

A Look Back...

EARLY USAF UNIFORMS - THE TRANSITION PERIOD
1947 - 1950S



Promotional photo showing the old U.S. Army Woman's Army Corps (WAC) Olive Drab (O.D.) uniform (right) and the new men's U.S. Air Force blue uniforms (middle and left)

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The establishment of the U.S. Air Force (USAF) on 18 September 1947 marked the day the Army Air Forces' brown shoes and like equipment, soon would see black dye applied. By 1952, the "old brown shoe days" were gone (jokingly the mentality remained), there may have been a few around but not many. Also, during the USAF "transition period" from 1947 to 1952 and later, among the Air Force's ranks were both Army and USAF uniforms and accouterments. Airmen wore uniforms consisting of summer issue and winter issue ensembles – with several combinations in-between. During the transition period the brown shoe was still worn with the Enlisted Army Olive Drab (OD) "Ike" jacket or waist coat uniform with new Air Force silver/blue chevrons added along with collar brass used by the Army now hollowed out. This insignia looks similar to the Air Force's most recent enlisted USAF insignia, with a hollow circle around it, but was gold rather than silver. Airmen also wore a cut-out gold circle with the old U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF) symbol known as the prop and wings. There was even new brass for the Army wheel hat, a hollow circle surrounding the eagle, all in gold. With this in mind there is a subject related to the Air Force uniform often overlooked. The following is a lookback at the origins of the distinctive USAF uniforms, what organizations oversaw the design and manufacturing and the early transition period of Air Force uniforms worn. For example, our service dress uniform has changed significantly in recent years; however, prior to 1990, it retained the same basic design from the beginning; a four-pocket service dress jacket (originally of a Blue Shade #84).

The Beginning of the USAF Image – the USAF Uniform

Prior to June 1950 the Quartermaster of the Army accomplished research and development on the Air Force uniform. The Army Quartermaster Corps developed the majority of the components of the male Air Force service uniform of the time. As early as 1944/45 (during WWII), steps were taken toward adopting a distinct autonomous Air Force uniform. Brigadier General Lauris Norstad, Deputy Chief of Air Staff, Army Air Forces Headquarters, felt a distinctive uniform could stimulate morale and aid in recruiting. In 1945, Michaels, Stern and Company presented designed uniforms for AAF leadership approval. Unfortunately, no actions took place and all development actions ceased. Later in January 1946, Brigadier General William E. Hall, Deputy Assistant Chief, Air Staff-1 (today's HAF/A1) presented a study for additionally proposed Air Force uniforms. In this study to the Chief of Staff of the Army Air Forces, General Hall 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 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.

From the study Brigadier General H. Griswold, Deputy Assistant Chief of Air Staff for Personnel, suggested soliciting the opinion of the enlisted corps. Interestingly, General Griswold disagreed with General Halls' assessment and stated the uniforms of the enlisted and officer corps should not be identical. Still seeking a distinctive uniform leaders submitted requirements to multiple men's tailoring specialists and clothing designers throughout the United States.



Brown shoes (to black) along with all WWII era uniforms were phased out in 1955.

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In 1946, the Army presented four dress uniforms for enlisted members and officers to Army Air Forces Leaders. Ultimately the Army Quartermaster Corps displayed these uniforms at Army Air Forces bases during the final months of 1946. By July 1947, a consolidated survey of reactions to the uniforms was complete; certainly at this time an autonomous separate Air Force was certain to occur.

United States Air Force leaders invited seven outstanding designers to participate in a uniform clothing conference on 29 September 1947. This conference led to a meeting with Stuart Symington, Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF), on 3 November 1947. This meeting was at the request of the SECAF and involved several designers, showing multiple uniform examples. With the creation of the United States Air Force, leaders moved quickly to create organizations to design and manufacture the Air Force uniform.

