

The nation's air arm in World War II was the Army Air Forces. However, there's more to the story.

But What About the Air Corps?

By John T. Correll



As most airmen know, the United States Air Force began in 1907 as the three-man Aeronautical Division of the Army Signal Corps. It went by various names in the early years, but the dividing lines between most of these eras are clear enough.

For one era, however, there is much confusion about the proper name for the Air Force's predecessor organization. That is World War II.

Even superficial research confirms the nation's air arm during World War II had the name US Army Air Forces. Some go on to claim that the name Army Air Corps was abolished in 1941 when the Army Air Forces came into being.

On the other side, one finds many who insist on calling that wartime air force the Army Air Corps instead of the AAF, or on using the two names interchangeably.

Neither side is entirely correct.

To begin with, the Air Corps did not die in 1941. In fact, the AAC was alive and kicking until 1947. Wartime photos of Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of the AAF, show him to be wearing on the lapels of his uniform the Air Corps insignia—a two-bladed propeller superimposed on wings.

The official song began, "Off we go into the wild blue yonder" and finished up with a rousing, "Nothing'll stop the Army Air Corps!"

However, the wartime Air Corps no longer controlled, as it once did, the affairs of Army airpower.

Every Army officer was commissioned into a specific Army corps or branch. When Arnold graduated from West Point in 1907, he desperately wanted assignment to the



Cavalry but instead was put into the Infantry. There he stayed—although detailed to one flying assignment after another—until 1920. In that year, the Army Reorganization Act made the Air Service a combatant arm of the Army, putting it on a par with the Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, and other branches.

Airmen were permitted to transfer to the new Air Service. Among those who did so was then-Major Arnold, who moved over from the Infantry in August 1920.

In 1926, Congress passed and President Coolidge signed the Air Corps Act. This legislation changed the name from Air Service to the Air Corps, but it did not alter the status of the branch. However, because the Air Corps was thus established by act of Congress, it could only be abolished by another statute. That did not happen until the National Security Act of 1947.

Still Junior

The Chief of the Air Corps, a two-star general, spoke for the air arm within the War Department. The Air Corps insignia was a modified version of that worn by the Air Service.

As late as 1935, the Air Corps was still no more than the most junior branch of the Army. It was famous and popular with the public, but it trailed the Infantry in clout inside the Army organization itself.

The activation of GHQ (General Headquarters) Air Force in 1935 took all Air Corps tactical units away from individual field commanders and put them under a single organization headed by an airman. GHQ Air Force reported to the Army General Staff, not to the Air Corps itself.

The leadership of the Army air arm was thus divided.

In the late 1930s, then-Major General Arnold was Chief of the Air Corps. Then-Maj. Gen. Frank M. Andrews was commander of GHQ Air Force. The division of power was roughly equal until Andrews went on to other things.

The Army reorganization of 1941 created the new Army Air Forces. GHQ Air Force was renamed Air Force Combat Command and was assigned to the AAF. The AAF controlled both the Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command.

In March 1942, War Department Circular 59 divided the Army into three autonomous Zones of the Interior commands: Army Air Forces, Army Ground Forces, and Services of Supply (later, Army Service Forces). Arnold's title changed to Commanding General, AAF.

The offices of the Chief of the Air Corps and Chief of Air Force Combat Command were abolished and their functions were taken over by the AAF. The Air Corps dropped off the organization chart.

Left, Army Air Corps airplanes practice aerial maneuvers over California circa 1930.



Lt. Gen. Frank Andrews, commander of GHQ Air Force. He reported to the Army General Staff, not the Air Corps itself.

Large combat organizations in the field might have personnel from several different corps. Almost everybody in the AAF was in the Air Corps, although some AAF support personnel were from some other corps. In May 1945, 88 percent of the AAF officers and 82 percent of the enlisted members were in the Air Corps.

When the Air Force became a separate service in 1947, it did not continue the Army corps system. The Air Corps was no more, but the last vestiges of it were slow to fade away.

The Air Force Band adjusted its rendition of “Off We Go” right away, but not until 1951 did the official published version of the song change over to conclude, “Nothing’ll stop the US Air Force!”

The wing-and-propeller insignia, which had served through the Air Service, Air Corps, and AAF periods, was worn briefly on the new blue uniform. It was finally eliminated in 1948. ■

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