

How American Camouflage Conquered the World

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March 25, 2026

At the Brooklyn Navy Yard—once famous for building aircraft carriers, now better known for creative studios—a company called [Crye Precision](#) is one of the biggest tenants. Its footprint in the building is 100,000 square feet. Inside its gigantic warehouse space, rows of whirring sewing machines are stitching together garments made out of the most popular, renowned, and confusing textile of our time: MultiCam.

MultiCam is so ubiquitous that you can buy a camping chair or baby carrier in the [camouflage](#) pattern. Arc'teryx and Outdoor Research make jackets in MultiCam. Perhaps most importantly, you may see this iteration of camo on police officers, [SWAT teams](#), [ICE agents](#), or your average [January 6 rioter](#).

For its influence, the pattern has earned a place in MoMA's permanent collection, a thrill to the Cooper Union art students who created it. "They gave us a lifetime membership, which is cool," says Gregg Thompson, who was still in graduate school in 1999 when a Cooper Union alumnus, Caleb Crye, reached out to him about a collaboration. "We always had an interest in all things military," says Thompson. "It's boy stuff—monster trucks and that kind of thing."

In 2001, Crye Precision (then known as Crye Associates) got its first military assignment: to make a prototype of a new kind of helmet. While the company was making it, [9/11 happened](#). With the announcement of the so-called [War on Terror](#), Crye Precision took on a new challenge: camouflage. In all their exploratory research conversations with soldiers, Crye and Thompson learned that the US camouflage situation didn't work. Soldiers were frequently wearing mismatched camo, which made them stand out on the battlefield as opposed to blending in. "When guys deploy, they're wearing desert uniforms with woodland body armor," Thompson explains. What if, they thought, there was one camouflage pattern that could work almost anywhere? It could be a "75 percent solution to environments in general," Thompson says.



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION: KYLE BERGER



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There are a few ways to make a camouflage pattern work in multiple environments. One is to make sure it has the right number of colors. “Three would not be enough; 12 would be too many, because they would just get lost,” Thompson says. He thinks seven is the sweet spot. These colors—greens and browns and beiges—all need to have warm overtones. “Most things in nature have some level of warmth in them,” he says. “Even a building—it came from stone and likely grew a little bit of green stuff on it. Very few things remain cold.” Also very important for a camo pattern is that it should have a lot of highlights, lowlights, gradients, and fades; no two outfits should be identical. As Thompson notes: “If you have all of your guys kind of looking the same, then as soon as you spot one guy, you can very easily pick out the rest, right?”

The design students didn’t start out in the field or on a hunting range. “You start in your Adobe suite, right?” Thompson says. “Go right in digitally, create it, print it, make uniforms out of it. Tweak, tweak, tweak, tweak, tweak.” It was a lot of guesswork. There wasn’t really a reliable measurement for testing the effectiveness of camo. “The human eye and the user and the guy in the field know what’s good or bad, but to make that be a test that you could replicate across different forces would be very, very hard,” Thompson says.

And yet, Crye Precision was pretty sure it had found something special. In the early 2000s, they presented their concept for multi-environment camo to the United States military. Crye made it clear that they intended to patent this pattern, an early design of which was called Scorpion. In 2004 they did, and christened it MultiCam. Around that same time, when the military had an open call for submissions for a new Army camo, Crye proposed MultiCam. It was rejected.

Instead, the US Army announced that it had designed its own version of an all-purpose camouflage pattern that could blend in with most environments. It was called Universal Camouflage Pattern (UCP)—a digital, pixelated pattern that looked as if someone had uploaded an image of camouflage in really low resolution. When UCP was widely adopted throughout the Army in 2005, it became, in the words of costume historian and journalist Charles McFarlane, “one of the most dunked-on camo patterns of all time.” Kit Parker, a Harvard professor and Army reservist who served in [Afghanistan](#) in 2009, was wearing UCP. “We were getting shot at by these Chechen snipers from a long way away,” he told journalist Ilya Marritz. “It was like I had a road flare duct-taped on my forehead.”

The only soldiers who could essentially opt out of wearing UCP were members of the [US Special Operations Forces](#). Elite teams like Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and the Green Berets get a little more wiggle room when it comes to their clothing. “Every unit, whether conventional or special, has what’s called a tactical standard operating procedure, or blue book,” a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne tells me. The blue book will outline the “third-party items you’re allowed to wear.” For Special Forces, “they’re usually pretty lenient.” He says he has a buddy in special ops who wears sneakers, and he has heard of someone who wears Vans high-tops.

As such, Special Forces were the perfect audience for MultiCam. This cutting-edge camo started being worn by some of the most elite soldiers in the United States military, many of whom had met Thompson and Crye during the duo’s many trips to Fort Benning. “Those are the people who have the ability to make their own decisions,” says Thompson, “and are also

maybe a little more open to some of the crazy stuff.” Crye started to produce runs of their camo, selling their own MultiCam products in the early days of e-commerce and also licensing the pattern.

Around this time, the culture of the Special Forces started to change. Before the War on Terror, elite teams were small and secretive; very few members of the military knew what they were doing. “Look at photos of the first Special Forces units going into Afghanistan in 2001,” says McFarlane. “They look like a suburban dad on a fishing trip.” As the number of special operators grew, the whole Army could see them fast-roping down from helicopters, breaking down doors, storming houses of suspected terrorists—often in MultiCam. Same with the popular video game [Call of Duty](#) and movies like [Zero Dark 30](#), [American Sniper](#), and [Act of Valor](#) (which featured active-duty Navy SEALs). In a confusing and unpopular war, stories of Special Operators offered rare victories the United States military could claim.

