin on rank for the 8-point cap or sun cap still has this potential problem.

As noted earlier, officers should be advised that in the past there has been a problem getting new ball caps with the proper size rank insignia. In the past, for ranks of CDR and below purchased from Navy-Nex the insignia was larger than it should be (the correct O-4/5 oak leaf insignia is approximately ¾ inch wide, for example). Reportedly ball caps from Navy-Nex now have the correct insignia size.

**Outerwear and Cold Weather Clothing**

**Foul Weather Parka, Type II:** This blue Gore-Tex® parka is the primary and, along with the parka liners, currently only outer garment for wear with the ODU (civilian outer garments are NEVER appropriate with the ODU or any other PHS uniform). It is currently worn only with the ODU and should not be worn with other uniforms. Unlike the BDU, a Field Jacket is not available. The parka is the outer shell of a two part system that also includes one of two optional liners that may be worn zipped into the
parka. It is currently only available through the CG UDC. The parka has a rank tab on the front left side to accommodate a slide on cloth rank loop (available on the CG UDC website under the “Foul Weather Parka II” tab) which should be worn anytime the parka is worn. Alternatively, a full size bright metal rank may be pinned on the tab. When worn, the parka should always be zipped up at least ¾ of the way closed, similar to the way the black windbreaker is worn. If it is warm enough to unzip it, then take it off! A foul weather hood is stored in the collar of the parka and should remain in the stowed position when not in use.

Personal Observation: I have had a few opportunities to try it out now. It is undeniably costly, particularly if you add a liner (which I highly recommend), but it appears to be an excellent piece of equipment. It is important to note that in cold weather, like the Hurricane Sandy deployment in 2012, this is the primary outer garment available. Officers should strongly consider obtaining the parka as if it were part of the primary uniform. Without it, you are simply not going to be well prepared for a rainy or cold weather deployment. For uniformity sake, I think it would be better if only one rank mechanism was used (personally I would recommend the slide on cloth rank loop which is readily available on the CG UDC website and does not poke holes in the garment) but for now either option is authorized.

Curiously, the parka has a fairly prominent black and yellow Gore-Tex® tag over the right lower pocket. It is unusual to see a brand name logo visible on a uniform item. Indeed, in most cases logos are discouraged and when present should be small and not distract from the uniform. While relatively small, I believe this logo does distract from the uniform. A small logo on a bag is one thing but a visible logo on a major uniform component seems all together a different situation. I have suggested that the tag either be removed or perhaps be blacked out with a permanent marker, but PPM 12-002 is silent on what to do with this tag. There is a similar tag on the parka zipper, but it is easily removed and not typically visible when the parka is zipped up properly. Although costly, the parka should also be useful for civilian wear as well by removing the rank from the rank tab, making its cost a bit more acceptable.

**ODU Utility Jacket:** As mentioned above, the parka is part of a two part cold weather system. This jacket is the newer of the two liners that can be worn with the parka. Both liners may be worn as a stand-alone jacket but this liner is the more finished appearing of the two liners when worn as a stand-alone jacket. In addition, it is readily available on the CG UDC website (where it is called the “Foul Weather Parka Liner”), is water repellent on its own and is designed to fit properly over the new ODU. The older liner is not water repellent and may not be long enough to fully cover the ODU shirt when worn. The Utility Jacket also has a rank tab on the outer surface (the other liner does not) and requires the use of a slide on cloth rank device. The wear of a pin on full size metal rank device, an option with the parka, is not part of the description of correct wear for this jacket in PPM 12-002, but is authorized based on information found in the December 2012 issue of the CC Bulletin. Like the parka, the liner should be zipped up at least ¾ closed when worn and should only be worn with the ODU.
Personal Observation: Unlike the other liner, this one is available for purchase on the CG UDC website where it offers a substantial savings over the manufacturer’s list price. In addition, it is the better, more professionally appearing liner when used as a stand-alone jacket in my opinion. This is the liner I own, and although it is slightly more expensive than the blue polar fleece liner described below, I recommend that officers purchase this liner for wear as a stand-alone jacket and parka liner.

**Blue Polar Fleece Liner:** This liner is the second of the two options available as the liner for the parka. This is the older of the two liner styles and has the “fluffy” polar fleece material on the outer surface. It does not have a rank tab on the outer surface.

