



The Enlisted Heritage Series

The Airmen Memorial Museum

BIRTH OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE 1945-1950



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“The United States Air Force is hereby established under the Department of the Air Force. The Army Air Forces, the Air Corps, United States Army, and the General Headquarters Air Force (Air Force Combat Command), shall be transferred to the United States Air Force.”

**National Security Act of 1947
Sec. 208(a), approved July 26, 1947**

BIRTH OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE

1945-1950

by Brian J. Howard

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By the end of the Second World War, the U.S. Army Air Force was the most powerful air armada in the world. Over 2,253,000 men and women wore the AAF uniform, serving at bases in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, as well as in the United States. Air power established itself as a primary component of modern warfare, capable of both large-scale strategic and tactical ground support operations. During the conflict enlisted men and women served as pilots, bombardiers, gunners, crew chiefs, and in a myriad of non-flying specialties to support the Allied war effort. With peace at hand the Army Air Force faced an uncertain future, now defined by the jet engine, rocket and missile technology and a looming “Cold War” with its former ally, the Soviet Union.

BACKGROUND FOR SEPARATION

Proponents for a separate air force cited air power as America’s “first line of defense”, a role historically occupied by the U.S. Navy. Fearing a diminished voice in policy decisions and the loss of its aviation

units, the Navy strongly objected to its establishment. The push for an independent aviation branch had been endorsed as early as 1916, when the Army Signal Corps administered most U.S. military aviation. World War I demonstrated the airplane's potential as a weapon, and led to the establishment of the Air Service in 1918 and to the Army Air Corps in 1926.

General Billy Mitchell's 1921 and 1923 "plane vs ship" bomb tests, held off of the Virginia coast, demonstrated the airplane's tactical prowess. In the 1923 trials an enlisted bombardier, MSgt. Ulysses Nero, dropped a bomb that sank the obsolete battleship *U.S.S. New Jersey*, and with it the notion that ships were impervious to attack from the air (see photograph at right).

The rise of Adolf Hitler and the overwhelming early successes of his air force, the *Luftwaffe*, prompted an expansion and reorganization of the Air Corps and the Army's combat aviation arm, General Headquarters, Air Force (GHQAF), in 1941. The two divisions were combined under one command and renamed the Army Air Forces, just prior to America's entry into the war.

During World War II, the AAF underwent an unprecedented expansion and saw air supremacy emerge as a primary component of victory in modern war. Fighting doctrines developed by Air Corps men in previous decades were put to the test during the conflict with devastating results to the Axis war machine. By 1945 the AAF operated largely as an independent service—the question of its establishment as such begged for an answer.



The enlisted bombardier, MSgt Ulysses S. Nero with a Martin MB-2 aircraft circa early 1920s. c/o U.S. Nero Papers, Airmen Memorial Museum

THE DRAWDOWN

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki irrevocably drew the world into the atomic age and laid the groundwork for an underlying conflict with the Soviet Union which lasted until the late 1980s. At the Potsdam Conference of July, 1945 attended by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Harry S. Truman, and Joseph Stalin, the communist leader hinted of his postwar plans for the "Cold War." Following World War II, the USSR concentrated on building a ring of communist-controlled satellite states in Eastern Europe, installing them with puppet governments under the leadership of the Kremlin. Behind this "Iron Curtain," Stalin commenced a program of rebuilding and rearmament that posed a threat to the entire free world. The focus of Soviet efforts at this time was Germany, especially Berlin. In Berlin the Soviets continued to confront Great Britain, France, and the United States in what was supposed to be a joint government of occupation. The Soviets wanted Berlin to themselves and eventually blockaded all roads, railroads and rivers going in and out in an attempt to starve West Berliners into submission. Wishing to avoid war, the United States was not willing to try to force entry into Berlin by land or water. Their only

choice was to establish the Berlin Airlift. Through the combined efforts of British and American pilots, the airlift delivered more than two million tons of cargo to West Berlin, supplying the besieged city entirely by air and making the Soviet blockade of land transportation ineffective. The bold and massive air support operation, conducted on a scale never before attempted and backed by the nuclear deterrent power of the U.S. Air Force, demonstrated to the world how air power can gain a diplomatic advantage without going to war (see photograph at right).

After America dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, Stalin felt he had wasted millions of Soviet lives in World War II because Communism gained no advantage over the United States. The Russian people would not rest until they too possessed a nuclear capability. The Soviet Union achieved their goal on August 29, 1949 when they succeeded in detonating an atomic device of their own.

