

Fifty years ago the Army awarded its first Military Aviator badges to two pioneer flyers. This year Maj. L. Gordon Cooper and X-15 pilot Maj. Robert Rushworth earned USAF Astronaut Wings. A lot of aviation badges have been awarded in the intervening years. Each was . . .

## THE MARK OF AN EAGLE



By TSgt. Harold L. Craven, USAF

**T**HE most cherished possession of tens of thousands of members of the US Air Force is the pair of silver wings that adorns their uniforms. These badges of accomplishment are awarded only to those who serve our country in the sky—or space. The flyers who receive silver wings wear them proudly.

On October 6, 1913, the first two Military Aviation Badges were awarded. They went to Capt. Charles de F. Chandler and Lt. Thomas DeWitt Milling. Now, fifty years later, the US Air Force is celebrating its Golden Anniversary of Silver Wings.

But the silver wings weren't always silver.

The design of the original Military Aviator Badge was an eagle in flight, carrying signal flags. It was suspended from a bar inscribed "Military Aviator." These badges were made of 14-karat gold and plated with pure gold. Initially, twenty-four officers were qualified to receive the badges, but the first written orders listed only eleven men: Capts. Charles de F. Chand-

ler and Paul W. Beck; 1st Lts. Roy C. Kirtland, Benjamin D. Foulois, Harold Geiger, Samuel H. McLeary, Lewis E. Goodier, Joseph D. Park, and Henry H. Arnold; and 2d Lts. Thomas DeWitt Milling and Lewis H. Brereton.

Subsequent orders authorized the awarding of gold badges to eight others, but Army Quartermaster records indicate that a total of only fifteen were issued before the design was discontinued in 1917. Several months elapsed between the first order authorizing the awarding of badges and their actual issue, with Chandler and Milling receiving the first two in October 1913. These two flyers, along with Lieutenant Arnold, had qualified for their Military Aviator rating in July of the previous year.

The War Department's qualifying test required a pilot to fly to 2,500 feet, to fly while the wind was blowing at least fifteen miles an hour, to complete a reconnaissance flight of at least twenty miles at an average altitude of 1,500 feet, and to demonstrate precision landing capability both with the use



Gen. "Hap" Arnold, wartime commander of the Army Air Forces, continued to wear his "Military Aviator" badge proudly throughout his entire career.

of power and without the engine.

Some of the flyers originally authorized to receive the badges were later downgraded to the status of Junior Military Aviator due to changes in requirements for the rating. Eventually a separate badge was designed for wear by Junior Military Aviators, and a few reluctant men had to give up their gold badges. Perhaps the title "Junior Birdmen" goes back to those days.

A number of the gold-badge aviators earned aeronautical prominence even before the first badge was worn. Chandler, Milling, and Arnold all held aviation records before 1913, and in 1910 Lieutenant Foulois was the *only* Army airplane pilot, having taught himself to fly at Fort Sam Houston, Tex., with the aid of letters from the Wrights.

In 1916, as a captain, Foulois led the 1st Aero Squadron with its handful of battered aircraft in not-too-successful operations against the forces of Mexican revolutionist Pancho Villa—the first time US Army planes had been em-  
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# THE WINGS OF YESTERDAY . . .