Personal Observation: It isn’t clear why two different liners are necessary. It is heavier than the ODU Utility Jacket and when worn zipped into the parka shell helps to make that combination a much warmer outer garment. The blue polar fleece liner is no longer available for purchase on the CG UDC website, although it can still be purchased on the manufacturer’s website which is [EPropper.com](http://EPropper.com). Note that the manufacturer’s price is likely higher than it originally sold for on the CG UDC website and may also require tax and shipping charges. However, it is still slightly less expensive than the second, and newer, parka liner. Even so, I think the ODU Utility Jacket is the better choice and strongly recommend it over this liner. The “fluffy” polar fleece finish makes it look rather casual and not very finished or “uniform” (although other services do use a jacket that is similar in appearance as stand-alone outerwear although they generally require some type of rank to be worn on it). If this liner is going to be used, then the PHS should consider adding a rank tab kit requirement (similar to the Navy requirement for their parka liner when used as an outer garment) so that rank can be properly displayed when worn alone. For this reason I personally chose not to wear this liner as a stand-alone outer garment and only wear it zipped into the parka shell.

**Foul Weather Trousers, Type II:** These blue Gore-Tex® trousers are a matching set to the parka and together can provide excellent rain and wind protection.

Personal Observation: Unfortunately, they are not stocked by the CG UDC and must be purchased from the manufacturer ([EPropper.com](http://EPropper.com)). As a result, the cost, already quite expensive even if they were available on the CG UDC website, is extremely high ($249.99!). In fact the trousers are more expensive than the cost of the parka itself on the CG UDC website. By comparison, Navy Gore-Tex® trousers are only $100. As a result it is hard to recommend them unless you expect to be in severe weather environments on a regular basis. It would be nice if it were possible to encourage CG UDC to start carrying them, but I suspect the high cost would make sales, even with the likely cost savings from CG UDC compared to the manufacturer’s list price, still sluggish at best.

**Blue Mock Turtleneck T-Shirt:** A new item for the ODU, the mock turtleneck t-shirt, is intended as a fall and winter option for wear with the ODU. This is a solid blue long sleeve shirt with no PHS markings on it. Be careful not to purchase the Navy version of this mock turtleneck as it is black in color and not authorized with the PHS ODU.

Personal Observation: This shirt may be available on the CG UDC website at some point, but as of the writing of this article it is not yet listed on the website or from any other source that I can find. There is
still a possibility that it won’t even be made available in the future. If that is the case, an alternative should be found such as the black Navy version. The description of this item indicates it is to be worn in lieu of the standard PHS t-shirt with PHS markings (although if cold enough I would have no objection wearing both with the long sleeve shirt over the standard t-shirt!). Because it is long sleeve, the sleeves of the ODU shirt can not be rolled up while the mock turtleneck t-shirt is worn. It is unclear if the ODU shirt can be removed while wearing this winter t-shirt (while indoors for example).

**Black Knit “Watch” Cap:** The black knit “watch” cap may be worn with the ODU but only when wearing an outer garment such as the parka or liner. This cap can be purchased from the CG UDC or a commercial source if it does not have a visible logo. A logo of any sort, no matter the size or appearance, is not permitted. No rank device is worn on the watch cap.

**Earmuffs:** Earmuffs are also permitted when wearing outer garments but are not specifically described in PPM 12-002. They should be the same as those worn with other uniforms. Plain black cloth earmuffs are acceptable but again no logos should be visible. Your favorite “fuzzy” earmuffs are not acceptable! In addition, they must be the type worn around the back of the head so that they don’t interfere with wearing a cover.

**Gloves and Scarves:** Interestingly, neither gloves nor scarves are mentioned in PPM 12-002. A scarf may not be necessary with the high collar of the parka. The olive drab green scarf worn with the BDU would not work with the ODU, but a black scarf may be approved in the near future. I suspect the omission of gloves is also just an oversight that will hopefully be corrected soon. Until that time it is reasonable to assume that the same plain black gloves authorized for wear with the BDU will still be authorized with the ODU. Gloves and scarves should be worn only in conjunction with an outer garment.

