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THE AIR FORCE UNIFORM

A Brief History

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Shortly after achieving independent service status in September 1947, the Air Force acquired its own uniform, one that had long been desired by the Army Air Corps and the Army Air Forces—a distinctively plain, blue suit. The suit itself has changed little through the years. However, it has been the subject of nearly constant controversy because of the desire of service members to add or remove insignia, chevrons, patches, badges, emblems, bars, stripes, and medals.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Air Force discouraged and finally discontinued shoulder and sleeve decorations; with retirements, it saw the eventual disappearance of World War I and World War II decorations. Yet since the late 1950s the Air Force has, despite promoting a "clean uniform policy," been pressured to approve, categorize, and standardize for wear a host of insignia and badges representing various skills and functions. The distinctively plain, blue suit, as described in AFM 35-10, has gradually become a distinctively plain, blue suit with standardized accessories.

THE AIR FORCE UNIFORM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Before the Air Force became an independent service, its leaders had discussed as early as 1945 the possibility of obtaining a distinctive new uniform. Breaking with convention, they expressed considerable sentiment for clean, subdued lines. Except for the lower pockets, lapels, fabrics, and tailoring, the blue service uniform that resulted from extended deliberations after World War II has not changed appreciably over the years. It has never ceased to be controversial, however, largely because of the desire among service members to adorn it with badges and emblems representing professional skills and official unit assignments.

Army airmen during World War II wore at least the Air Corps emblem—a winged, white, five-pointed star on an enclosed blue circular field with a red disk, the "meatball," centered within the star. Regulations prescribed the placement of various insignia, service bars, wound stripes, individual valor medals, and Army Air Forces (AAF) unit emblems. The AAF began to seriously consider new service attire as soon as its conversion to an independent department seemed likely. In November 1945 the Air Quartermaster had already received preliminary designs from the Personnel Equipment Laboratory at Wright Field.¹

On January 29, 1946, Brig. Gen. William E. Hall, Deputy Assistant Chief, Air Staff-1 [Personnel], emphatically proposed

that insignia and accessories of all types be limited to an absolute minimum. It appears desirable that all personnel be identified with their major organization by their uniform. Rank designation, badge of aeronautical rating, and awards ribbons will be the only authorized additions to the uniform. To keep the esprit de corps of the Air Force at top level . . . all personnel [should] be permitted to wear the same uniform with only the necessary military command requirements causing differentiation between individuals. . . . Service bars and all other distinctive insignia currently authorized for wear on the

¹ Memo for AC/AS-4, Office of Air Quartermaster Daily Activity Report (hereafter, AIR QM DAR), 17 Oct 1945, p 1.; AIR QM DAR, 14 Nov 1945, p 2.

sleeve—except insignia of rank—should in the case of both officers and enlisted men be dispensed with and the act or service for which authorized be indicated by some ribbon or addition thereto.²

In 1946 the Army developed four new blue dress uniform combinations for officers and enlisted men. The Quartermaster General exhibited samples at several AAF bases during November and December 1946³ and completed a survey on troop reactions in July 1947,⁴ by which time the independence of the Air Force had become a certainty.

The new Office of the Assistant Chief, Air Staff-4 [Materiel], which included the Air Quartermaster, inherited the responsibility for developing a new Air Force uniform and, on September 9, 1947, presented the four blue dress uniforms to the Air Board for evaluation. Each had braided sleeve insignia similar to those on RAF and naval uniforms admired by Chief of Staff Gen. Carl A. Spaatz. Because the new uniform's shade of blue had not yet been specified nor had the funds for its estimated eighteen-month final design, production, and distribution process been released, the Air Quartermaster also presented two summer and winter "interim" uniforms in khaki and olive drab. Each had braided sleeve insignia. Their "Ike" battle jackets, however, featured stripes on the epaulets. Brig. Gen. Lyman P. Whitten, a Deputy Assistant Chief, Air Staff-4 [Materiel], the Office of Primary Responsibility, described two decidedly different kinds of military uniform:

One is . . . as near to a civilian type outfit as you can [get with] no shoulder loops, no patch-pockets, no belt . . . or anything . . . just a straight civilian-looking suit with merely the rank on it, whereas, the other one has shoulder loops, patch-pockets, and is a military outfit.⁵

Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Knerr, Secretary-General of the Air Board, sharpened that distinction, asking, "Does the Air Force want a uniform . . . decorated with devices and gadgets . . . traditional to the military service of the past, or . . . a more

² Memo for the Chief of the Air Staff, Proposed Distinctive Air Force Uniform, Brig Gen W. E. Hall, Dep AC/AS-1, HQ AAF, pp 1, 6, 8, 9.

³ AIR QM DAR, 1 Nov 1946.

⁴ AIR QM DAR, 1 Jul 1947.