The exodus of draftees back to civilian life after V-J Day gutted the Army Air Force. By May 1, 1946, the number of personnel in uniform fell to around 485,000. By June of the following year, only 303,600 were left on active duty. The nucleus of the Air Force, its aircrews and aircraft maintenance personnel, experienced a drastic reduction in numbers. Aircrew strength from August, 1945 to June, 1947 dropped from 413,890 to just over 24,000, while only 30,000 maintenance men remained in November, 1946, from a force of 350,000 just 18 months before. Aircraft combat readiness fell from 54 percent to 18 percent over the same period of time. Wartime improvements in jet technology rendered most propeller-driven aircraft obsolete by the end of the war, setting in motion a period of transition in the U.S. aircraft inventory. Likewise, the advent of guided rockets and missiles in the late 1940s spurred the development of new, high-tech weapons systems.



C-54 Aircraft departing Templehof Field, Berlin, Germany, circa 1948-1949. c/o D. Heil Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum Archives

REORGANIZATION

General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, an aviation pioneer and Commanding General of the Army Air Force during World War II, passed postwar control to a fellow pioneer, General Carl "Tooe" Spaatz, on February 9, 1946. As Commanding General of the AAF and later as the first Air Force Chief of Staff, General Spaatz worked to restructure the Air Force around a 70-group plan under three combat commands: Strategic Air Command (SAC), Tactical Air Command (TAC), and Air Defense Command (ADC).

From 1945 to 1947 the Army Air Force worked in a paradox, dismantling its wartime force and disposing of thousands of obsolete aircraft, while simultaneously building a restructured, nuclear-capable fleet of aircraft and educated airmen. Two components under the Air Defense Command, the Air National Guard and the Air Reserve, were introduced to facilitate this objective. In the Air Guard and Reserves the concept of the "citizen airman" was born.

National Guard aviation units reorganized as the Air National Guard and became an important part of the postwar Air Force. The original plan called for 514 ANG units to provide

tactical, service, engineering, and communications functions for the Air Force. By July, 1947 the ANG had 10,341 in its ranks, with 257 units earning federal recognition. The Air Reserve also organized and trained under the Air Defense Command, primarily to maintain a qualified roster of Air Force officers in times of national emergencies.

Guard and Reserve duties included the air defense of the United States, military air transport and logistics activities. Citizen airmen also provided the Air Force with a trained contingent pool to draw on in times of need while maintaining a smaller active duty force. Due to budget cuts in February, 1947, both components experienced setbacks in facilities, equipment, and manpower.

After years of debate and compromise, President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947 into law, establishing a Department of Defense and three co-equal services: the Army, Navy, and the new United States Air Force. On September 18, W. Stuart Symington was officially sworn in as the first Secretary of the Air Force, signaling its birth as a separate branch of the U.S. military.

UNIFORMS

One of the many issues to arise with independence was the development of a distinctive Air Force uniform. Introducing a new uniform provided opportunities to make significant changes from the U.S. Army outfit, to benefit enlisted airmen and enhance concepts of teamwork and interdependence between them and commissioned officers.

Airmen continued wearing variations of the Army uniform until the new "blues" became widely available in the early 1950s (see photograph below). Planners noted animosity directed at Army officers wearing expensive, tailored uniforms by enlisted personnel who wore standard government-issue garb. The Air Force avoided this controversy by issuing the same uni-



A variety of enlisted uniform combinations prior to the Air Force "Blues" era, circa 1948. c/o I. Averill Collection Airmen Memorial Museum Archives.

form to both groups, with grade differences indicated only by insignia. Male personnel wore similar Shade 84 blue or summer khaki suits. Women received gender-appropriate clothing that took the same "one uniform for all grades" approach. General Hoyt Vandenberg, the second Air Force Chief of Staff, strongly supported the new Air Force apparel. Putting the meaning back into "uniform" meant the Air Force could focus on its mission, instead of on differences arising from appearance.

Planners kept the uniform's appearance clean and simple. Army traditions, i.e. the wearing of unit patches, service stripes, and overseas bars, were discouraged and eventually prohibited. Unit citations formerly displayed over the right breast pocket joined service ribbons and awards above the left. Branch insignia no longer existed, leaving only "U.S." discs on Air Force collars and service coat lapels.

Significant change also came to the enlisted grade chevrons. In 1948 a group of 150 NCOs at Bolling Field in Washington reviewed several designs to represent the new service. The winning selection featured silver-gray details on a blue background, emphasizing both traditional and progressive themes. A pierced star, the old Air Corps insignia, was centered between downward-sloping stripes, giving the appearance of wings. The Air Force retained the Army's seven-tiered enlisted grade structure but soon renamed the four enlisted grades "Airmen" instead of the traditional private, private first class, corporal, and sergeant.

