

## Early USAF Uniforms and Insignia

Under Section 208 of the National Security Act of 1947, US Air Force was formed as a separate branch of the military on September 18, 1947. In preparation for this change, the Army Air Force started to study distinctive uniforms in 1946, but while new clothing was in development, on March 9, 1948, General Vandenberg decided to continue using the army uniform with changes to newly designed Air Force seal buttons in gold color, and modified enlisted insignia.<sup>1</sup> The changeover was to be made at each air base or installation when enough were on hand to issue to all enlisted personnel at the facility.

This position had been brought about as a result of congressional hearings in early 1948 when the Subcommittee on Supplemental Appropriations pointed out the costs of new uniforms, and Under Secretary of the Air Force Zuckert defended the new uniforms and General Edwin Rawlings stated that no uniforms would be thrown away. He stated the current uniforms would be used until worn out and that air force personnel would continue to wear "Army-type uniforms." Congress cut USAF uniform appropriates for 1949.<sup>2</sup>

After considering using army style chevron but embroidered in black, in March 1948 the air force introduced new four-inch wide "inverted" silver-gray on dark blue chevrons with a pierced star in the center, but the army titles of master sergeant, first sergeant, PFC, and the like remained. Master sergeants and first sergeants wore the same chevrons four inch wide that were described as "three chevrons, inverted, centered on a pierced star, and three wing-type arcs inverted beneath star." Technical sergeants had the same but with two "wing-type arcs inverted beneath star," staff sergeants had just one arc, sergeants the three chevrons centered on a pierced star, corporals two chevrons, and PFCs one chevron.<sup>3</sup> These titles lingered until April 1952 when the lower enlisted ranks were retitled to various airmen grades.<sup>4</sup>

Generally air force personnel could wear army uniforms carrying the new USAF gold colored buttons and collar and lapel insignia until July 1951 (soon extended until July 1952), but for anything not covered, Army Regulations 600-35, as amended, continued to apply.<sup>5</sup> The exception was the enlisted four-pocket service coat popular early in World War II, which was prohibited for wear.<sup>6</sup> Enlisted cap insignia were gold colored Coat of Arms of the US in a 1-3/4 inch diameter ring while collar insignia were the letters "U.S." and a winged propeller, each within a one-inch gold ring. Enlisted airmen and women<sup>7</sup> placed a one-inch diameter ring inclosing "U.S." letters on their right coat or jacket collar with the letters horizontal to the ground, and a similar winged propeller on a ring on the left collar. On shirts worn with the coat or jacket, the right collar tip had the "U.S." while the left collar tip carried the "Air Force wing and propeller." As shown below.<sup>8</sup>



Other army insignia continued on uniforms, including current and wartime shoulder patches on the left and right sleeves respectively, silver on blue overseas bars on the lower left sleeve three inches above the cuff bottom, and service stripes.<sup>9</sup>

Officers wore "U.S." on both coat collar ends, and for other than generals, offices wore either aide insignia or the winged propeller on the coat lapels. On shirts, generals wore their stars of rank while other officers had their insignia of grade on the right collar tip, one inch from the end, and either aide or the winged propeller on the left collar.<sup>10</sup>

Generally the use of army insignia continued, including the meritorious unit emblem, which at this time, was a laurel wreath worn on the lower right sleeve. This accounts for the silver versions embroidered on blue that appeared in 1950 for a short time.<sup>11</sup> The AAF technician's badge introduced in November 1942 continued to be authorized, as did French and Belgian forragers and the Netherlands Orange Lanyard.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike today, before and during World War II officers and enlisted army uniforms differed in cut and color. After considerable discussion and consideration of a wide range of colors, air force leaders decided early on that all members would wear the same blue uniforms with silver ornamentation, and with black shoes and boots.<sup>13</sup> In 1948 the air force approved AF blue shade 84 for its new uniforms, along with oxidized silver buttons and insignia,<sup>14</sup> and in April 1949 the air force officially announced its new male personnel uniforms that could be worn on or after 1 September 1950 and were required by 1 July 1952.<sup>15</sup> The new shade 84 air force blouse did not have a cloth belt like army officers' and the skirt had no flair. Outside lower pockets were bellows style. In the army style, commissioned and warrant officer coat sleeves were trimmed with 1/2 inch wide dark blue shade 95 sleeve braid placed three inches above the cuff.

