



## **Early History of the US Air Force Blue Service Uniform**

By the time the Second World War had ended, it was clear to all concerned that the establishment of a separate and fully autonomous air force was simply a matter of time. As a result, planning commenced in fall of 1945 to conceptualise and design a suitably distinctive service dress uniform for the anticipated new military branch. This early effort was, however, quickly complicated to a vast degree by heated disagreements and arguments over the details of the proposed new service dress uniform. The only consensus was that the days of the former standard US Army 'pinks and greens' uniform would soon to come to an end and that a suitable replacement was needed (a rather weak starting point, all other factors considered!).

To say there was much contention over style, shape, features, colors, and distinctive rank insignia to be agreed upon would be considerably understating the situation that existed at the US Army Air Force's higher command headquarters. One of the strongest sentiments prevailing among air force officers in charge of the deliberation was the feeling that wartime conditions had permitted far too much personalisation and individualised variation in attire into the wearing of previous service dress uniforms. Two of the most notorious examples of this state of affairs were the famous Army Air Force '50 mission crush' look of visored service caps and the wild, sometimes bizarre personalisations decorating aircrew A-2 leather flight jackets.

There was also a commonly shared feeling that any new uniform the Air Force adopted should recognise the highly technology-oriented stature of the new service. These sentiments prompted a near consensus at AAFHQ that whatever the other details adopted, the new uniform should ideally be markedly plain, standardized, largely unadorned, and generally identical in overall appearance for both officers and enlisted personnel. Some regarded it as properly a military approximation of the common American 'business suit' and most felt individualised attire to be incompatible with a carefully structured, technically oriented military organisation in which strict adherence to rules, regulations, and directives are crucial aspects of the process.

Meanwhile, some of the ideas discussed by AAFHQ included a two-tone uniform (similar to the old Army Air Force 'pinks & greens' style blouse and trousers), a range of colors ranging from darker grays to medium green and sapphire blue, and styles that included a double-breasted, belted blouse. One of the most popular ideas was, quite understandably, that some shade of blue would be most appropriate for a service that performed its primary active service in the air. In this the precedent of the Royal Air Force's traditional dark blue wool service blouse was strongly felt, since that highly esteemed service had used the same basic

blue service dress for several decades. There was also strong sentiment favoring the adoption of a single, standard uniform for both officers and men, a practice varying considerably from the custom of other US military services mandating distinctive officer service dress that differed markedly from enlisted dress. The feeling among the other, more senior services was that promoting too much uniformity, equality, and familiarity in the appearance of officers and enlisted personnel acted to lessen discipline and degrade lines of command authority.

There was also strong favor for keeping the new uniform austere, almost Spartan in its cut and appearance, with perhaps the most extreme opinion coming from Army Air Forces General Lyman R. Whitten, who suggested adoption of a militarized counterpart to the ordinary civilian business suit (no cloth epaulettes, patch pockets, belts, etc.), with merely simple rank insignia attached to it.

Eventually, a darker shade of blue-gray wool cloth came to be favored, as was a single-breasted, belt-less 4-button blouse design (with cloth epaulettes) that featured four pleated patch pockets (two chest and two lower); the proposal bore remarkable resemblance to the RAF Nr. 1 blue service uniform blouse. By 1946, the US Army Air Quartermaster had already developed four prototype blue air force uniform designs on this theme which it displayed and exhibited at several Army Air Force bases. By mid 1947, these displays permitted a survey of comprehensive feedback from servicemen on reactions to the new uniform concept to be completed.

Interestingly, each of the four originally proposed 'blue suit' designs featured braided sleeve rank insignia similar to those used by the Royal Air Force and US Navy, but because the final shade of blue to be used had not yet been agreed upon, and also due to the fact that funding had not yet been successfully secured from Congress, the Air Quartermaster also presented two 'interim' uniforms in khaki and olive drab (which also featured sleeve braid rank).

Brigadier General Lyman Whitten, Deputy Chief of Air Staff, envisioned two alternatives for consideration. These included *"...a near to civilian type outfit with no shoulder loops, no patch pockets, no belt...or anything...just a straight civilian looking suit with merely the rank (braid) on it"* and *"...(the other) one with shoulder loops, patch pockets; (in other words) a military outfit."* To this, Major General Hugh Knerr (Sec. Gen. of the Air Board) sharpened the distinction, asking *"Does the service wish a uniform...decorated with devices and gadgets...traditional to military services of the past, or...a more subdued uniform...adopted to a technical future?"*

The Air Board at this time did not resolve the matter of whether to adopt

RAF/Navy style sleeve rank braid, or traditional Army style rank insignia, but approved use of the present US Army uniform as an interim measure pending approval of a distinctive Air Force counterpart. However, at the behest of Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington, a selection was made of a standard blue wool serge suit in 18 ounce fabric (Uxbridge 1683, cable shade 84) at a specially convened clothing manufacturers conference that featured silver oxidised buttons, bearing the seal of the US Air Force.

Finally, after much further heated discussion and consideration of the uniform's details by Army Air Force Command Headquarters, the new air forces uniform proposal was taken to Congressional lawmakers for funding approval. No sooner was the plan introduced to Congress than it quite unexpectedly ran into a whole *new* set of problems no one at USAAF HQ had anticipated.

