

UNIFORM PRIDE: LOST OR FOUND?

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A normal first assignment for any USAF developmental engineer is at one of the three Air Logistics Centers (ALCs) across the country. Being a military engineer at an ALC, or depot, is a very different experience. You usually work with mostly civilians and contractors. Sometimes you can go almost all day without ever seeing another blue suit. Fortunately, you do get the chance to go TDY to the field units and work with what's often called the "real" Air Force. I've always enjoyed working with the users, where the rubber hits the tarmac if you will. It's also the place where you usually learn the most about the weapon system you work day to day.

Earlier this year, I had the honor of deploying as an aircraft battle damage repair engineer for Operations SOUTHERN WATCH and IRAQI FREEDOM. Deployment is one thing I would recommend to everyone. It is certainly a unique experience. Here, on a small patch of land in the middle of nowhere, are personnel representing most of the USAF specialties, and often those of our sister services and allied forces as well, all gathered together and surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Sure, it can be stressful, even downright boring at times, but you learn so much more there than you would back home, especially if it's your first time on deployment. You're in charge of yourself for the most part and will have to figure out many of the things others normally accomplish for you back home.

While deployed, I had the opportunity to work with some of the finest people I've ever known. The dedication of some of these individuals was simply remarkable. Even after working twelve or more hours a day nonstop for months on end, their professionalism and courtesy would always shine through. I also witnessed something else that has left its unforgettable impression on me.

At first, I began to notice that not all customs and courtesies were being given. A missed salute here and there is understandable, but it was often very blatant. Later, though, I also began to notice more and more people who didn't wear their uniform properly. As you started to look around, though, you really began to see the whole picture of what was going on.

Hats were either being worn while indoors (while not being armed) or not being worn while outside in the open. Even more recently, I've seen four crew chiefs from this year's USAF Thunderbirds, our very own "Ambassadors in Blue", walking to our local base exchange together, all in Thunderbirds uniforms, without a single hat being worn. (I will admit that "no hat" areas were rarely marked very clearly.) Sunglasses either hung from the hole in the left breast pocket, a spare spot of the field gear or were worn on top of the head. (One of the members of my team tried to correct a major with this problem. The major simply pointed at his aircrew name patch as his response.) I had to correct one female airman who allowed her hair to hang down to the middle of her back. There were several other notable cases of people not wearing their blouses around camp as well. It eventually got to the point to where it was simply impossible to correct so many people day after day.

Working at a depot, it's pretty easy to see how one can get lax after being around so many civilians day after day (not that it's any excuse). I guess I just never really expected to see it was

the same in the “real” air force too, at least not nearly so widespread. A friend of mine graduated recently from the Air and Space Basic Course (a course for all new lieutenants covering basic doctrine, core values and ethics). One of his fellow flight members said the core values weren’t important.

I’m curious how others see us. One of the very first things you hear at every place conducting basic military training is: “perception is reality”. What is the perception one gets when looking at four lieutenant colonels standing outside the chow hall “smoking and joking” without a single one of them wearing their hats or at a technical sergeant whose BDUs look as if they have been wadded-up and stored in a coffee can (actual cases witnessed personally)? How does a junior officer or airman answer a lieutenant colonel’s remark to “not concern yourself with my hat”? After all, is it really that important anyway?

I’ve thought a lot about that. It’s one of the reasons I’ve waited so long to write this article. Then I remembered: “perception is reality”. How dangerous does Joe–bag of doughnuts look to us? He’s dressed in ratty clothes with a towel on his head for goodness sakes! Then we see the aftermath of the explosive-laden belt he was wearing: the burning wreckage of what we think was once a bus. Now, how does the terrorist perceive us as he looks through the fence, with people walking around base wearing all sorts of different hats and no shirts? One wing commander at another deployed location told the whole wing that he didn’t care what your uniform looked like; he had other, more important things to worry about. If we have become so lackadaisical with our most basic of standards, doesn’t this make his job only that much easier?

I’m sure by now we’ve all seen, or at least heard about, the newly proposed uniform. Our Chief of Staff, General John Jumper, said he wants the USAF to have a uniform we can wear proudly. I truly hope he is successful in this endeavor. There is certainly a need for a more comfortable and up to date utility uniform, but shouldn’t we already have a uniform we should be proud to wear? The last time I checked, mine still said US AIR FORCE on it.

What is it that truly distinguishes a mob from a professional army? At its most basic, there are only two things: discipline and a uniform. Armed forces have been around, probably, since civilization began in the fertile land between the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Professional armies have only been around since the time of the Roman Empire, though. Uniforms didn’t really appear until then. Not only were they used to distinguish combatants from non-combatants on the battlefields, but they also were to show civilians that “I am a soldier”. In these roman times, soldiers enjoyed a very high social status; indeed, as a leader, you weren’t held in much high regard unless you had military experience. This has been true throughout our history, since those ancient times.

We’ve all been through some form of basic military training. I hope that we can recall what it is we learned there. I hope that we all can look into ourselves and remember that we chose to serve our country. Doing so should mean that we believe in “Duty, Honor, Country” in whatever form it’s said. Has our esprit d’ corps really fallen so low that many of our brothers and sisters no longer care to represent the US Air Force, the greatest military power in history, in its finest form? I hope that if someone does feel this way, they would recognize that perhaps it’s time for

them to take off their uniform for good. Standards, such as AFI 36-2903, are only the minimums; excellence is something far beyond that.

Finally, after having said all of this, I'd like to close with a dedication to all of the First Sergeants out there. I admire the work that you do. Those few of you, with whom I have had the pleasure of working, have been true professionals, who we should all strive to emulate. You truly have one of the toughest jobs in the Air Force. Keep up the good work!

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