⁵ Transcript, 6th Meeting of the Air Board, 9—10 Sep 1947, pp 169—70, 297—99.

subdued uniform . . . adapted to a technical future?" The Air Board, favoring a blue uniform produced by professional designers, did not, on this occasion, resolve the issue of standard Army rank insignia versus RAF/Navy-style sleeve stripes. While not actually opposed to the stripes, the board recommended "the adaptation of the current Army uniform to interim use as the Air Force uniform, pending the provision of a new permanent uniform." When board member Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle requested clarification, General Knerr replied, "We'll leave that to the administrative [function] . . . The word 'adaptation' includes insignia."⁶

On November 3, 1947, at a special clothing manufacturers' conference sponsored by Air Force Secretary W. Stuart Symington, the service selected a standard blue wool serge suit in eighteen-ounce fabric (Uxbridge 1683, cable shade 84) which carried the Air Force seal on its buttons in oxidized silver and the Great Seal of the United States on its dress service cap.⁷

Two weeks later, Secretary Symington received authorization from President Truman to prescribe the new Air Force uniform. On December 2 he formally requested the Army to provide it as soon as possible.⁸ On March 5, 1948, he and the Secretary of the Army in a joint memorandum informed the Secretary of Defense of their plan to acquire it. Four days later, on March 9, the Vice Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, examined the latest uniform designs. Manufacture of the blue winter uniform was scheduled for completion in September 1949. New insignia and accessories for the current khaki summer uniform were to be available shortly; however, manufacture of accessories for the new khaki summer uniform would not be completed until the fall of 1948.⁹ Thus, General Vandenberg decided to postpone the service's changeover to the new khaki

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Minutes, Conference, USAF Uniform, 3 Nov 1947, 1400 hrs, Col G. H. Dietz, Dep Air Quartermaster, HQ USAF, n.d.

⁸ Comment 2, QMGRV 421 Air Force, The Quartermaster General (hereafter, TQMG) for SS & P Div, SS USA, 20 Feb 1948.

⁹ Memo for the Secretary of Defense, Distinctive Uniform for the United States Air Force, Sec AF W. S. Symington and Sec Army K. C. Royall, 5 Mar 1948.

summer uniform and to retain the current gold Air Force seal buttons on the interim uniform until the blue uniform became available.¹⁰

On March 19, 1948, the Air Quartermaster forwarded to the Army Quartermaster General a list of new uniform components: chevrons as insignia for enlisted personnel and, for new air cadets, sleeve braid ranks on special evening dress and officer grade insignia "identical with current Army usage" on the service uniform.¹¹

Meanwhile, congressional proponents of a unified armed service and a single uniform were blocking the authorization of supplemental funds for the Air Force uniform. Countering them, the Air Board, on May 5, 1948, recommended that the service authorize "the immediate individual procurement of the new Air Force uniform" and change accessories "to the new Air Force design where suitable for use with the present uniform." However, General Whitten, Director of Maintenance, Supply, and Services, Deputy Chief of Staff/Materiel, reminded the Air Board that newly-purchased Army uniforms with Air Force accessories had been authorized for wear for three years.¹² (As it happened, the last vestiges of the Army uniform did not disappear until October 1959.)

By the end of November 1948 the Air Force had ordered new accessories and had issued formal directives, Air Force Letters 35-4¹³ and 35-47,¹⁴ on the components and wear of the interim olive drab and khaki uniforms. On January 25, 1949, General Vandenberg approved the new blue uniform, which was scheduled for service-wide distribution by September 1950. To prevent the use of unauthorized fabrics and colors, he barred the private purchase of blue uniforms

¹⁰ Minutes, meeting, Uniform Presentation, 9 Mar 1948.

¹¹ Ltr, Col D. H. Dietz, AFMQM-1, HQ USAF, to TQMG, Approved Items of the United States Air Force Uniform, 19 Mar 1948.

¹² Transcript, 8th Meeting of the Air Board, 4—5 May 1948, p 233.

¹³ AFL 35-4, USAF Uniforms for Male Personnel, 1 Sep 1948.

¹⁴ AFL 35-47, Wearing of the Air Force Uniform, 22 Nov 1948.

until "full instructions, specifications, and samples of cloth [were] made available."¹⁵ The Air Force published purchasing guidance on April 8, 1949.¹⁶

In August 1949 the service established an Air Force Uniform Board at Headquarters, USAF. Chaired by Maj. Gen. Carl A. Brandt, Deputy Director of Requirements, the board reported to the Director of Military Personnel. (There is no record of meetings after November 1950.) Then on September 9, 1949, the service established a Uniform Clothing Branch within the Engineering Division of the Directorate of Research and Development under the Deputy Chief of Staff for Materiel.¹⁷ Within a year, the Directorate of Research and Development became part of the new Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Development. On July 2, 1952, the Air Force disbanded the Uniform Branch. Responsibility for uniform development then fell to the Air Research and Development Command.¹⁸ The uniform monitoring function within the Air Staff remained with the Deputy Chief of Staff for Development and its successor, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Technology, until December 1, 1961.

