

Everyone, even Red the Uniform Tailor, has said his piece about how to fix USAF's blue suit.

In Search of the Perfect Uniform



By Peter Grier

On Oct. 31, 1991, Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, then Air Force Chief of Staff, unveiled a new service uniform to assembled photographers and reporters in the Pentagon's press briefing room. McPeak was wearing it.

The lanky ex-fighter pilot moved somewhat stiffly, and admitted he was no one's idea of a catwalk star, but he gamely tugged at the front of the three-button coat to show off its slim cut. He pointed out his new sleeve rank insignia, a two-inch silver braid embroidered with clouds and thunderbolts topped by three additional narrow braids. He raised his arms high in the air to show the garment's flexibility and ease of wear.

"It's much more comfortable," McPeak said. "The armholes are larger."

McPeak had ordered up the new uniform to give Air Force personnel a more military appearance. What he got was a firestorm of controversy.

Many in the Air Force disliked the new coat, which to critics offered not a more military look but a stripped-down, corporate appearance.

Nor did they approve of the silver piping on the lower sleeves worn by officers to display rank. It looked like

an airline uniform, grumbled many in the service. It looked like a Navy uniform, said others.

"Instead of looking like soldiers in blue uniforms, we will all look like stewards from the Love Boat," wrote one critic in a 1991 letter to the *Air Force Times*.

The new "blues" lasted only three years. McPeak's successor, Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, ditched it within a week of his taking office.

Fix The Ones We Have

Since then, the Air Force has continued its search for a dress uniform that expresses the service's distinct identity. The latest effort—the "heritage coat"—is currently on hold.

The heritage coat was designed to partake of the service's history. Its design borrowed heavily from the belted, high-button jackets of the era of Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, the airpower pioneer and World War II leader of the Army Air Forces.

However, Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, the current Chief of Staff, decided in August to defer a decision on whether to proceed with the heritage coat effort begun by his predecessor, Gen. T. Michael Moseley. Instead, Schwartz wants the service to focus on rolling

out the new airman battle uniform and improved physical training gear.

"The Chief of Staff said he'll take until [this] summer and then decide whether to proceed," said an Air Force spokesman. Schwartz, he added, "wants to fix the uniforms we currently have before we add new uniforms to the inventory."

Given the Air Force's relatively short history as a separate service, it should perhaps come as no surprise that it is still searching about for uniform elements to combine into a distinct look. The Navy, for its part, has had more than 200 years to figure out its uniform requirements. Since World War II, Navy uniform changes have primarily involved materials, as opposed to basic patterns.

For the Air Force, the color blue has been a constant, of course. But the question of how elaborate service uniforms should be has remained open to debate, with opinions veering back and forth over the decades.

McPeak considered the service dress to be too cluttered. He also regarded it as being, at heart, a blue version of the Army's uniform. When he became Chief in 1990, he was determined to give the Air Force a more distinctive look.



Going back to the uniform known as “pinks and greens” (shown here on Gen. George Kenney) was considered, but ultimately rejected.



The result was stripped-down, radical, and unloved—to put it mildly.

Designed by Red the Uniform Tailor, of Toms River, N.J.—and at a cost of \$1.5 million—McPeak’s uniform did away with outer patch pockets and a number of decorative buttons. It eliminated epaulets, emblems, name tags, and as many pin-on items as possible.

The coat was three-button, instead of the old four. Lapels were cut lower to provide what its designer described as a “more elegant fit.” The fabric was a polyester-natural fiber blend, as opposed to the former polyester double-knit.

As Chief, McPeak wanted to shake up the Air Force’s traditional way of doing things. He was known for his attention to detail, and the uniform reflected that.

A fitness enthusiast who mixed his own muesli-based breakfast each morning, McPeak made every effort to stay in shape and said that he expected everyone else who wore a blue uniform to do the same.

The new clothing “fits in with ... our image of a streamlined, trim, and tougher Air Force, with less doodads of all kinds,” said McPeak at the

uniform’s Halloween day unveiling. “It’s a return to basics.”

Rows of “fruit salad” ribbons marking awards and decorations were discarded in favor of a minimalist “top three.”



During the early 1960s, the dress blues (shown here on Gen. Curtis LeMay) bore a close resemblance to today’s uniform.



Then there were the sleeves—more specifically, the silver braids ringing the lower sleeves as indications of rank. Did the braid speak of “US Air Force” or “US Air?” Many in the service thought it was the latter.

“Guilty as charged,” said McPeak, when asked by a reporter if the new coat looked just a little bit like an airline uniform. “We do look something like ... many airline pilots.” However, that was not a bad thing, according to McPeak.

“We want a distinctive military look. We also want an airman’s look,” he said.

Airmen liked the new, more comfortable fabric, and the fit met with approval. In general, though, the stripped-down look got a thumbs-down response. Air Force personnel did not want to be asked the way to the business class lounge. Nor did they want to be confused with Navy officers.

BDUs Are Better

Among the senior officers who were not fond of the new design was Fogleman, who was then the commander of Air Mobility Command at Scott AFB, Ill. He directed members of his command to wear the battle dress uniform, not service dress, as their day-to-day outfit.

Fogleman’s opposition was so well-known that, after he was picked to succeed McPeak as the Air Force Chief of Staff, press reports openly debated whether he would wear the



Gen. Merrill McPeak, as USAF Chief of Staff, introduced a widely disliked “stripped down” dress uniform with Navy-style braids in 1991.



McPeak uniform at his October 1994 change-of-command ceremony. Many thought that he would show up in his older, traditional blues.