The primary obstacle appeared to be that since the new 'Department of Defense' concept had been established to unify the separate (but equal) military service branches under the Secretary of Defense, prominent members of the respective congressional armed forces committee felt that it would be more logical to adopt a *single* standard uniform for *all* the armed forces...Navy, Army, and Air Force included! Subsequently referred to as '*the Purple Suit concept*', this idea would later find unsuccessful expression in Canada's Military Forces Unification Act of the late 1960s, wherein all branches of its military (excluding their navy) were lumped in together as the '*Canadian Forces*' and given a single, standard green service uniform. [Note: A number of years later, this idea was rescinded and each Canadian service had its distinctive uniform restored. In retrospect, this innovation, motivated by a desire to promote fiscal austerity and reduced military spending, proved remarkably unsuccessful from both a philosophical *and* financial standpoint.]

Fortunately, reason and common sense eventually prevailed in Congress after a strong case was made for the deleterious effect on morale and *esprit de corps* that adoption of a single uniform for all services would have and the US Air Force was permitted to pursue further, final implementation of its own distinctive blue uniform. In January 1948 President Truman approved authorization of the proposed new blue Air Force uniform and a week after that Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg officially circulated word that funding had been approved by the congressional appropriations committee. The new uniform, incorporating a shade of blue fabric (patented as 'Uxbridge Blue' and based on "*Uxbridge 1683 Blue, cable shade 84*", developed at the former *Bachman-Uxbridge Worsted Company*) would be available for distribution by September of 1950. It should be noted that Vandenberg clearly caveated that remark by clarifying that no air force personnel should purchase a blue uniform until 'full instructions, specifications, and cloth samples' were available (for official review). In March of 1948, the Air

Board formally stipulated rank chevrons for enlisted personnel and conventional officer grade insignia congruent with existing US Army counterparts.

By April 1949 the process had been accelerated by the new (temporary body, since a *permanent* uniform board would not be initiated until 1959) Air Force Uniform Board (in (Air Force Letters 35-4, 35-46, and 35-47) that announced that the new blue Air Force service dress uniform (officially designated as being *Shade Nr. 84*) was available for purchase and immediate use (while also specifying accessories and components to be worn on the interim khaki and OD transitional uniforms). Actual distribution of the new blue uniforms would at first begin on an attritional basis, with the new service dress being issued when older, worn-out OD colored uniforms were turned in. Shortly thereafter (in 1950), sufficient stocks of the new blue service dress uniform had become available to permit general replacement issue for all members of the service, but in the interim, both the newer blue and the older OD colored service dress ensembles were authorized for wear concurrently. [Note: It was not unusual at first to find the earlier enlisted Army OD uniform blouses with the new style Air Force blue & silver chevrons sewn on during the period of initial overlap of the two styles].

For officers, conventional US Army style metal officer insignia were worn on shoulder epaulettes of the new blouse, while enlisted ranks would wear new sewn-on and somewhat stylized cloth rank chevrons consisting of silver and blue stripes (referred to as the '*stars and bars stripes*') on their sleeves. The new blue service dress blouse featured oxidized silver colored 'US' insignia for officers on the lapels, whereas enlisted ranks would wear the same oxidised silver 'US' insignia within a circle on their lapels. The only other metal insignia authorized for wear on the new blouse were aviation badges for rated flight crew and rows of service decoration ribbons on the left chest in the traditional manner (an exception was made for General Staff officer aides, chaplains, and air police, who *could* wear their distinctive insignias). [Note: It is worth noting in passing that the new silver insignia were created in an oxidised silver finish *deliberately* to discourage individuals from *individualising* them with a high polish, as had been occasionally done during the Second World War.]

Whereas some unit and most major command embroidered emblems (such as 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force, etc.) were initially permitted on the left shoulder of the new Shade Nr. 84 service blouse, by the mid to late 50s these were eventually prohibited and the only cloth emblems worn on the sleeves of the new blue blouse thereafter were to be the rank emblems of enlisted personnel.

As may be predicted whenever a given group contains a number of individuals with divergent and widely ranging tastes, the new Shade 84

blue service dress uniform received decidedly mixed reviews. Some greatly favored the simple, uncomplicated nature of the new uniform, while an equal number of airmen felt it was too drab and too dull. Efforts to give the new visored blue service cap that distinctive 'crush' look were effectively stymied when it was discovered that the visored service caps featured a soft, sponge-rubber forming ring inside the crown that resisted crushing (although some removed the sponge ring, this practice was forbidden by specific orders not to).

Field grade officers (excluding Majors, but including Lt. Colonels, and Colonels) and General Officers had new visor decorations authorized for wear on their visored service caps that consisted of a silver bullion cloud and lightning embroidery on a felted black upper visor surface. Sometimes referred to as 'scrambled eggs', this distinctive Air Force senior officer identifying feature soon earned the nickname '*farts & darts*'. Company grade officers (Lieutenants and Captains) wore plain, black, polished visors on their caps, as did enlisted men, with all ranks (company grade officers and all enlisted men) having black leather chin straps on their visored service dress cap.

The highest US Air Force General officers functioning in special capacity as *Air Force Chief of Staff* (or in the event an Air Force General served as *Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*) had additional clouds and lightning bullion embroidery circling the woven bands of their visored service caps. For officers, a silver counterpart to the traditional gold US Army eagle was worn frontally on the visored cap, while enlisted ranks wore a slightly smaller version within a circle (following somewhat the existing US Army custom).

Officer rank blouses also featured a dark blue strip of half-inch embroidered braid situated three inches from the end of each sleeve, whilst enlisted sleeves lacked this braid. Aside from these small touches, the officer and enlisted rank service dress uniform blouses were indeed almost identical in general appearance. The fabled 'bus driver look' complaint would soon arise as a protest to this understated, unadorned blue apparel.

