



## GUERRILLA KNITTING FOR MEN

BY CHARLES CAPALDI

Let's face facts. In our society, knitting is considered a womanly pursuit. Growing up in the 1970's, I had to beg and plead with my grandmother to teach me to knit – something she did only after closing the curtains in the evening and in the absence of my grandfather. “Knitting isn't really for little boys,” she said. As if sugar, spice and everything nice were forever barred to me because of my gender. For years, I knitted on borrowed needles, in darkened rooms, and behind closed doors, gracefully accepting compliments about the “lovely pullover your grandmother made for you.”



A man who knits in public is viewed askance, an object of derision, as if his masculinity is questionable for owning a pair of needles and a ball of yarn. When I asked whether her sons knit, Danish knitwear designer Viviane Høxbro scolded me. “I have three sons who would say they can knit if you asked them. But they just don't do it.”

In spite of being a closet knitter, I grew up healthy, strong, with a wife, three children, and a farm. As a farmer, I have a healthy respect for hard work and honest sweat - the building blocks of good character. So do my colleagues, the men and women who tend their crops and herds in my community. For them, knitting doesn't fit into that equation. I get recognition for putting my hay up before the spring rains come, or for being able to spit tobacco juice with the accuracy of Daniel Boone. The measure of my manhood is a function of how straight my fences run, how tall my children grow in the sun and

how thick the calluses are on my hands. So, a closeted knitter I remained - churning out woolen wear for my family in fits and starts, ALWAYS in a room with the curtains drawn.

One fine post-Y2K day, I was boarding a flight from Minneapolis to San Antonio. Two men in grey suits approached me as I was about to board the plane, "Excuse me sir, would you please come with us." It was phrased as a question but let there be no doubt, he wasn't asking. They escorted me to a windowless room, somewhere in the bowels of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport.

"Sir, please remove your clothing and set it on the table. Hands on the wall, legs spread." They stood watching me impassively as I complied with their instructions. Anxious, embarrassed and confused, I submitted to their examination and sat waiting at a table for over an hour – with no idea of what was happening, and positive that I had missed my flight.

Eventually, I was taken to a room with dingy yellow curtains hanging limp with age. In spite of my sweaty palms, all I could think about was how I wished I had my knitting with me to kill the boredom. After a few minutes, a security officer came in with a look of unadulterated disgust on his face.

"Do you knit, sir?" He asked point blank, one eyebrow cocked higher than the other.

Only later did I find out that my circular knitting needles and the half-finished indigo blue child's pullover that hung from them, looked just like the detonation device for a bomb. Even after security recognized them as knitting needles, the fact that they were in the bag of a solitary male business traveler was reason enough for concern in a post 9/11 world.

I eventually managed to board another flight, stripped of my pride. The flight attendants watched me furtively from their stations as they launched into the standard emergency exit routine. Frankly, I couldn't help but ask myself if the response would have been the same had I been a woman. Little did I know that my experience had a historic precedent. During World War II, the FBI waylaid a traveler in possession of a code they had never seen before. Her "subversive literature" included such cryptic lines as "K1.p2.K6." Only later did they discover that she was a knitter and not the secret agent of some foreign power in much the same way they discovered that 60 years later, I was simply a knitting dad and not a terrorist bent on destruction.

Packed like a sardine on the over-booked flight, I was flanked on either side by business men with portable computers, cell phones and rustling copies of the New York Times. My knitting needles, and the pullover which had been ripped from them, had been stuffed into my briefcase. For the first time in my life, I took my knitting out in public. The response was almost immediate. Within minutes my seat mates were squirming with discomfort. Here was a man doing "a woman's work." With muttered excuses and averted glances, they both found seats elsewhere. This was all the invitation I needed to stretch out comfortably on the empty seats, knitting in hand, while reflecting on the nature of our cultural bias against men knitting. For a change, I opened the window shade instead of shutting it.

The Roman philosopher Lucretius (who credited men with weaving the first cloth), said, "... the male sex in general far excels the other in skill and is much more ingenious." Throughout the Middle Ages, knitting guilds were dominated by men. During the colonial era, children of both sexes were pressed into service producing their own garters, socks, stockings, caps and scarves. Spinning, knitting and weaving were the only means of turning raw wool into a product necessary for winter survival. During the American Revolution, colonists spurned British wool and the taxes that came with it. Wearing clothes made of "homespun" and "hand-knit" wool was the ultimate snub to King George III. Every third grader can identify the Boston tea party, an isolated act of defiance that is easily illustrated in history texts. Ironically, we teach them nothing about the role of wool in the revolution.