MAY 1913



Military Aviator

AUGUST-OCTOBER 1917



Military Aviator



Junior Military Aviator



Enlisted Pilot



Observer

DECEMBER 1918



Military Aviator



Military Aeronaut



Observer

JANUARY 1919



Military Aviator



Military Aeronaut



Observer

NOVEMBER 1941



Command Pilot



Senior Pilot



Combat (Aircraft) Observer



Balloon Pilot

SEPTEMBER 1942-APRIL 1943



Bombardier



Navigator



Aerial Gunner



Aircrew Member

FEBRUARY-DECEMBER 1943



Flight Surgeon



Flight Nurse

Hundreds of thousands of men have earned Air Force silver wings since the first "Military Aviator" badges were issued in 1913. Shown here are some of the designs authorized between 1913 and the end of World War II. The wings of today are shown in a similar chart on page 47. Top row shows the original badge, of 14-kt. gold and issued to only a handful of pioneer airmen. The first three badges on the second row came along in August 1917, with the Observer's single-wing emblem following in October. These were silver bullion (or white silk for the Enlisted Pilots) embroidered on dark blue felt. Third row shows badges introduced a few weeks after the end of World War I. Junior and Reserve Military Aviators and Aeronauts wore the same basic wings as the regular Pilots and Aeronauts. Today's wing

shape, originally modeled by Herbert Adams, dates back to January 1919 (fourth row) when the "US" was dropped. On fifth row are badges introduced just before the US entered World War II, when Senior and Command Pilot ratings were established as were ratings for Senior Balloon Pilots and Balloon, Combat, and Technical Observers (wings not shown). Wings for Bombardiers, Navigators, and Aircrew Members came along on September 4, 1942, with those for Aerial Gunners added on April 29, 1943 (sixth row). Other WW II wings included those for Service, Glider, and Liaison pilots, similar to pilot wings with the appropriate letter on the shield. Flight Surgeon wings (bottom row), originally gold, became silver on September 12, 1944; the Flight Nurse wings were introduced on December 15, 1943.

## THE WINGS OF TODAY . . .



SENIOR PILOT



PILOT



COMMAND PILOT



COMMAND PILOT ASTRONAUT NAVIGATOR or AIRCRAFT OBSERVER



AIRCREW MEMBER



FLIGHT SURGEON



FLIGHT NURSE

USAF today authorizes the wearing of sixteen different aviation badges, or wings. These are in six basic categories. Five of these categories have three "grades" or levels of proficiency. The categories are:

- **Pilot** (also including Senior and Command Pilot).
- **Pilot Astronaut** (also including Senior Pilot Astronaut and Command Pilot Astronaut).
- **Navigator or Aircraft Observer** (also including Senior Navigator or Senior Aircraft Observer and Master Navigator or Master Aircraft Observer).
- **Aircrew Member** (also including Senior Aircrew Member and Chief Aircrew Member).

- **Flight Surgeon** (also including Senior Flight Surgeon and Chief Flight Surgeon).

- **Flight Nurse.**

There is only one "grade" of Flight Nurse wings, and this badge also varies in size from the others, being two inches long instead of the standard three inches of the others.

Also today if an individual holds an Air Force, Army Air Forces, or Army Air Corps aeronautical rating that is no longer current, and if he does not possess a currently effective rating, he may wear the aviation badge that was in effect at the time his rating was granted.

## THE MARK OF AN EAGLE

CONTINUED

ployed against any armed enemy. The over-all commander of the campaign against Villa was Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing. Later, when Pershing was chosen to head the American Expeditionary Force in France in 1917, he promoted Foulois to brigadier general and made him his Chief of Air Services. Still later, in 1931, Foulois, by now a major general, became Chief of the Air Corps, the position he held until his retirement in 1935.

The rapid buildup of Army aviation in World War I made it economically impossible to issue a gold badge to every aviator. A new set of wings, based on a pencil sketch by Lieutenant "Hap" Arnold, replaced the original device as an item of issue in August 1917. Qualified flyers who already had gold badges were allowed to keep them. One such flyer, of course, was Arnold himself, who in 1938 became Chief of the Air Corps and rose to five-star rank during the war as Commanding General of the Army Air Forces.

Arnold's design was an embroi-

dered three-inch double-winged shield, made of silver bullion on a dark blue felt background, with the gold letters "U.S." superimposed on the shield. A similar but single-winged shield was authorized for Junior Military Aviators. The first enlisted pilot wings were authorized simultaneously. These measured five inches from wingtip to wingtip, were embroidered of white silk on a dark blue felt background, and had a four-blade propeller in place of the shield.

