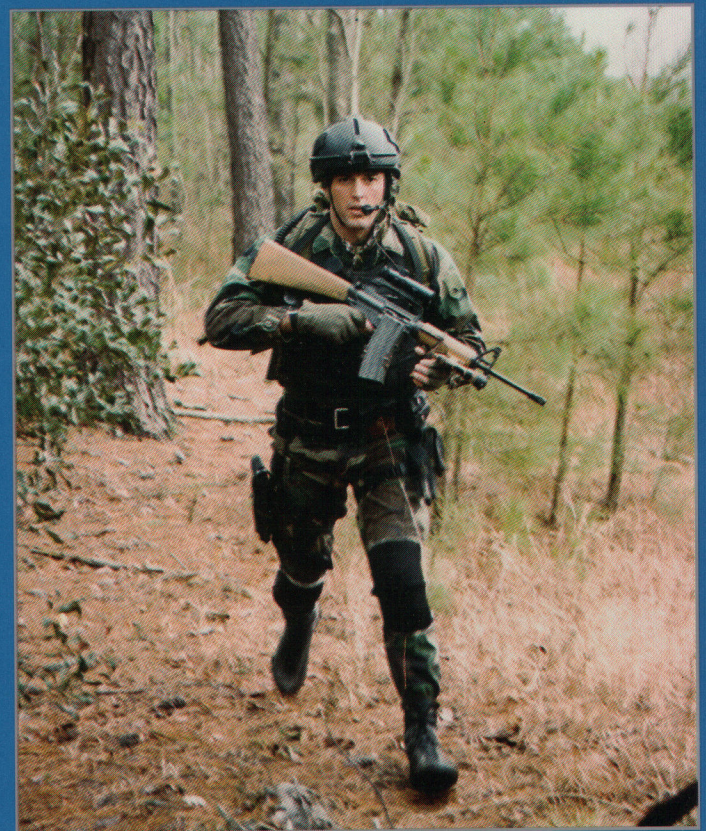
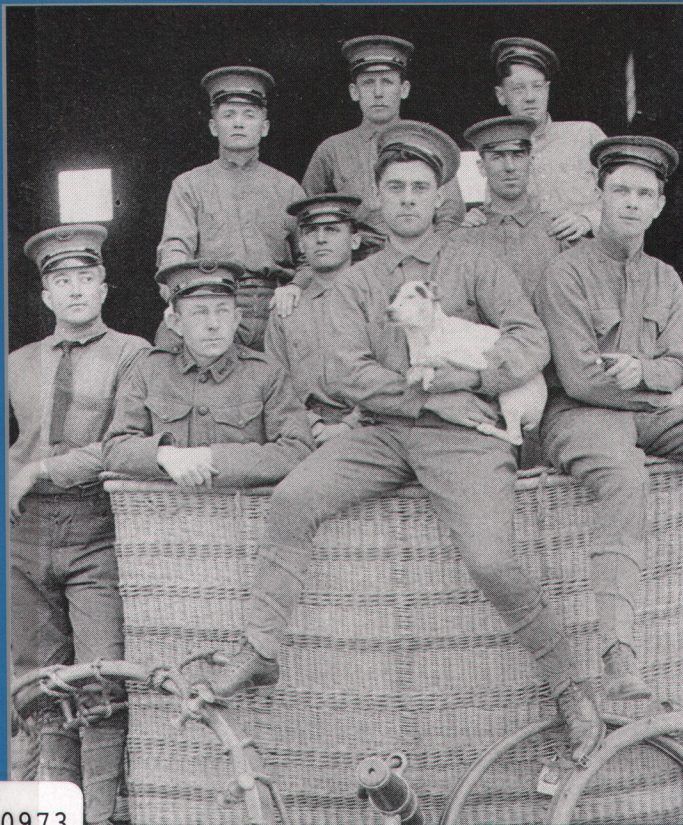