Attitudes toward men knitting were on a downhill slope by the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where people had traditionally eked out a subsistence living in the country, by the early 1900's, they were flocking to the city in record numbers, earning their daily bread in factories and sweat shops. Once an essential domestic skill, knitting itself fell from favor as women

joined the work force and cheap, mass-produced clothing became widely available. By the 1920's, men who knew how to knit were hardly the exception to the rule, but men who did so publicly were.

Wartime has always proved to be the exception which confirms the rule. During both World Wars, recuperating soldiers took to knitting as a means to pass the idle hours. Groups of civilians like the *Rocky Mountain Knitter Boys* of Mapleton, Colorado produced washcloths, socks, scarves and knitted helmets for the troops. In fact, knitting for the troops was a national imperative. In 1918, a knitting bee was held in Central Park using Red Cross yarn. The Park was filled with knitters of both sexes, enjoying the sunshine and company as they stitched away. Prizes were awarded to the most prolific knitters based on how much they had produced over the two-day event. Patrolman Patrick Fitzgibbons, then chairman of the NYC Police Glee Club, drew in people by the scores to watch him sing and knit socks while in uniform. He was not the only knitting man of his day – many war veterans joined the 1918 Knit-In to add their stitches to those of the rest of the nation in support of the war effort. Allied POW's during World War II were



provided with Red Cross sweaters which they quickly learned to unravel and knit into socks and mittens – a last line of defense against sub-zero weather. Lacking proper knitting needles, they used straightened pieces of barbed wire. By their own admission, many more would have been lost to exposure if it weren't for the skill of those who could knit. Necessity may have been the mother of invention in this case, but by war's end, men knitting went back underground and knitting itself resumed its gradual decline, at least until now.

**T** rue to patterns established during previous wars, knitting stores in New York City experienced an increase in sales since September 11<sup>th</sup>, according to the American Craft Council. They continue to note an increase annually around the anniversary of the attack. While these are hard statistics, they do nothing to help elucidate how knitting breaks out across gender lines. Anecdotal

evidence sheds more light on the situation. Eighty-six years after the 1918 Knit-In, a group of young professional men meet weekly in Central Park for what is colloquially referred to as a Stitch-n-Bitch – an opportunity to sit around with friends and shoot the bull while knitting. Enjoying the sunshine and fresh air, they lay down row upon row of knit stitches during their lunch hour - a vast improvement over the trademark two martini lunch and a continuation of a tradition that will soon span a century. The world today is marked by greater personal freedoms than in any previous society – at least since the fall of Rome. For all that, our civilization still doesn't encourage men to knit, a fact which begs the question, “Why do so many of us do it anyway?” And perhaps more importantly, “What will it take to liberate us?”



Certainly, as men shed the traditional sexist roles of prior generations, things they *are* changing. Many men do laundry, housework and change diapers. In fact, the model of Mr. Mom is increasingly prevalent in today's dual, working parent household. Popular culture has even found room in its collective heart to embrace cross-dressing leading men in a number of films, (Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* and Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*). Of course, in both cases, the justification of their behavior was on the basis of "need." As Viviane Høxbro points out, "We don't need to knit any more. We can buy clothes cheaper [than knitting them] and we probably have more clothes than we need anyway." Would it be acceptable for men to knit if there were a need for them to do so?

Judging from the plethora of low-cost polyester winter-wear lining the shelves of my local mega-mart, no doubt many low-income families would benefit from a knitting dad. But somehow, I don't think that will be enough either.

Kaffe Fassett, the London-based color and design guru, has succeeded in breaking through the barriers with both knitting and needlepoint. But let's face facts, his knitting is a higher art form than the simple hand-knit sweaters I crank out for my kids – at least in the eyes of the American public. Even Martha Stewart, the doyenne of American do-it-yourself fashion, has given her imprimatur to knitting, elevating it from a necessity to a heightened form of artistic expression. Knitters across the continent await her new line of monochromatic grey hand knits as she settles into a life behind bars. But even Martha's blessing isn't enough to do it. If history is in fact doomed to repeat itself, men need to have a reason to knit before it will be considered socially acceptable.

