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Rushing to suit up *French aviation's adjustment to* *wartime uniforms, 1914–16* Guillaume de Syon

Upon arrival in October 1914 at the Saint-Cyr aviation field west of Paris where he had been affected, Sergeant Marchal was told that his infantry uniform was unacceptable: “Don’t you know that aviation is part of the corps of engineers?”¹ He thus traded his red and blue regalia for the dark engineer’s outfit. As he notes in his memoirs, “I did not think, militarily speaking, that I’d gained much in terms of looks, but I was now up to specs.”² This remark reflects the challenges associated with the beginnings of French military aviation and its adjustment to war conditions, especially in terms of defining aviators’ collective identity.

Vernacular memory and history have long tended to agree on the portrayal of the Great War military pilot as an undisciplined individual wearing a suit “whose elements are mostly unrelated to a military uniform.”³ While such a description bears an element of truth, its veracity is limited to appearances, for it overlooks important elements of early military aviation. Indeed, the adoption of a uniform fashion specific to aeronautics reflects in fact a search for identity through style, ritual, and distinctiveness. Taken together, they emphasize the different kind of combat French First World War pilots experienced for the very first time. Many collectors, military historians, and amateurs have extensively documented the evolution of the military aviation uniform.⁴ Yet, when casting such fashion in both social and military contexts, Herbert Blumer’s comments come to mind, whereby beneath the seeming anarchy lives a forward-looking structure: Fashion, whether military or civilian, is not the result of accident, but depends on both necessity and consumers’ limited choices.⁵

This chapter considers the sociocultural aspect of a military tradition and its contribution to the fashion phenomenon in the Great War. The focus on French aeronautics is based on the circumstances affecting the beginning of hostilities in 1914. Although France, like other belligerent powers, had

begun experimenting with less visible and more practical uniforms and equipment, it was not until 1915 that these were distributed to French troops, in contrast to other armies that had already adopted helmets and monotone uniforms.⁶ Furthermore, aviation was a new weapon, the practice of which had yet to crystallize into any form of military tradition. There followed throughout the conflict an experimentation that covered not only flying techniques, but also the flyer's clothing. The interpretation of this process thus contributes to our understanding of a sociotechnical phenomenon.

The start of a tradition, 1911–14

A brief overview of the start of military aviators' uniforms is necessary, as it reflects the tensions associated with the transformation of aviation into a new weapon. Aeronautics was a heated subject at the French Assembly; it opposed the artillery and engineering branches of the service. Engineers came to incorporate aviation without, however, excluding the artillerymen who had demonstrated the value of aerial observation units.⁷ Thus followed a dual tradition, whereby flyers wore the dark engineer's uniform. A newly created service, the corps of engineers attracted mostly members of the middle class and technical school graduates. The black color not only affirmed a bourgeois egalitarian military ideology, but reflected "parsimony, merit and hard work."⁸

However, aviation did not solely attract engineers before the Great War. Since there was no air force as such, it became acceptable to see flyers wearing either the uniform or at least the cap associated with their original realm of training. Even as standardization slowly occurred, the headpiece often stayed the same. The exception, as pioneer René Chambe recalls, was that aviation received a "distinctive color for its collar badges . . . orange ('tango' as specified in directives)."⁹ Such a concession was in fact the result of an evolution begun in 1911, when another pioneer, Albert Étévé noted that aviator caps' golden pompons were "replaced with red plumes made of coq feathers."¹⁰ Such disparity during the prewar period helps understand the individualist nature of the pilot. Even as they trained in the existing arms, the regulations in force did not easily match flight conditions.

Captain Louis Mazier added that officer pilots were required to carry the standard saber while in flight. However, when authorized to fly to another base or a distant city, they would leave the weapon on the ground as they considered it too dangerous (the size of the saber could damage the doped cloth fuselage of the plane). Consequently, they found themselves confined to quarters for "breaking sartorial regulations."¹¹ It took multiple protests and appeals from pilots to have the carrying of the saber replaced with a star sewn on the uniform's arm. Therefore, prior to the Great War, and independently of the Law of 1912 that acknowledged the nascent French air force, a symbolic separation of the aerial weapon from others had begun.¹² It appeared in the invention of badges, arm bands, and other insignia sewn on the black engineer's uniform.¹³

Wartime inspiration

The August 1914 mobilization did not modify the situation much, and even accentuated the odd mix of civilian and military pilots called to serve. The beginnings of trench warfare that fall affected a new change. For example, the dearth of textiles (many factories in northern France found themselves under German control) required the adoption of various uniform styles. This recast the aviator's identity. Whether beige velour with insignia sewn in a hurry or dark toned or black jackets, the message sent was that it was up to the flyers to figure something out.¹⁴

There followed a redevelopment of traditions that answered the double necessity of protecting oneself in operations all the while identifying oneself as an aviator on the ground and during leisure time. Thus, the introduction of the "horizon blue" uniform throughout the French army nonetheless kept the symbols specific to the air division. Since pilots and aerial observers were expected to carry the head piece of their original training arm, the mixes that followed became clear in many photographs whereby some pilots wore blue while others stuck with black (Figure 13.1).