The Army changed badge designs and eligibility requirements so often during World War I that the flyers were hard pressed to keep up with uniform regulations.

Two months after Arnold's design was approved, the rules were changed to permit Junior Military Aviators to wear the double-winged badges, and full-fledged Military Aviators were told to add an embroidered star above the shield. The single-winged shield then was relegated to aerial observers. Shortly thereafter, the observers were told to switch to a new insigne, a

single-wing bearing the letter "O."

Embroidered wings underwent additional minor changes before they gave way to the first oxidized silver wings in 1918, minus the blue felt background. Also the star that distinguished between top-qualified flyers and their juniors was eliminated. Today's basic USAF pilot wings date back to January 1919 when the letters "U.S." were dropped from the shield and the configuration of the wings was further altered.

Again no special device was provided to distinguish between Military Aviators and Junior Military Aviators. No further changes were made until November 1941 when a star was added above the shield to signify the rating of Senior Pilot and a star encircled by a wreath was added to the badges of those who met the higher qualifications established for a Command Pilot rating.

The newest of the Air Force's silver wings came into being in 1961 to recognize the men who fly  
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First USAF Astronaut wings went to Mercury Astronaut Virgil I. Grissom. The wings were pinned on by one of the gold-badge "Military Aviators," retired Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois.



USAF Maj. Robert M. White earned his Astronaut wings for flight to 314,750 feet in the X-15 in July 1962. USAF Chief, General LeMay, pins the wings on as Mrs. White looks on approvingly.



Air Force Maj. L. Gordon Cooper orbited the earth twenty-two times in a Mercury capsule in May 1963 to become the third USAF Astronaut. General LeMay presented his wings.



Latest USAF Astronaut is X-15 pilot Maj. Robert A. Rushworth, who took the research aircraft to 286,000 feet on June 27, 1963. General LeMay pinned on his wings last July 25.

## THE MARK OF AN EAGLE

CONTINUED

in aerospace. The first set of USAF Astronaut wings went to Capt. Virgil "Gus" Grissom after his sub-orbital spaceflight in a Mercury capsule downrange on July 21, 1961. The presentation to Astronaut Grissom was made, appropriately enough, by retired Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois.

The basic design of the USAF Astronaut wings is similar to that of the familiar pilot wings Army and Air Force flyers have worn since 1919, but a design symbolizing the aerospace mission of the Air Force has been superimposed on the shield (*see cut above*).

Astronaut wings have gone to three other Air Force men: Maj. Robert M. White received his for his flight to 314,750 feet, or 59.6 miles, on July 17, 1962, in the X-15 rocket-powered research plane.

White's wings were presented to him by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay in a Pentagon ceremony on July 19 of last year.

General LeMay also presented Astronaut wings to Mercury Astronaut L. Gordon Cooper after the Air Force major's twenty-two-orbit spaceflight last May. The fourth to qualify for USAF Astronaut wings was X-15 pilot Maj. Robert A. Rushworth, who reached 286,000 feet—more than fifty-four miles—on June 27, 1963. His wings also were presented by General LeMay.

These are the wings of a new breed of eagle. These flyers into space have little in common with the eagles of 1913. Little, that is, except boundless courage and limitless faith in the future of aerospace.

How much progress we will see in the next half century is anybody's guess. It's unlikely that any of the Military Aviators of 1913 could have predicted then that in 1963 men would be confidently preparing to fly to the moon.

But one prediction can be made today with a fair degree of certainty: The Air Force, it seems likely, will celebrate its Silver Wings Centennial in the year 2013.

Perhaps in that year an extraordinary flight will be made by a youthful twenty-first-century Astronaut, and he may well be awarded a new kind of aerospace badge for his accomplishment. And maybe a pair of aging eagles from a bygone era—retired Generals Virgil Grissom and L. Gordon Cooper—will be on hand to take part in the ceremony. —END