

The quest for a distinctive uniform led to selection of Air Force blue, but didn't stop there.

# Suited for Service in War and Peace



**W**hen it became a separate service in 1947, the Air Force underwent many changes. One of the more important ones concerned the uniform. Early USAF leaders strongly believed it should be distinctive. A large inventory of Army olive drab material was on hand, and this somewhat hampered the new service's plans, but even Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington supported using a different color, saying, "For God's sake, let's not have ODs because it means 'olive drab.' And it means drab. That's the thing we should stay away from."

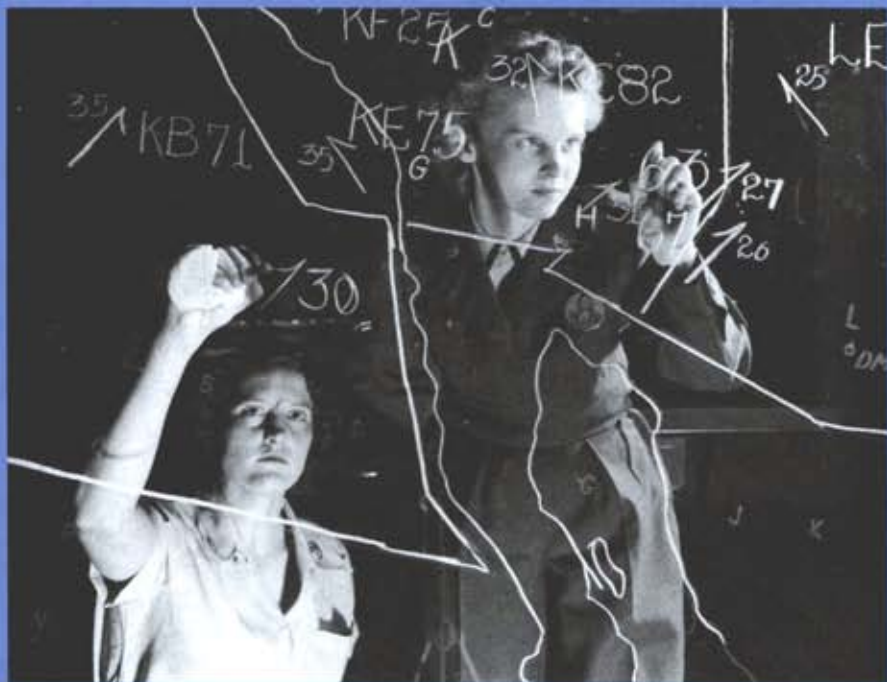
A mix of Army and Air Force uniforms and insignia was the rule until decisions and clothing replacements were complete. Above left, the new Air Force enlisted stripes are displayed on an "Ike" jacket.



Above, in an early publicity photo, Cpl. Claude Ridings (left) checks out the new uniform of MSgt. Edward Ancas.

Uniform photos by Paul Kennedy

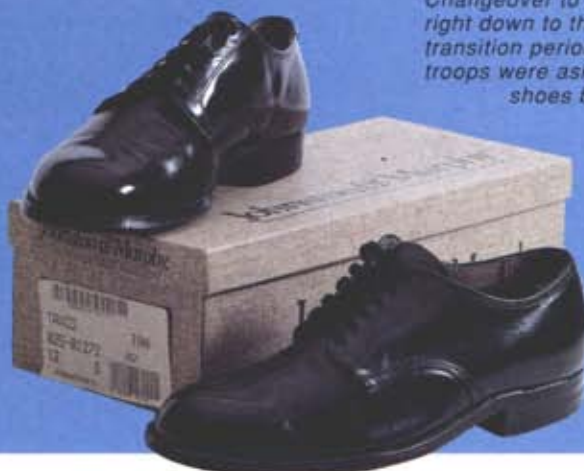
Several colors for the uniforms came up for consideration, including sapphire blue, gray, and chocolate brown. But by late 1947, a group of seven designers had agreed on a medium blue shade called Uxbridge 1683. By spring 1949, most of the details for the new uniforms had been worked out, and specifications were released to the field. (The goal was to phase out the last of the olive drab by July 1952.) Airmen at Barksdale AFB, La., in February 1949 became the first to receive the new official-issue blue uniform. At right are two versions of that first uniform—the popular Ike jacket and the longer-length coat.



The process of developing a uniform for Air Force women suffered as many tribulations as the process for the men's uniform. Like men, women in the Air Force wore Army uniforms and substituted USAF chevrons and insignia as they became available. The Ike jacket (above) proved to be popular with both men and women.