Also introduced was a new jacket somewhat similar to the army's OD "Eisenhower" jacket but in shade 84 blue. Known as the winter service uniform it was soon required for all personnel. The jacket had four concealed buttons down the front and two-piece sleeves and cuffs with buttons, but unlike the similar World War II period "Eisenhower" jacket, it had a one-piece back and shoulder loops. The service uniform could also be worn without the jacket and with the tie tucked into the shirt front between the second and third visible buttons.<sup>16</sup>

New blue air force caps and hats were similar to army headgear. Initially the service cap had a black bill and was of wool or gabardine, shade 84 but unlike the AAF practice, the interior soft rolled grommet was required and the air force made a point that wear of the cap without the grommet and front spring would not be tolerated. With the jacket, personnel could wear the optional "overseas" type hat which the air force called a garrison cap or a flight cap, and in the tropics, airmen could wear the sun helmet when authorized by local commanders.<sup>17</sup>

The summer semidress uniform was khaki colored (shade 61) and for enlisted personnel the tropical worsted or gabardine coat was optional. With it personnel wore a service cap shade 84, cotton shirt shade 1, a necktie shade 83, and belt shade 89. Only officers and warrant officers were required to have this summer semidress uniform.<sup>18</sup>

With the September 1950 blue uniforms, silver buttons and insignia were introduced. Enlisted collar devices were "U.S." in a one inch ring and the cap device a national eagle in a 1-1/16 inch ring. Similarly, officers wore "U.S." on coat collars while the winged propeller disappeared. The cap device was the same as the army design but in silver. These same silver insignia were prescribed for wear on the summer khaki uniforms.<sup>19</sup>

Some army type insignia lingered. Metal and enamel distinctive insignia remained for major headquarters down to operational groups, but squadron members wore a five inch patch on the left pocket of the flight or field jacket. Other army remnants embroidered in silver were World War I service chevrons, World War II overseas bars, and for airmen, diagonal service stripes. These went on the lower left sleeve, four inches from the sleeve end, with overseas bars above service stripes.<sup>20</sup>

Starting in 1950, shoulder patches were allowed only for personnel who served with an overseas unit in a theater of operations during World War II.<sup>21</sup>

The 1948 USAF evening dress uniform introduced the initial description of the billed cap that had on the visor lightning, cloud, and dart pattern. While later silver ornamented cap visor

were used by colonels, in 1948 only generals had the designs that were embroidered in gold.<sup>22</sup> In 1951 a slightly less ostentatious gold embroidered visor was authorized for colonels.<sup>23</sup>

Field uniforms continued to be army olive drab clothing. In April 1951 the Air Force Chief of Staff approved a sage green, cotton sateen combat uniform, which to the average person, looked somewhat grey.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AFEHRI File 100.049, "Background Paper on the Development of USAF Uniforms up to 1959," by SMSgt R. E. Helmick, 19 Feb 1992, pp. 3 and 5.

<sup>2</sup> Case History of the Blue Uniform, William J. Luttmer, Historical Office, Air Material Command, January 1952, p 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp 2 and 6.

<sup>4</sup> AF Regulation 39-36, 24 April 1952.

<sup>5</sup> Air Force Letter (hereafter AFL) No. 35-4, 1 September 1948.

<sup>6</sup> AFL 35-4, 1 September 1948, para 2 a, (2).

<sup>7</sup> AFL 35-48, 8 April 1949, prescribed women's uniforms and prescribed women's insignia to be the same as for males.

<sup>8</sup> AFL. 39-25, 23 August 1948.

<sup>9</sup> AFL 35-47, 22 Nov 1948, para 4,c.

<sup>10</sup> AFL 35-47, 22 Nov 1948, para 4,b.

<sup>11</sup> AFL 35-47, 22 Nov 1948, para 5,a,(3).

<sup>12</sup> Army Adjutant General Instructions 421, dated November 16, 1942, which was later published in Changes 10, dated January 1943, to AR 600-35 AFL 35-47., paras 5, d, (2) and 5, e,(6).

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. AFEHRI File 100.049, p 2.

<sup>14</sup> ,Op cit, AFEHRI File 100.049, p 5.

<sup>15</sup> AFL 35-46, 8 April 1949.

<sup>16</sup> AFL 35-47, 22 Nov 1948, para 2 ,a.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, para 2, b, (6) and para 4,a,(2). The term flight cap was introduced in AF Reg 35-14, 15 November 1950, paras 8 b and 16 b.

<sup>18</sup> AFL 35-46, 8 April 1949, para 5, d.

<sup>19</sup> AFL 35-46, 8 April 1949, para 6, (1) and (2).

<sup>20</sup> AFL 35-46, paras 6, a, (3), (4) and (5) and para 6, c, (1), (i).

<sup>21</sup> AF Regulation No. 35-14, 15 November 1950, para 26 a.

<sup>22</sup> AF Regulation No. 35-12, 1 October 1948, para 3, h.

<sup>23</sup> AF Regulation 35-12A, 23 February 1951 and AF Regulation 35-14, para 19, a.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., Case History of the Blue Uniform, p 10.