

Early Air Force leaders wanted an unadorned dress uniform, but things turned out a bit differently.

Whatever Happened to

By Bruce D. Callander



USAF photo by TSgt. Scott M. Ash

When the Air Force opened shop as a service separate from the Army in 1947, USAF leaders wanted the airmen to wear a “plain blue suit,” unadorned except for rank insignia, award ribbons, and aviation badges. Things haven’t exactly worked out that way.

Planning for the plain but distinctive dress uniform began as early as the fall of 1945, two years before the separate Air Force became a reality. The Personal Equipment Laboratory at Wright Field, Ohio, developed what it said could be the basis of an Air Force uniform if the air arm separated from the Army.

A few months later, in January 1946, Brig. Gen. William E. Hall, deputy assistant chief of staff in charge of per-

sonnel, formally proposed a distinctive Air Force uniform and recommended that its ornamentation be “limited to an absolute minimum.”

From the beginning, there was little doubt that, whatever else it was, the Air Force outfit would be blue. That was the color worn by Britain’s Royal Air Force and most of the world’s other air forces. Beyond that agreement, however, there was considerable debate among air leaders over the style of the uniform and which adornments—and how many—it should have.

Some wanted the uniform to be as close as possible to a civilian business suit. Others favored a more typically military design but with a minimum of decoration. Still others supported a distinctively military style and all

the ornaments that Army Air Forces members had become used to while they were part of the Army.

Unfortunately for those who supported the unadorned business suit, World War II had been a period of relaxed dress and appearance standards, particularly in flying units. Airmen crammed their earphones over their service caps to give them a “50-mission crush” and wore cowboy boots, scarves, and items borrowed from the British and other air forces. Their flight jackets sometimes sported garish artwork, and their uniform combinations were more mix-and-match than regulation.

Service leaders lamented the lax attitudes in place during World War II, but feared that cracking down would

the Plain Blue Suit?

damage morale. The assumption was once the war was over, discipline would return.

Even when the force shrank to peacetime strength, however, there still was strong sentiment in favor of a well-decorated uniform. Apart from the liberties members had taken on their own, the Army itself had favored adornments such as shoulder patches, marksmanship badges, specialist insignia, and unit emblems. Even some of the air leaders were reluctant to give those up.

Another factor in the controversy was that the proposals being considered called for all airmen, officer and enlisted, to wear the same basic uniform. Only the rank insignia and hat emblems would

distinguish officers from enlisted.

The idea went down hard with some traditionalists. The Army had kept its enlisted troops in government-issue uniforms while officers sported olive drab jackets and khaki pants (“pinks and greens”). The Navy dressed its sailors in bell-bottom pants and cupcake hats while its officers wore suits. Letting enlisted airmen wear the same outfits as officers, some thought, would threaten good order and discipline.

Despite the controversy, the Army Quartermaster continued to develop prototype blue uniforms. In late 1946, it displayed them at a number of AAF bases and ran a survey of troop reactions. A year later, the proposed uniforms were shown to top officials. At that point, the exact color was undecided and there was no funding for the conversion. In the end, the early AAF leaders settled on an “interim” uniform of olive drab and khaki—not exactly today’s dress blues.

An Air Force History Support Office research paper summed up the two main schools of thought on the subject. In it, Brig. Gen. Lyman P. Whitten said, “One [version] is to get as near to a civilian type outfit as you can—no shoulder loops, no patch pockets, no belt on it, or anything, and just a straight civilian-looking suit with merely rank on it.” The alternative “has the shoulder loops, patch pockets, and is a military outfit.”

The Air Force became a separate service in September 1947, but the uniform question dragged on for another year until lawmakers raised a question that seemed to endanger the whole idea of a distinctive uniform for the air arm.

Since the same law that created the Air Force also unified all the services under the Department of Defense, some argued, all service members should wear the same uniform. This “purple suit” idea didn’t sit well with any of the services, but Congress had the power to withhold funds for uniform development. The danger of a single uniform for the

Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps seemed real.