**Insignia and Identification Patches**

Just as was the case with the BDU, few things are likely to result in more questions or cause more confusion for officers than appropriate wear and placement of insignia, nametapes and patches on the ODU. The quick answer is that insignia, nametapes and patches on the ODU are placed in essentially the same manner as found on the BDU. Initially, insignia borrowed from the coverall uniform were used on early test versions of the ODU, but now devices on the same blue ripstop material as the ODU are available. They should be used for all insignia sewn to the ODU.

One major exception is the wear of the “Special Unit Identification Patch.” This patch is currently required to be worn on the left shoulder of the BDU. There has been discussion of a similar patch in a blue/gray color to be worn on the ODU, but as of this time no patch is authorized. Should the patch be authorized, the location of the patch is not as yet determined, but it has been suggested it may be worn on one of the front pockets.

Personal Observation: It is my hope that the patch will be authorized sooner rather than later and that it goes back on the left shoulder where it belongs. Placing the patch on one of the front pockets might have made sense when it would have been necessary to cover an embroidered emblem of another
service, but this is no longer the case. The pockets might be better reserved for other patches or badges. The miniature metal “Officer in Charge” badge, noted in PPM 12-002 as an optional item, is already one such badge (exactly how it is to be worn on the ODU is not yet defined, although it appears likely that it is to be worn over the nametape above the right pocket).

It is also unclear why it must be a “subdued” blue/grey patch. This uniform is clearly not tactical as discussed previously and to help us identify ourselves with the public, the uniform could really use additional dashes of color. A full color PHS patch would help do that (it might also keep us from being confused for a fire department EMT, which is the main comment I have gotten so far from people unfamiliar with our service). Few people outside of our service have any idea what “USPHS” means. If we are not wearing the ball cap (indoors for example), there is little to clearly identify us. A nice bright full color PHS patch would help fill this role nicely. If a tactical appearance is truly needed the patch could be made with a Velcro backing and either removed or replaced with a subdued patch as necessary. We have the technology! And while we are at it, a full color reverse US flag patch for the right shoulder would be a welcome edition as well.

**Cap Insignia:** Cap insignia has been described above and, with embroidery of the rank on the new blue command ball caps, there are no “pin-on” components now authorized with the basic ODU uniform (pin-on rank is currently still authorized for the eight point cap, sun hat and as an option for the tab on the Foul Weather Parka). All other patches should be embroidered cloth that is then sewn on to the uniform. Currently placement of patches using Velcro® backing, as is done with some other services, is not an option with the PHS ODU. Note that embroidering directly onto the uniform is also not authorized. Patches and name tapes should be sewn-on with thread that matches the background material or edge. A straight machine stitch should be used in sewing; cross-stitches, whip-stitches, or other stitches are not authorized.

**ODU Shirt Collar:** Insignia on the collar is placed in a similar fashion to the BDU (and also similar to the collar of the Service Khaki shirt). “Rank on Right” is still the rule of thumb and rank insignia goes on the right side of the collar. It should fall along an imaginary line bisecting the angle of the collar point. The center of the device should be 1½ inches perpendicular from each collar edge. This 1 ½ inch location tends to look very high on the collar and is different from the Navy and Coast Guard guidance. The Navy uses 1 inch for placement, similar to the guidance for the Service Khaki uniform. For O-1 thru O-3, the bar(s) should be pointing toward the collar point, for O-4/O-5, the stem of the oak leaf should be pointing towards the collar point and for O-6, the head and feet of the eagle should both be on the imaginary line that bisects the collar point with the eagle facing forward.

On the left collar, the yellow gold PHS corps device insignia on a blue background is worn in a similar fashion to the Service Khaki with the point of the caduceus towards the tip of the collar and falling along an imaginary line bisecting the angle
of the collar point with the anchor pointing inward. The center of the device should be 1½ inches perpendicular from each collar edge. The patch itself should be approximately 1 inch square.

Personal Observation: The PHS Collar Device can be found on both Navy-Nex and the CG UDC website although it is a bit harder to find on the CG UDC website. It is not located under the “NOAA CORPS AND PHS UNIFORMS” tab but rather near the end of the “ODU Sew-On Collar Devices” section under the “ODU Accessories & Attachments” tab. Perhaps the easiest way to find it is to type “PHS” in the search box.

