#### Introduction

This is an update to my last effort (version 2 dated Dec 09 - how time flies!). The thanks received and the lack of criticism (including over the typos) in V2 is much appreciated. Hopefully there are fewer in this one and I have added some more illustrations.

I still do not set myself up as an "expert" in this subject, however good reference sources are available for what follows and the objective is to pass on some wisdom learnt from experience. I have not gone into the technical topic of Operational gear here – just the sort of uniform you will be looking to start out with on a not too generous budget. Parachutes, flying helmets, gloves, flying boots all cost an arm and a leg these days so you surely want to know what you are doing by talking to those with the knowledge of such things before going there!

The vast majority of those serving in the RAF & Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) were Airmen & Women, generally referred to as "Other Ranks" (OR) and of course there were the Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) – Corporals, Sergeants, Flight Sergeants/Chief Techs and the Warrant Officers. Senior NCOs on the ground were apparently a different breed to those in aircrew. By reputation the Station WO was not someone to be messed with & I suspect that was so even if you were an officer!

Given the relative size of Bomber Command, which was by far the biggest component of the RAF during WWII, very many aircrew members, were NCOs - Sergeants, Flight Sergeants & Warrant Officers. In fact you could have an NCO "skipper" (Pilot) in command of a crew that included officers. Back on the ground (if lucky enough to return that is), he and his crew could all disappear off to different quarters. RAF crews were a tight knit bunch (how they were "crewed up" is a story in itself) and the local pub was a favoured social venue for more reasons than one.

RAF portrayals at 1940s events tend to be heavily skewed towards the officer ranks. This is sometimes regarded as caused by people wanting to "rank themselves up", however in truth I believe the cause is largely an economic one. Basically RAF Officer's uniforms are easier and cheaper to get hold of, largely because a passable impression can be obtained by "clocking back" a Cold War uniform because, although not identical, the fabric and cut of the uniform is reasonably close, at least to the general public. Airman's uniforms have however changed greatly, the rough "hairy Mary" wool of their No1 tunics giving way to a simpler version of the officers dress (i.e. in similar smooth Barathea-like fabric) which does not look quite right for 40s events. A point worth noting here is that the WO dress was, in effect, the same pattern as a Commissioned Officer, so maybe we should see a few more of those about with Aircrew badges on. Just be sure you get the right hat and badge combination. The badge is specific and it is on a cap with a shiny peak – not one with an Officers cloth peak. See also comments under WAAF for other ranks portrayals.

Whatever the "Anoraks" will say remember that traditionally RAF Officers uniforms were tailored/made by different people – I have a photo somewhere of a group of officers on an award parade and they all seem to have slightly different cuts of uniform when you look closely at details such as pocket lines, collars and particularly hats. Of course in Wartime uniforms varied in terms of their condition, No 1 dress was often worn when on active service so some of it must have got pretty tatty. Conversely it all had to be new at one point and if worn for best, kept in top condition, so is there really any point in brushing your nice new repro cap badge with weak tea to "age it"?

#### **Sourcing RAF Uniform**

I hold a very personal view that genuine/original WWII uniforms are part of our heritage. They are not things to be "worn out" by the likes of us. Those that are in good condition need to be preserved as carefully as any other historical artefacts. Apart from that you are likely to require War rations for a few months (at least) to get into one and a second mortgage to buy a good example. So, if you are of the same mind there are basically two avenues you can take;

- Reproduction uniforms the best suppliers use good examples of WWII uniform as copy templates and these can be very good indeed. The down side is that this comes at a price – I was recently quoted £220 for an RAF "Hairy Mary" battledress tunic and trousers. Anyone who cannot relate to this nick name has never worn one! I was one of the last generation of Air Cadets to wear (late) wartime pattern uniform. If only we'd kept it all!
- 2. "Clocked" post War uniform. A cheaper alternative but battledress is still rare (and therefore not cheap) and there are problems with its pattern as this did change notably cuffs and pockets.