Uniforms evolved as different styles were considered, sometimes with disastrous results. In the mid-1950s the Air Force introduced British-style khaki "bush" jackets, Bermuda shorts, and wool knee socks for summer wear. Adding insult to injury, a hard sun helmet topped off the ensemble. The result, the "crummiest looking uniform ever" according to one Air Force Times reader, left many personnel with reservations about their on-duty apparel options. More often than not, however, periodic uniform alterations and changes reflected current trends, new missions, and a pride in personal appearance that defines the enlisted airman.

As the Air Force's most visible manifestation, the uniform continues to symbolize the simplistic, professional, and unified approach the service takes towards the nation's defense.

ROLES OF THE ENLISTED FORCE

Postwar prosperity in civilian industries did not bode well for the retention of skilled technicians and specialists in the Army Air Force. The military could not keep up with the private sector's employment opportunities and was losing its ability to maintain an effective fighting arm. Housing problems, frequent transfers, and broken promises all contributed to a falling re-enlistment rate in the late 1940s and 1950s.

To counteract this trend, the Air Force steered enlisted duties away from strictly supporting roles by putting them in leadership positions and offering opportunities for education and advancement. According to Herman S. Wolk, by October, 1947, twelve major Air Force career fields were planned: medical, chaplain, justice, aeronautical engineering, electrical engineering, automotive and armament, construction, personnel and administration, general supply and procurement, information, flying, and nonflying tactical. Recruiters pushed the military as a career, and encouraged the view of airmen as skilled professionals. Three-to-six-year enlistments replaced shorter tenures to retain skilled personnel on active duty. Initial shortages in manpower led to broadened recruit training, thus exposing enlistees to several occupations to facilitate a better understanding of their careers. This cross-training gave recruits a wide range of experience not previously available to the enlisted corps.



Senior Master Sergeant Raymond P. Meier receives his Chief stripes, circa 1968. c/o Raymond P. Meier Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum Archives

Experienced noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and warrant officers gradually assumed administrative and leadership-oriented positions once occupied only by commissioned officers. Increasing NCO responsibilities necessitated the establishment of formal training schools under several major Air Force commands. Starting in 1953, these “NCO Academies” educated their senior enlisted airmen in the areas of leadership, management, and communications.

The NCO’s increasing importance also influenced creation of the “super grades” of Senior and Chief Master Sergeant in 1958. The Air Force concurrently did away with its warrant officer grades, removing an important stepping stone for many senior NCOs to the commissioned ranks. On the plus side, Master Sergeants with unit-wide or command responsibilities received recognition above other E-7s whose duties were not so widespread. Establishing the E-8 and E-9 grades was in many ways a double-edged sword though, which drew a sharp line between airmen and the officer corps (see photograph above).

INTEGRATION

The composition of the Air Force was also changing. The Armed Forces formally desegregated on orders from President Truman in July, 1948. Prior to that it experienced an increase in the number of black enlistees, filling the void created by the postwar drawdown. Unfortunately, while established promotion policies were based on merit, not race, this was not the reality. Regulations still excluded black airmen from some of the more prestigious NCO assignments and largely relegated them to non-aviation support specialties. A notable exception was the all-black 477th Composite Group, composed of “Tuskegee Airmen” of World War II fame, located at Lockbourne AFB in Ohio (see photograph on next page).



An integrated photograph of Air Force personnel in the early 1950s from the J. Bancroft Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum.

On June 12, 1948, the Women's Air Force Integration Act created the Women in the Air Force (WAF) department as an integral part of the USAF. Scores of women who experienced their first taste of liberation during World War II chose to join the new division, along with Women's Army Corps personnel who qualified for transfer to the new branch. WAC Staff Sergeant Esther Blake, a mother of two AAF bomber pilots, is credited with being the first WAF enlistee. She signed up in the first minute of the first day of the WAF's regular existence on July 8, 1948.

MILESTONES

Personnel remaining after the postwar drawdown found duty at bases in the United States, Germany, and Japan. A few outposts like Okinawa remained open, but by and large American bases overseas were dismantled or abandoned. The nuclear clouds above Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in a new era of weaponry, administered by the few thousand who chose to call the post-war Air Force their home.

With the nuclear age came the concept of deterrence: maintaining peace through the threat of nuclear retaliation. In the early days this concept relied on the ability of the Air Force to place aircraft over Soviet targets and deliver their payloads.