As the process continued in succeeding years, in keeping with the original intent to simplify the new Shade 84 Service Dress blouse, higher Air Force officials remained strongly in favor of the 'plain blue suit' concept and efforts to remove various insignia and decorations deemed superfluous (from Army Air Force days) to the uniform remained consistent. The renewed emphasis on the 'clean and uncluttered' look (aircrew aviation badges and service ribbons only) promptly ran afoul of complaints by less senior personnel that while senior Air Force officers had plenty of colorful 'splash and dash' on their uniform blouses (including distinctive visor embellishments), junior officers and enlisted personnel were being discouraged from wearing distinctive insignia

adornments. All relics of prior service in the Army Air Force soon disappeared on the service blouse, adding to the 'unadorned' simplicity that was the favored standard, but this also resulted in further waves of strident protest from Air Force personnel who felt the banned badges and decorations were important for morale purposes. The associated indignant protest reached a peak when USAF Command HQ issued a directive to remove the silver 'US' insignia from the new blouse. To many Air Force personnel, that was one insult too many and the directive was soon reversed after scores of protests had been filed with Congressmen by servicemen over these changes that many deemed extremely 'insulting' to their sense of national purpose and identity.

Periodic renewals of efforts to reduce uniform clutter were further frustrated by the fact that certain specialty badges *had* been allowed for wear on the service dress uniform that included distinctive medical, nursing, and police devices. Based on this precedent (in true *Camel's nose in the tent* fashion), a missile crew badge soon followed. This provoked a further proliferation of service dress specialty and unit devices, all considerably frustrating the high headquarters staff intent to simplify the new blue uniform.

From the 1960s through the present era, given the recurrent war-fighting campaigns that have actively involved US military forces, and with regard to the serious problems associated with personnel retention concerns, the bureaucratic 'war' against US Air Force service dress uniform gaudiness (at least in terms of badges, insignia, and other distinctive decorations) has repeatedly failed. Today there are numerous specialty badges for just about every major occupational specialty in the Air Force. The latest one, just approved in November 2009, is a wing-like device for remotely piloted vehicle (UAV or UPVs such as the Predator, Global Hawk, and similar unmanned aircraft) operators. There is every reason to expect the trend to continue, since it is clear that those who risk their lives for their nation strongly insist on being allowed to wear some conspicuous visual recognition of their service in the form of insignia and/or uniform embellishments.

## **Major Uniform Revisions and Changes**

### **First Pattern US Air Force Blue Service Dress Uniform**

In July of 1952, the old style OD colored US Army style service dress uniform was finally phased out entirely (no longer permitted for Air Force wear). The first and original 'Shade 84' USAF Service Dress uniform, consisting of a blue-gray belt-less, semi-drape, single-breasted blouse with epaulettes, four patch pockets and four silver *30 ligne* (3/4 inch) oxidized buttons (plus smaller ones on each pocket and on the epaulettes), remained virtually the same from its introduction until about 1964. This original blue blouse had large lower pockets, prompting the

observation by some that they were '*Captain Kangaroo pockets*', a reference to the commodious coat pockets popularized by that popular children's television host of the 50s and 60s. The original Shade 84 blouse was also known as the 'winter uniform coat', since it featured moderately wide lapels and was made from heavier, all wool serge fabric (either 15 or 18 oz).

Optional fabric types and weights were authorized for officers that included all-wool gabardine (13 to 15 oz), all-wool Venetian gabardine (13 oz), and all-wool *barathea* cloth (15 oz). Silver oxidised buttons in use had the Seal of the Department of the Air Force on them in relief outline. The blouse was a fitted item, slightly compressed at the waist, but comfortably eased in the shoulders, chest, and underarm areas. Matching trousers featured pocket tabs in the rear, were full cut with zipper or button closure, and hung straight without cuffs. They were made of corresponding blouse fabric materials and always matched the shade of the blouse. A webbed belt, made in Shade 89 color, was worn with the trousers; it featured a plain, unadorned silver oxidised friction buckle otherwise identical to that used by the US Army.

The appropriate shirt worn with this assembly of blouse and trousers was the USAF Blue Shade 120 cotton poplin or 126 oxford cloth shirt, in a single (left) pocket style without shoulder loops or epaulettes. A USAF Shade 84 blue tie was also worn as part of the basic uniform. Either a Shade 84 overseas cap (sometimes called the flight cap, or overseas cap) or standard Shade 84 Blue visored service cap in wool serge material was normally worn to complete the ensemble, and wear of the visored cap was not permitted with the sponge rubber ring removed. All ranks featured a plain black leather chin strap (including senior officers) on their visored caps. The same (lighter) optional materials as cited in earlier paragraphs were also approved for use on garrison and service caps. On flight cap edging, pure silver edging was worn by General Officers; silver and blue edging in a diamond pattern was worn by all lower officer ranks, and solid blue edging was worn by all enlisted ranks. Shoes were all black polished low-quarter type with black stockings.

In addition to the Shade 84 Service Dress Uniform a Summer Service Uniform Tan Shade 193 was authorized as optional lightweight summer wear in the early 1950s to replace the older AAF khaki colored summer uniform; it was worn with the standard Shade 84 blue service cap and/or flight cap. This uniform was commonly referred to as 'silver-tans', but by 1965 this popular uniform was no longer authorized for wear and was replaced by a lighter 'All Season Blue Shade 1084' ensemble. Aside from being constructed of lighter, more multi-seasonal material, it was in cut and style completely identical to the original Shade 84 ('Winter') Service Dress. The transition period for retirement of the 'silver tans' and replacement by the new Shade 1084 ensemble ran from 1962 through

October of 1965, although there was a very slight change in the hue of the fabric (slightly darker). Eventually, the original, heavier Shade 84 ('winter') Service Dress was retired when it was considered no longer serviceable and the newer Shade 1084 'multi-season' ensemble became the year-round standard. Two weights of material in the newer Shade 1084 soon came into use, but it was not permitted to mix the two weights (such as a heavier blouse with a lighter set of trousers).