I will not cover repro uniform here as those doing the job ought to get it somewhere near the mark (fabric seems to be their biggest obstacle). Instead I will highlight a few issues arising from choosing the more economic route, some of which also apply to repro uniforms.

Firstly **know your uniform**! A little guide book from the RAF museum by Osprey Publishing in the Men at Arms series entitled The Royal Air Force 1939 – 45 is an excellent start. <u>www.ospreypublishing.com</u> My copy is from the 8<sup>th</sup> reprint so they must have shifted a good number of these since 1994.

Ebay, Military fairs & Surplus Stores/Traders are the key sources of uniform but <u>do your homework</u> <u>first!</u>

#### Sizing - suits you sir!

RAF stores sizing can be rather "unhelpful" and just because that's what it says on the label the manufacturer printed does not mean that's how it was when the person wore it – there was (and still is) alteration to standard issue sizes. Worse still, the vast majority of Officers uniforms were/are actually made to measure, and even if off the peg would still be tailored to fit. If you can try it on before you buy so much the better. You do not want a No1 tunic too loose on you so bear this in mind if you are comparing measured size to an existing jacket hanging in your wardrobe. Hat sizes are not easy either. If you can find one belonging to a friend you know fits and it is marked with a size it is not a bad starting point but again, Officers caps were more often tailored individually and not marked with any sort of size. It helps if you know your hat size in metric, imperial and the shorthand hat size as any of these 3 can be used. ( i.e 57cm 22.5 ins or 7  $\frac{1}{4}$ , they are all the same).

#### Which Uniform?

The RAF was organisationally divided but everyone wore similar pattern uniform. There were therefore no major differences in the basic uniform worn by Airmen, Women and Officers serving in Bomber Command, Fighter Command, Coastal Command or those "flying a desk" somewhere in a London office or a shed in Lincolnshire.

There were variations in insignia – for instance shoulder flashes worn by the RAF Regiment (charged with protecting airfields and installations). The Polish Air Force had some unique and quite interesting insignia but basically wore RAF uniform and many people from what I will, if I may, refer to as "The Old Empire" had their country of origin shown on the shoulder of their jacket. The Royal Australian Airforce had its own pattern airmans badges and wings, Canadians had their own RCAF buttons, some others did not. There were other variations, including Eagle Squadron members (US volunteers serving with the RAF before the USA joined in). You will need to do your own research for these portrayals but don't just guess. The information is there if only in old photographs if you bother to look for it and it would be nice to see a few more portrayals of the large numbers of overseas volunteers who "did their bit".





Other than that badges of rank, trade etc were common. The only overt indication that someone was from Bomber or Coastal command would be if they wore the brevet of a trade unique to their Command (not too much call for bomb aimers in fighter squadrons) or a Pathfinder badge.

Pathfinders (Bomber Command Sqns charged with target marking) could wear an eagle badge on their <u>No1 dress</u> left breast pocket flap – but only when they were <u>NOT</u> on active duty. An original Pathfinder badge will be expensive to buy (unless you are lucky). There are however loads around that purport to be one and are not. This is because the eagle is common to other parts of the uniform past and present. They can be used, just don't get conned into parting with too much cash for one and be sure you get one that faces the correct direction (Eagle facing to its left). Some old shoulder insignia eagles were in pairs – so there was a right and left shoulder eagle, one will therefore be facing the wrong way for a Pathfinder badge representation (and I have seen them sold as such)!

I am assuming here we do not want to be dressing for Dinner, so the choice is basically Other Ranks or Officer and either Battledress or No1s. No1 dress was often also worn on active service however.

### Repro v "Clocked" – RAF Officers Uniform

The "anoraks" among us will always spot the difference, but that does not stop me from wearing an adjusted post WWII uniform so don't think I am being snobby when I say we should all aspire to the best representation we can afford. Sometimes getting it reasonably good is not about cost (you do see some toe curling errors unfortunately) and whilst I have pointed out the differences in material on the OR side you can still make a good effort there.