Utility Coat front: A blue ODU cloth or webbed tape with the upper case letters “USPHS” embroidered on it (closely spaced with no periods between the letters!) should be worn over the left pocket. A similar tape (tapes should both be of the same material and if possible bought together to try to insure similar background material is used for each one) with the officer’s last name is worn over the right pocket. The tapes should be one inch wide and 4 ½ inches long (The same width as the pocket). They will be longer when you get them and the ends will need to be folded over to match the pocket width when sewn to the uniform. They name tapes should not be cut to fit the pocket to prevent a frayed appearance. They are worn parallel to and touching the top edge of the pocket. The letters should be in gold, block-style and ¾ inch high. (Name tapes containing more than ten letters should be in Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed print, 48 point, ½ inch high). Different manufacturers may tend to use cloth tapes of slightly different appearance, so it is highly recommended that you always purchase a name tape and a USPHS tape at the same time from the same location for each set of a BDU so that they match in appearance.

In addition to the name tapes, officers are authorized to wear special skill badges, such as the Field Medical Readiness Badge (FMRB), on the ODU shirt. Badges are limited to a maximum of two and the skills badge is worn centered on and ¼ inch above the "USPHS" tape. If two badges are worn, the second badge is worn centered on and ¼ inch above the lower badge. Only cloth badges are authorized. Subdued metal badges such as those worn by other services are not authorized. The FMRB is now available in a blue ODU cloth patch for wear on the ODU. Also note that if the FMRB and a skill badge from another service are worn together then the FMRB should always be worn above the second badge.

Personal Observation: For those officers like me who are authorized to wear skill badges from other services, you are unlikely to find the badge you need embroidered on the correct material to match the ODU. I have had success working with the website www.1800nametape.com (1-800-626-3827) in getting the skill badge needed on the appropriate background material. Other sites may be able to do the same thing. Note that for silver colored badges the thread should be the same silver thread used
for silver rank insignia on the ODU while gold colored badges should use the same yellow gold color thread used for the PHS collar device.

**ODU Shirt Left and Right Shoulder:** As previously discussed, there are currently no patches authorized for either shoulder of the new ODU. PPM 12-002 does not clarify whether guidance in POM 06-003 for officers assigned to DoD operational units is still applicable with regard to the US Flag patch for the ODU. But based on information published in the [September 2012](#) issue of the CC Bulletin, it appears the US Flag patch is not authorized on the ODU even when assigned to DoD operational units.

Personal Observation: Leadership has provided no indication why this has changed or why the flag patch is not authorized as a routine part of the ODU. Without further belaboring the issue, it is my hope that leadership will elect to add the Special Unit Identification Patch to the left shoulder and the US Flag to the right shoulder for all officers. But for now, no patch is authorized for either shoulder.

**ODU Trousers:** Just as was the case with the BDU, no patch or nametape is required for the trousers. However, officers still have the option of placing the nametape flush with the top edge of the right rear pocket.

Personal Observation: I have recommend officers to add the nametape to the trousers since I began writing guidance about uniforms, even when it was not specifically authorized. Now at least it is an option and I encourage every officer to implement it when preparing their ODU. It is a superb way to keep track of uniform items on deployment when things are a bit chaotic and/or group laundry facilities are used. I believe it should be made a required component of the ODU, just as is the case in the Navy. While we are making changes now is the time to do so!

**Foul Weather Parka and Liners:** As previously described the Foul Weather Parka and the two liner/stand-alone jackets are the only outer garment options currently described for the ODU. The parka has a tab on the left front over the zipper for a slide on cloth rank loop or full size bright metal rank insignia which is a required component of the parka. The ODU Utility Jacket also has a rank tab on the left side and as noted previously both the slide on cloth rank loop and large bright metal insignia are authorized, as noted in the [December 2012](#) issue of the CC Bulletin, and is required for wear. The Blue Polar Fleece Liner does not have any accommodation for a rank insignia (the Navy requires that a rank tab be added to wear their liner as a stand-alone jacket).