In 1967 a newer, darker shade of blue fabric material was introduced for the service dress uniform. This was Air Force Shade 1549 and both the earlier Shade 84 and the newer Shade 1549 Service Dress ensembles were permitted for wear by Air Force personnel.

Although all US Air Force enlisted personnel were issued an initial complete set of uniforms, officers had the privilege of having custom tailored, higher quality uniforms made for them. The bespoke providers of these uniforms were required to submit their materials for approval by the Air Force, and labels testifying to this certification usually appeared on all such custom fabricated uniform items.

### **Second pattern US Air Force Service Dress Uniform (McConnell)**

By 1969, under the aegis of Air Force Chief of Staff John P. McConnell, the new Shade 1549 Blue uniform (which used a slightly darker shade of blue than the original gray-blue Shade 84) came to be authorised as the permanent service dress attire. Major changes in the design included slightly narrowed lapels and the original two lower blouse pockets (i.e. '*Captain Kangaroo pockets*') were replaced by flapped hidden pockets. Overall, the new 'McConnell' service dress uniform amounted to a visually attractive and more 'up to date' variation on the original 1949 design, although most other blouse details were kept unchanged. It was a rather good looking concept and in our opinion, one which should have been kept in perpetuity (with very slight upgrade detailing only); however, as we shall shortly see, this was not to be.

From 1969 through about 1975, the newer 'McConnell' Blue Shade 1549 remained standard and the preceding Blue Shade 1084 ensemble was finally completely phased out. Advances in fabrics and materials also saw the introduction of newer polyester blends in proportionate winter and summer weights. By 1978, the term *All Season Blue* was replaced with the term *dark blue service dress* in common reference. This change remained more or less the status quo through about 1986, when a radical change in authorized insignia for use with the service dress uniform occurred.

Prior to 1986 all Air Force service dress uniform insignia were required by regulation to be of the dull silver or silver oxidised type. Beginning in 1986 regulations first permitted high gloss insignia to be used (this has

come to be known as 'bright' or 'mirror finish'). Whether the dull silver or high-gloss insignia were to be used, all insignia in use on a uniform had to match: mixing of the older dull and newer shiny types was not permitted. Both types of insignia were permitted concurrently, however, until about 1991 when the next major service dress uniform updating occurred (the so-called and highly controversial '*McPeak Uniform*') and from that date onwards, all uniform insignia was required to be of the mirror-finish type.

The mid to late 80s were a time of rapid change with regard to smaller uniform changes, since the by now permanent *Air Force Uniform Board* engaged in repeated experimental variations in attempts to further 'improve' the existing blue service dress. These changes included use, by 1989, of darker Blue Shade 1578 (wool & polyester mix), Blue Shade 1598 polyester serge, and Blue Shade 1608 polyester and wool tropical weave fabrics. There was also a completely polyester (100%) service dress ensemble, but the same caveats concerning mixing and matching of materials and fabrics remained in place. As has been pointed out in other references, such as John Schlund's rather good historical assay of the Air Force officer's service dress uniform history, this was a period of intense and frequent transition and experimental variation in both details and materials. Due to the complex sequence of events associated with changes to the service dress uniform (i.e. proposals, wear-testing of prototypes, adoption dates, etc.) tracking such minutiae precisely in details of time and dates becomes all but impossible (unless the historian has direct access to such documentation as the actual minutes of Air Force Uniform Board committee minutes).

### **Third Pattern US Air Force Service Dress Uniforms (McPeak)**

In 1991 perhaps the most controversial and certainly most radical revision of the blue US Air Force Service Dress Uniform occurred at the instigation of the new Air Force Chief of Staff, General Merrill A. McPeak. General McPeak, the fifteenth Air Force Chief of Staff since establishment of a separate US Air Force branch in 1947, felt that the Air Force was long overdue for a return to the original 'plain blue suit' concept and ordered a complete new style of uniform into use. The extreme feelings this new uniform engendered by all who were affected by its establishment were so intense that the uniform eventually came to be not just identified with General McPeak, but known pointedly as '*The McPeak Uniform*'.

The radically new McPeak service dress uniform found its expression in a dark Blue Shade 1620 service dress blouse fabricated from material that was a 55/45 percent polyester/wool blend serge weave of relatively light weight. In an extreme reversion to the original 'simple, unadorned' style concept, the blouse did away entirely with upper chest flapped pockets, substituting a single, basic upper left breast 'slit' pocket and two lower

flapped (but hidden) pockets. There were also moderate width lapels and no cloth epaulettes on the shoulders. Its most distinctive feature consisted of sleeve end silver rank braid patterned after civilian airliner pilot rating braids and US Navy sleeve ranks (a similar concept of which had been among the first features considered back in 1947). Senior (General) Officers had proportionately more elaborate silver rank braid with 'cloud and lightning' pattern overlays (similar to service cap bullion visor patterns). There were no 'US' insignia displayed on the new blouse's completely unadorned collar and the only insignia authorized for use on it were mirror-finish aviation rating wings. Three of the highest decoration ribbons awarded to the wearer could also be worn, centered over the upper left breast slit pocket. Underneath the blouse a standard light-blue USAF shirt and AF Blue Shade 1621 tie were worn with the blouse, as were trousers of a similar fabric to the blouse. Insignia worn with the McPeak blouse were to be mirror-finish (wings only), but flight or visored service caps worn with the new blouse were NOT required to match the blouse's fabric (strangely). The three silver buttons worn on the McPeak blouse featured, in another total break with prior custom, a new design with the original US Army Air Corps 'winged star' emblem in high relief (sometimes referred to as the *Hap Arnold style button*).