While research does support that knitting is a highly effective form of stress relief and an activity that promotes good health - no matter how fast and furious you work at it, you'll never get out of breath knitting. So it might be a stretch to claim that it is exercise, something most Americans need more of. The reality is that the modern world with all its "work-easing" inventions is replete with stress. "*Knitting for health*" has had its proponents for almost 90 years, both in the US and abroad. During the 1920's, male patients of tubercular and mental hospitals were often taught to knit as part of their Occupational Therapy. Time spent with needles in hand was considered a highly effective cure for "*moodiness and apathy.*"



In the 1930's, prominent psychologists were consulted to determine if there was anything wrong with *all this knitting*. On the contrary, mental health care professionals claimed that knitting produced something practical, useful and stylish while helping to alleviate tension. Judging from the societal impact of the Depression, we can only imagine how many lives were saved by the click of needles. Needlework was even recommended therapy for people recovering from nervous breakdowns. Seventy some years later, in a

nation which has increasing numbers of people on Prozac™, perhaps we should consider knitting as a revolution in universal mental health coverage. And revolutions, whether they occur in an internal or an external universe, tend to shake things up.

Chairman Mao Tse Tung once wrote, “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous.” The Chairman obviously hadn’t been around many knitters. At the G8 Summit of 2002 in Calgary, Canada, members of the Revolutionary Knitting Circle prepared their own peace protest. Grant Neufeld, the founder of the RKC says, “Knitting is a great tool for social change.” The RKC flew knitted banners and proudly displayed the group’s logo – a ball of wool with a lit fuse. “We were inspired to start the RKC because of a European activist group which,” Mr. Neufeld claims, “spent the day knitting at a major intersection. At the height of rush hour, their [needlework] culminated in a massive net that shut down the whole intersection. The image was so forceful, so powerful, and yet so extremely peaceful that the idea stuck.”

**M**r. Neufeld has no difficulty getting a reaction when he whips out his knitting on Calgary’s public transit system. “As peace activism, [knitting] has been tremendously effective because it breaks down a lot of barriers. The media presentation of what it means to be an activist is equated with terrorism, a guy bent on destruction. For some people, it makes them uncomfortable to see me doing what is traditionally associated with women.” He adds that the attention gives him an opportunity to talk about his cause with fellow riders.

While we may be in the minority, men who knit are a lively bunch representing a remarkably broad cross-section of society. The MenWhoKnit Yahoo Group, created in early 2002, has 85 members who span the nation and range from the beginning knitter to the guy who has been knitting for 50 years. Take Ken Houghtaling, the knitting grandpa of Chester, Connecticut. “Isn’t it funny how liberating kids are? In my case, my second was twins and if I hadn’t started knitting in public, I never would have gotten their things finished. I’ve been knitting for almost 50 years, about 30 publicly.”

Lest I’ve given the wrong impression, men knitting isn’t just about good clean fun and bobby socks. In “guy” terms, knitting is a major chick magnet. In fact, for every man who has run shrieking from my company when I pulled out a project, a woman has sidled up to ask what I’m making, and reached out tentatively to touch the fabric as it fell from my needles. “A man who can knit is somehow softer, kinder, gentler,” says Andrea Strobach, a fiber artist in Northern Vermont. It screams, “I’m comfortable with my masculinity” and yet smacks of sensitivity. It isn’t uncommon for an anonymous granny to give me a toothy grin and a “thumbs up” on buses, trains and in restaurants.



**M**y ten-year-old son and I are the only men in our local knitting guild. The second male generation in our family to knit, he takes a wicked pleasure in perpetuating our contrarian family tradition. To him, there is no relationship between knitting and masculinity, or any inferred lack thereof. And he certainly has never had to close the curtains or turn down the light in order to avoid discovery. In fact, he is more interested in the knitting than in the sheep on our farm. My daughter, as it turns out, is more interested in the sheep. While she is happy to wear what I knit for her, she is thrilled to be able to specify “green cows on a purple” sweater, and as her father, I’m proud to be able to stand and deliver.