The Strategic Air Command procured new aircraft and technologies to meet these long-range weapons delivery and reconnaissance requirements. The first generation of post-war bombers included the 10,000-mile range B-36 (see photograph on next page), and a much improved version of the B-29 Superfortress, the B-50. First perfected in 1923 by men under

then Major Hap Arnold, aerial refueling became a top priority in the postwar Air Force. The 1949 non-stop world flight of the "Lucky Lady II", a B-50 from the 43rd Bomb Wing, succeeded due to aerial refueling from KB-29 tankers. An aerial fuel boom developed by Boeing was first installed on its KC-97 Stratofreighter tanker in 1950. Versions of this tanker formed the backbone of the SAC refueling fleet until the introduction of the jet-powered KC-135 in 1957.

American nuclear weapons testing began in July, 1946, when "Operation Crossroads" commenced near Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. "Dave's Dream" a 58th Bomb Wing B-29, dropped an atom bomb over 250 obsolete warships to measure surface vessel and hardware

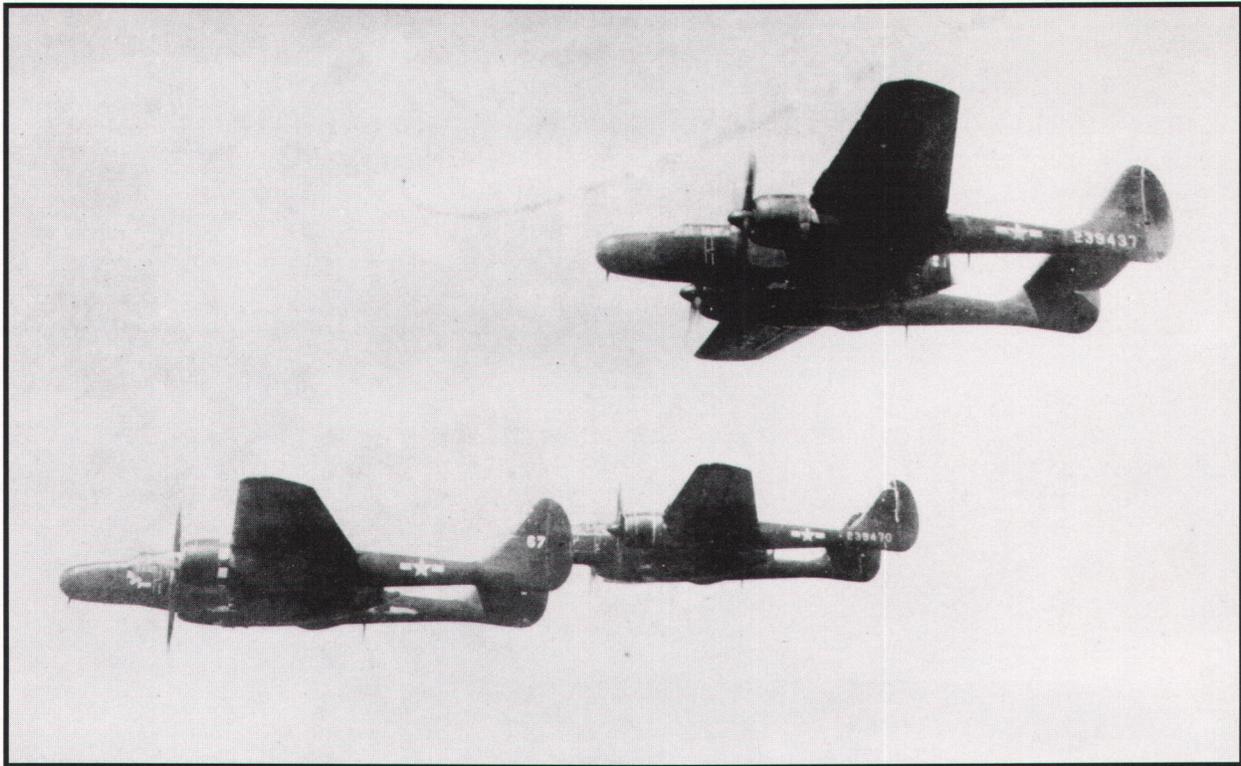


An early model B-36 Peacemaker in-flight circa late 1940s, c/o Official Air Force Photo, from the L. Howard Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum.

damage from an airborne atomic blast. Other tests soon followed. In December of 1949 the Air Force set up the Special Weapons Command to oversee the research and development of atomic weapons.

Captured German technology also had a major impact. Swept-wing fighters like the F-84F Thunderstreak and the F-86 Sabre first flew between 1947 and 1951, as did America's first all-jet, swept-wing bomber, the B-47 Stratojet. Higher aircraft speeds necessitated the development of the ejection seat, successfully tested for the first time by Army Air Force Sergeant Lawrence Lambert. On August 17, 1946, he quite literally launched himself into the pages of enlisted history, ejecting from the crew compartment of a modified P-61 Black Widow (see photo next page).