The Airmen Heritage Series  
The Airmen Memorial Museum

# HISTORY OF THE AIR FORCE ENLISTED UNIFORM

*From Balloons*



*To Bosnia*

1907 Through 1997

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*The enlisted men of the 1907 Aeronautical Division wear a combination of at least five different Army uniforms. Photo care of the Burge Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum.*

**Brig. Gen. William Hall, Deputy Air Chief of Staff for Personnel:**

*"It appears highly desirable for all members, both officer and enlisted personnel, to wear the same uniform with distinctive insignia. It is firmly believed that one of the morale problems which has always faced our armed forces has been the fact that officers were permitted to wear a uniform so entirely different from that of enlisted men that a severe class line was drawn."*

January, 1946

# HISTORY OF THE AIR FORCE ENLISTED UNIFORM

1907 THROUGH 1997

by  
**William I. Chivale**  
*Director of Operations*  
*Airmen Memorial Museum*

**T**he tiny aeronautical division, from which the modern Air Force claims its lineage, was organized under the protective wing of the Army Signal Corps in 1907. Consequently, the modern Air Force uniform evolved out of the U.S. Army uniform. Enlisted men of the time were pictured as disheveled, bearing no resemblance to the flashy commissioned officer corps. Pilots of the time wore silk scarves wafting in the breeze, with football-like helmets adorning their heads, clutching swagger sticks, with highly polished riding boots, and wide hipped jodhpur riding breeches. From 1907 to 1926, enlisted airmen wore olive drab and khaki uniforms not unlike those of the cavalry, featuring riding breeches, wool or leather leggings, and tunics with high "choker" collars. Winter clothing was 100% wool, while summer uniforms were made of cotton.



Their disheveled look appeared, no doubt, from many hours spent getting their hands and uniforms dirty preparing the balloons, dirigibles, and the first aeroplanes for the well dressed officer at the controls.



*Pvt. Ayers wears high collar uniform with campaign hat and puttee leggings, 1914. C/O AMM.*

Airmen's uniforms continued to be standard Army issue until the first "blues" were authorized in 1949. Until then, only collar insignia, aircraft-related badges and patches, and a winged propeller device, embroidered beneath the enlisted grade chevrons (an unauthorized addition), distinguished

enlisted airmen from soldiers of other branches.

The Army's first aviation-specific insignia appeared in 1913, in the form of a gold Military Aviator's badge which was given to no more than fourteen pilots, all commissioned. An enlisted aviator's patch appeared around 1917, for wear on the upper right sleeve of the service uniform. Despite its authorization, however, the Army would not allow its enlisted pilots to wear this new insignia. Many did, in defiance of the War Department's wavering reluctance to acknowledge its cadre of enlisted aviators.



*Enlisted men in Army Signal Corps uniforms perform clean-up, circa 1911. C/O AMM.*

By 1917, the Air Service had become a separate entity. Specialty badges and distinctive insignia were authorized for the new branch of the Army. Enlisted men received new ranks, new chevrons, service stripes, collar insignia and devices to indicate their duty specialization. Yet their duty uniforms, while functional, were decidedly indicative of their status in the Army. Photographs of enlisted airmen at work depict tattered shirts, campaign hats with distinctively rolled brims, wrapped leggings, canvas leggings, and shirts of every manner and cut of cloth. Enlisted men were definitely separate and distinct and it was readily apparent in the uniforms they wore. Until the advent of





*95th Aero Sq. enlisted men wear the collar brass and devices of the Army Signal Corps, circa 1918. C/O Olmstead Collection, AMM.*

