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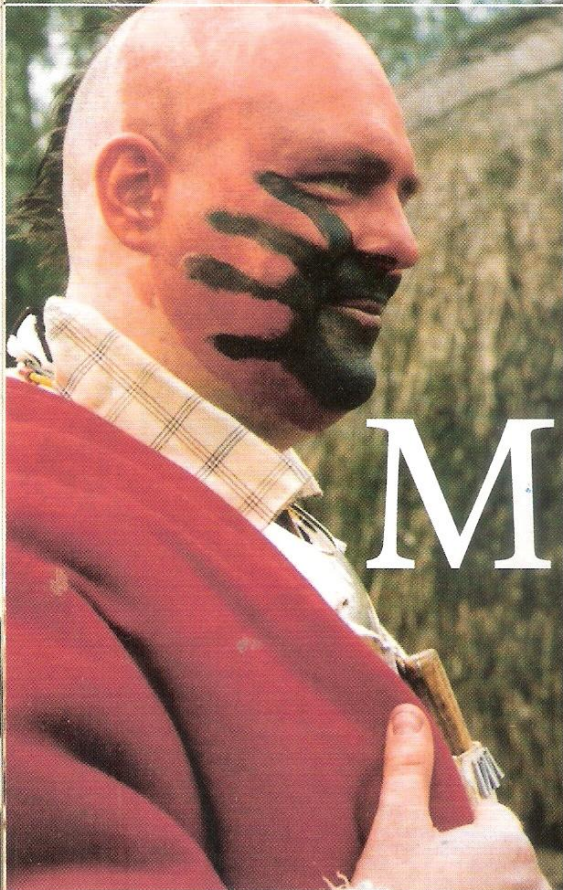
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RECREATING A MOHAWK

RANGER OF THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WARS
1754-1763

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY
MARC GEERDINK-SCHAFTENAAR

Above: Red and black face paints were most frequently used but there are descriptions that mention other colors. The hand over the mouth signifies having killed an enemy, i.e. "having drunk his blood".

When I got involved in re-enactment, I was soon interested in the American Colonial period. I visited a few small scale events in Belgium and Germany, where I met re-enactors portraying Native Americans, especially Mohawk and Oneida. At one point, I thought it would be a nice addition to my portrayal if I could say at least 'hi' to any Mohawk scout, so I started looking for more information. Before I knew it, I was working my way through a Mohawk language course as well as books on clothing, beadwork, arts and crafts, warfare and more, and was working on my first Native garb.

Let me first state that I am in no way the expert on Mohawk history and culture. This article is about my experiences on how I built my portrayal of a mid-18th century Mohawk / Ranger. So let's start with my choice for the Mohawk nation.

The Mohawk and the Dutch - The Mohawk, or Kaniienkeha:ka, – "the People of the Flint" – are part of the Six Nations Confederacy, a group of tribes that allied themselves to the British throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that is better known as the Iroquois League or Haudenosaunee. The Mohawk were a powerful tribe that had defeated several Algonquian tribes during the 17th century, thereby controlling the beaver trade around New England.

Although New Netherlands was incorporated into the British colonies, the Dutch had maintained their own identity for a long time. A Dutch sailor writes in 1812 how he met Dutch speaking farmers on Manhattan, living in farms that looked like the ones at home. The Dutch traded extensively with the Mohawk and Oneida, trading beaver pelts for wool, muskets, knives, axes, silver and of course, beads. With this came a cultural exchange, with Dutch rangers, known as "Boschloopers" (Forest Dwellers) acquiring skills in Native warfare and dressing accordingly.



Below - From left to right: a trade knife in a leather sheath, decorated with metal cones and horsehair; a knife; a pipe tomahawk; a military waist belt with tomahawk and bayonet; a tin canteen; a linen hunting bag with beadwork decoration on wool; a powder horn; a gourd. Knives, axes and powderhorns were mostly manufactured in Europe for the American market, hence the Mohawk word for white people – O'serroni, which means "Axe makers". The Natives however became increasingly dependant on these items.

Cultural exchange - To me, the most interesting feature about the American colonial period is how European and Native cultures blended with each other through extensive contact. Already, New York was a cultural melting pot. European soldiers adapted to the new type of warfare by dressing in "the Indian manner", cutting short their coats, hats and hair and replacing swords with tomahawks. The colonials, recruited as 'Rangers' into the army for their knowledge of the terrain, even went as far as wearing nothing more than breech clouts and leggings and shaving and painting their bodies, just like their Native allies. That saved me making up stories about "being adopted into a tribe" or whatever when explaining why I, a chubby white guy, is 'dressing up like an Indian'. I'm just not the Native-adoring New-Age type toting an 'Indian name', although 'Hysterically Swearing Gerbil' sounded good after a few beers.

