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BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

THE DEVELOPMENT OF U.S. AIR FORCE MALE UNIFORMS UP TO 1959

The purpose of this paper is to provide a historical account of the development of U.S. Air Force male uniforms from 1946 to 1959.

We will look at initial Air Force (AF) uniform studies started in 1946, the transitional uniforms used into the early 1950s, and the development of the winter and summer service uniforms in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

We use the term "Blue Suiters" frequently when referring to Air Force personnel. Interestingly enough, blue was the fourth color choice proposed in 1946, by the Army Air Force (AAF) Air Staff (1:7).

In 1946, it was already apparent to AAF leaders that the Air Force would soon become a separate service, and should have its own distinctive uniforms. Some guidelines were set in an Air Staff uniform proposal: 1) To create an attractive career for enlisted men in the post war Air Force, it must be designed and tailored to be worn properly and proudly; 2) The same uniform would be worn by officer and enlisted personnel (1:3,4). To have some insight to the rationale of those guidelines, let's look at the Army uniforms worn in 1946.

Army officer and enlisted personnel did not dress alike. Officers could wear a dark green four pocket service blouse, with either matching shade trousers or a drab shade trousers called "pinks"; a summer khaki four pocket service blouse; or a waist length olive drab (O.D.) shade 33 battle jacket, commonly known as the "Ike" jacket. Those were the authorized service

uniforms, although officers wore many unauthorized variations of those styles (10:27). Enlisted personnel were only authorized two service uniforms. For winter wear, an O.D. shade 33 "Ike" jacket was worn, with matching trousers. Enlisted personnel did not have a O.D. service blouse, it had been declare limited standard (no longer issued) in 1944. Enlisted personnel wore a khaki long sleeve shirt with tie, and trousers for the summer service uniform.

The Air Staff proposal recommended four different colors for the uniform. In order of desired priority the colors were: dark gray, medium Brunswick green, cocoa, and sapphire blue. A later recommendation by Brigadier General Griswold, Deputy Assistant Chief of Air Staff-3, was to consider a blue/gray color like the Royal Air Force and Luftwaffe uniforms (1:7).

Two designs were proposed, a double breasted and a single breasted. The blouses had an airline uniform appearance, with lower flapped pockets and no shoulder epaulettes. Officer rank would be black with contrasting backing and be in Navy style on the cuffs. Enlisted chevrons would be like the Army's, but in black. The shirt, trousers, tie and socks would be the same color as the blouse. The proposal recommended keeping the "Ike" jacket for duty wear (1:9-12).

Major General Norstad reviewed the proposal and commented that, "A noticeable bit of color tastefully applied has always been attractive in a military outfit (uniform). In general, people like colorful uniforms unless they are carried to the extremes of theater doormen or musical-comedy generals". This was in response to the conservative description of the proposed uniform. He also suggested that a tropical (summer) uniform consisting of shorts, short sleeve shirt and a British type bush jacket be

added to the agenda (1:8).

At this point, you are probably wondering what's so important about this proposal; after all, it wasn't adopted! It's true that the proposal wasn't adopted, but some items in the proposal were adopted later, as you'll see. While proposals for a distinctive Air Force uniform were being developed, AF leaders decided on a transitional uniform. It consisted of Army uniforms with Air Force insignia.

General Vandenberg chaired a meeting on 9 March 1948 on the transitional uniform. The decision was made to continue using the present Army uniform with gold Air Force seal design buttons and insignia of adopted design. One recently adopted insignia was the enlisted chevron. The design of the chevron had been selected by polling 150 enlisted men at Bolling Field. Fifty-five percent of those polled chose the design we use today. He also requested that a bush jacket be placed on the agenda and prototype be field tested at Eglin Field for suitability as a summer uniform (3:5).

Air Force Letter 39-25 addressed the transition from Army insignia to the newly approved AF ones. It stated that "enlisted men would continue to wear current (Army) insignia until new insignia are available at a particular Air Force base or installation in quantities sufficient for a complete issue to all enlisted men at that activity (6:1)."