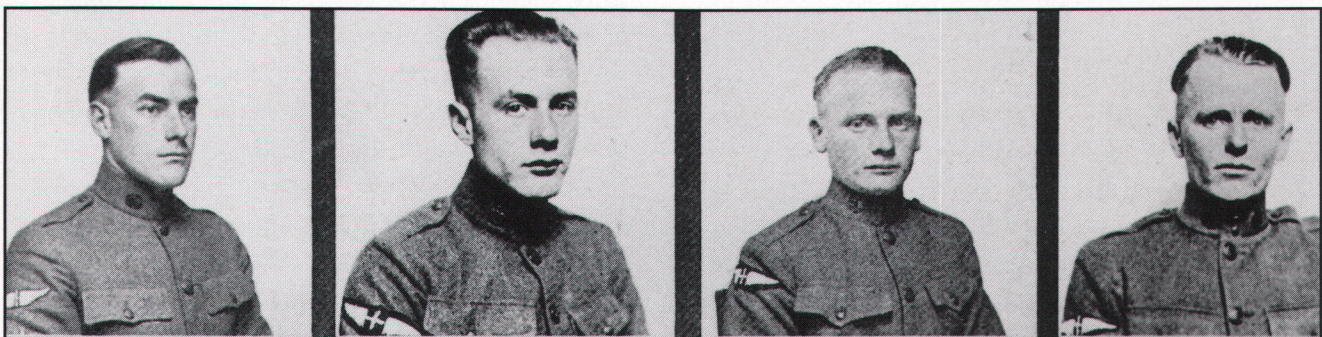
the Air Service in 1918, U.S. Army aviation was under the control of the Signal Corps. Consequently, airmen wore the Signal Corps' crossed flags insignia on their collars (*above*). In World War I, airmen indicated their aviation affiliation by wearing squadron patches, or versions of their army shoulder patches with the U.S. national insignia or other aircraft-specific designs attached. Enlisted collar brass with wings or

propeller designs began to circulate, as well.

After separating from the Signal Corps, new insignia appeared for Air Service personnel, including silver wing badges for qualified aircrew members. The basic design for these badges came from none other than H.H. "Hap" Arnold, destined to become Commanding General of the Army Air Forces during World War II. New collar insignia, featuring a pair of wings bisected by a two-bladed propeller (*see below*), were also authorized, giving enlisted airmen well-deserved recognition for their involvement in military aviation. In 1920 the Army established seven basic enlisted pay grades for all branches, and authorized chevrons to reflect this new alignment.

Close to when the Air Service changed to the Air Corps, in 1926, the Army redesigned its service coat. The new design was based on the British open collar tunic, a popular item with U.S. airmen serving overseas during World War I. The uncomfortable choker collar faded into history, as airmen moved their insignia to the lapels of the new service coat (*photo next page above*). By the middle 1930s, simple open-leg trousers replaced riding breeches and leggings for Air Corps personnel. This style remained standard through the end of World War II and up through the design of uniforms for the newly separated U.S. Air Force.

World War II seemed to weaken barriers between enlisted airmen and officers. Crew served aircraft and the interdependence of men fighting for their survival, dispelled



*The enlisted flying instructors wear Aviator's Wings on their high collar dress uniforms, Feb. 6, 1919. C/O AMM.*





*Col. Charles Lindbergh inspects the 110th in 1935. Note the open collar dress uniforms and the puttee wrappings still in use. C/O The Olmstead Collection, AMM.*

many so-called class distinctions. In fact, in filling the ranks with the draft in World War II, the Army Air Forces skimmed off those who tested better, those who were better educated, or those who were mechanically oriented for the air war. Once in the air, rank was often left on the ground. Air crew members knew who was in charge and why. There was a reliance on the cockpit crew and a confidence in their ability. And, with that heavy flight suit everyone looked the same.

In January 1946, Brigadier General William Hall submitted his staff study which echoed the many calls for a separate Air Force. Within the document were recommendations for a new, distinctive from the other branches of service, uniform that would be the same for officers and enlisted

men. The document went on to suggest that, "It is firmly believed that one of the morale problems which has always faced our armed forces has been the fact that offi-



