

Feature Exhibit

Creation of the 8th

by Jamie Hanna

The Revolutionary and Civil Wars had some use of unit insignia but it was never coordinated in any official government/military capacity. In World War I, General John J. Pershing wanted his units to wear patches that would quickly and clearly indicate a person's division. He ordered all military units to develop an insignia with the added desire that this would also create an 'esprit de corps', meaning a common spirit that would inspire a strong sense of camaraderie within each group of soldiers. In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson created the Heraldic Program Office under the War Department General Staff to create and approve coats of arms for the Army. This office not only designed identifying insignia for various units but also created decorative ribbons, medals, flags and badges. By World War II, every unit had identifying insignia.

When the Eighth Air Force was created in January, 1942, the men wore the traditional Air Force patch on their shoulders, which had a blue background representing the sky and a white star with gold wings. A red circle sat in the middle of the star. The wings of the star stretched up to make a "V" for victory. On May 20, 1943, a new design was approved for the Eighth Air Force that kept the blue background, but had a golden winged 8 with the traditional white star and red disk inside it. Stars and Stripes magazine credits Major E.H. Winter of Savannah, Georgia as co-designer of the new insignia. The wings on the 8 of the initially approved design were upswept; however, when the final design was approved on June 5, 1943, the wings were stubbed in more of a "V" shape. According to Lane Callaway, the historian at Barksdale Air Force Base, the second design was most likely done at the behest of General Ira C. Eaker as Commander of the Eighth and superseded the design of the original, upswept wings. Both versions of the insignia are considered correct as there are photos of General Eaker during the war wearing both versions of the shoulder patch.

So while Stars and Stripes newspaper did credit Major Winters as being the co-designer of the symbol of the 8th Air Force, I was unable to confirm this with the Eighth Air Force Headquarters. Most likely, Major Winter designed the version with the upswept wings that was later modified by Eaker. Interestingly, before he was transferred to the Mediterranean Theatre, Eaker had a punch bowl and nine cups made out of sterling silver for him and his close friends stationed with him at High Wycombe, England. They were to be used to toast one another after the war when the friends would gather for reunions. He had the insignia of the Eighth Air Force engraved in the bowl - using Winters' design with the upswept wings.