The incorporation of the new style (traditional US Navy type) sleeve rank sorely vexed many Air Force personnel, who felt that the uniform was not just inappropriate for Air Force issue, but vastly unappealing and aesthetically unattractive as well. [Note: Some have speculated that some small part of this resistance to the new look may have sprung from latent traditional USAF and USN rivalries, a surmise that may indeed have some verity given the keen competition that existed between US Naval Aviation and the US Air Force in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.] While many higher level officers readily adopted the new service dress (in a display of political solidarity with the new Chief of Staff), most lower ranking officers and virtually all enlisted personnel found the new design total anathema. Predictably, a huge outcry went up and resistance to the McPeak uniform was strong and immediate.

When the new uniform was first publicly revealed in October of 1991, a four year transitional period was established during which personnel could switch from the earlier McConnell style uniform to the new McPeak ensemble. Wear testing was anticipated as extending through 1992, with the official issue date being set for October 1995. During the transition period both the earlier McConnell style and the new McPeak uniforms were permitted for wear concurrently, but such was the resistance to the new McPeak style that most lower rank officers and virtually all enlisted personnel resisted the transition and continued to wear the old style (McConnell) uniform, hoping that a rescission of the new style would eventually occur; most waited as long as they could before even

seriously *considering* a switch to the new style.

Fortunately for all who so strongly resisted this change, General McPeak was replaced by General R.R. Fogleman in October of 1994, one year before the transition would have become mandatory. General Fogleman, quite well aware of the outspoken displeasure voiced by personnel over the McPeak uniform, rescinded the earlier order as soon as he was installed as the new Chief of Staff. As a result of all this, the McPeak uniform is today generally regarded by historians with bemused interest, while uniform collectors consider an example of the McPeak service dress to be a rare and valuable find.

#### **Fourth Pattern US Air Force Service Dress Uniform (Fogleman)**

In the mid-90s, a state of *ordered confusion* reigned with regard to the status of the blue Air Force service dress uniform, since the older (McConnell style) uniform was still authorized for wear until 1999, and the new McPeak uniform remained authorized for wear by those who had purchased them until September of 1996. When the McPeak uniform was discontinued for new acquisition after 1994, there was no automatic reversion to the earlier McConnell design. Instead, a third proposal was produced by the Air Force Uniform Board that has today become known as *The Retrofit Uniform*. Of all three designs, the newest (Retrofit) style would alone survive. It remains authorized through the present date (2009) and due to recent developments (to be covered in following paragraphs) shall probably remain in use for the foreseeable future.

The Retrofit Uniform may be described as being a polyester/wool fabric of serge weave, semi-draped, single breasted, with three silver 'winged star' (or *Hap Arnold*) buttons on its front. As with the McPeak style, there is one welt-edged slit pocket on the upper left breast, with two lower pocket flaps (the pockets themselves are non-functional). Officers wear fabric epaulettes with mirror-finish rank insignia placed in the conventional manner, while *enlisted* Retrofit blouses do not feature epaulettes (since rank stripes are work sewn to the upper outer sleeve, as in the prior custom).

Originally, the Retrofit blouse was authorized to be worn with identical 'mirror-finish 'US' insignia on the lapel of *both* officers *and* enlisted personnel, marking another radical change in previous practice; however, in late 2007, a revision of the regulation established a return to the 'US' insignia within a circle (as in the original custom) for enlisted personnel, permitting only officers to wear the non-circled 'US' on their lapel. [Note: This small change has in itself helped create *much* uncertainty concerning uniform 'authenticity' in venues such as motion pictures where the uniform was worn as a costume prop, and is simply another source of potential confusion for those who are interested in Air Force uniform history.] Officers wear a half-inch dark blue braid three inches from the

end of the sleeve in the former manner (General Officers wear one and a half inch dark braid) and enlisted personnel have no sleeve-end braid (as before).

Mirror-finish insignia are mandatory with the Retrofit ensemble, but a profusion of specialty badges, rating insignia, and other insignia are now permitted to be worn on the left breast (above the pocket welt), along with decoration ribbons in either three abreast or four abreast stacked rows.

### **Fifth Pattern US Air Force Service Dress (Pending)**

In 2006, a consensus was apparently reached in USAFHQ that an entirely *new* blue Service Dress Uniform should be developed for Air Force personnel (doubtless causing much head-scratching and further bemusement by those interested in or involved with the history of Air Force traditions!). There are some who remain rather puzzled as to *why* the Air Force seems to change its mind so regularly with regard to its service dress, viewing this tendency as perhaps part of a (public relations generated) compulsion to reinvent its image every six months or so for recruitment purposes.

Consequently, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May (2006), the Department of the Air Force unveiled two proposed prototypes for a new US Air Force Service Dress uniform. These designs were (we surmise) the result of concerns within the Air Force that in order to continue to attract high caliber personnel (and to help retain them), a new uniform was needed that *'more closely reflected the traditions and heritage of the service.'* The first prototype, fabricated from dark blue wool/polyester fabric and known as the *'Billy Mitchell Heritage Coat'*, featured an uncomfortable stand-up collar (a standard feature found on WWI blouses), left and right upper patch pockets, two lower flapped pockets, cloth epaulettes, a five-button front, and a belt. The second proposal, made of similar wool/polyester material and known as the *'Hap Arnold Heritage Coat'*, was similar to the Billy Mitchell prototype except that it featured a conventional rolled-down collar with wide lapels similar to that worn on the US Army service dress uniform of WWII.