Organizations overseeing USAF uniform design and manufacturing

In June 1950, Air Force uniform research and development responsibilities hastily transferred from the Army Quartermaster Corps to the Air Force. This, in an attempt to expedite the development of distinctive uniforms for men and Women in the Air Force (WAF). HQ USAF leaders created a "Branch" to monitor the clothing development program and became involved in considerable detail, this primarily to necessitate expeditiously obtaining a distinctive uniform for Air Staff approval. Also, during this timeframe a uniform board formed to expedite development and processes. The board consisted of general officers from Headquarters USAF. After 21 months, once distinctive Air Force uniforms were created, this particular uniform board dissolved. In addition to its responsibility in designing aircrew and special purpose uniform clothing, the Aeromedical Laboratory assumed the overall operational uniform workload. In mid-1952, when Headquarters Air Research and Development Command (ARDC) (an AFMC antecedent) activated, the Uniform and Personal Equipment Division stood up to specialize in clothing matters. Within ARDC a total fifty-two people directly contributed to the development of Air Force clothing. Their experience levels varied and by estimation this number is small when considering the Army strength was ten times more with regards to their uniform research and development.

During the early 1950s, poorly defined distinctions between the functions of HQ USAF, Uniform and Personal Equipment Branch, and Headquarters ARDC remained a considerable issue. Normally, expected to confine itself to broad policy and planning, the Uniform and Personal Equipment Branch, became deeply involved in uniform processes. The HQ ARDC office did not have the opportunity to assume its proper responsibility for aggressively steering the research and development program.

The Air Force clothing program's mission was considerable after considering the vast variety of clothing/uniform items developed or in development. Men and women, required clothing for a wide range of duties and varying climates. Still in the early 1950s, the majority of service uniform items saw full development and were distinctive of the Air Force. Requirements for flying clothing were very fluid and believed to not be satisfied for any length of time. The thought was, as aircraft performance increases, so likely will the need aviator and crew flight clothing to change accordingly. With an understanding of uniform processes and organizations let us discuss what these early efforts produced.



Photo shows several male transition period uniforms

The early transition period of the USAF uniform

The Air Force uniform has its heritage reaching back to the Balloon Corps of the American Civil War. Thus from very meager beginnings of simple observation and reconnaissance the Airman of the transition period and beyond can be proud of the uniform worn by the Air Force. We walk in the footsteps of greatness, the men and women who answered our Nation's call flew and supported flyers. There is no way of knowing if they were aware of the invaluable legacy they were leaving behind.

Also available to both Airmen was an Air Force-unique tan shade summer uniform created in line with the new Air Force blue, silver and black accessories and was dubbed "Silver Tans". It was identical to the blue service uniforms and was mandatory for officers but optional for enlisted personnel. Silver Tans were part of the Air Force wardrobe from 1952 to 1965. In the late 1950s, a new khaki summer uniform ensemble replaced the previous khakis, a carry-over from WWII. Issued to both officers and enlisted members was the "bush" uniforms for wear in warmer climates. The tan cotton jacket was similar in design to the BDU jacket with one distinctive difference – it included a waist belt. Also worn was a pith helmet and shorts with tan knee-high socks and a pair of black low quarters. Not surprisingly this uniform known as the "Jungle Jim" enjoyed little popularity in the ranks and thus had a short life span with some components surviving until the early 1970s.

Along with this uniform was the introduction of the tan shade 505 summer service uniform. It was the very first short-sleeve men's uniform in Air Force history and made of a lightweight basket-weave cotton material. However, the 505s (pronounced "Five-oh-Fives") had one major drawback: Unless the uniform was heavily starched, it lost the well starched sharpness and would wrinkle badly in fairly short order. The successor to the 505 uniform was the tan shade poly/cotton 1505 uniform. 1505s (Fifteen-oh-Fives and no other term was used) was the last of the khaki uniforms issued by the Air Force. It phased out in 1978 after which time airmen no longer wore khakis, but the predecessor to our modern two-tone blue uniform in use since 1972.

