

TRADITIONS: From the U.S. Army Signal Corps to U.S. Air Force

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FSH Museum

The U.S. Air Force developed from the U.S. Army, but it is really the child of the Army's Signal Corps.

The Signal Corps has always been the most technologically-oriented branch of the Army – from the development of long-distance communication, to the use of electrical equipment, to the operation of the national weather service, to Arctic exploration.

Assigning development of flying machines to the Signal Corps was a logical step.

All the members of that 1910 aero detachment that grew into the Air Force – from the lieutenant in command to the cook – were members of the Signal Corps. All had backgrounds involving electrical wiring, wired and wireless telegraphy, telephone service or handling of balloons.

As Signal Corps men, most of the detachment wore the insignia and colors of the Signal Corps on their uniforms – crossed signal flags and the

colors golden orange and white.

The master sergeant electrician was the highest rank attainable for a Signal Corps enlisted man. More equivalent to today's warrant officer, there were very few of them. Several of the men in the aero detachment attained that rank and when they did, they wore an insignia called a "lightning bouquet" – five lightning bolts emanating from a central point, which many times was shaped like a cloud.

However, the Signal Corps' Aviation Section soon started developing insignia of its own. An early pilot's badge included a flying eagle clutching signal flags in its talons. The early collar insignia displayed a winged globe or plain wings superimposed over the Signal Corps symbol of flags and torch.

In 1918, the newly-designated Army Air Service adopted a design of horizontal wings crossed by a vertical propeller as its insignia. For its colors, the Air Service adopted blue, for "wild blue yonder," but kept golden

orange to remember its parent, the Signal Corps.

In 1926, the Air Service became a fully independent branch, the Air Corps. In keeping with the Army heraldry tradition that units incorporate their branch colors into their unit insignia, the new Army Air Force units designed patches of blue and golden orange. On their campaign hats, Air Corps enlisted men wore a blue hatcord with an orange slider and acorns. Their garrison caps were piped in blue and orange.

Like their parent Signal Corps, they designed unit patches that included the Master Sergeant Electrician's lightning bolts, now symbolizing speed and being on the forward edge of scientific advancement. Globes symbolized their area of operations covered the world.

The Air Corps made eagles and especially wings, their own symbols. And the white star pierced by a red circle – taken from the national markings used on U.S. aircraft – was uniquely their own.

When the Army reformed



Aviation Cadet Thomas P. Shively

its enlisted rank structure in 1920, all the specialized ranks and their insignia went away. The Master Sergeant Electrician and many other specialized senior sergeants became the new highest Army enlisted rank – the Master Sergeant.

Rank insignia were to include any branch devices on them. However, many branches ignored this, and the new Air Corps, which had just got its insignia two years before, was probably the number one offender. All enlisted rank

insignia displaying the propeller and wings design, from 1920 to 1947, were unauthorized Army insignia. Then it became authorized U.S. Air Force insignia.

When the Air Forces became the United States Air Force in 1947, it kept the blue of the Air Corps, but changed Signal Corps golden orange to golden yellow.

Today, the official colors of the U.S. Air Force are ultramarine blue and golden yellow, representing the sky and the sun. Modern Air Force insignia still has a preference for lightning bolts, globes and stars.

The old Army Air Forces blue-and-orange patch of wings spread to form a "V" for Victory, rising above a pierced star has turned into the Air Force silver-and-blue logo of stylized wings and star doing the very same thing.

And the Master Sergeant Electrician's lightning and cloud insignia now graces the Air Force officer's dress hat.

See TRADITIONS AB17

Army, Air Force insignia share traditions, designs



Unit Insignia, U.S. Army Signal Center and Fort Gordon and U.S. Army Signal School current using branch colors and signal flag design.



Unit Insignia, 106th Signal Brigade, U.S. Army current using branch colors with blue accent and lightning bolt design.



Unit Insignia, 1st Aviation Brigade. U.S. Army current using branch colors with red and white accents and eagle with spread wings design.



Unit Insignia, Airborne Troop Carrier, U.S. Army 1943-1945 using the golden yellow and blue colors later adopted by the U.S. Air Force, red and white accents, with spread wings and star design.



Unit Insignia, Air Forces, U.S. Army 1942-1947 using branch colors with red and white accents, with spread wings suggesting a "V" for Victory and the star from the U.S. aircraft national marking.



Air Medal, 1942-present using Air Corps branch colors, with compass rose, eagle and lightning bolt design. Established by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1942, it is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity in or with the Armed Forces of the United States, shall have distinguished himself/herself by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight.



Collar Insignia, Signal Corps Air Service, officer, WWI, using the Signal Corps signal flags modified by adding wings; other versions used a winged skeleton globe.



Collar Disk, Signal Corps, enlisted, WWI, using the Signal Corps signal flags.



Collar Disk, Air Corps, enlisted, WWI, using the new Air Service propeller and wings design; new officer insignia also used this design.



Campaign Hat Insignia, master electrician sergeant, circa 1907. Called a "lightning bouquet," the design consisted of five lightning bolts emanating from a central point. On many versions, the central point is shaped like a cloud. The lightning bouquet was also used by coast artillery electricians and during WWI by radio operators.

Pre-1920 rank



Private first class – Signal Corps



Private first class – Air Corps



Master sergeant electrician



Corporal – Signal Corps (not authorized after 1920)



Corporal – Air Corps (not authorized)



Sergeant – Signal Corps (not authorized after 1920)



Sergeant – Air Corps (not authorized)



Master sergeant – Air Corps



Private first class – specialist sixth class - cook



Private first class – specialist fifth class – Air Corps



Private first class – specialist second class

Photos courtesy FSH Museum

Army vs. Air Force = mixed signals

In 1983, the Army established the Aviation Branch. This new branch adopted a slightly modified version of the Air Corps propeller and wings insignia, and the Air Corps blue and orange colors. Army Aviation units use these colors, usually with white accents on their insignia. Signal Corps units use their orange and white, but frequently use blue accents on theirs, which leads to Aviation and Signal units having insignia of the same color. To distinguish them, look at the design – wings means Aviation; lightning bolts mean Signal.)

How the Air Force Got Its Stripes?

Among other uniform changes the Air Force developed after 1947 was a unique series of rank insignia for its enlisted people. But Air Force sources do not quite reveal the basis of the design. It seems influenced by aircraft markings of a pierced star and bars, and perhaps the raised and curving wings used on so many World War II Air Forces unit insignia led to the similarly curved stripes of Air Force enlisted rank.

But where did all those stripes come from?

Shortly after the 1920 enlisted rank reform, the Army saw the need to acknowledge Soldiers who had specialized skills with extra pay and prestige. In the rank of private first class, the Army organized a series of specialty ranks – from the lowest, private first class - specialist sixth class, to the highest, private first class – specialist second class.

Although these ranks were not authorized any insignia other than the single chevron worn by all privates first class, insignia were developed anyway, adding a series of arcs below the chevron. The private first class – specialist sixth class insignia looked like today's private first class insignia. The private first class – specialist second class had one chevron with five arcs below it.

The Air Corps units had lots of Soldiers holding these specialty ranks and the commands very frequently allowed their men to wear these unauthorized insignia – with the also unauthorized propeller and wings design in the field between the chevron and first arc.

Take the private first class – specialist second class insignia, change the branch design to the pierced star, slide the star down on top of the arcs, curve the arcs and chevron to suggest wings, change the colors to silver and blue.

Voila: the Air Force Master Sergeant insignia.