*Bocks Car flight crew, 1945. C/O Albury Collection, AMM.*

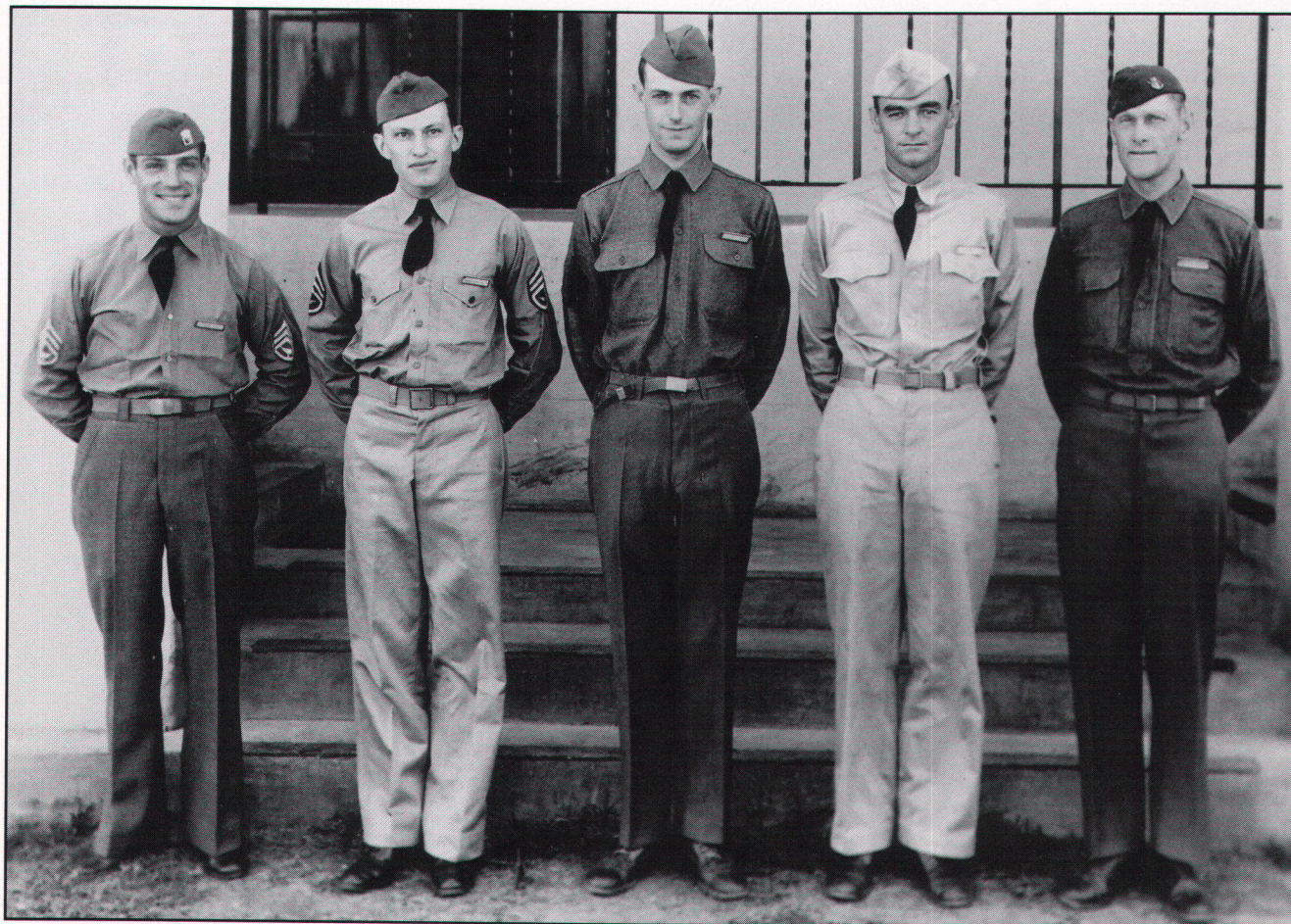




*TSgt. Kenneth V. Harshey, Winter, 1943, age 23. C/O AMM.*

cers were permitted to wear a uniform so entirely different from that of enlisted men that a severe class line was drawn." Then he said, "*..Officers [have been permitted]... to deviate from a prescribed uniform to the point where officers have been designing their own uniform and the name "uniform" has lost much of its meaning.*"

After the Air Force was established in September 1947, enlisted airmen continued wearing surplus Army clothing until their new uniforms became widely available in the early 1950s. The new Air Force service coat and field ("Ike") jacket differed little from the Army's designs, except for their striking Shade 84 Blue color. While different shades and fabrics were used, by and large the basic Air Force uniform remained unchanged over the next four decades.