On October 14, 1947 at Muroc Dry Lake, California, (later Edwards AFB), Air Force Captain Charles "Chuck" Yeager became the first man to break the sound barrier, flying the Bell X-1 rocket plane past Mach 1. Within 10 years nearly every new fighter design in the USAF inventory was capable of supersonic speed.



A formation of Northrop P-61 Black Widows circa 1945. c/o Russell E. Koetke Collection, Airmen Memorial Museum Archives

Amid this background of change, in 1948 the Air Force assumed primary responsibility for the air defense of the United States. In early 1950 the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the Air Force exclusive responsibility for the U.S. Strategic Guided Missile role. Missile wings soon joined aircraft wings in the Air Force's strategic arsenal, opening another high-tech career to the enlisted airman.

CONCLUSIONS

Enlisted Air Force personnel benefited extensively from the experience of World War II. The traditional gap between officers and enlisted was bridged somewhat by their interdependence on one another to complete the mission at hand. The rapid pace of aviation technology meant that ground crewmen had to be more aware and more knowledgeable than ever before. The progressive nature of aviation alone dictated the need for an educated supporting cast, as was seen with the introduction of the jet engine and guided missile in the late stages of the war.

The drawdown forced Air Force planners to restructure their organization and offer incentives for qualified men and women to stay in uniform. Career opportunities were broadened, as was the potential to find relevant work in the civilian sector upon discharge or retirement. Air Force planners emphasized philosophies of teamwork and interdependence by giving all personnel the same uniform when it was issued in 1949. Women and minorities were empowered by the establishment of the WAF and desegregation in 1948. Consequently the military continued to evolve in a favorable manner for all enlisted personnel regardless of race, religion or creed; those same enlisted people produced outstanding results in the furtherance of the Air Force mission.

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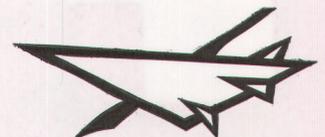
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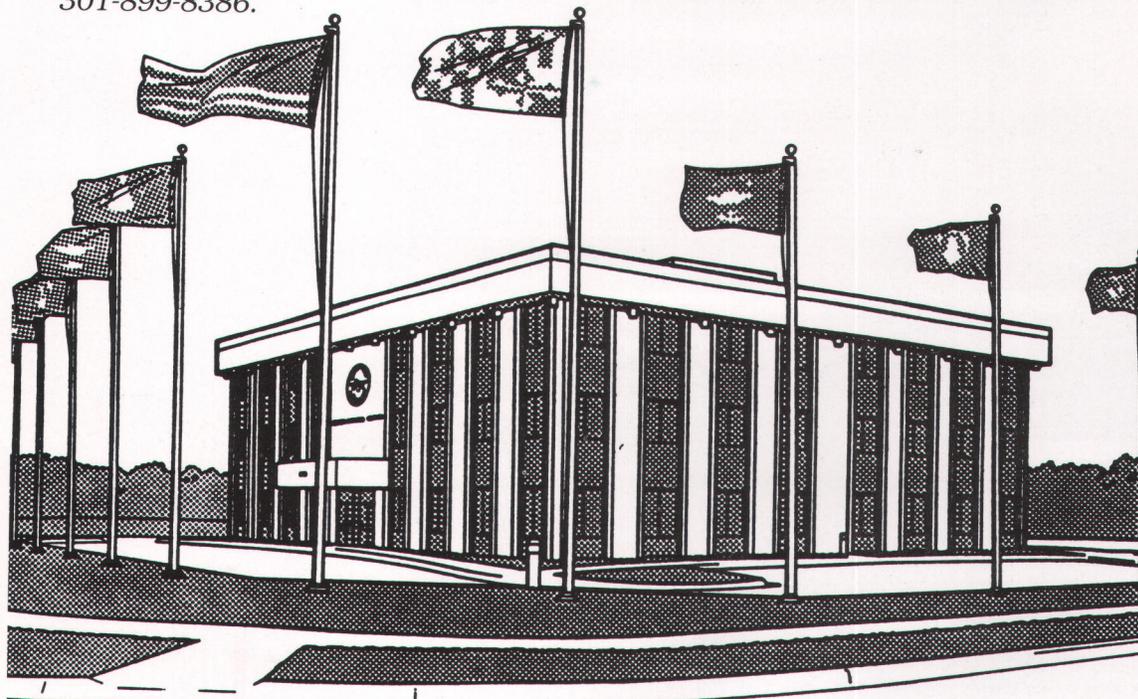


AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stands 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 have 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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