After a series of wear tests and actual use of the two prototypes revealed that the Billy Mitchell proposal was rather uncomfortable in a functional context, a third proposal was configured that closely approximated the first Hap Arnold prototype, but with narrower lapels. The belt concept was kept, along with epaulettes, upper patch pockets, 4 front buttons, and flapped lower pockets. This modification had the appearance of a fairly good looking, handsome design and was met with some favor by those airmen wear-testing it, although one complaint that was repeated often seems to have been that the belt was a bit awkward and confining

in normal use.

Despite all the testing and after much deliberation on the matter of how to best proceed with a new *heritage* look (a process that had taken almost two years thus far), in early 2009 Air Force Chief of Staff General Norman Schwartz announced that the project had been put on indefinite hold, so that 'more important priorities could be more adequately dealt with'. This followed closely upon several developments that included substantial new budgetary cutbacks and, not surprisingly, no small amount of ridicule and criticism of the Air Force's apparent 'vain concern' with its appearance, by both the public and the other armed services. General Schwartz further qualified his decision by stating that although the new service dress Heritage project had been placed on indefinite hold, the findings and determinations arising from it would '*...be available to Air Force leaders for review and possible future action*'.

This is the present status of the US Air Force's Blue Service Dress Uniform (as of November 2009) and there are few indicators that suggest that further action will be forthcoming in the short term on this matter. In the meantime, the 'Retrofit' uniform will continue to soldier on as the standard service dress of all US Air Force personnel, as far as anyone has yet been able to reasonably speculate.

### **Apocrypha and Anecdotal Information**

One of the most popular and enduring of the anecdotal 'legends' associated with the original blue Shade 84 Service Dress was the fact that it was purportedly often mistaken by civilians for something other than a military uniform. So unused to 'Air Force Blue' uniforms on its airmen were ordinary citizens that some former Air Force personnel report having been mistaken for bus drivers or airline crews by passersby, on the street or near transportation terminals. A frequently repeated and popular utterance by many today, there is nevertheless some reason to believe that such incidents were actually far *less* common than one would think; whatever the actual facts were, this legend appears to have great symbolic appeal for those who reflectively look back on their early experiences in the new service. This 'fact' has often been cited as evidence, by some who strongly resisted the effort to 'clean up' the service dress blouse, that the new 'simple and uncluttered' look lacked suitable glamour and appeal appropriate to the pride, traditions, and aviation history it represented.

Another favorite anecdotal reference associated with the large lower blouse pockets that appeared on the First Pattern Shade 84 Service Dress Uniform blouse was the term popularly used to describe them: *Captain Kangaroo pockets*. Popular children's television show host Bob Keeshan, whose network program first aired in 1955, wore a large train conductor's coat with oversized pockets that he tended to pull surprises

out of. It didn't take some wag very long to make the comparison with the new Shade 84 blouse's somewhat equally commodious pockets. The allusion, while amusing, was functionally unfair, since the pockets were similar to those featured on the standard Royal Air Force Number 1 Service Dress (the equivalent of our USAF Service Dress Uniform) uniform blouse, with which they had much in common.

Regarding the new style enlisted personnel stripes adopted when the Shade 84 blouse was first introduced, some confusion exists today over rank references to a particular period. This is due to at least three separate major overhauls of the enlisted rank chevrons over the past 60 years. Although the general shape of the chevrons have remained similar (upward sweeping silver bars radiating to the left and right of a centrally circled silver star), minor changes over time involved both rank designations and cosmetic appearance changes that have considerably compounded the task of accurately identifying past rank ratings.

The first and original set of the new USAF chevrons, initiated in 1949, were ordered as follows. No stripe = Airman Basic (E-1); one stripe = Airman Third Class (E-2); two stripes = Airman Second Class (E-3); three stripes = Airman First Class (E-4); four stripes = Staff Sergeant (E-5); five stripes = Tech Sergeant (E-6); six stripes = Master Sergeant (E-7).

The second set of rank chevrons, initiated in approximately 1974, featured an odd removal of the central silver star that left the circle entirely blue (no star) for several of the lowest ranks, and added two higher Master Sergeant ranks to the one already existing. The rank designations of the new chevrons were: No stripe = Airman Basic (E-1); one stripe with solid blue circle = Airman (E-2); two stripes with solid blue circle = Airman First Class (E-3); three stripes with solid blue circle = Senior Airman (E-4); four stripes, with silver star in blue circle = Staff Sergeant (E-5); five stripes, with silver star in blue circle = Tech Sergeant (E-6); six stripes, with silver star in blue circle = Master Sergeant (E-7); seven stripes, with silver star in blue circle (with one superior stripe) = Senior master Sergeant (E-8); eight stripes, with silver star in blue circle (with two superior stripes) = Chief Master Sergeant (E-9). The two new highest Master Sergeant ranks were added owing to a desire to provide more 'high-end' promotional opportunities for enlisted airmen, although to some this move seemed more like a taxonomic splitting of hairs. Chevrons were arranged with three lateral stripes adjacent to the starred circle and a maximum of three below it, with a maximum of two arrayed in a superior arch over the circle.

