

Spit Shine your Combat Boots - THE SPIT SHINE

Asking how to get a pair of boots to shine like black glass will instantly collect everyone in earshot for a quick debate. There are a number of ways to do it and much debate over what works best, from flaming polish to cotton balls and real spit (all of which work).

A black glass level "spit" shine requires that a very smooth shell of wax has been built up on the leather. To get that perfectly smooth shell, the pores of the leather must be filled and the normal irregularities on the surface filled in and smoothed over. The debate is over how to accomplish that.

Some types of boots, such as oil tanned or silicone treated, will never take a spit shine. Some boots, such as Corcoran II Field Boots, can only be spit shined on the toes and heels; the rest of the boot must be done with a conventional brush shine.

First, if your boots are new, give some serious thought to breaking them in first. They actually change shape and it's best to work on a stable platform.

❑ Here's a method that works:

Wash your hands. Your skin contains natural oils and you can't polish a boot that has oil on it, nor can you polish a boot with the oil on your skin.

- ❑ Step 1: Clean the boots. For a new or relatively clean pair, all you will need is a damp cloth. If they're really dirty, put a small amount of saddle soap on a soft shoe polish applicator, dip it in water, and lightly scrub the boots. The saddle soap should foam a bit. Wipe off the soapy water and dry the boots with a clean towel. If they're oily, you'll need to wipe them with mineral spirits.
- ❑ Step 2: If the boots already have old layers of polish on them, strip the old polish off using mineral spirits on a clean cloth. If you use "paint thinner", read the label to make sure it is indeed mineral spirits. Provided it is mineral spirits, the cheap stuff works just as well as the major brand names - be sure to use it in a well-ventilated area.
- ❑ Step 3: If any areas show anything but deep black leather, dye the entire boot with black shoe dye. Kiwi works great.
- ❑ Step 4: Using any cotton cloth, rub in a relatively thick layer of shoe polish onto one boot. Again, Kiwi shoe polish works just as well as any I've tried. Get the big tins, as you will use a lot of polish. Remember to apply polish to the tongue of the boot, and also to the edge of the sole and heel. Use a toothbrush to apply polish to the "seams" where the sole meets the upper shoe leather.
- ❑ Step 5: Here's the hi-tech part: After you have applied the polish to the boot, take a hair dryer using the hot setting, and slowly blast hot air over the boot. You will see the polish melt briefly. This melts the polish into the leather and seals the pores. Some folks use a match or lighter, but that tends to burn the polish and excite the neighbors.
- ❑ Step 6: Let dry and brush (horsehair shoe brush works best) Repeat steps 4 thru 6 for the other boot, then repeat steps 4 thru 6 three more times, so that you have melted four layers of polish into the leather and built up a good, smooth base. You should have a pretty decent shine at this point, but not the "black glass" shine we're looking for.

- ❑ Step 7: Put on the boots and walk around a bit. Flex the "cracks". This will flake up excess wax in the creases - just give them a quick brush and walk around a bit more. Take them off and dust away any flakes.
- ❑ For the most part, this takes care of polishing all but the heel and toe. You'll be able to get them to glass-up better on the following steps, but that's quickly lost anywhere your boots flex during normal use. In order to get the black glass effect (i.e. when you look into the toe cap you can see your own reflection), you need to have good base layers to polish on.

Now comes the spit shine. To do this you need the following 3 items:

1. A very high quality polish such as Kiwi or Lincoln Stain Wax.
2. A damp 100% cotton cloth, cut into a square the size of a handkerchief. An old T-shirt is ideal. Better yet is one of the tan colored buffing cloths from a typical shoeshine kit. It must be 100% cotton. Polyester will strip off the polish, which is the last thing you want at this stage. Put away the horsehair brush, you won't be using it from here on.
3. Clean water to keep the cloth damp. A spray bottle works really well. Some folks prefer spit or beer for their additional lubricant properties, but I'm not that dedicated - and not sure there weren't ulterior motives on the beer claim.

Wet the cloth and wring it out - you want it damp but not dripping wet. Wrap it round the one or two fingers and grip the excess cloth so that you have a nice taut surface at your fingertips.

Put a small amount of polish on the cloth at your fingertips and begin lightly coating in little circles, working a section at a time. Do not press hard, you only need to have a slight pressure on the pad of your finger.

The first thing you will notice is that while polishing, it feels "rough" and is almost putting pressure back onto the cloth. This is because you need to lubricate the polish being applied. This is where your small amount of water comes in. Put just enough on the cloth to allow the rubbing to feel smooth. Start applying the polish again in a circular motion.

When you are applying the polish (in a circular motion), you will see polish "swirls". Swirls are good, they show that you are doing it right. As you keep polishing, the swirls will start to go away - that indicates it is time for the next layer.

At first you will think a shine will never appear, but keep doing those little circles on the section you are working on. Eventually you will see a mirror shine begin to appear through the haze of polish.

Do not brush. Just keep rubbing. How long? Depending on the prep work, an hour or so per boot. The good news is that once you've achieved a real black glass shine, it only takes a coat or two to refresh it after a drill.

This process takes a bit of practice. In time you will develop the technique that works best for you. You will also find by experimenting that variations on the little circles, such as back and forth buffing with the damp cloth, work better on certain areas of the particular boot you are shining. Turn the cloth to get a clean surface occasionally.

Use polish sparingly - the layers must be thin, or else the polish you just applied will strip off ruining the shine you have so far. Keep the cloth damp using your spray bottle or whatever. The purpose of the water is to make the polish stick to the leather not to the cloth. It is the thin layers of polish that gradually fill the tiny holes and bumps in the leather, producing a smoother and smoother shell that shines like a mirror. As you build up the shell, use less and less polish - keep going until you are only using a very small spot of polish.

Options: Unfortunately, wax is really a liquid and can soften and dull in direct sunlight or hot conditions. If your boots get rough duty (or you tend to run into things), you may want to give them a final liquid coat of KIWI Premiere Shine Ultra-Brilliant. It provides some protection for your hard work. Don't bother until the boots are at their best shine, as liquids will not fill in the pores and irregularities. I'd also suggest skipping floor wax, and other similar "tricks" - they wreck your boots and any good NCO will spot it in a heartbeat.

Ongoing Maintenance: Maintaining the shine is much easier than the procedure just outlined. Provided you have no major scuffs, all you really need to do is add another layer or two of spit-shine polish with your damp cotton cloth.

If you have a large scratch, you can dip your finger in mineral spirits and melt the polish in the scratched area, then rebuild the layers.

Personally, I find it easier to strip the polish off a somewhat larger area (typically the toe cap), and then redo the entire process described above on that area.

Photo credits: CadetStuff