**Wear of the ODU**
The ODU is intended to be a working uniform and as such should be loose fitting and comfortable. Alterations to make it form-fitting are not authorized. The ODU shirt should be worn outside the trousers, not tucked in, and all buttons should be buttoned except for the collar button. The collar is worn open. The PHS undershirt is always worn tucked in. The trousers are worn bloused at the boots. Tucking the pant leg into the boot is not permitted. Blousing accessories may typically be found at
military clothing sales stores or website to assist in giving the pant leg a bloused appearance. There are two basic types. One is a wide elastic band with a Velcro closure and the other is an intertwined elastic band with a hook closure. CG UDC sells the green blousing bands shown in the picture. For those who want to continue the all blue theme Navy-Nex sells a similar blue colored blousing band. The pants do not have a drawstring in the cuff as the BDU pants did making a boot blouser essentially mandatory. When working in extreme heat, the LUA may authorize removal of the ODU shirt and unblousing the trousers from the boots. This should only be done when authorized. The cover is still worn when the utility coat is removed in outdoor settings unless the LUA indicates it is appropriate to remove it.

Loose threads must be trimmed from all uniform components. Shoe laces must be secured in a manner such that no loops are created (don’t loop the laces around the boot before tying) and the ends of the laces must be tucked into the boots. Boots should be shined to the extent that is possible to do so depending on the working environment. The sleeves may be worn rolled up or down. The manner in which the sleeves are rolled up has changed again from the most recent style used with the BDU and should now be rolled with the outside material showing on the cuff when completed (similar to the Coast Guard method). The sleeves will be rolled neatly above the elbow with the rolled sleeve width approximately 3 inches wide and centered on the mid-to-lower third of the upper arm. The sleeves should not be pushed part way up the forearm or rolled to a point below the elbow.

**Some Final Thoughts**

In summary, the new PHS ODU will hopefully be the working uniform for commissioned officers for the foreseeable future. This section includes some of my additional thoughts on the new ODU. These comments are mine alone and don’t reflect the opinion of ACOA as a whole. If you already have all the information you need to put your ODU together, you may feel free to stop now!

I personally feel more could have been done (and can still be done!) to make the new ODU stand out both as a uniform that is specific to the PHS Commissioned Corps as well as a uniform that could serve to bring more awareness to our service by the public as a whole. The decision to use yellow gold thread for nametapes was a good one in my opinion to help set us apart from the Coast Guard and NOAA. As already noted, the addition of a full color PHS patch and the full color US flag would also add some much needed identification and additional color to the uniform. This is a working uniform and not a tactical uniform after all.
The current black t-shirt would seem to have worked perfectly well with the blue of the ODU uniform, just about every officer already had them and they have been readily available for purchase for years. So why it was necessary to make this particular change is a bit unclear. Granted PHS colors are blue and gold so I suppose the new color fits. But it was my understanding that, as noted in the August 2012 issue of the CC Bulletin, production of the new blue t-shirt (along with the new blue ball cap) was part of the problem that resulted in the delay of getting this uniform authorized in the first place. As was done with changing the color of the name tape thread to yellow gold, this seemed like a good opportunity to make our uniform distinctive rather than similar by choosing to have a T-shirt that was different, whether it be to keep the current black shirt or choosing a completely different color instead of using a rather bland matching blue t-shirt that is similar to the Coast Guard or NOAA.

One option could be reversing the t-shirt color with a yellow gold shirt and blue lettering. That would definitely help set us apart! Indeed there is plenty of precedent for this sort of thing with the different t-shirt colors worn under flight suits by Navy and Air Force aviation personnel and even the distinctively colored berets worn by Army Airborne, Special Forces and Ranger units. And if the proposed PHS PT uniform shirt is going to be yellow gold as well then the new t-shirt could potentially fill two needs at once. If we do have an occasion where a blue t-shirt was truly necessary, which seems at best remote, there would always be the option of the plain blue “tactical” t-shirt.

Like the blue t-shirt, the change to a blue ball cap is a somewhat curious one although perhaps less so than the t-shirt. Again the black ball cap looks fine with the new ODU and the production of the new blue ball cap, as noted earlier, was one of the issues in the long delay in authorizing the new ODU. Retaining both the black cap and black t-shirt would have further helped to set us apart from the Coast Guard and NOAA as a distinctive and separate service.