Special Forces started to develop a new image in the popular imagination, says McFarlane: “Dudes with huge beards and long hair and just totally ripped and just wearing lots of technical gear.” Because Special Forces were so admired and idolized, regular infantry soldiers would buy MultiCam backpacks or accessories to emulate them. Everyone wanted to wear MultiCam—not only to cosplay but also to get away from the ugly digital UCP pattern. Including, eventually, the US Army itself.



An American soldier trains Iraqi special forces in 2003 with mismatched camo patterns on his plate carrier and pants.

PHOTOGRAPH: AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/GETTY IMAGES



Even civilians are not immune from the influence of Special Forces. In February 2020, Drake and the late Virgil Abloh sat front row at a New York Fashion Week event wearing matching MultiCam rain shells.

Photograph: Bennett Raglin/Getty Images



An ICE agent sprays pepper spray at a protester in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on January 7, 2026.

Photograph: Alex Kormann/Getty Images

Although UCP was deployed to American troops all over the world, it became increasingly associated with Iraq: a hated, unsuccessful pattern for a hated, unsuccessful war. In 2010, when the Obama administration was trying to distance itself from [Iraq](#), the military was instructed to get rid of the UCP pattern. And so, to quickly supply a troop surge in Afghanistan, it turned to the most readily available replacement camo: MultiCam.

Even though the US military called its pattern OEFCP (Operation Enduring Freedom Camouflage Pattern), it was MultiCam from Crye Precision, bought in bulk when roughly 100,000 members of the conventional forces were deployed to Afghanistan. Then, in 2014, the Army announced that its in-house camo team had finally developed a new pattern: Operational Camouflage Pattern, or OCP. As McFarlane believes: OCP is “basically MultiCam without the branding.” If you view two swaths side by side, you can see that OCP is ever so slightly more brown. There’s a reason they look so similar: Both are inspired by Scorpion, the original pattern that Crye presented to the US government.

In a few niche corners of the internet, debate still simmers over whether Crye had the right to trademark MultiCam or whether the Army had the right to make its own version. Truly, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that, because of this whole saga, some version of MultiCam or OCP or Scorpion is everywhere. The militaries of Australia, Georgia, Denmark, Belgium, Portugal, Argentina, Chile, Malta, and France all wear variants of MultiCam uniforms—some specifically

customized by Crye Precision. Soldiers fighting for both Russia and Ukraine do, too; they don colored armbands to tell who is on what side. Even the Taliban wear MultiCam. In January 2026, the [Minnesota National Guard](#) wore bright yellow vests over their camouflage in part “to help distinguish them from other agencies in similar uniforms.”



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION: KYLE BERGER

MultiCam has trickled down from Special Forces to all kinds of law enforcement: American SWAT teams, municipal police, teams within the FBI, US Marshals, Drug Enforcement, and Border Patrol all dress like Bradley Cooper in *American Sniper*. ICE also wears a mixture of civilian clothes and MultiCam, and in January, Crye Precision was awarded a nearly \$40,000 contract to provide cold-weather gear for Border Patrol in Maine. Although there have been a number of camo companies attempting to rival MultiCam’s ubiquity (notably the impressionist looking A-Tacs and the animalistic Kryptek), none of them seem to hold a candle. “I think the fact of the matter is, there’s been no other pattern that’s proven,” Thompson says proudly.

Even civilians are not immune from the influence of Special Forces and their camo of choice. In February 2020, Drake and the late Virgil Abloh sat front row at a New York Fashion Week event wearing matching MultiCam rain shells, made by Arc’teryx LEAF (Law Enforcement and Armed Forces, which has since rebranded to Arc’teryx Pro) and sold for more than \$1,000. The rareness and exclusivity of the jackets instantly turned them into grails, and High Snobility

published an article titled “You Can’t Buy Virgil Abloh & Drake’s Matching Arc’teryx Jackets, Unless You’re in the Army.” This turned out to be untrue, and eventually anyone could buy MultiCam jackets in a lot of places, including in a collection that Outdoor Research made called Allies.

“People are gravitating to those tactically adjacent products and using them as fashion in their ‘[gorpcore](#)’ wardrobe,” says Katarzyna Schoewe, VP of design and product innovation at Outdoor Research. “Tactical gear feels like it’s at the root of the gorpcore trend.” (Gorpcore is a fashion phenomenon where people don hiking gear as street wear).

It’s easy to lampoon these trend followers, who it’s assumed (perhaps falsely) have never gone hunting and don’t even know a member of the armed forces. What right do they have to MultiCam? The truth is, they might have the most authentic claim: It was made in Brooklyn by art school grads, after all.

Styling by Laurence Ellis. “The Rise of Digital Camo,” from top: Kyle Berger; Getty Images; Reuters; Getty Images.

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SAVEDEMOCRACYNOW

13 days ago

Congrat's to Crye Precision for their success. However, the bigger picture here is that their success piggybacks on an ever-growing insidious war footing that has been taking over American, and now world-wide culture since 9-11. Our daily language, government policy, shifting from policing responsibilities to militarized police forces, and more have taken over nearly every aspect of our daily lives - with virtually no one recognizing it. Yes, we need to defend ourselves, but if Osama bin Laden wanted one thing - it was to destroy America's open society. It seems he may have succeeded in this goal as we now turn on each other and strip away civil rights. MultiCam is simply one visual aspect of America's shift toward a militarized society.

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Reply

WHISPERER

Replying to

SAVEDEMOCRACYNOW

13 days ago

I think you are absolutely right to point this out. From fashion to violent language like "killing it", to the militarization of police, war video games, "tactical" everything for sale, politicians flaunting their service, and ICE inserting itself into more and more areas of daily life, the military influence is everywhere. But I have to point out - Bin Laden, if we go to his actual statements, didn't care much about eroding civil society in the US. His stated goal was to end the US presence in the Middle East.

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Reply