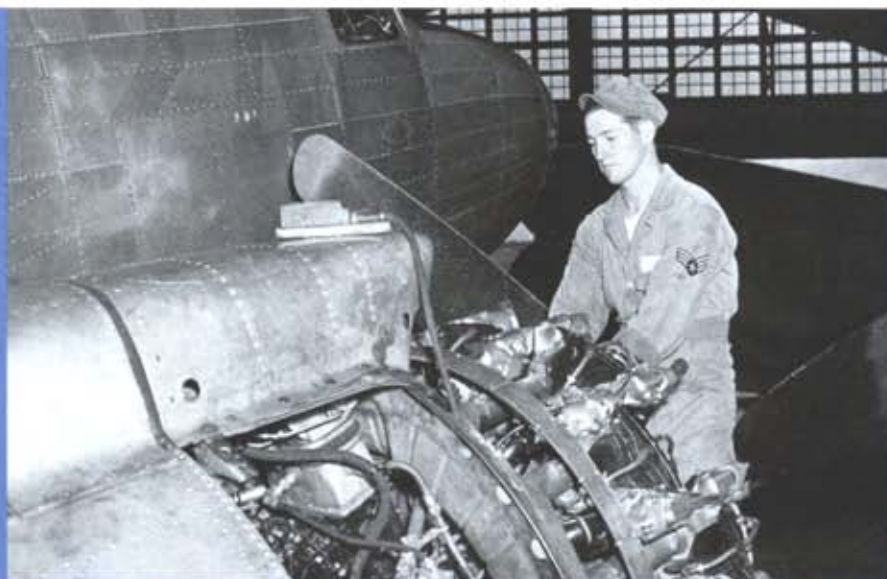
As with the selection of color, debates raged over chevrons and insignia. No one is certain who designed the Air Force chevron, with its star and circle; however, the minutes of a March 1948 meeting of USAF representatives state that designs had been sent to Bolling Field, D.C., where 150 airmen had been polled. Fifty-five percent chose the design used today, and Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, USAF Chief of Staff, approved it. Specialty insignia and rank would linger but soon were limited to the simple "US" and the new standard insignia.

Changeover to a new uniform went right down to the shoes. During the transition period in the early 1950s, the troops were asked to dye their brown shoes black. Ever since, the term "brown shoe" has denoted those airmen whose careers spanned two eras—that of Army olive and Air Force blue. At left is an early version of the black oxfords that were issued to new airmen.



The new blue uniform looked good, but the Korean War underscored the need for clothing that would hold up in combat conditions. Development of utility and fatigue wear had not received as much attention as dress and flight clothing, and even in work clothes, airmen wanted to show that they belonged to the new service.

Below is an early fatigue shirt not unlike the one worn at right by A1C John Rainey in 1952, working on a C-47.



Despite the initial goal of simple uniformity, commands began to make exceptions, and in many career fields, specialized uniforms or variations cropped up. At right is an example—a dark blue fatigue uniform worn by missile crews.



As USAF's commands became established, some utility uniforms began to proclaim the identity of an organization and even a specific crew member position. By the early 1960s, the standard olive green fatigue usually sported a command or squadron patch.



Uniform photos by Paul Kennedy

*In one of its more unusual decisions, the Air Force Uniform Board in the mid-1950s approved creation of the bush jacket. Designed as summer wear for troops in tropical climates, the uniform included shorts, knee socks, and an optional pith helmet. Knees could be "bared only under strict control," and officers were not to wear any of the uniform combinations in the Washington, D.C., area. By 1962, this summer uniform was no longer mandatory.*

*In early 1956, regulations covering the uniforms were laid out in Air Force Manual 35-10. The number 35-10 became synonymous with the wear and care of every part of virtually every USAF uniform. Over the years, it codified major changes, such as the demise of the popular Ike jacket in 1964, and lots of minor changes, such as wear and placement of insignia.*



*The baseball cap-style headgear has been a staple of utility uniforms for years, and the mid-1960s saw an abundance of colorful ball caps. Unit commanders approved them in order to foster esprit de corps, and the troops viewed them as a welcome relief from the green issue utility cap, at right.*



In the photo at left, MSgt. Lee Rogers, 1960 Recruiter of the Year, is wearing the highly popular "Silver Tan" summer-version dress uniform. Below, an officer (left) wears a Silver Tan shirt, which required officer rank on the collar when worn without the coat, while the master sergeant next to him appears "wilted" in his khaki 505 uniform. Even though they had to be starched to a "crackle," the 505s would not retain their crisp look throughout the workday. They were replaced by 1505 khakis, made of a different fabric that didn't require heavy starch and kept its fresh look longer. However, the summer-weight blue uniforms became the standard in 1961, leading to phaseout of the Silver Tans by 1965. The Air Force phased out the other khaki-style uniforms, the last vestige of its Army heritage, in September 1978.