Figure 13.1 *The mix of uniforms of this military class at the Avord training airfield reflects the variety of arms that contributed flyers to the nascent French Air Force. Traditionally, pilots adopted the dark engineer's uniform but kept the cap of their original unit. Some kept other parts of the uniform or had special ones made as there were no standard directives initially issued. Postcard from author's personal collection.*

General Fernand Hederer recalled decades later how his transfer from the navy to aviation training gave him a sense of freedom: Most aerial observers wore artillery uniforms, but the colonial infantry veterans kept their own style, while some former members of the cavalry still sported red pants and boots. Seeing such heterogeneity, the young officer ran off to Castel, a fashionable Paris couturier to have a uniform of his own design sewn up: a black belted vest with dark blue pants and boots.¹⁵ Such confusion would prompt a belief that flyers were highly undisciplined. In fact, one should see in this disparity of dress an endeavor to adapt to conditions different from those at sea or on the ground. Indeed, it would eventually be combat gear that influenced uniforms, thus forging a peculiar fashion.

Accentuating difference: The flight suit

Jean Renoir's 1937 masterpiece movie, *The Grand Illusion*, follows the social interactions of a group of French prisoners of war. The start of the film presents an odd dialog. An airplane mechanic asks an aerial observer about to set off on a mission: "flight suit or goat skin?" to which the latter responds: "It doesn't matter, the flight suits stink and the goat skins lose their hair."¹⁶ Indeed, flight suits, often made of canvas, would protect their wearer from the cold only when doubled, but their waterproof advantage also retained the wearer's sweat, and thus its smell. As for the notorious goat skin, its use dates back to the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, when its value as a shield against the cold was ably demonstrated.¹⁷ Made of goat skin and sometimes doubled with sheepskin, its wearer could choose various sizes depending on how much warmth they sought. However, when poorly dried or exposed to humidity in altitude, it lost its hair, and its effectiveness. Its usage reflected the desperate need to adjust to new combat conditions. The adaptation of flyers to greater altitudes as well as night patrols created trouble in the granting of appropriate flight gear. Before the Great War, pilots known for their endurance flights such as Roland Garros or Adolphe Pégoud wore woolen sweaters, leather vests, and helmets and goggles comparable to those of early automobile drivers (Figure 13.2). Flights at the time were limited to day patrols in fair weather and at lower altitudes. As wartime demands on aviation became more specific and demanding, patrols came to last four to six hours on average. Describing the cold problem, a captain noted that "the most energetic pilot loses controls after 90 minutes."¹⁸ Aerial observers, also freezing, had trouble taking notes or even operating the onboard camera. Commander Barrès, in charge of aviation supply in the fall of 1914 asked for the immediate study of a heating system, yet in the meantime squadron leaders had to order warm clothing on their own for their units.¹⁹

The lack of supply led to stunning exchanges between quartermasters and aviation units. Caught short, supply officers rushed the purchase of warm clothing in civilian stores, but had trouble finding the necessary numbers. The dearth of sufficient flight suits was such that pilots had to share them, or

Figure 13.2 Pilot Adolphe Pégoud (1889–1915) sports a mix of clothing, combining leather pants with a leather coat over his military tunic in 1914, at the start of hostilities. Pégoud, who had first worked as a civilian pilot looping his airplane at air shows, was used to improvise his clothing choices. He became the first war ace, before his death in combat. Postcard from author's personal collection.

even leave such clothing behind when transferring to another unit.²⁰ Ordered not to requisition too many raincoats reserved for the cavalry, or leather coats for truck drivers, squadron chiefs replied that both kinds were far too thin, and endeavored to explain how different operational conditions were between riders, drivers, and flyers. This amounted to obtaining a few dozen goat skins, balaclavas, sweaters, gloves, and lined shoes.²¹ The delays in delivery forced many aviators to seek replacements on the home front. Aerial observer Louis Resal emphasized such needs in a letter to his sister:

The silk balaclava I asked you for is not available in stores, but I think you could easily make one for me. By wearing a woolen balaclava and a silk one over, one gets good protection against the cold, since the silk one blocks the wind, while the other shields against the cold.²²

As the war dragged on, its new dimensions complicated clothing discipline. Drivers operating on air bases, for example, were only entitled to infantry coats despite the fact that cavalry coats, reserved