The Air Force uniform, the blue suit itself, has changed little through the years. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the service deleted and discouraged shoulder accessories, and with retirements, saw the gradual disappearance of World War I and World War II patches, bars, and other decorative elements. In 1952 General Vandenberg began a morale-raising effort for non-commissioned officers, ordering that they be issued new chevrons styled differently from those worn by lower-grade airmen. His effort stalled, however, when it was discovered that a two-year supply of chevrons was still available.¹⁹ (By mid-1954 it had become evident

¹⁵ Memo for the Chiefs of all Headquarters Offices, Air Force Blue Uniform, Col L. L. Judge, Air Adj Gen, HQ USAF, 25 Jan 1949.

¹⁶ AFL 35-46, The New Air Force Uniforms for Male Personnel, 8 Apr 1949, p 1.

¹⁷ Hist, Dir of R & D, DCS/Development, HQ USAF, FY 1950, pp 3, 12.

¹⁸ Hist, Dir of R & D, DCS/Development, HQ USAF, Jul—Dec 1952, pp 2—3, and attachments, (1) memo for Maj Gen Briggs, Release of Personnel Spaces, Maj Gen D. N. Yates, AFDRD, HQ USAF, 29 May 1952; (2) ltr, Maj Gen D. N. Yates, AFDRD, USAF, to Personnel Mgmt Br, DCS/D, HQ USAF, Transfer of Military and Civilian Spaces, 26 Jun 1952.

¹⁹ Memo for Gen Lee, New Insignia for Lower Grade Airmen, Col R. L. Oliver, Act Ch, Career Dev Div, Dir/Personnel Planning, DCS/P, HQ USAF, 10 May 1954.

that stocks would not be depleted until early 1957.)²⁰ In March 1956 the Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. Thomas D. White, cancelled General Vandenberg's initiative.²¹ Thus, a complicated, slow-moving clothing supply system, which had imposed on the service a three-year uniform wear-out provision, a large stock of accessories, and a drawn-out uniform-fielding procedure, had defeated a well-considered change.

For a few years the Air Force managed to hold the line against additional accoutrements. However, under steady pressure since the late 1950s, it has slowly but surely accepted, categorized, and standardized a host of skill, activity, and functional badges and insignia. Since the 1980s the service's distinctively plain, blue suit, as described in AFM 35-10, has become a distinctively plain, blue suit with standardized accessories.

On October 28, 1949, the Uniform Board recommended that all shoulder patches, except the Major Command patch, be eliminated. This included the metal headquarters insignia worn on shoulder loops.²²

On February 24, 1950, General Vandenberg agreed to drop the shoulder loop unit insignia and the current assignment patch worn on the left sleeve, but to permit optional wear on the left sleeve of the World War II assignment patch.²³

On June 18, 1956, Maj. Gen. Raymond J. Reeves, Director of Military Personnel, suggested to the Assistant Vice Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Jacob E. Smart, that shoulder sleeve insignia, badges, and the metal frames surrounding the three unit citations be eliminated.²⁴ General Smart consented on August 4 but noted that "our objective is a uniform on which insignia of rank, appropriate aviation

²⁰ Memo for Dir of Military Personnel, DCS/P, New Chevrons for Airmen Grades, Col C. B. Root, Dep Dir, Supply & Services, DCS/M, HQ USAF, 26 Jul 1954.

²¹ Notes from Hist, Dir of Military Personnel, Jan—Jun 1956.

²² Notes on rpt, 7th AF Uniform Board Meeting, 28 Oct 1949; memo for DCS/Personnel, Decisions of the Chief of Staff, Maj Gen C. A. Brandt, Chmn, AF Uniform Board, 12 Jan 1950, and attachment, Report of Uniform Conference, Maj Gen C. A. Brandt, Chmn, AF Uniform Board, 22 Dec 1949.

²³ Memo for Maj Gen Brandt, Shoulder Patches and Unit Insignia, Maj Gen W. F. McKee, Asst VC, HQ USAF, 24 Feb 1950.