*Enl. pilots, 1933, (L to R) Sgt. Rafferty, Blair, Layman, Tyler and Wilson. C/O Arbon Collection, AMM.*





*Note the transition uniforms in the above picture, AF stripes with Army "Ike" type jackets. C/O AMM.*

The Air Force hoped to avoid many of the uniform-related pitfalls and problems encountered by the more traditionally-minded Army. Recognizing the importance of unity and teamwork to get the job done, the new service issued identical uniforms to its officers and enlisted personnel. This avoided enlisted resentment over officers wearing better cut, higher-quality uniforms, and eliminated one of the most visible symbols of the elitist culture that subtly divided the U.S. Army. Putting the meaning back into "uniform" meant Air Force personnel could focus on their work, instead of wasting their time and effort on unproductive issues.

The desire for a clean, professional, simplistic appearance guided the design and placement of insignia on the new uniform. New chevrons, designed by a panel of NCOs at Bolling AFB,

blended well with the slate blue coat and silver buttons. The Air Force discouraged Army traditions like the wearing of unit patches, service stripes and overseas bars, and eventually prohibited them. Unit citations, formerly displayed over the right



*May 23, 1949, note transitions uniforms on first mbrs. Keesler's WAF Sq. C/O Joyce Collection, AMM.*

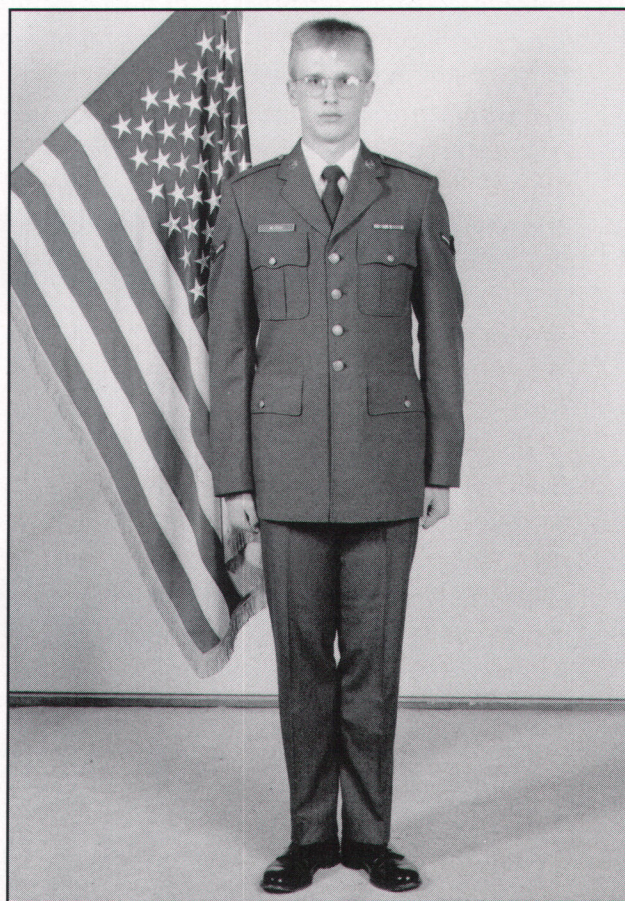




*The women's two-piece summer service dress uniform is well represented in the above photo, circa 1950. C/O AMM.*

pocket, joined service ribbons and awards above the left. The singular Air Force focus, to fly, ended the need for branch-specific collar insignia. Gold-colored "U.S." and winged propeller discs were initially tested for enlisted collar brass, but later shelved in favor of two "U.S." discs, now colored silver (photo right).