This proposal may actually have accelerated the Air Force decision on a uniform design. By the fall of 1948, all of the new USAF accessories were approved and ordered, and the Air Force issued directives regarding proper wear of the interim olive drab uniforms.

Then, in January 1949, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Chief of Staff, officially authorized the new blue uniform. He said that the blues would not be available for distribution until September 1950, but members could buy their own as soon as specifications were released.

How Plain Is Plain?

The blue suit finally had arrived. It was beltless and fairly plain, but had patch pockets, shoulder loops, and large lapels. It definitely looked more like a uniform than a business suit—but was undoubtedly less garish than the old pinks and greens.

The question of which adornments should be worn on the USAF uniform remains a debate to this day. As the interim uniform had been made up largely of Army items, airmen continued to wear most of the adornments they had worn during their “brown shoe air force” days. As the distinctive Air Force garments phased in, USAF leaders had to decide which embellishments should stay and which should be dropped.

There was no question about allowing aeronautical badges and the ribbons representing medals and service awards. The Air Force adopted new stripes for its enlisted members and, for a time, considered identifying officer ranks with sleeve insignia similar to those used by the Navy. In the end, however, USAF stuck with Army-style shoulder insignia.

The most difficult decisions were those involving such items as shoulder patches, longevity devices (“hash marks” on the lower sleeve), marksmanship



On the opposite page, Lt. Gen. Roger Brady, Air Force personnel chief, prepares to present the new Headquarters Air Force badge to Capt. Brian Humphrey and SSgt. Chris Kennerly. The badge is the latest addition to USAF's dress uniform. Above, 1st Lt. Leo Batch in his World War II Army Air Forces dress uniform.

ship badges, and some of the occupational emblems that had proliferated during the war. With these ornaments removed, some airmen complained that they looked more like mail carriers or bus drivers than service members.

In the fall of 1949, the newly formed Air Force Uniform Board looked at the patches, insignia, and other accessories and the overall appearance of the uniform. The board recommended removing all shoulder patches except those of the major commands and removing the metal "headquarters" insignia from the shoulder loops. The stripping process had begun.

That winter, the board recommended eliminating more of the accessories, and Vandenberg agreed to drop current assignment shoulder patches but to allow those from World War II on an optional basis.

The uncluttered suit was gaining favor among air leaders, but those who wanted more ornamentation noted that those top officials already had ample adornments on their own uniforms. Critics pointed out, for example, that Vandenberg himself wore eight rows of ribbons and his command pilot wings above them. There was scarcely any space left between the wings and the row of stars on his shoulders.

On the other hand, young airmen who had yet to earn any stripes or ribbons had nothing but the blue suit to show for their service.



USAF photo

Antecedents to today's bomber jackets, service caps, and pilot's wings can be seen here on (l-r) Brig. Gen. Benjamin Foulois, Maj. Gen. James Fechet, and Brig. Gen. H.C. Pratt. The jodhpurs did not stand the test of time.

The counter argument not only was that a plain suit was neater, but that removing the "Christmas tree ornaments" inherited from the Army helped to signal the Air Force's independence.

The clean-up process continued for years but, periodically, a new effort was mounted to speed up the de-ornamentation.

In 1956, Maj. Gen. Raymond J. Reeves, director of military personnel, made a detailed study of uniform accessories. He recommended eliminating

shoulder patches, various badges, and the metal frame on unit citations. Officials approved elimination of shoulder patches, but urged the voluntary removal of badges and other adornments.

By 1959, the Air Force had set up a permanent uniform board. The board underscored its commitment to the plain uniform by rejecting bids for additional skill and unit badges. Although the Army approved corps insignia and the Navy favored specialty badges, USAF stressed the unity of all members.

This position was weakened, however, by the fact that since the uniform had been adopted, new medical, dental, and nursing badges had already been introduced, as had special insignia for missile specialists and air police.