Insignia approved for wear on the enlisted service jacket were gold color and consisted of the letters "U.S." enclosed in a one inch circle, worn on both sides of the collar, and the Air Force (wing and propellar) insignia enclosed in a one inch diameter circle, worn on both lapels. On the summer service (long sleeve khaki shirt) uniform, the "U.S." would be worn on the right side of the collar and the Air Force insignia on the left. Enlisted

chevrons would be worn midway between the shoulder seam and the elbow. Silver on blue overseas bars and diagonal service stripes would be worn on the left sleeve, three inches above the bottom of the cuff. Two items were carried over from the Army uniform. The AAF or numbered Air Force sleeve patch would continue to be worn on the left sleeve, a half inch below the shoulder seam, and World War II veterans would wear their war time insignia on the right sleeve in the same position (6:--).

In November 1949, the prescribed placement of the collar and lapel devices was changed on the service jacket. The collar insignia would be worn on the jacket with the "U.S." on the right collar and the AF insignia on the left.

To get a head to foot picture of the uniforms, I'll briefly describe what the winter and summer uniforms looked like. For the winter uniform, the airman wore the an O.D. service hat with a gold circled U.S. Coat of Arms, an O.D. "Ike" jacket with gold U.S. and Air Force collar insignia and AF grade chevrons, O.D. trousers, a long sleeve O.D. or khaki shade 1 shirt, O.D. shade 5 necktie, tan or brown socks, and russet brown service shoes or low quarters (5:7). The O.D. shirt with collar insignia and chevrons, necktie, and O.D. trousers was another winter uniform authorized. For summer, the enlisted uniform consisted of a khaki service hat cover with hat insignia as above, long sleeve khaki shirt with insignia worn as on the service jacket, necktie, trousers, tan socks, and russet brown service shoes or low quarters. A gaberdine khaki blouse and trousers could be worn as an optional item for enlisted personnel. When the winter or summer shirt was worn as an outer

garment, the necktie was tucked in between the first and second button of the shirt (8:113-120). Those were the standard issue uniforms for Air Force enlisted personnel until the blue service uniform became available.

In 1948, the AF took its first step towards adopting a distinctive uniform. A blue/gray color was approved for the winter uniform. The color was given the designation of AF blue shade 84. It was also decided that all buttons and metal insignia would be of oxidized silver (2:2). Different uniform styles were studied, with the assumption that, unlike the Army, Air Force officer and enlisted personnel would wear the same uniform, and it would be distinctly Air Force (12:1).

The adopted winter blue uniform design was distinctive. It was not an Army uniform dyed blue. There were many noticeable differences, such as: the Army winter service blouse had a belt, a separately attached flaring skirt, narrow notched lapels, inside hanging lower pockets, and only officers were allowed to wear it (4:2). The AF blouse didn't have a belt or flaired skirt. It had outside bellow lower pockets and wide notched lapels.

The blue shade 84 uniform became available for purchase in 1949, as an optional item (7:1). The new uniform consisted of a service hat cover or overseas style hat, blouse or "Ike" jacket, and trousers in 100 percent wool or gaberdine; a shirt with two patch pockets and button flaps, made of light blue shade #120 poplin; blue shade #83 necktie; and a blue shade #89 belt with a silver buckle and tip. Officers were required to wear black socks and shoes with the uniform. Due to this being an optional uniform, enlisted personnel were authorized to wear the russet brown visor hat (with blue cover), tan or brown socks, and russet brown service shoes with this uniform. The Air Force collar insignia was deleted, and in its place another "U.S." insignia was

worn. Enlisted chevrons were worn on the sleeves midway between the shoulder seam and elbow. The AAF sleeve patch was deleted from the uniform, but current assignment and WWII veteran sleeve patches were still authorized (7:4).

The Air Force retained the Army summer service uniform, as the required summer outfit for enlisted personnel. Insignia and chevrons were worn the same as on the winter uniform (9:218).

