

# ***Look, Mom! Are those Doughboys?***

## **A Novice's Guide to Reenacting**

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You've seen them at airshows, parades and other patriotic pastimes, adorned in period garb and gear, gathered around a vintage vehicle or beating the heat beneath the wing of a warbird. They recall, often quite convincingly, bygone eras as they entertain and educate. And when the event begins, they transform from bystanders to belligerents locked in a struggle to decide Man's fate.

So, who are these temporary time travelers known by the collective title of "reenactors" and why are they commanding more of the history-minded public's attention?

**“Reenacting”** is a broad term that describes the desire to recreate a period of history, usually based upon an individual's or group's level(s) of interest and expertise. Military-themed reenacting is arguably the most popular branch of the hobby; in fact, battle recreations date back at least to the Roman Empire, when its rulers organized these events as entertainment for the masses or to encourage patriotism. But not all reenacting involves military history or even conflict. Whether suiting up for a skirmish or sitting at the spinning wheel, most reenactors profess desires to learn more about a particular era by “experiencing it” and sharing their



Most reenactors choose to portray better known or elite organizations and units. Here living historians recreate a Royal Air Force fighter squadron, circa 1940-42, complete with dispersal hut, lawn furniture and tea set – but lacking the requisite Spitfire or Hurricane. One of the downsides to portrayals of flying units is the common lack of an aircraft to “anchor” the group. Regarding this gathering, one might paraphrase the title of a popular British wartime film: “One of *their* aircraft is missing.”

knowledge with the public. Military reenactors overwhelmingly express honor for the sacrifices of veterans among their stated goals.

Experts on the pastime generally point to the mid-1970s as the time frame when World War II reenacting began. While no one has stepped forward to claim the title of card-carrying World War II Reenactor No.1



Other reenactors opt for a more workaday approach to the hobby. This USAAF mechanic takes a break from repairing an aircraft. It seems someone forgot to post the “No smoking within 100 feet” sign.

many, if not most, reenactors believe Second World War group role-playing surfaced somewhere on the East Coast when Civil War reenactors decided to branch out to other time periods.

The website [www.reenactor.net](http://www.reenactor.net) describes the early days of World War II reenacting as a time when “it wasn’t cool to cut your hair or even to wear military uniforms” and the early hobbyists as “groups of guys who rejected the ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ view of the war.” As with most activities involving large numbers of people with similar interests, it wasn’t long before the hobby divided into two major, closely related camps. They are:

“reenactors” who pursue the activity with varying levels of dedication and authenticity and divide their time between private mock confrontations called “tacticals,” public

demonstrations referred to as “show battles,” and “static display” where they exhibit collections and wear original or reproduction (or a combination thereof) clothing and equipment while interacting with spectators. Reenactor-combatants garner the majority of the public’s attention because of the excitement generated by show battles. Since tacticals and show battles are conducted either privately or at some distance from the public, many reenactors limit their costumes (called “impressions”) to uniforms, weapons and equipment and may not concern themselves with small or personal items that would have been carried by people living in the time period being recreated. There also exists a tiny percentage of reenactors that chooses to not interact with the public and participates only in the battle portions of reenactments, known as “trigger time”

and

“living historians” who assume (or “interpret”) the persona of an important historic figure, or who represent more-or-less generic characters from a chosen era. Living history often attracts people who, for reasons of age or health, limit their activities to displays and presentations. The genre also includes women, children and men who portray non-combatants and civilians. Many living historians do take part in the more physically



Sometimes living history can be a dad-and-lad activity. A recreated trooper of the German *Grossdeutschland* Division supervises *Hitler Jugend* reenactors who help prepare the noon meal. A fine example of male *bund*-ing.

demanding "reenacting" aspects of the hobby. Because of living history's up-close nature, more emphasis is placed upon such small details of daily life as printed materials, food and eating utensils, jewelry, money, even health and hygiene items.

As one can see, the two groups are not mutually exclusive. In the early days of World War II reenacting uniforms and equipment were more available and relatively inexpensive. As interest increased and time otherwise took its toll on wool and canvas, the supply of vintage uniforms, belts, pouches, boots and helmets – to say nothing of weapons – waned and prices skyrocketed. Here another factor came into play: clothing sizes.