Female members of the Air Force also had several distinctive uniforms. In the early years, the Women in the Air Force, aka WAF (pronounced wāf) started out like the men with WAC Army Air Corps uniforms until about 1953. The leadership and general rank-in-file personnel preferred fashions that were similar to airline stewardesses for their new Air Force wardrobe. In the early 1950s, the WAF fielded a new blue winter service dress uniform, a "Silver Tan" summer uniform and a white service dress for summer months and off-duty wear. Their summer service uniform consisted of a two-piece cotton corded blue-and-white striped uniform. The top featured cuffed short sleeve blouse (common female style in the service industry at the time) with a matching skirt, aka the "Seersucker" uniform or simply "the Cords". The flight cap was of a quilted material and rounded like those of airline hostesses. The "bucket cap" fielded during this time is one of the few items of the early days withstanding the test of time. They also fielded an exercise uniform of a light blue color to include shorts, a wrap-around skirt, baseball-style cap and a lightweight cotton shirtwaist. Through the years the Air Force image has changed, once having many colors, combination and fabrics. The Air Force now has a streamlined image however, one thing remains true, the image of the United States Air Force is nothing without the men and women who have worn it throughout the ages and those who wear it today. Following are some of the early transitional uniforms developed by the Army Quartermaster Corps and the USAF uniform branch.



Early enlisted collar brass and cap device.



Note: 18 September 1947, not only marked the establishment of the United States Air Force, but it also launched the quest for a distinct Air Force identity. Throughout our nation's military history, wool was common place for all winter uniforms and this would remain true with Air Force uniforms as well. This Army Air Service World War One uniform shows us where the Air Force was looking for ideas on our new uniform. Officers typically bought their uniforms such as this uniform known as a summer service dress and worn during WWII and the transition period of the Air Force 1947 to 1952. At the same time enlisted members received issued like this one transition Air Force uniform showing the first real evolution with silver and blue Air Force chevrons added to the Army OD uniform in 1948. Women in the Air Force (WAF) personnel still wore World War Two uniforms the first few years as depicted above and transition O.D. WAF Duty Uniform

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WAF transition uniforms...above is the Army Shade No.61 summer tropical worsted uniform...during the transition period the female enlisted uniform sported the 4 inch male silver-blue chevrons.



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This page and opposite: Transition period enlisted male and female uniforms consisted of Army uniforms with gold AF-unique insignia. Though debatable, there was a very short period of time when the blue shade 84 service cap cover was worn with the Army OD uniform. The service cap was of a blue shade 84 wool material and a russet brown bill, chin strap and gold AF seal buttons securing the chin strap. With gold AF cap device (different for officer (above) and enlisted (left)).

Note: 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 here 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. (As it happened, the last vestiges of the Army uniform did not disappear until October 1959.)



Below can are examples of the Gold AF Seal buttons on this WAF SSgt's service dress tunic.

WAF transition uniforms...Army Shade No.61 summer tropical worsted uniforms with Air Force accouterments.

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Above, what could have been.



On this page: 1950s – 1960s, Women in the Air Force (WAF) Flight Tunic (shade #84) – also known as Short Waist Jacket (or Ike Jacket) ...utilized and recognized as a flight jacket by nurses and other WAF medical and flight personnel. Also shown is the WAF service dress and sketches of what the WAF uniform could have looked like.