²⁴ Air Staff Summary Sheet, Elimination and/or Repositioning of Certain Air Force Uniform Items, Maj Gen M. J. Reeves, Dir, Military Personnel, DCS/P, HQ USAF, 18 Jun 1956.

badge, the U.S., and ribbons representative of decorations are worn" plus medical, chaplain, and aide insignia. He thought it "proper" to "clean up" the uniform more by encouragement than by directive.²⁵

The AFM 35-10 of July 15, 1957, stated the following on uniform wear: "When the Air Force uniform was originally approved, it was decided to reduce to an absolute minimum the number of badges, insignia, and patches worn. . . ."²⁶ The Airman magazine of August 1957 noted that "these new changes are a continuation of Air Force policy to make the blue uniform plain, yet distinctive. . . . The Air Force is our business . . . the distinctive blue uniform, our business suit."²⁷

On May 28, 1959, the new Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, in its second meeting refused numerous requests for new assignment badges and insignia, and, in the interest of service unity, rejected both the Army corps and the Navy skill rating badges. Even as the Air Force discarded patches and service designators, the Chief of Staff, General Thomas D. White, on July 6th approved badges and insignia for medical, dental, nursing, guided missile, and air police activities.²⁸ (There is evidence that the Permanent Uniform Board existed as early as June 1958 but did not hold its first formal meeting until March 24, 1959. The Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, did not ratify its "charter" until April 9, 1959.)²⁹

In the fall of 1961, General LeMay was still supporting an "uncluttered" uniform.³⁰ On December 1, 1961, the Uniform Board was transferred from Research and Development to the Directorate of Supply & Services, under the Deputy Chief of Staff for Systems & Logistics.³¹

²⁵ Memo for DCS/Personnel, Maj Gen J. E. Smart, Asst VC, HQ USAF, 4 Aug 1956.

²⁶ AFM 35-10, Service and Dress Uniforms for Air Force Personnel, 15 Jul 1957, p 1.

²⁷ Airmen's World, "Shoulder Patches on Way Out," The Airman, Aug 1957, p 30.

²⁸ Notes on rpt, Permanent AF Uniform Board Meeting, 28 May 1959, n.d.; Hist, Dir of Military Personnel, Jul—Dec 1959, p 38.

²⁹ Hist, DCS/Development, Jul—Dec 1958, p 52; Hist, DCS/Development, Jan—Jun 1959, pp 16—18.

³⁰ Notes on MFR, 27 Sep 1962, from MPC files.

³¹ Hist, Dir of Supply Services, DCS/Systems and Logistics, Jul—Dec 1961, p. 106.

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(~~FOUO~~) In the early 1960s the service accelerated the authorization of badges and insignia to recognize professional skills and accomplishments. On August 28, 1962, General LeMay, the Chief of Staff, cautioned that his award of ribbons for NCO Academy graduates and small arms marksmanship "should not be interpreted as a departure from a clean uniform policy." He was merely complying with the Air Force's tendency since 1949 toward new ribbons for wear on the left breast and away from badges and shoulder accessories.³² In March 1963, he and the Uniform Board rejected a new recognition/identification badge.³³ It was reconsidered in deliberations held in October and November and approved in a 3 to 2 vote.³⁴ General LeMay, however, backed the minority, which had submitted its objections to him, and disapproved the badge.³⁵

(~~FOUO~~) Support for new accessories continued, often from such unexpected quarters as Congress. On April 3, 1964, Representative Carl Vinson, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, questioned the restriction, in place since 1956, on the wearing of foreign aviation badges (i.e. RAF/RCAF wings). Such badges could be displayed only in or at functions hosted by the countries which had awarded them. The Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. William F. McKee, answering for Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert, upheld the "clean uniform policy" and maintained the restriction.³⁶

³² Ltr, Gen C. E. LeMay, AFCCS, to Pres, Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, Clean Uniform Policy, 28 Aug 1962.

³³ Ltr, Maj Gen Melvin F. Nickle, Dir, Supply and Services, HQ USAF, to AFSDC and AFCCS, Uniform Board Recommendations, 19 Mar 1963, and attachment, Minutes of the 14th Meeting, 21 Feb 1963, K. B. Starr, Sec, Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, pp 1, 5, n.d.

³⁴ (~~FOUO~~) Minutes, 16th Meeting of the Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, 23 Oct 1963, K. B. Starr, Sec, Perm AF Uniform Board, n.d., pp 1, 4, 5; Hist, Dir of Supply and Services, DCS/Systems and Logistics, Jul-Dec 1963, pp 93, 95.

³⁵ (~~FOUO~~) Minority rpt, 16th Meeting of the Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, Minority Report Agenda Item 16-9, Recognition/Identification Badge, Col H. S. Coad, AFSS and Col H. R. Brown, AFSPD, n.d.; Hist, Dir of Supply and Services, DCS/Systems and Logistics, Jul-Dec 1963, p 195.

³⁶ Ltr, Brig Gen L. F. Loesch, Pres, Perm AF Uniform Board, to AFSDC and AFCCS, Wear of Foreign Aviation Badges, 11 May 1964, and attachment, ltr, Gen W. F. McKee, AF VC, HQ USAF, to Hon C. Vinson, Chmn, House Armed Serv Cmte, 20 Apr 1964.

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