In 1962, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, Chief of Staff, approved the wearing of ribbons to replace the small-arms marksmanship badge and to recognize NCO Academy graduates. LeMay said this was consistent with the policy of substituting ribbons for badges and should not be taken as a move away from the clean uniform policy. A year later, he rejected a bid for a new skill badge, even though the uniform board had favored it.

Cracks in the Dam

In 1968, a uniform board committee again decided to keep the clean uniform and limit the number of badges and insignia allowed to be worn. It also called for setting up specific categories of adornments and for allowing no more than three badges to be worn at one time.



Gen. George Kenney, the top air officer in the Pacific during World War II, wears the Army's "pinks and greens" of the time. Note the belted jacket with shoulder insignia and longevity "hash marks" on the sleeves. Early uniform boards considered but rejected these styles for the Air Force's new "dress blues."

Gen. John P. McConnell, Chief of Staff, approved the idea.

The category system was intended to discourage the addition of more devices. In 1950, there had only been the aviation badges and those for chaplains, police, and aides. USAF then approved badges for physicians, nurses, dentists, parachutists, guided missile personnel, and those serving with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It also approved a combat crew badge, a Presidential service badge, a recruiting service badge, and three marksmanship badges. Then it added a veterinary badge, a pararescue badge, a USAF Academy permanent professor badge, and an Air Training Command instructor insignia.

Officials had hoped to head off this cluttering of the service uniform by letting members decorate their work outfits more. On flight suits, fatigues, and other functional uniforms, airmen were allowed to wear unit patches, pins, and distinctive insignia. Gaudy baseball caps and berets of various colors were permitted, and some combat units adopted colored scarves. Such concessions helped morale but did not end the demand for skill badges and job identification on the more public uniforms.

Still more efforts were made to make the uniform simpler. Designers eliminated the lower patch pockets and the winged corps insignia that members had worn in the Army. When officials decided to eliminate the US insignia

Today's uniform bears a close resemblance to the Cold War uniform seen here on Gen. Curtis LeMay, Chief of Staff in the early 1960s. LeMay, as Chief of Staff, rejected at least one badge the uniform board had approved.



USAF photo

from the lapels, however, the reaction was instantaneous and loud.

The justification for removing the US insignia was that the blue uniform was distinctive enough to mark the wearers as American airmen, and the uniforms of most other nations did not carry national identification devices. However, members took the gesture as an insult to their patriotism. They wrote letters and petitioned their members of Congress. Before the order could take effect, it was withdrawn.

By 1975, uniform board members were worried about morale and retention, and knew the uniform had at least a little to do with both. Functional leaders were now arguing that if some groups had distinctive badges, they all should.

By the early 1980s, USAF had approved eight more badges: for nonrated officer crew members, vice presidential service, fire protection, junior ROTC instructors, weapon controllers, security police qualification, air traffic controllers, and Army air assault.

In 1984, there was agreement that there should be no more badges approved for the service uniform, with even more leeway to be given on what was allowed to be worn on fatigues and functional uniforms.

Less than a year later, however, leadership considered requests for still more badges. This time, the four-stars interpreted the uniform policy of limiting badges as a restriction only on the number of badges to be worn on the uniform at one time, not a limit on the approval of additional badges. Corona conferees OK'd an aircraft maintenance-munitions badge and opened the way for still more.

Two years later, Gen. Larry D. Welch, Chief of Staff, approved six new badges. They were for Defense Language Institute instructor, administration, communications-electronics maintenance, medical technician, meteorologist, and supply-fuels.

When Gen. Merrill A. McPeak was Chief of Staff in the early 1990s, he

Gen. Merrill McPeak campaigned for uniform simplicity. Chief of Staff in the early 1990s, McPeak drastically stripped down the dress uniform and added Navy-style sleeve insignia to designate officer ranks. This uniform proved unpopular, to say the least.