I have long thought that the PHS description of how to wear skill badges is not ideal and should be changed to match that of our fellow services. The ¼ inch spacing invariably leads to a non-uniform appearance and irregular placement of skill badges. It increases the likelihood that the badge will be tilted rather than horizontal and even with the nametape and pocket edge. The PHS has generally followed Navy Uniform guidance with a few exceptions. No one is more of an advocate for our Corps to have uniforms that are as distinctive as possible from other uniformed services as practical considerations will allow. But this is one case were I believe we should stay with Navy Uniform guidance which states that the skill badge should be worn: “centered and flush above the ‘U.S. Navy’ fabric strip.” The Coast Guard has a similar instruction for their ODU which states that skill badges should be: “sewn centered immediately above the U.S. Coast Guard...
tape.” The ¼ inch guidance is generally intended for placement of metal badges and not the cloth version used on the PHS ODU. I hope the PHS will seriously consider adopting the method used by our fellow services and eliminate the instruction to put a ¼ inch space between cloth skill badges on the PHS ODU.

Perhaps at some point in the near future we can be a bit more distinctive with our uniform choices. But for now, Commissioned officers need to take the necessary steps to make the transition to our new working uniform, the PHS ODU. New officers or those who have put off acquiring the BDU in anticipation of the new working uniform should now move quickly to obtain and assemble the ODU in order to be able to meet potential future deployment requirements like Hurricane Sandy. Those officers who currently own the BDU will be able to continue to wear it until December 31, 2014. But all officers should start preparing to make the transition to the ODU as soon as is practical. Although it should come as no great surprise, this uniform change is unfortunately not occurring in conjunction with any supplemental allocation of a uniform clothing allowance. But with nearly a year to make the transition every officer should be able to make the move to the ODU by the deadline.

Examples of Work and Tactical Uniforms of other Uniformed Services

U.S. Coast Guard

Left: USCG version of the ODU

Center: USCG seal embroidered on right front pocket of USCG ODU (Also on trouser cargo pockets)

Right: USCG Commandant wearing a prototype of an 8-point cap similar to PHS 8-point cap (not currently approved for Coast Guard use).
NOAA Commissioned Corps

Left: NOAA Corps ODU similar to PHS ODU with blue ODU, blue t-shirt and ball cap (Vessel specific cap shown in this picture).
Center: Standard NOAA ball cap
Right: Shorts! NOAA Corps personnel can be authorized to wear ODU shorts made from standard ODU material.

U.S. Navy

Left: Recently approved Navy Working Uniform (NWU), Type I – The primary working uniform for the Navy is predominantly blue and gray in color.
Right: Recently authorized NWU Type III is a digital woodland camouflage uniform for tactical requirements. A desert version, the NWU Type II, has also been approved but is currently restricted to Special Operations forces. Other Navy personnel continue to wear the standard desert camouflage uniform.
Left and Center: Army Combat Uniform (ACU) – Intended as an all purpose uniform for both woodland and desert terrain. This uniform may be replaced in the near future primarily because it doesn’t seem to provide camouflage in either terrain very well.

Right: The Army recently adopted a second battle uniform pattern for use only in Afghanistan known as Operation Enduring Freedom Camouflage Pattern or OCP (Commonly known as “Multicam”). It is also one possible option for a future replacement of the ACU.

The Air Force now wears the Airman Battle Uniform (ABU) which has a semi digital tiger stripe pattern. It is a grey-green camouflage uniform (complete with distinctive grey-green suede boots). Similar in color to the ACU, it too may be revised or replaced in the near future. For example Air Force personnel currently wear the Army OCP while in Afghanistan.
U.S. Marine Corps was the first service to introduce a digital camouflage pattern which is known as MARPAT (Marine Pattern).

Left and Center: Marine Corps Woodland “Combat Utility Uniform” or CUU. Right: Desert pattern CUU (The Navy NWU II desert uniform is similar in appearance).

CAPT Tierney is a past president of Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association and has made a number of presentations and written articles to help update officers on uniform changes since 2005. He is a past member of the CDC/ATSDR Commissioned Corps PAC and represented the PAC on the Uniforms, Personal Appearance and Grooming Standards Working Integrated Project Team.

Note: The author makes every effort to insure that the contents of this presentation reflect current published uniform guidance as of the date of this article (18 APR 2014). The author does not set uniform policy for Commissioned Officers nor does he mean to imply otherwise. Uniform policy decisions are made by the Assistant Secretary for Health and the Surgeon General. Guidance and recommendations made in this article, although based on current policy, are those of the author alone. Any discrepancy between this presentation and current policy should always be ruled in favor of current published PHS uniform policy. Opinions expressed by the author in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association.