In the early 1960s, the utility uniform appeared for the first time as part of 35-10. It included specifications for the ultramarine-colored US Air Force tape and name tape, stenciled with white letters. During the Vietnam War, USAF personnel often wore fatigues made in Vietnam and Thailand, as unit commanders were able to authorize some changes and local industry was able to supply the sewing expertise. Local "improvements" included nonregulation subdued rank insignia and name tapes and, paradoxically, bold, multicolored unit patches.

At far left is an example of subdued stripes as well as name tapes made in Southeast Asia. At left, the brightly colored rank and name tapes were worn to clearly distinguish USAF personnel who were working with the South Vietnamese military. Camouflage, tiger stripe, solid green—what you wore depended on where you were and what you did.

Gen. John P. McConnell, USAF Chief of Staff from 1965–1969, led the way for a change in the service uniform to a darker shade of blue, smaller lapels, and elimination of what were sometimes called "Kaptain Kangaroo pockets," in favor of a hidden pocket. The alterations were described as the first style changes in the blue uniform since its introduction, and the service dress uniform generally retained this look until the 1990s.



By the late 1970s, the brightly colored name tapes and patches on the utility uniform gave way to the subdued look that had been popular in the Vietnam War. AFR 35-10 officially introduced the subdued insignia in 1980, and they became mandatory in 1983. The utility uniform material also changed from high-maintenance cotton to a lighter, permanent press fabric that was more comfortable and easier to care for. The light blue shirt and dark blue trousers were standard "office wear." Above right, at a training session at Sheppard AFB, Tex., an instructor in his blue shirt stands out from the students in their subdued fatigues.

Uniform photos by Paul Kennedy

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In the early 1980s, the woodland pattern Battle Dress Uniform began to appear. The Air Force BDUs were of the same design and color as those worn by the other services, part of a move toward standardization among the services.



BDUs became the standard utility uniform for men and women. They soon began to show unit variations in the form of specialized patches like the "Weasel Keeper" insignia on the BDU shirt at left or an aircrew-style leather patch, worn over the left pocket, sometimes with a specialty device. (Troops soon realized that the aircrew-style patch, stating name and rank, made it hard to determine rank quickly, so subdued stripes and eventually subdued name tapes returned to BDUs.)



Staff photo by Guy Areno



Although few airmen knew it, there was a desert camouflage version of the BDU. With the Persian Gulf War, military and civilian alike became familiar with a pattern nicknamed "Chocolate Chips." Also in that war, a new version of the Vietnam-era "boonie" hat shielded troops from the intense sun. At left are the older, Chocolate-Chips-style hat and the simpler desert pattern that had supplanted it by the end of the Gulf War. On an Air Expeditionary Force deployment to the region last year, A1C Rueben Aguirre (above) wore the current version of the desert BDU with the approved Security Police arm band and US flag.



At left and below are the current men's and women's service dress jackets.



In fall 1994, Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, in one of his first moves as new USAF Chief of Staff, approved a return to epaulets with the traditional rank for officers' coats; as well as the US insignia for lapels for both officers and enlisted personnel.

In fall 1991, Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, USAF Chief of Staff, led the most dramatic redesign of the Air Force uniform since McConnell's changes more than two decades before. The new look aimed for clean lines, upgraded material, and comfort. Notable, though short-lived, changes included silver-colored braided bands on the sleeves of officers' uniforms and elimination of the metal "US" insignia on the service coat's lapel. Interestingly, these elements were suggested by designers of the very first Air Force uniform but were rejected. The 1991 uniform's buttons—a takeoff on the Army Air Corps' World War II patch—harkened back to the service's roots.

Most troops liked the looser fit, and airmen seemed to like the larger, brighter enlisted stripes on the sleeve, but some changes were controversial and far from universally accepted.



Minor changes continue to alter and add to Air Force uniforms. Change has even come to 35-10, which became Air Force Instruction 36-2903 as part of a USAF streamlining effort. And changes come about not only through orders from the top. The Air Force Uniform Board that met in January 1996 received more than 2,500 suggestions—including one for a familiar summer-wear shorts set with matching socks—from active-duty service members and their families, retirees, and even former USAF members. The overwhelming interest in uniforms underscores the pride that comes with wearing Air Force blue. ■