Figure 13.3 *A postcard showing a typical reconnaissance crew wearing a combination of leather pants and fur coats or goat skins, c. 1915. Such improvisation was legion and came to influence the flyers' preference for an "anything goes" attitude in the air and on the ground. Postcard from author's personal collection.*

exclusively for riders, were better suited to drivers' activities. In another letter to his sister, Louis Resal mentions the need for a long scarf, an item that popular culture associates to this day with early aviation. Indeed, such an accessory not only protected one's face, but could be used to wipe goggles covered in engine oil. Yet, French authorities misunderstood such a need. In November 1914, Barrès sent an urgent message forbidding the use of such scarves, adding, "you may buy balaclavas instead."²³ In light of such supply difficulties, as well as evolving aerial combat conditions and the confusion surrounding needed equipment, aviators' own initiative is not surprising. Such a "takeover" was not so risky, for frontline inspections were relatively limited, but on the ground, conditions differed and saw a new elite endeavoring to affirm its own aviator identity (Figure 13.3).

A prestigious uniform?

Although flyers enjoyed regular rest periods in their mess halls between missions, patrolling conditions remained very difficult. Even though the relaxation time would have come across as paradise to the trench

soldiers, few actually envied aviators: the fear of flying and of heights mixed with admiration for those who dared it. As a way to “decompress,” flyers exhibited considerable fantasy in what they wore on their rest days. So long as the commanding officer showed patience about this particular practice, discipline in the unit was not an issue. As Lt. Marc notes in his memoirs, “the pilots who aren’t bothered by petty officer harassment remain proper and disciplined.”²⁴ Individualized clothing paralleled combat practices.

Such clothing fantasy further transformed pilot tradition and added to the myth that would crystallize with such aces as George Guynemer.²⁵ Other, less known, pilots also showed approach and illustrated the tension that arose between the need to control military aviation in a disciplined fashion, and that of supporting the initiative flyers showed in dealing with a new and poorly understood flying environment. In the air as on the ground, such deviation from standards both technical and sartorial gained acceptance, though it was not the first time this happened. In the nineteenth century, French officers were known to approach tailors and order uniforms that departed from the norm as a way of marking themselves apart from the rest of the troops.²⁶ One should thus speak of a social negotiation rather than a direct imposition when considering military aviators’ uniforms.²⁷ War conditions as well as a public adulation for all people flying added to the individualism of pilots and aerial observers.²⁸

The transformation of the pilot into a hero (even when he was not an ace with at least five aerial victories) encouraged many flyers on furlough to dress in a dandy way and break the rules in the hopes of being noticed and getting lucky. Bernard Mark has unearthed one such style of dressing: “a black tunic with a yellow belt; sky blue-striped salmon red britches.”²⁹ While such fantasy worked well in salons and restaurants, any unfortunate encounter with a tradition-oriented officer could cause serious trouble. In February 1918, for example, fighter pilot Henry Aye de Slade was confined to quarters for a week for having sported in Paris “a kaki English coat, an open tunic, and a black regatta jacket.”³⁰

French ace Georges Guynemer did not experience such trouble. His sartorial choice, ironically, reflects some of the original traditions of the engineering corps. The ace liked the black uniform, but added to it an Anglo-Saxon style built around the “Sam Brown” belt around the waist with a strap over the shoulder. When he first used it in 1914, the thickness of the belt made him look ridiculous in light of his thin stature, yet two years later, his use of a longer jacket with large pockets helped him masculinize his style.³¹ In so doing, Guynemer and others heralded the change of perception of the uniform and the body it enclosed. For all the variations in colors that subsided to the end of the Second World War, by 1916 the pilot fashion had found itself (Figure 13.4).

Conclusion: The end of individualism

Describing his joining the aerial observers in April 1917, Jean Dagullion notes in a journal entry that he and his comrades in arms received a kind of kit that included clothes needed for high

Figure 13.4 *By the end of the war, two air force uniforms existed, one light blue, worn by French top ace René Fonck at the victory parade on July 14, 1919, and the other dark blue (almost black), as shown here. Although Georges Guynemer had fewer confirmed combat kills (53) than Fonck (75), the former's death in 1917 became a kind of martyrdom and also contributed to a marked preference for a dark-blue uniform like the one he sports here. Postcard from author's personal collection.*