In 1950, a blue shade #84 wool shirt was authorized as an optional item. Insignia and chevron placement were as prescribed for the khaki shirt (10:218). At this point in our new Air Force's history, the rank and file were a mixture of blue and O.D. uniforms.

During ceremonial formations such as, reviews, parades, etc., local commanders selected the color of the uniform to be worn, based on which uniform was possessed by the participants (9:214). This situation was soon resolved as more airmen were issued the blue uniform.

Headquarters Air Force issued the AF uniform and accouterments by geographic regions. Issue of the new uniform to all personnel was completed in 1952. In July 1952, the AF blue and the AF configured khaki summer uniform became mandatory wear, and phase out of the O.D. uniform began (9:214). A black visor hat with blue cover, black socks and shoes also became mandatory wear with the uniform. The AF also discontinued the wear of shoulder sleeve patches on uniforms, except for WWII veterans wearing war time patches. (7:2,3). Now, the Air Force started looking for a suitable replacement for the Army style summer service uniform.

In 1955, a new uniform became available for summer wear. This uniform was developed to replace the Army summer service uniform (10:28). The new uniform was in AF shade 505 tan. It was made of 100 percent cotton to provide comfort

in warm weather. The uniform consisted of a belted four pocket jacket, a short sleeve shirt, trousers, and Bermuda shorts (13:251).

The official name for the jacket was the "cotton summer service jacket", but it was commonly called the "bush" jacket. It was a single breasted, coat (formerly called a blouse) length with a convertible collar, epaulettes, four bellow pockets and a belt with an open faced plastic buckle. It was made of a cotton twill material. Enlisted personnel wore rank insignia midway between the shoulder seam and the elbow. Unlike the long sleeve shirt, collar insignia were not authorized on the bush jacket (14:253).

As far back as 1946, AF leaders had seen the need for a short sleeve shirt. The shade 505 shirt was the first short sleeve AF shirt. It had two flap pockets, a square cut bottom, and was made of a basket weave cotton material. Chevrons were worn centered between the shoulder sleeve seam and the end of the sleeve. This was the first AF shirt, designed as an outer garment, that did not have epaulettes (14:253).

The trousers and Bermuda shorts were both made of cotton twill material. The shorts were worn with knee high tan socks (13:251).

This uniform was authorized to be worn in five different combinations, at the discretion of the local commander. Here are the different shade 505 combinations: 1) Trousers and short sleeve shirt, without necktie; 2) Shorts with short sleeve shirt, without necktie; 3) Jacket and long trousers; 4) Shorts and jacket; 5) Jacket, trousers, and short sleeve shirt, with necktie (11:15). The wear of the optional sun helmet was decided by the local commander. The most widely worn summer service uniform was combination one.

This was the last service uniform introduced in the 1950s, but other changes occurred.

By the end of the 1950s, the AF phased out its final uniform ties with the Army. In 1957, shoulder sleeve patches were no longer authorized for wear on any uniform (10:28). The Army type summer service (khaki long sleeve shirt) uniform was phased out and not authorized for wear after 30 September 1959 (11:2). The proposals and designs started in 1946 finally provided the Air Force with truly distinctive uniforms.

The proposal, in 1946, recommended four colors, the last being blue. Although the uniform and rank proposed was not adopted, some recommendations were, such as: officer and enlisted personnel wearing the same uniform; and later, the bush jacket, short sleeve shirt and shorts. In 1948, transitional uniforms were adopted for the AF. It consisted of Army uniforms with AF insignia and chevrons. The blue uniform, which was adopted in 1949, became mandatory for wear in July 1952. The tan shade 505 summer service uniform, consisting of a jacket, short sleeve shirt, and trousers or shorts was introduced in 1955. Five different combinations could be worn using different components of the shade 505 summer service uniform. The Army summer service uniform was phased out in 1959, and at that point all uniforms were distinctively Air Force.

The history of Air Force uniform development is a personal history, because the leaders of the new Air Force worked hard to develop distinctive uniforms that were worn with pride.

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