

From Donald Duck to the Hat in the Ring, official archives register nearly 9,000 unit emblems.

Patches

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Photos by Paul Kennedy

DURING World War II, if an airman walked into certain pubs with the "wrong" shoulder patch, it was, at the very least, grounds for ridicule from the other patrons, a majority of whom usually belonged to another squadron.

A unit's insignia, usually taking the form of a uniform patch, has been a rallying device for squadrons and wings since the beginning of air combat. Patches are even written up in the regulations: "The Air Force encourages the use of emblems as a means of fostering unit pride and morale."

Today, Air Force Regulation 900-3 explains in great detail what can and can't be used as a unit symbol. Typically, however, it was the flyers and maintainers in the field who first started identifying themselves by use of distinctive symbols.

During World War I, the wearing of individual unit markings by ground troops was authorized soon after the American Expeditionary Force landed in France. However, by War Department order, the unit symbols devised by the Aero Squadrons were only to be used on



Members of the animal kingdom growl, crawl, snort, butt, or otherwise make their way onto the patches of Air Force units. Representative fauna include (clockwise from left) a tiger from the Air Force Reserve's 906th Tactical Fighter Group, an F-16 unit at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio; a spider from Air Force Space Command's 8th Missile Warning Squadron, a Pave Paws radar unit at Eldorado AFS, Tex.; a charging bull from the Air Force Prime BEEF (Base Emergency Engineering Force) civil engineering teams; and a ramming billy goat from Air Training Command's 559th Flying Training Squadron, the T-37 Instructor pilot trainers at Randolph AFB, Tex.



Bright, colorful unit patches differentiate various units, but they don't help folks hide once the shooting starts. Most units now wear subdued versions of their unit insignia on their work clothes. This low-visibility "family portrait," though slightly outdated, illustrates the typical chain of command. At Hurlburt Field, Fla., the 16th (AC-130H Spectre), 8th (MC-130E/H Combat Talon), and 20th (MH-53J Pave Low III and MH-60G Pave Hawk) Special Operations Squadrons come under the 1st Special Operations Wing (center). Previously, the 1st SOW reported to Twenty-third Air Force (upper left), which, in turn, reported to Military Airlift Command (center left). The 1st SOW now reports to the newly created Air Force Special Operations Command.



airplanes and, oddly, to differentiate crew luggage. The designs were not to be used as shoulder insignia.

Eight months after the Armistice, Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell (at the time Acting Chief of the Air Service) insisted that he be given the authority to approve aircraft and unit markings. The emblems of the fifty-five Aero Squadrons that had seen service in France during the war were officially approved in November 1919.

The insignia, as much symbols of teams as football helmets are (and quick, visual means of identifying aircraft), ranged from the Seminole (later Sioux) chief in full warbonnet used by the 103d Aero Squadron (the Lafayette Escadrille, after it had been absorbed into the AEF) to the probing searchlight beams that formed the Roman numeral nine (IX) used by the 9th Aero Squadron.

Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, America's leading ace in World War I, went into the automobile business after the war. He wanted to use the Hat-in-the-Ring symbol, which his unit (the 94th Aero Squadron) had made famous, as a decoration for

A few units still active today can trace their lineage to the very beginning of military aviation. The 27th (top) and 94th (right) Aero Squadrons from World War I are now known as the 27th and 94th Tactical Fighter Squadrons and are assigned to the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing at Langley AFB, Va. These two F-15 units were among the initial wave of US forces sent to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Shield this past summer. The 94th may be the best known squadron in Air Force history because of Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker (far right), the leading US ace of World War I. The 25th Aero Squadron (left) is now the 25th Strategic Training Squadron, the only flying unit directly assigned to Strategic Air Command's Strategic Warfare Center at Ellsworth AFB, S. D.



In 1959, for the sum of \$1.00, Walt Disney Productions allowed Jiminy Cricket to serve as the mascot of the 3d Mobile Aerial Port Squadron at Pope AFB, N. C. (Jiminy, left, in subdued hues; right, in full color). The load adjuster in the dapper insect's right hand represents the squadron's loadmasters; the umbrella in his left, being used a parachute, represents parachuting combat controllers. Several cartoon characters were "called up" for service in World War I, and a whole host of funny-paper denizens, including many from Disney, saw service on unit patches in World War II.