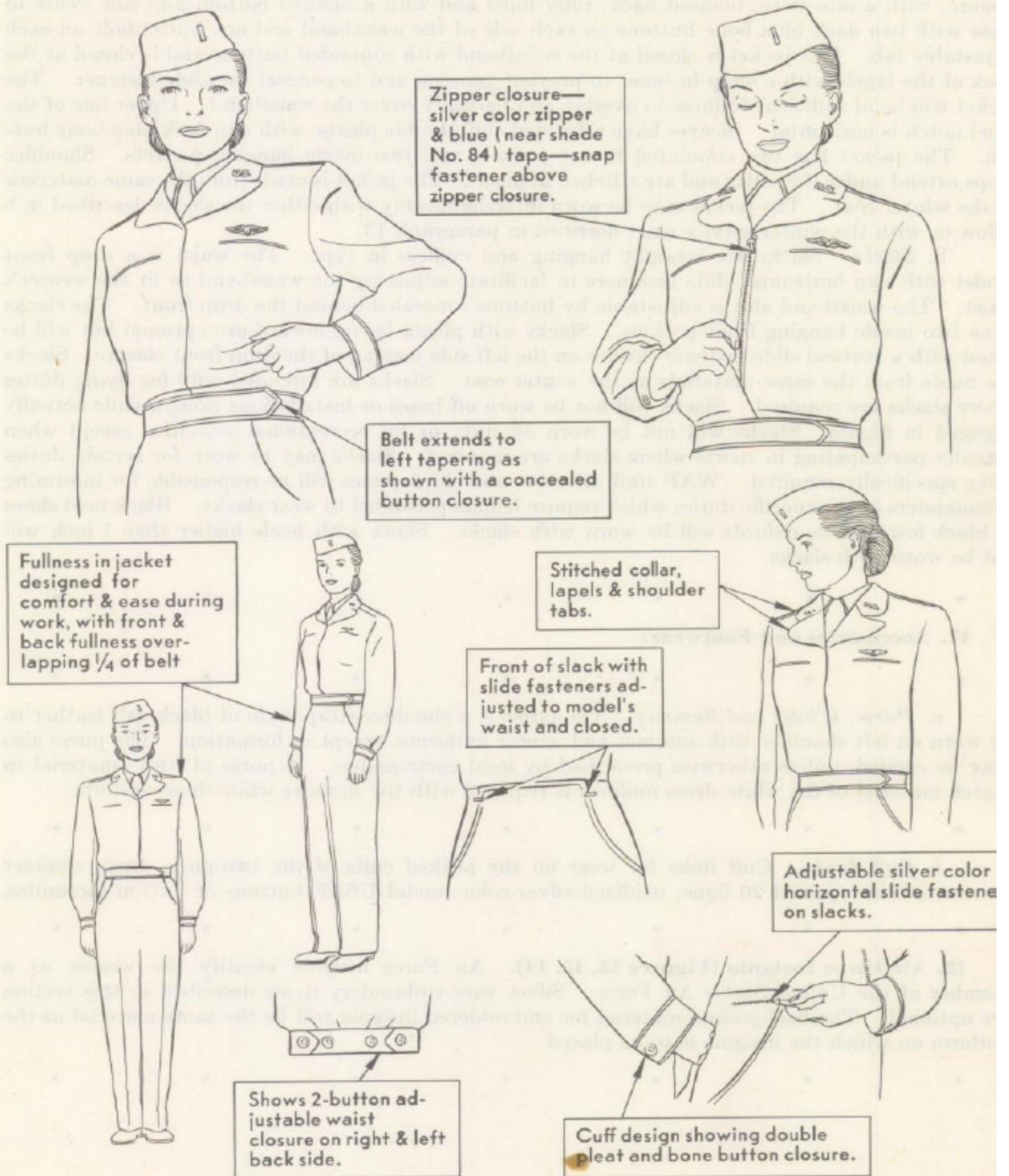


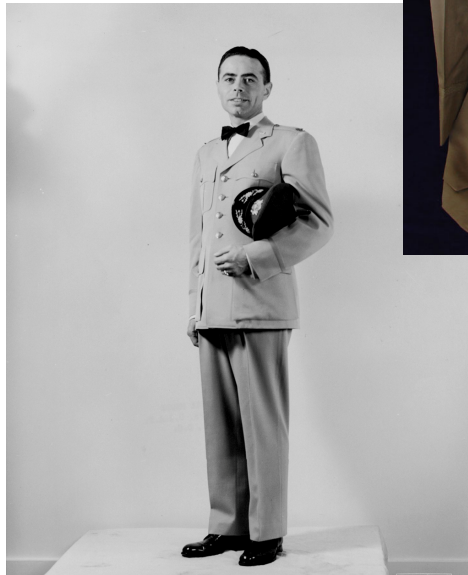
FIGURE 9.1.