Somewhat later (in the 80s), the enlisted rank chevrons and designations were again revised, in which the process the silver star was again restored to the solid blue circle for the lowest ranks; the stripe arrangement was also modified slightly (as follows): No stripe = Basic

Airman (E-1); one stripe = Airman (E-2); two stripes = Airman First Class (E-3); three stripes = Senior Airman (E-4); four stripes = Staff Sergeant (E-5); five stripes = Tech Sergeant (E-6); six stripes (with one superior stripe) = Master Sergeant (E-7); seven stripes (with two superior stripes) = Senior Master Sergeant (E-8); eight stripes (with three superior stripes) = Chief Master Sergeant (E-9). In addition to the First Sergeant variant (with diamond), there was a further higher enlisted rating added of 'Command Chief Master Sergeant' (also E-9) and a rating of '*Command Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force*' (E-9). The single individual selected for promotion to this last and highest enlisted rank served as the senior non-commissioned advisor to the Air Force Chief of Staff in all matters affecting enlisted personnel. Additionally, the stripe arrangement for the highest ranks now featured a maximum of three stripes lateral to the starred circle, with a maximum of two below and three arrayed in a superior arch over the circle.

There was additionally, as if the above renderings of rank and designation aren't confusing enough, a briefly transient period in the mid 60s when the three stripe 'Airman First Class' rank (E-4) was re-designated as 'Sergeant'. This was another attempt to instill a greater sense of personal pride in airmen who had reached that level (although E-4 is not considered an NCO rank in the US Air Force; only E-5 and above are regarded as NCO ranks), for purposes of bolstering reenlistment and enlisted retention rates at a time when the war in Vietnam was becoming problematic and extremely unpopular at home. [Officer ranks remained unchanged and exactly as originally structured in the US Army, prior to the *National Security Act* of 1947].

[Note: Owing to the fact that many enlisted personnel could not realistically afford formal Mess Dress uniforms back in the 50s and 60s, the standard blue Service Dress Uniform blouse was authorised to be worn with a white shirt and black bow-tie in a mode designated as 'Semi-Formal Dress'. Senior Enlisted personnel were expected to provide their own standard USAF Mess Dress uniforms for NCO dining-in events.]

### **Some General Observations and Commentary**

One is forced to conclude, after a review of all the changes made to the basic 'Air Force Blues' over the past 6 decades, that good sense has frequently been sacrificed to the overriding interests of somewhat lesser and more peripheral importance, as regards appropriate respect for the chief traditions and legacies of the service. The most recent round of proposed uniform changes (the so-called 'Heritage Coat' project) has perhaps predictably provoked much strong and outspoken reaction among US Air Force service personnel. One particularly pointed and sharply incisive comment noted at an Air Force website on the new uniform matter noted that "*...It almost seems as if every new Air Force Chief of Staff harbors a latent desire to become a fashion designer*".

Ouch!

The chief conflict appears here to consist of a clash between three not very complementary or congruent main elements: 1) A higher command desire to adhere to the original uniform clean, simple, and uncluttered uniform appearance; 2) recognition of the need to maintain, sustain, and perhaps 'recapture' a sense of tradition and heritage; and 3) a recognised need to make the uniform glamorous and dashing enough to foster a stronger sense of pride by its wearers (read: principally for lower enlisted ranks, whom the Air Force sorely needs to enlist and/or retain).

Rather than rely on more internalised and possibly more *cerebral* appeals to a sense of principle, mission, substance, and noble intent to enlist and retain its enlisted personnel, the Air Force instead seems to have fallen back on the far easier and more superficial promotion of 'splash, flash, and dash' visual gimmickry to achieve that purpose. Despite the higher command's continuing effort to set a simple and uncluttered aesthetic standard for its uniforms, it has found through sheer practical expediency that it can ignore the colorful impact of more 'visually attractive' uniforms and decorations *only at its dire peril*, since younger soldiers who go to war want to display sartorial evidence of their calling that equates to (in their minds) the glory and bravery they feel it should reflect.

A level-headed analysis (complemented by a healthy dollop of good taste) of the entire evolutionary process that US Air Force uniforms have undergone in the past 60 years strongly suggests that the *slightly* militarised original 1949 'plain blue uniform' concept was the correct one, and that moreover, it very likely should have been retained. Instead of periodically redesigning the uniform with the nervous earnestness of a major fashion house designer (who feels compelled by peer competition to constantly add unique and singular new things to his collection), the Air Force should properly have settled instead for continuing to make very minor, subtle improvements to the basic original blue uniform design of 1949. Changes therefore logically might have been *restricted* to such improvements as slight adjustments of the lapels, use of slightly darker shades of newer (polyester blends) blue fabrics, and some improved tailoring of trousers for fit. As for all the radical restyling and redesigning that have instead been resorted to, the functional results have simply proven (in retrospect) too expensive, too unnecessary, and (in our opinion) too unsuccessful to justify them.

Certainly one of the most important aspects of building and promoting a strong sense of service loyalty and pride in enlisted personnel is sustained respect for, and acknowledgement of, existing history and heritage. Such a sense is not achieved with frequent overhauls consisting mainly of cheap visual artifice, but by steady and unchanging respect for the past accomplishments and customs of the service. One way that objective may be achieved is by resisting the urge to change or

modify uniform traditions, and certainly there exists no better example of this than that evidenced by the US Marine Corps.