There's a generally accepted notion that people were smaller, or at least weighed less, during The Depression and the war and there is truth to that. Accordingly, the hobby's "husky," "big-boned" or "athletic" adherents were resigned to waiting for a costume (many reenactors recoil at the mention of the word: "It's a UNIFORM, %\$@\* it!" they declare) in their size, losing enough weight to fit into what was available, or piecing together something that looked "close enough" – and that third notion morphed into what's commonly called "the 10-foot Rule"

in reference to any item in the reenactor's kit that *might* appear acceptable (if not authentic) at that distance.

In the days before the free market discovered that grown men worldwide will forgo life's necessities in favor of acquiring a well-made facsimile of grandfather's Ike jacket or *Wehrmacht* tunic, most units allowed for a bit of "wiggle room" in a reenactor's collection – if not in his trousers. This meant granting dispensations to first-timers, newbies and



Many living historians portray civilians for reasons of age, health, gender or simply to showcase individual skills and talents. These living historians perform Golden Age radio programs before an audience inside a hangar decorated as a 1940s soundstage.

reenacting "veterans" who could not acquire rare (or correctly sized) items. How times have changed: currently at least two dozen companies in the United States and abroad are dedicated to turning Everyman into an Audie Murphy, if not a Rommel or a Patton (and, Goodness, how the "Pattons" of the reenactor ranks range from the passable to the pathetic).

The average cost for Joe the Reenactor's head-to-toe, reproduction World War II dress uniform: about \$1,200. The look on his wife's face: priceless. The subsequent conversation: unfit for print or the ears of children, pets and clergy.

Authenticity has also coined a term unique to the hobby: "farb," also written as "Farb," "FarB" or "FARB." The word refers to any item – or reenactor – not passing muster by reason of authenticity and is used with the same derision service personnel reserve for "SNAFU" and "FUBAR."

The jury's out on the origin of "farb"; a *Wikipedia* entry on "Historical reenactment" (sic) declares that its use stems from "a truncated version of "Far be it from authentic" or, alternately, "Far Be it for me to question/criticize." A third explanation offered by *Wikipedia* is an acronym derived from "Fast And Research-less Buyer," while a fourth theory ties the term to the German word "*Farbe*, color, because

inauthentic American Civil War reenactors were over-colourful



These ladies sport period fashions as they visit with a G.I. His modern Coke, eyeglasses and wristwatch are be considered farby, unacceptably non-period by most standards.

compared with the dull blues, greys or browns of the real uniforms that were a principal concern of American reenactors at the time the word was coined.”

“Farb” can be used as an adjective (“That’s farby”) or as a derogatory noun (“He’s a farb.”). The description might be levied upon a member of the community by a keen-eyed, conscientious peer who strives to portray his time period of choice with realistic reverence, or by one of the dreaded *stitch Nazis*; thread-counting fanatics who immerse themselves completely in the era,

wear even underclothing of the correct pattern and fabric, and find fault in everything from the width of a reproduction rucksack’s tie-down straps to (it is whispered) their mother’s love.

“Farbiness” is also used to describe reenactors who, for age, health, weight or gender reasons, do not authentically represent people of the time period they wish to portray. This has generated criticism from within the ranks -- and catcalls from the public -- concerning the large percentage of: greying, hefty PFCs; barrel-bellied, Tommy Gun-toting "commandos" and "paratroopers" who've never jumped from a plane; and numerous "We're all pilots here," aviation troupes that boast nary a single real-life aviator, much less an aircraft.

As with any other social movement, reenacting is subject to influence by the mass media. After the release of *Saving Private Ryan*, there was a groundswell of interest in portraying U.S. Army Rangers; the Pacific Theater enjoyed increased popularity after *The Thin Red Line* and *The Great Raid*; and, years hence, the hobby remains in the throes of a *Band of Brothers* paratroop mania. Following several false starts, Vietnam is generating increasing interest among living historians.

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