AFR 35-10 sketches of the WAF short waist jacket.

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In 1949, the Air Force offered its first major uniform change with the adoption and issue of the Air Force blue Shade #84 uniform series. The service dress jacket was a four-pocket tunic that did not change much until the mid-1990s. Since issue uniforms were not immediately available, officers purchased the new uniforms and began ordering them as early as 1948. Also available was a blue waist jacket; officially listed as a battle jacket but, fondly known as the "Ike" jacket. The "Ike" jacket eventually phased-out but, the blue service dress saw little change until the late 1960's with the McConnell version (named after Gen. McConnell, CSAF at the time).



The "Silver Tan" service dress uniform

Note: On 25 January 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 until "full instructions, specifications, and samples of cloth [were] made available." The Air Force published purchasing guidance on April 8, 1949. AFL 35-46, The New Air Force Uniforms for Male Personnel, 8 April 1949. Additionally, there was a male Tan Shade 193 "Silver Tan" "Ike" Jacket.

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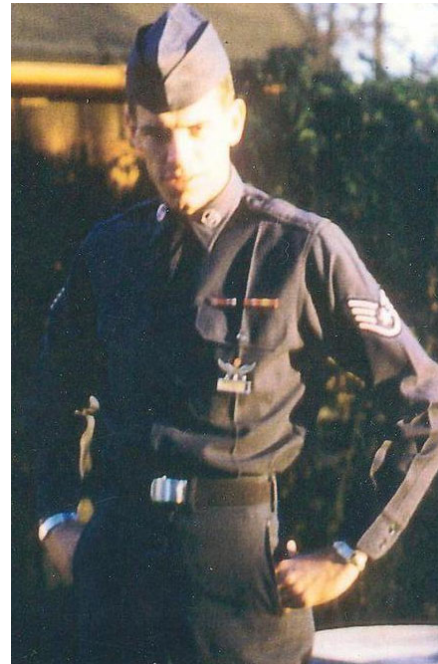


This page contains examples of 1950's era blue uniforms containing some of the old Army insignias such as Overseas bars and Federal Service "hash marks". During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the service eliminated and discouraged sleeve insignias, and with retirements, etc., saw the gradual disappearance of World War I and World War II patches, bars, and other decorative elements. Above and bottom right are examples of the "Ike" Jacket.



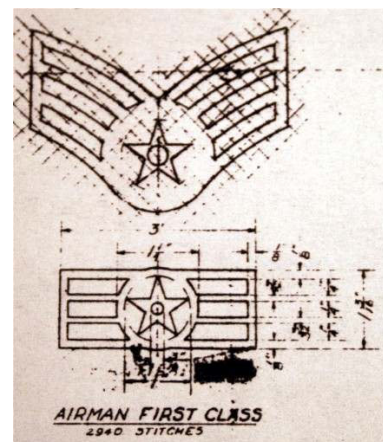
Above: Airman wearing the Ike jacket and another Khaki Shade # 1; shirt and pant combination. Worn with this combination is the blue service cap, blue tie (tucked into the shirt between the second and third buttons, the style of the time) and blue belt.