The Corps appears to well understand the need to remain constant and steadfast in its regard for historically important symbols and visual displays (read: uniforms, insignia, and related items of heraldry) to best foster and preserve an enduring sense of tradition and pride in its personnel. Its uniforms have remained essentially the same for almost a full century. In contrast to that, the Air Force's constant, frantic public relations efforts to *reinvent* itself periodically with a new and updated uniform betray a certain sense of uncertainty and a lack of broader, more *enduring* vision (in our opinion).

An excellent example of the above may be seen in the recent Air Force dithering over development of an appropriately distinctive '*Airman Battle Uniform*'. After adoption of a blue camouflage scheme ABU, the new pattern and color were later determined to be unsuitable, requiring further extensive (and expensive) changes to be made. The total cost for all of this was quite substantial and in a time of tight military fiscal restraints (with active war-fighting going on in several theatres), it would seem almost a no-brainer that there are far *better* ways to expend existing limited budget funds than in support or pursuit of superficial fashion statements.

### **Helpful References and Sources for Further Study**

There is, perhaps surprisingly, a relative paucity of useful, accurate and comprehensive information available on-line on the subject of US Air Force uniforms history. One of the best references available at this time (2009) is *Brother John Schlund's* rather good website on Air Force Uniform history. Brother Schlund seems a somewhat 'complex' fellow, having been a collector of militaria for most of his life, but is someone who is also a member of a staunchly Roman Catholic religious order (the *Order of Mary, or Marionites*). While the images and content on Air Force uniforms at his site (some taken directly from AFM references) are all commendable for the most part, Schlund virtually ignores the enlisted ranks and focuses his attention instead on uniform information relevant to senior Air Force officers only. Viewed from a certain stance, there is a bit of an elitist bias discernible in Schlund's coverage of the subject, since in our opinion a historian should concern himself with the *entire* subject range: the history of uniforms of enlisted personnel being equally as important as their officer counterparts.

Unfortunately, there are those who persist in regarding commissioned officers as somehow being more glamorous and deserving of special regard than the ordinary, lowly 'soldier', but it is in fact the ordinary enlisted soldier who executes war. It is his actions, courage, motivations, and conduct that for the most part determine whether a nation wins or

loses in battle. In recent US Air Force history, prior to the advent of today's increasingly favored experimentation with UAVs (unmanned and armed aerial drones flown by ground based 'pilots'), commissioned aviator officers were the primary element involved in fighting (as aircrew); this should not obscure the fact that no aircraft or its pilot could even get off the ground without the efforts of those 70 percent or so of total Air Force personnel who are of enlisted ranks, working alongside flight crews in critically important technical support roles.

Now, with the distinction between flying officers and highly trained enlisted personnel becoming blurred by increasing reliance of the new generation of unmanned, remotely flown combat vehicles, the glamour formerly associated exclusively with commissioned officer aviators appears destined to come to an end, in the near future. Clearly, highly trained enlisted personnel have been shown to be just as capable (with the right training) of 'flying' UAVs as their aviator officer cohorts, so an elitist bias for officer rank status shall soon (hopefully) become a relic of past customs. [Note: This expectation is further encouraged by the somewhat ironic fact that a large number of the highest ranking enlisted personnel in today's US Air Force now possess graduate academic degrees and may actually be more highly educated than many lower ranking officers!]

All that having been said, Brother John Schlund deserves tremendous credit for researching, archiving, and presenting the information he has generated on the history of US Air Force officer uniforms and I have the highest regard for what he has accomplished to date. His material may be found and viewed at a website he maintain on the internet:

[http://usafflagranks.com/usaf\\_service\\_dress\\_coat\\_uniform.html](http://usafflagranks.com/usaf_service_dress_coat_uniform.html)

Other sources, such as information available through *Wikipedia*, are nowhere near as comprehensive as Schlund's and even official US Air Force websites often present a very truncated and greatly over-simplified array of information on this rather convoluted and moderately obscure subject.

Two particularly helpful, full length articles on the history of US Air Force uniforms may be found in papers written for and presented in *Air Force Magazine* by historian and former Air Force Magazine editor Bruce D. Callander. The first, published in 1991, is titled '*The Sartorial Splendor of the Air Force That Was*', while the more recent one (2007) is titled '*Whatever Happened to the Plain Blue Suit?*' Both of these may be viewed at the Air Force Association website on-line <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/Pages/default.aspx> .

Callander has in both cases presented a most readable, entertaining, and historically significant overall review of the development of US Air Force uniforms that has definite value to anyone interested in this subject. I

highly recommend both of his articles, although some of the content in each is repeated to some extent in the other.

In closing, in our opinion the US Air Force owes an indirect debt of gratitude to the Royal Air Force, for the US Air Force Service Dress Uniform shares many commonalities with its RAF precursor that undoubtedly helped inspire it. Although then RAF have changed their *Nr. 1 Service Dress Uniform* slightly over the years, it remains largely true to the original model adopted in the early 1920s. It is my belief that the United States Air Force could learn much by emulating the RAF example and maintaining existing traditions without feeling compelled to resort to radical modifications and alterations of previous bellwether standards. Whether that particular message *EVER* gets across (and the question of whether or not it is too late, at any rate), remains to be determined in future decades.

Regardless of higher command sentiment to hew to the original standard of functional, austere simplicity, pressure continues to be brought to bear on the service by its members, who feel its *Class A Service Dress Uniform* should make a stronger 'military' visual statement than it presently does.

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*[Note: We do not presume to claim the absolute accuracy of the foregoing material and would appreciate contact if errors, unverified assumptions, or incorrect data become apparent in its reading. We would therefore welcome your constructive input; please feel free to visit us at our website with any suggested corrections or comments:  
<http://webs.lanset.com/aeolusaero> ]*

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