Taboos - So, how did I start? Well, as with all my portrayals, I did extensive research. I ordered several books from specialized publishers, offering a wealth of information. Also, visiting a forum about the Mohawk helped out, not only with acquiring information and some useful tips and tricks, but also learning that Native American re-enactment is a touchy subject. To many Native Americans today, re-enactors are like most Indian wannabes: cultural parasites that like to dress up and play Indians, mocking their culture with their ignorance. If anything, I wanted to prevent that. For instance, I asked if it would be an idea to make a False Face mask for educational purposes. Despite the good intentions, the general opinion was no. To the Mohawk, False Faces are spiritual beings that are alive. Not anyone can just make these masks, nor wear them.



Top: unbleached linen hunting shirt; the shoulder parts dyed red. Middle: a red chequered trade shirt. Trade shirts had no buttons. Right: "Half breed Indian leggings", a combination of Indian leggings and European over-the-knee gaiters, to be worn with colorful woolen garters.

Making Mohawk garb

The first thing I bought was red and dark blue wool, the favourite colors of the Mohawk. Out of those I made leggings, a breech clout and a blanket. My white European shirt I replaced for a chequered trade shirt (no buttons). I made several pairs of moccasins, since I found out the hard way that these simple yet essential pieces of footwear wore out quickly. It also led me to make a more sturdy set of hard soled moccasins, that would provide more warmth and comfort in foul weather and on hard soil.

One tip I got was a link to an online sutler on Native American goods and accoutrements. This provided me with beautiful replica trade beads, tomahawks, silver jewelry, etc. Of course, I made the mistake first to go wild on beadwork, sewing on beads by the hundreds, but seeing this would not be very practical in forest warfare (thick bushes ruin your beadwork and jingling metal cones and bells can be heard a mile away), I made a more practical garb, being a mixture of European and Native clothing.

My clothing and accoutrements

My clothing consists of a breechclout, half-breed leggings (a mixture of wool gaiters and leggings), two trade shirts, an undyed linen hunting smock (modelled after a work smock, NOT the wrap-around smock of American Revolutionary fame), woolen vest, several pairs of moccasins and European shoes. A blanket coat and simple cap of wool and fur are added for foul weather. Depending on the weather conditions I can add or take off several layers of clothing.

My accoutrements are a military waistbelt, a linen hunting bag, a large decorated woolen bag, a powder horn and a wool blanket. Along with my musket I carry a bayonet, small axe, pipe tomahawk, three knives and a gunstock warclub. For decoration I made a horsehair roach and bought silver jewelry like armbands and a gorget. Bead necklaces, either as jewelry or as tradegoods, complete the outfit.

Clothing and bags were made by myself, silverwork and weapons were ordered from sutlers. But the most prized possessions are those given as a gift by friends: the war club, a small medicine bag, hand woven garters, a necklace... all of these items add character to my portrayal.

Last, but not least, comes the haircut and the facepaint. The scalp lock, being the most essential to the Mohawk warrior, was heavily decorated with beads, shells, feathers, et al, and to get that right is the icing on the cake. When going to an event, I let my hair grow, in order to create a full scalp lock. I used to wear a Mohawk haircut, but I found out that this is not an authentic cut. Red and black, symbolizing life and death, were the most used by the Mohawk for facepaint, or either a full bodypaint. For designs, I turned to contemporary prints, but also respected pictures of other re-enactors.

A final word

"Going Native" requires some serious research and dedication, but it is fun and you can put a lot of your own identity into your outfit. The compliments I received from re-enactors and Native Americans make me confident I've done justice to the history and culture of the Mohawk people.

*Onen'ki wahi,
Marc Geerdink-Schaftenaar.*



Above: Strings of trade beads, Italian beadmakers settled in Amsterdam because of the want for beads.

Middle, top to bottom: arm and wrist bracelets, a selection of trade silver, including crosses, council fire-motifs, turtle, fish and of course beaver-motifs, and a gorget, a type of ornamentation known to the Natives and recognized when they met European officers.

Right top: a horsehair roach, to be worn on the scalp lock. Next to the gorget are some Dutch 'Delft blue' trade beads.



This traditional weapon is painted one side red, with bear paw, snake and sunburst motifs and the other side black with a lightning burst painted on. Tacks are added for decoration. The metal blade is made in Europe.