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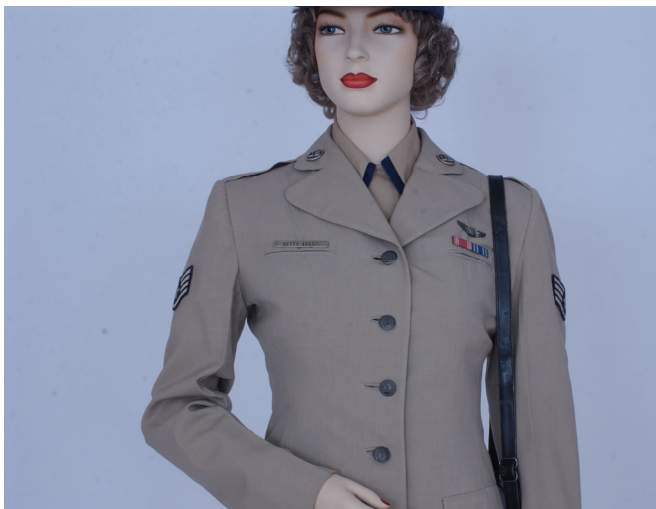
The dark blue shirt was authorized as a Class "B" or uniform of the day (male) combination. The shirt could also be worn in lieu of the standard light blue shirt as seen pervious pages.





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. (By mid-1954 it had become evident that stocks would not be depleted until early 1957.) In March 1956 the Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. Thomas D. White, cancelled General Vandenberg's initiative. 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.

Late 1940s—1950s, White and Tan Service Dress uniform



In the early years of the WAF there were several female uniforms similar to those of their male counterparts most, however, were developed by men and were very uncomfortable. Among these WAF uniforms was a white service dress worn in the summer months (left) and the tan service dress uniform. Also, known as the “Silver Tans” (below).