One of the great supporters of the new blue uniform was Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington. He and Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg went through great lengths to convince Congress to grant the necessary funding for the uniform. In the spring of 1948, General Vandenberg ordered an officer and enlisted version of the newly designed uniform made and delivered to his office. He dressed in the sergeant's uniform and had Colonel Richard E. Sims, of the Air Ordinance Office, to dress in the general officer's uniform. Vandenberg played the role of the sergeant to the hilt. As they marched through the halls of the Pentagon, he kept the "senior officer" on his right and held the staff car door for



*The Air Force "Class A" dress blue uniform. C/O AFSA.*





*AF Chief of Staff McPeak, CMSAF Pfingston and Capt. McGinn unveil the new AF uniform, October 1991. C/O AFSA.*

the uncomfortable colonel. He continued the ploy in the Congressional Committee room, allowing the colonel to introduce the sergeant who was to brief them on the merits of the new blue uniform. As Colonel Sims read the brief speech his superior had prepared, he introduced the sergeant as the new Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. "The normally staid and serious Senators were standing, clapping, cheering and yelling." Vandenberg knew right away they would get official approval for the new uniform.

While the basic blue suit remained, many notable changes in service uniform attire occurred between the 1950s and the 1990s. After two decades, in 1964 the Ike jacket was phased out of the Air Force clothing inventory. By October 1965 the last khaki service uniform was likewise removed, in lieu of the availability of a lightweight summer blue replacement. The last Shade 84 Blue wool uniforms went by the wayside a few years later, supplanted by a darker, cotton blend or polyester outfit. In late 1978 the final Shade 1505 khaki uniforms were dropped from the Air Force's list.

After using the same basic design for

over four decades, Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill A. McPeak, along with Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Gary R. Pfingston, unveiled the new Air Force service coat on October 31, 1991 (see photo left). The driving factor behind this change struck a familiar chord; the desire to have a cleaner, more professional, simplistic uniform for the Air Force.

Gone are the outer patch pockets that were not usable anyway. Also missing are the name tags, emblems and epaulets, as well as any U.S. designation. There are fewer buttons, and the ones that are left no longer bear the Air Force shield. Enlisted uniforms have brighter, larger chevrons. The chevrons themselves also changed. Master Sergeants receive a top stripe, Senior Master Sergeants receive two top stripes, and Chief Master Sergeants receive three top stripes.
































The new design features a streamlined coat with the Army Air Forces insignia, a pierced star under outstretched wings, stamped on its three buttons (see below). Larger chevrons, white instead of silver, adorn each sleeve. Lapel insignia is now standardized between officers and enlisted personnel, each group wearing a pair of silver, officer-style "U.S." pins. The four large pockets present on the old coat are no more; a slash pocket is available to line ribbon bars on the left breast of the new service coat.

Despite initial opposition, the new service coat design has gradually gained acceptance as the Air Force moves into the future. As the Air Force's most visible manifestation, the uniform continues to symbolize the simplistic, professional, and unified approach the service takes toward our nation's defense.





# THE HISTORY OF AIR FORCE ENLISTED GRADES

ARMY	CHEVRON	1948	1958	1967	1969	1976	1992
		A3C	—	—	AIRMAN	—	—
Pvt 1st Cl						AIRMAN	
		A2C	—	—	A1C		A1C
Cpl						A1C	
		A1C	—	—	SGT	—	SRA
Tech 5th Cl						SRA	
		SSGT	—	—	—	—	—
Sgt							
		TSGT	—	—	—	—	—
Tech 4th Cl							
		MSGT	—	—	—	—	
SSgt							MSGT
			SMSGT	—	—	—	
Tech 3rd Cl							
							SMSGT
Tech Sgt							
			CMSGT	—	—	—	
MSgt							
							CMSGT
1st Sgt				CMSAF	—	—	
							CMSAF