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dramatically stripped down the uniform and instituted Navy-style ranks—which were later removed—on the sleeves.

Fruit Salad ...

Along with the addition of new badges came a boom in other uniform adornments. Originally, the Air Force plan was to convert some of the old Army badges to service ribbons. With time, however, USAF began to add ribbons to recognize service in specific areas and circumstances.

Since World War II, for example, USAF has adopted its own Commendation Medal, a Meritorious Service Medal, and an Air Force Achievement Medal, all to recognize service not quite qualifying for higher awards.

USAF has approved an Aerial Achievement Medal for sustained meritorious service in flight. The Air Force Training Ribbon is for initial accession training and can be worn by anyone who completes basic. There is another ribbon for basic training honor graduates and one for graduating from NCO professional military education.

There now are ribbons for marksmanship, longevity, serving overseas, outstanding voluntary service, for the outstanding airman of the year, and humanitarian service.

DOD has authorized other medals, including those for having been a prisoner of war, service in the Antarctic, Vietnam, or Southwest Asia.

Just since 9/11, awards have been approved for the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, for the Global War on Terrorism, and for Korean defense service. There is an expeditionary service ribbon, a Gallant Unit Citation, and a Meritorious Unit Award.

The current awards and decorations directive (AFI 36-2903) lists more than 100 medals and ribbons that members can wear on the uniform, in addition to those awarded by other services and foreign governments.

... And Badges Galore

Despite the effort to hold the line on badges, there now are more than ever—including World War II. There are seven types of wings for pilots, navigators, flight surgeons, flight nurses, and aircrew members. Each has a senior and command or master rating.

There is a parachutist badge, and the Air Force recently unveiled a new badge for space and missile professionals which looks more like the aeronautical



USAF photos by SSGT. C. Todd Lopez

In May, officials unveiled two prototype uniforms for comment and evaluation. The uniforms attempt to address criticism that the current dress blues are too corporate looking and not military enough. SMSgt. Dana Athnos wears the “Billy Mitchell heritage coat,” while Brig. Gen. Robert Allardice shows the “Hap Arnold heritage coat.” Elements from these prototypes may appear in future uniforms.

wings than did the previous missile and space badges.

Nonflying medics now have badges. More than 20 other badges identify members in functional areas from public affairs to explosive ordnance disposal, and from band to intelligence.

While the fight for the plain blue suit seems to have been lost, the Air Force has maintained strict rules on the personal appearance of its members. Rules regulate hair, tattoos, and body piercings. New rules were written to cover the carrying of beepers and cell phones, as well as the use of head coverings for religious purposes.

Despite the increase in occupational and functional badges, there still are periodic efforts to remove uniform ornaments. In the 1990s, for example, USAF phased out most fourrageres and lanyards. Over the years, the service has dropped shoulder patches, wing-and-propeller lapel insignia, longevity and overseas stripes, the “rope-ladder” marksmanship badges of Army days, and the embroidered metallic wings and accessories popular in World War II.

Still, the net effect is that the once-envisioned plain blue suit never materialized. “The basic blue suit has not

appreciably changed,” the Air Force History Support Office’s paper on uniform evolution concluded, but there has been “steady pressure since the late 1950s to add skill and functional badges and insignia to the uniform.”

Slowly but surely, most of these additions have been approved.

Not everyone is happy with the end result, and the Air Force continues to look for ways to improve the uniform. Responding to common criticism that the dress uniform looks too corporate and not military enough, on May 15 officials rolled out two sets of prototype uniforms for comment and review.

These “initial prototypes are direct descendents of our heritage [uniforms], rooted in Hap Arnold and Billy Mitchell’s Air Force,” said Brig. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, chief of airman development and sustainment on the Air Staff. USAF’s uniform board will review the comments before recommending changes to the current dress uniforms. Finally, four days later, officials announced the creation of a new Headquarters Air Force badge, already approved by the uniform board. The Air Force today may have a blue suit, but it is certainly not a plain one. ■

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