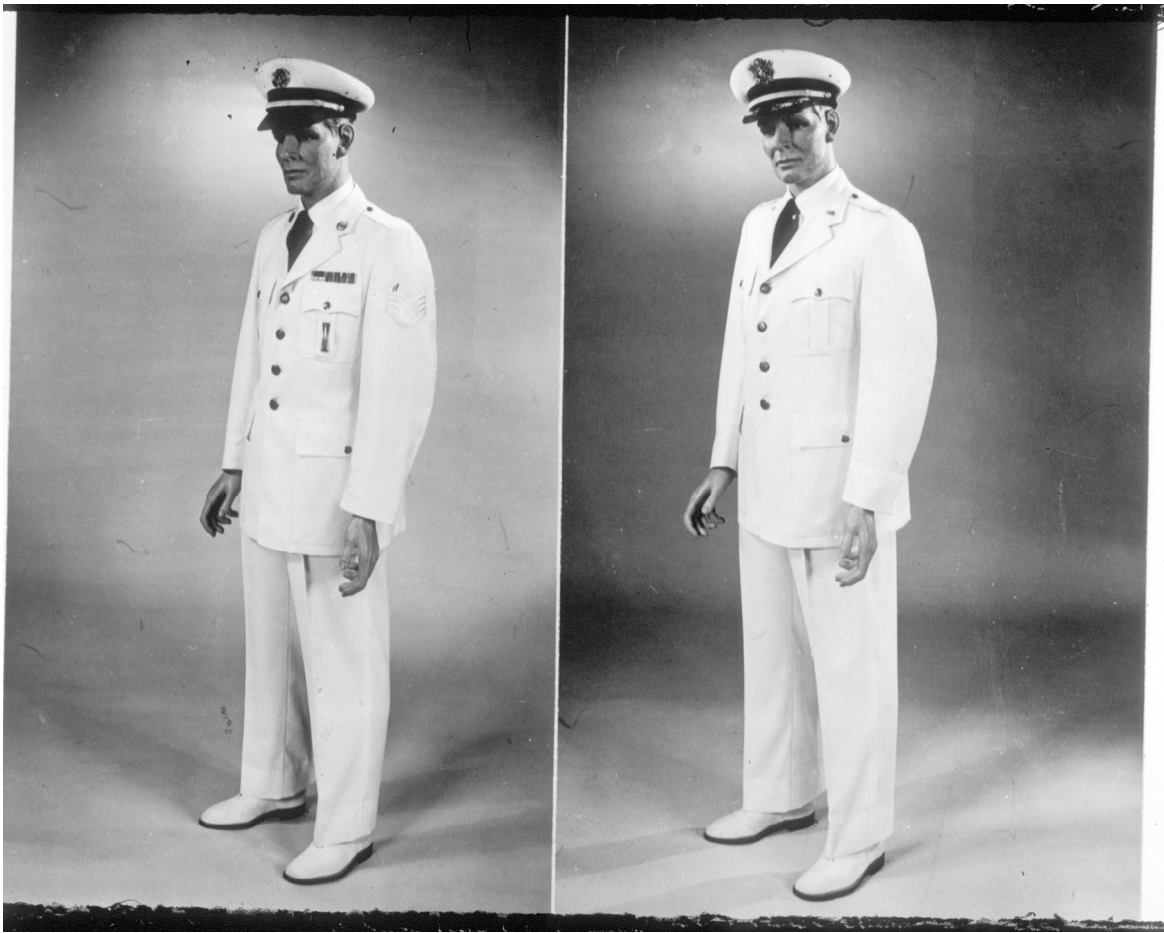


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Note the white chevrons used for a short period of time on several different uniform combinations. Including the white and black mess dress.

Late 1940s - 1950s, White Service Dress (male) uniform



WAF "Seersucker" Uniform



USAF promotional photo showing a variety of uniforms including the WAF raincoat and galoshes, the seersucker Class "C" or UOD without jacket, Seersucker Class "B", Shade #84 service dress and overcoat.



USAF anniversary display during the dedication of the AF memorial showing the Class "C" seersucker on left with the White Service dress. With early AF crash rescue boat uniform and early dark blue flight suit.

WAF Utility and Fitness uniforms

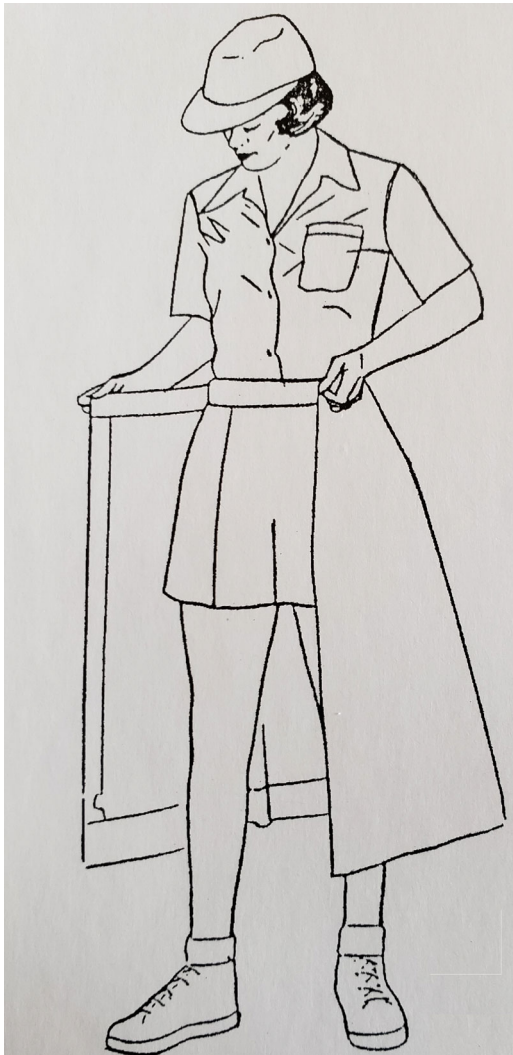


Different combinations of the WAF utility Uniform (left utility uniform with 1943 field jacket).

Note: the Army male WWII utility uniform remained in use by the Air Force until 1957.



Below - Different combinations of the WAF physical fitness uniform. Below left - fitness combination with skirt.



Button-up skirt, same color as shorts. Also, could be worn with white socks and white sneakers.



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