altitude operations.³² Standardization was now in full swing in the field. The transformations of military production, operational tactics, and the need to grow the air force meant that the exploratory phase of uniform fashion was over. Even though fantasy in military dress continued to exist until the end of the conflict, aviators generally sported either the black color Guynemer so enjoyed until he was killed in action in 1917, or the pale blue variation other aces had chosen. René Fonck, the top-scoring French ace of the First World War, thus wore a powder blue uniform when bearing the flag down the Champs-Élysées when France celebrated its 1919 Bastille Day. This clearer identity, though much needed for what was then the biggest air force in the world, also heralded the end of a golden age in which escapism from the horrors of war was expressed in an improvised fashion that operators of a novel technological arm used to help them explore its newfound domain.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on the original presentation delivered at the Paris conference on Fashion in the Great War in December 2014, and on subsequent more advanced versions delivered at Albright College in April 2016 and at a luncheon lecture at the Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, in November 2018. The author wishes to thank Dr. Nathalie Roseau for her support by granting him work space at the University of Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée LATTS Center in 2018–19.
Marie-Catherine and Paul Villatoux, *L'Extraordinaire épopée du lieutenant Marchal* (Paris: Histoire et collections, 2013), 65–6.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Edmond Petit, *La Vie quotidienne dans l'aviation en France au début du XXème siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 126.
- 4 See the very detailed site “Le Musée de l’Air et de l’Espace,” at: http://albindenis.free.fr/Site_escadrille/Equip_uniformes.htm (accessed March 2020).
- 5 Herbert Blumer, “Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection,” *Sociological Quarterly* 10, 3 (1969): 275–7.
- 6 Alexandre Rigal, “L’Uniforme militaire: La Production d’une identité collective,” *Sociologies militaires*, November 13, 2011, at: <http://sociomili.hypotheses.org/author/alexandrericigal> (accessed December 2019).
- 7 Pascal Venesson, *Les Chevaliers de l’air* (Paris: Presse de Sciences Po, 1997), 49.
- 8 Dominique and François Gaulme, *Les Habits du pouvoir: Une histoire politique du vêtement masculin* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 162.
- 9 René Chambe, *Au Temps des carabines* (Paris: Flammarion, 1955), 21.
- 10 Albert Étévé, *La Victoire des cocardes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1970), 77.
- 11 Ibid., 95.
- 12 *Journal Officiel de la République française*, March 31, 1912, 3108.
- 13 Christian Benoit, “L’Aéronautique militaire à la conquête de son identité,” in *La Grande guerre des aviateurs*, Gilles Aubagnac and Clémence Raynaud, eds. (Paris: Livres EMCC, 2014), 135–8.
- 14 See, for example, the photographs available at “Le Musée de l’Air et de l’Espace,” at: <http://centenaire.org/fr/tresors-darchives/fonds-publics/musees/archives/le-musee-de-lair-et-de-lespace> (accessed May 2020).
- 15 Service historique de la défense (SHD), Vincennes, Oral History, No. 318, Fernand Hederer (1889–1984).
- 16 Jean Renoir, *La Grande illusion* (Réalisation d’Art Cinématographique, 1937).
- 17 “Variétés,” *Les Modes parisiennes*, 1872, 221.
- 18 SHD, 1A 52/2, letter of Cpt. de Saint-Quentin, 2ème armée, November 20, 1914.
- 19 SHD, 1A 52/2, telegram of Cdr. Barrès to Army HQ, November 18, 1914.
- 20 SHD, 1A 52/2, “Équipement des avions 8/1914-7/1919,” correspondence, October 1914–February 1915.
- 21 Ibid.

- 22 Jacques Resal and Pierre Allorant, *La Grande Guerre à tire d'ailes: Correspondance de deux frères dans l'aviation (1915–1918)* (Amiens: Encrage, 2014), 40.
- 23 SHD, 1A 52/2, “Vêtements chauds,” telegram of Cdr. Barès to aviation units, November 4, 1914.
- 24 Jean Marcel Eugene Beraud-Villars (pseud. Lieutenant Marc), *Notes d'un pilote disparu (1916–1917)* (Paris: Hachette, 1918), 172.
- 25 *Guynemer: Un mythe, une histoire* (Paris: Service historique de l'Armée de l'air, 1997). Georges Guynemer (1894–1917) was the second-highest-scoring French fighter ace, with 54 victories during the First World War, and was a French national hero at the time of his death.
- 26 Alison Matthews David, “Decorated men: Fashioning the French soldier, 1852–1914,” *Fashion Theory* 7, 1 (2003): 3–7.
- 27 A summary of this issue is found in Carrie Hertz, “The uniform: As material, as symbol, as negotiated object,” *Midwestern Folklore* 32, 1–2 (2007): 43–56.
- 28 For an overview of the myth of the war ace, see Dominick Pisano, Thomas J. Dietz, Joanne M. Gernstein, and Karl S. Schneide, *Legend, Memory and the Great War in the Air* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1992).
- 29 Bernard Marck, *Le Dernier vol de Guynemer* (Paris: Acropole, 1991), 77.
- 30 Noted in: <http://lagrandeguerre.cultureforum.net/t51646p15-mon-aviateur-de-1914> (accessed December 2014).
- 31 Marck, *Le Dernier vol de Guynemer*, 35.
- 32 Jean Dagullion, *Le Sol est fait de nos morts: Carnets de guerre (1915–1918)* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1987), 271–2.

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