## EXPLANATION:

A3C: Airman Third Class  
 AMN: Airman  
 A2C: Airman Second Class  
 A1C: Airman First Class  
 SGT: Sergeant  
 SRA: Senior Airman

SSGT: Staff Sergeant  
 TSGT: Technical Sergeant  
 MSGT: Master Sergeant  
 SMSGT: Senior Master Sergeant  
 CMSGT: Chief Master Sergeant  
 CMSAF: Chief Master Sergeant of the AF



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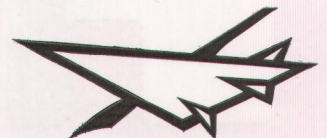
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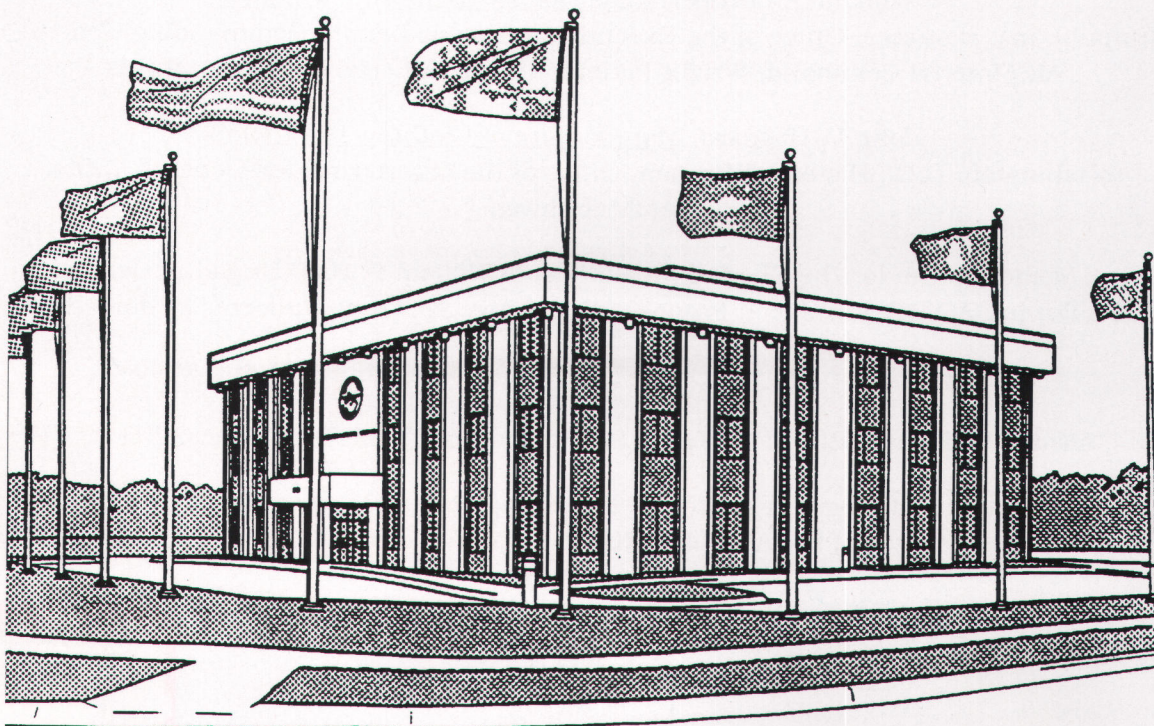


## **AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM**

*Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stand as a tribute to enlisted airmen who have served in the U.S. Air Force, the Army Air Corps and the U.S. Army Air Forces.*

*Located in the Airmen Memorial Building just eight miles from Washington, D.C., this museum is a maturing showcase of accomplishments. It is also designed to function as a research and reference center that documents and preserves the contributions of the men and women who served honorably but, until now, without a memorial or museum they could call their own.*

*The museum is open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays and during specially scheduled events. For more information about the museum and its research project, contact the Airmen Memorial Museum, toll-free, at 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-8386.*



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