—Design © Walt Disney Productions



Contractors are justifiably proud of their products, and pilots and crews usually love to brag about their aircraft. By providing patches such as these, contractors allow the blue-suiters to wear their aircraft on their sleeves, and the companies get some free advertising. The "F-16 Fighting Falcon" patch (upper right) is given to US pilots by General Dynamics. Pilots being pilots, GD has the patch made up bearing the flag of each nation that flies the aircraft. McDonnell Douglas gives the "Eagle Driver" patch to F-15 pilots, while the mechanics get the "Eagle Keeper" patch. Not to be outdone, pilots who flew slow and low in the Cessna O-2 forward air control aircraft (called "ducks" because of the way the main landing gear retracted) came up with their own knockoff design—the "Duck Driver" insignia.



Intercontinental ballistic missiles have only been a part of the Air Force since the late 1950s. As a result, many ICBM wings and squadrons were assigned the unit designation numbers of deactivated World War II bomb units. The new units adopted the insignia of their predecessors, adding missile symbols. The 490th Strategic Missile Squadron (left), a Minuteman II unit at Malmstrom AFB, Mont., descends from the 490th Bomb Squadron in World War II. The 400th SMS at F. E. Warren AFB, Wyo. (right), the only Peacekeeper unit in the Air Force, harks back to the 400th Bomb Squadron in World War II, and the unit today pays homage to its history by wearing the 90th Bomb Group "Black Pirates" insignia (far right) as its unofficial, "off-duty" patch. Not all missile units go quite that far back; the 91st Strategic Missile Wing (center), a Minuteman III wing at Minot AFB, N. D., was started as a strategic reconnaissance wing and was activated in 1948.

the car's grille, but the Army Air Service objected. Since legal ownership of the logo had never been established, Captain Rickenbacker used the emblem anyway. In the aftermath of his action, the first official regulations governing squadron insignia were issued on September 19, 1923.

During World War II, the rapid expansion of the Army Air Forces led to an avalanche of insignia being submitted to the War Department for approval. Almost 600 squadron and 200 wing, group, and higher headquarters emblems had been approved by 1944. Then, as today, the squadron patches tended to be much more colorful than the staid, "dignified" wing and headquarters designs.

The units didn't always come up with completely original designs. At the request of several squadrons, Walt Disney sent Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck to war. Bugs Bunny answered the draft board's call while under contract at Warner Brothers. Alley Oop and Krazy Kat also left their regular jobs in the funny papers to join the fight against the Axis.