Fogleman wore the McPeak-style uniform. Still, once in office, he quickly sent a message to Air Force personnel around the world, announcing uniform changes.

The “US” and traditional rank insignia were reinstated, bringing captain’s bars and general’s stars back to the shoulders. Ribbons, too, were back. Epaulets were reinstated.

Most importantly, the silver braid was unraveled. Old rank insignia were the new order of the day.

Fogleman billed the alterations as “midcourse corrections” which would enhance the uniform’s acceptability, functionality, and appearance.

“Our goals are to make the necessary changes as soon as possible and eliminate the uniform as an issue,” said Fogleman in his message to the field, alluding to the dislike McPeak’s uniform had engendered.

In some ways, the recent move to postpone a decision on whether to institute the heritage coat may proceed

from the same motives that drove Fogleman. Whatever the merits of the design, at the moment the Air Force does not need a new uniform to be an issue or source of controversy.

The service has plenty to do in regard to making sure the new ABU

rollout goes smoothly, and that PT gear is upgraded in response to airmen complaints.

“Our airmen spend their hard-earned money on these uniforms, and we owe it to them to do the research, development, and quality assurance to guarantee every uniform item put on the shelf is right the first time,” said CMSAF Rodney J. McKinley after the heritage coat was delayed.

The service is developing a lighter-weight ABU for hot weather climates, for instance. PT shorts are being lengthened by one inch for larger sizes, and one-half inch for smaller ones. PT gear is getting bigger pockets.

The Air Force is also looking at quieter fabrics for warm-up jackets and pants.

This is not a reshuffling of the deck chairs on the *Titanic*: On combat assignments, airmen can only wear ABUs or PT gear, noted service spokesman Capt. Michael Andrews.

“Depending on where you are, that ‘swish-swish’ sound isn’t something you want to be making,” he said.

Limited production of improved ABUs will begin in the summer of 2010, depending on funding and fabric availability, according to the Air Force. Deployed units will receive the first production models.

Boots have also been an issue. Air Force officials say ABU boots have led to complaints about blistering, contusions, sprains, swelling, and general pain.

The service has recently certified a second manufacturer for the boots,

USAF photo by SSgt. C. Todd Lopez



An early version of the “heritage coat” (shown here on SMSgt. Dana Athnos and then-Brig. Gen. Robert Allard-ice) was styled after the uniform worn by airpower pioneer Billy Mitchell.





Here, Gen. Robert Kehler is seen in a heritage coat styled after the uniform worn by Gen. H. H. "Hap" Arnold. A recent uniform board considered over 900 proposed uniform initiatives.



following an extensive wear test of their products conducted by Air Force Academy cadets.

It's doubly important to get boots right, considering their importance to an expeditionary Air Force, said Lt. Gen. Richard Y. Newton III, deputy chief of staff for manpower and personnel.

"We continue to strive to provide our airmen uniforms that are functional and practical," said Newton in August.

As for the heritage coat, Schwartz opted for delay following a gathering of senior leaders at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., over the summer.

A wear test of the coat is proceeding apace, however, and the results were expected in by the end of 2008. Some 240 airmen participated, from a range of locations around the country.

"The heritage coat isn't dead. ... Air Force officials will review comments and present their findings to Schwartz, who will make a decision next summer," read a statement in an "Airman's Roll Call" issued the first week of September.

Airmen have long expressed a desire for a more military, less corporate look, and the heritage coat project was intended to respond to that desire.

"We want a service dress that clearly represents our pride as airmen and history as a service, and we want to make sure we get it right," said Maj. Gen. Floyd L. Carpenter, who was director of airman development and sustainment when the heritage coat design was unveiled in August 2007.

Back to the Future?

The Air Force considered several prototypes for the heritage coat. One had a stand-up collar reminiscent of the era of airpower pioneer Billy Mitchell. Another had a belted coat and high lapel meant to evoke the time of Hap Arnold.

Designers considered different lapel styles and sizes, button placements, and many pocket iterations, as well as

belted and unbelted styles. In the end, they based their final prototype on the Hap Arnold uniform model.

The official coat candidate that was announced in 2007 was a high-lapel, belted style with a relatively high neck opening, due to the four-button design, and scalloped-edge pocket flaps. Two different belt configurations were produced for wear testing.

At the time of the coat's introduction, Air Force officials noted that service personnel who wished for a more professionally tailored look than the standard issue would be able to obtain a custom-tailored coat from Brooks Brothers.

The Navy has a similar arrangement with the company.

"This new coat will help make our airmen look sharp, and it better personifies today's warrior ethos of an airman engaged in the war on terrorism," said Carpenter at the time.

Reception among Air Force personnel was mixed, if comments posted on Air Force Link are any guide. Some approved of the nod back to the service's past. Higher-ranking officers and retirees in particular seemed interested in the heritage look.

But others did not want to look like they had gone backward in time.

Critics generally disliked the vintage belt or the necktie on the women's version of the new uniform. And some questioned the wisdom of focusing any attention on clothing at a time when the nation is at war.

"Any time you introduce a new uniform, obviously there will be folks for and against it," said spokesman Andrews, who added that the feedback USAF has received shows airmen are supportive of the effort.

The Air Force does take the concerns of airmen into account in uniform design, say service officials. A recent "virtual uniform board" considered more than 900 proposed initiatives, which helped lead to the changes now being made to the ABUs and PT gear.

"The Air Force is committed to ensuring airmen have a fully functional uniform at the right time at the right cost," said Andrews.

This has been an odyssey of at least 17 years, however, and perhaps of 61 years. The search for the perfect uniform continues. ■

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