



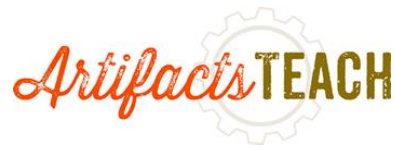
CONQUISTADORS

The Spanish and Portuguese gentlemen who departed the Iberian Peninsula in the 16th century to conquer new lands for church and crown had very good reasons to leave. Generally, they were second, third, and fourth sons of aristocrats. Because of the rules of primogeniture, only the first son could inherit his father's estate. This meant that second, third and fourth sons were left to gain fame and fortune on their own. Because they were from noble families, and because Spain and Portugal had been at war against the Moors for 700 years, these young aristocrats had received extensive training in weapons and warfare. They lived in a semi-feudal, martial society that rewarded those who defeated the enemies of church and crown with grants of land, official positions, special trading privileges, and with money. In other words, these young men without prospects could establish landed estates and gain great wealth by conquering new lands and new peoples in the "New World." When they left Spain or Portugal, they had everything to gain and nothing to return to at home. As a result, they seem ruthless and ferocious to us, today. Remember, however, that they were continuing a 700-year crusade (the *Reconquista*), that they were in a worldwide struggle against the Dutch, the English and the French, and that they personally, had nothing to lose. This combination made for a formidable, persistent and unforgiving soldier.

Conquistadors were tough, professional fighters. While they joined forces to fight their enemies, they were, essentially, individualists. Each provided his own equipment, which included a *camisa* (long-sleeved shirt), a *doublet* (close-fitted jacket) with or without sleeves, and from the waist down, a variety of pants and boots. Most conquistadors possessed a full set of armor, which consisted of heavy breastplate, arm and leg greaves (steel forearm and shin guards) and a *gorget* (metal plate) that protected the neck. Steel or bronze helmets were worn during combat. A full suit of armor weighed about sixty pounds. Upon their arrival in the Western hemisphere, these men found that their armor was rarely necessary. The heat, combined with the bow and arrow weaponry of their opponents, caused many to switch to a light protection, called *escaupil*, a combination of cloth and leather. This lighter equipment allowed for greater movement, was not as uncomfortable in the stifling heat of the deserts and rainforests, and still protected the wearer from the arrows, darts and hatchet blows of the Aztecs, the Incas and their allies. *Escaupil* armor was much more adaptable to the more mobile warfare that characterized fighting in the Southwest.

HELMETS

In battle, conquistadors most always wore helmets. There were three types that were popular during the 16th and 17th centuries. The first was the "Mori6n." It was an open helmet (it had no faceplate) with a flat brim and a crest (high ridge) from front to back. The crest was designed to strengthen the helmet. The name, "mori6n" derives from the noun "morra," which means, "the upper part of the head." The second helmet style was



the “Cabasset.” This type was more cone-shaped with a narrow brim that encircled the base. Soldiers thought the shape resembled a pear, which is how it got its name. Infantry, especially those who carried pikes, weapons that consisted of a long wooden shaft with a pointed steel head, wore this type helmet. The final helmet popular with conquistadors was the *burgonet* (*borgonata*). The design consists of a helmet-like “skull” with a large fixed or hinged peak projecting above the face-opening, and usually an integral, keel-like crest or comb running from front to rear. Attached to the skull are substantial hinged cheek pieces, which do not meet at the chin or throat. A flange projects from the lower parts of the skull and cheek pieces to protect the back and sides of the neck.

BREAST PLATES

A breastplate is a large, metal piece of armor that covers the chest and upper abdomen of a knight or conquistador. It was usually made of brass or steel and was the largest and heaviest of all the pieces of armor. Generally, breastplates were worn only for battle, though they were sometimes required wear at ceremonial events. Because of their size and weight, they were usually the first items discarded in the deserts and jungles of the Western Hemisphere. Conquistadors readily preferred the cotton and leather *escaupil*.