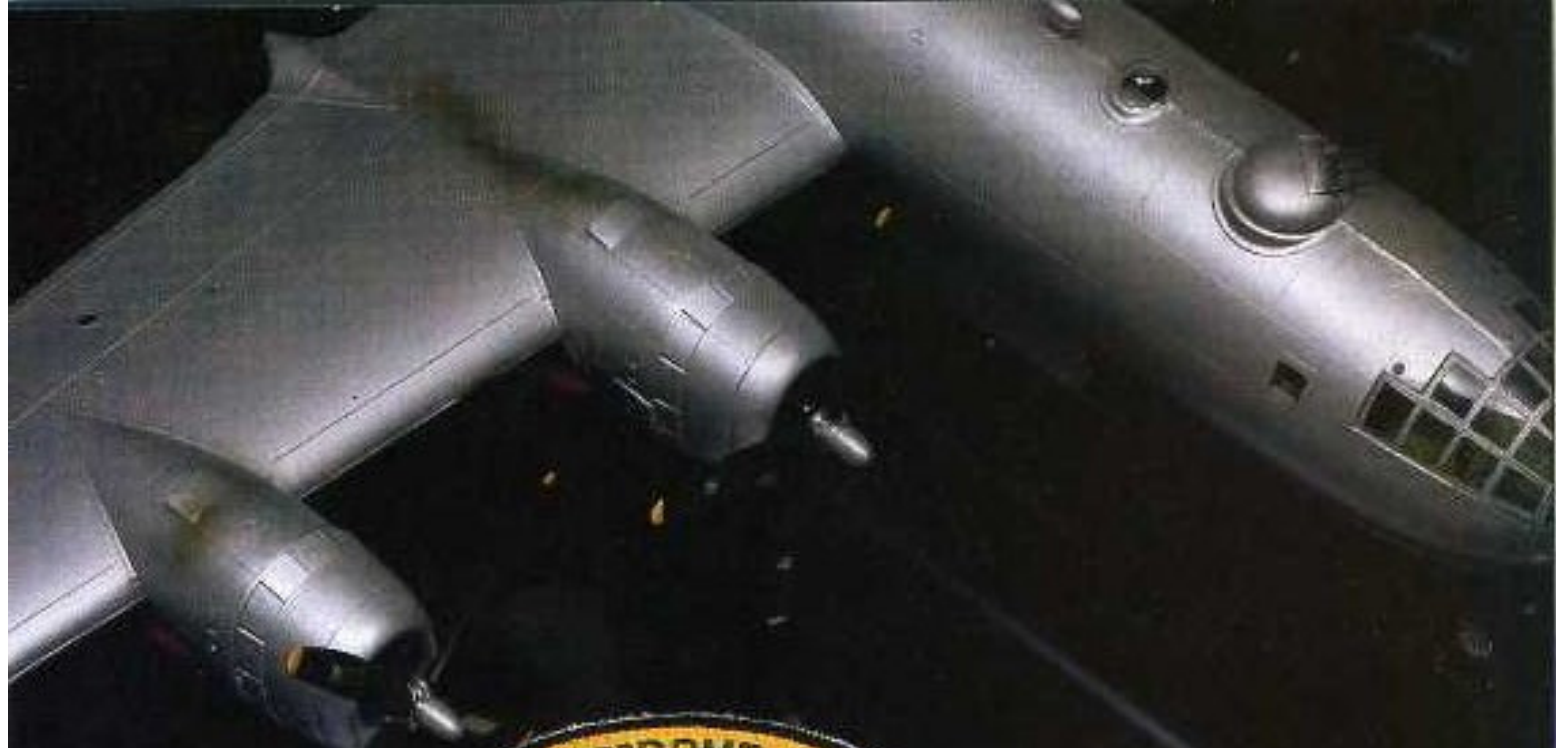
The Air Force Historical Research Center at Maxwell AFB, Ala., is the keeper of all unit insignia. "We get close to 300 new emblems a year, including some that are changes that come from a unit's having its mission changed," said Jay Godwin, the archivist in the Office of Heraldry at Maxwell. "Most of them start out as just a rough sketch."

From early symbols of unit pride has sprung a complete branch of military heraldry. Close to 9,000 emblems of active and inactive units dating back to the beginning of military aviation are registered at Maxwell. "We still don't have them all," noted Mr. Godwin. "I think many units, especially the newer ones, aren't aware of AFR 900-3 and that their insignia designs have to be recorded with us."

The patches shown here are only a sampling of those thousands of official emblem designs (as well as a few unofficial ones), covering squadrons and wings that have flown or worked with everything the Air Force and its predecessors have had, from Nieuports and Spads to Peacekeepers and B-1Bs. ■



Some Air Force units fight only with electrons. The 28th Air Division at Tinker AFB, Okla. (top), has control over many of the Air Force's EC-135s and EC-130s and all of its E-3s. The 552d Airborne Warning and Control Wing, also at Tinker, flies Boeing E-3B/Cs; the unit dates back to 1955, when it flew RC-121s.



Although standard unit patches are seen less and less, Strategic Air Command crews still tend to wear them more than do crews of most other commands. This SAC "family portrait" represents a significant part of the Air Force's past and its future. The chain of command flows from SAC (lower right) to Eighth Air Force (upper right) to the 509th Bomb Wing at Pease AFB, N. H. (center). The 509th started out as a Composite Group during World War II, and the unit's 393d Bomb Squadron (top) was the unit that dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. Today, the 393d and the 715th Bomb Squadron (left) fly FB-111s, but not for too much longer. The aircraft are being turned over to Tactical Air Command, and the wing is to be deactivated when Pease is closed. The 509th BW is scheduled to be reactivated in the mid- to late 1990s at Whiteman AFB, Mo., where it will be the first operational B-2 wing.