WWII officers uniforms were commonly tailored (individually made) and sometimes not especially "uniformly" either. Most seem to have been made in London but they could be made anywhere, even in the Far East, particularly so for hats. As indicated previously, I have a photo of a group of Officers striding out at a medal ceremony & they all seem to have subtly different hats and jackets, which makes life great fun when people start to get picky about the cut of your own uniform and how good a representation it really is. A recent trip to the RAF Museums Reserve Collection to do a bit of hands on research revealed some very interesting variations on WAAF tunics, some with lower pocket buttons, some without.....and it didn't go by year of manufacture either!

There are lots of views on whose repro is best and that can vary year to year so if you are going to bite the bullet and spend serious money ask for opinions from those who have already done so – use one of the forums. You will get some differing views so consider attending a show where some examples are on view from the supplier.

There is at least on supplier of "ready clocked" uniform. They are not without the need for some work but will get you close without much of a wait and you can order your size rather than search for it.



Original uniform: Pathfinder (Bomber Command) Pilot

#### Hats

In relation to Service Dress caps (The favoured Officers Peak Cap) these were generally in 2 designs – one with a bigger peak and a flatter top for best dress and a "slouch" for Ops. The Cold War SD cap has a shorter peak but does not look too bad, especially as a "working hat". Repros are available and not too badly priced.

I have a repro officer's peak cap and although not bad, from my trip to the RAF Museums vaults I can see now where it is not exactly spot-on. I won't point the deficiency out here because it will upset too many others who have exactly the same issue. Despite being only £25 it was well made, passable and cheaper than buying a Cold War one! I had to put my own badge on but quite honestly that is infinitely better than putting up with some of the truly awful repros they sometimes stitch onto reasonably well made hats. Go to Hand and Lock, London. It is less than a tenner for a badge made to a pattern they have had in stock from when they made them in the 40s! Good source of rank braid too.

One point that is important is getting the right hat with the right uniform, especially. not wearing a standard officers hat with a Group Captains (or above) uniform and ensuring the right WAAF hat is on display. More on this later.

Not so many officers are pictured during WWII wearing the side cap but it was clearly favoured by some. Be aware there are notable differences between officers and OR side caps, especially material (it matches the comments made on tunics). Make sure you have an officers badge on the side cap if you have an officers uniform – it is a brass eagle with a separate little Kings Crown above it. Repros are relatively cheap and the originals are not too bad to get hold of. The badge should have 2 screw posts on the eagle and one on the crown – a brass backing plate keeps them all in order.

### Trousers

One of the most obvious differences is not that visible – well it shouldn't be! Later trousers have a zip fly rather than buttons. The trouser waist line has dropped post War but you can only see that when the tunic is open. Most noticeable is that the 40s trouser cut was somewhat fuller, as was the fashion then. Comments as regards material also apply here.

One point worth noting is that Officers post War uniforms are a different shade of material to Other Ranks (and seem to vary slightly with time). Try to buy as a matched pair and/or compare in daylight if buying in person. Later pattern OR trousers shade is close enough to the earlier officers tunic but there are so many older surplus ones about you could get caught out. That said, I doubt very much matched exactly by the mid War years.

#### Buttons, Braces & Belts & Ties

I have said that Post War officer's tunics are cosmetically very much like the WWII version at a few paces distance. The cloth is not identical and the colour tends to be slightly darker post War but again these are not the things that usually detract from a reasonable representation. Other differences can be seen in the depth of the arch in the breast pockets and in the rounding of the lower pocket corners (sharper in later jackets). Later Canadian pattern seem to be better in terms of their cut, especially the pockets.

Belts were stitched to the back of the jacket in the originals (if you see a so called "original" WWII tunic and the belt is separate then it is not what it is purported to be. This difference is not that obvious when worn. The other tell-tale (and very visible) sign is the loss of the 4<sup>th</sup> brass RAF button on the front of the post War tunic – the one just below the belt disappeared and a flat button under the belt buckle was used. You can quickly and cosmetically add the 4<sup>th</sup> button back as a dummy – use a letter opener to part (but not cut) the material where the button hole should be, pass the button loop through the hole and use a slip ring or split pin to keep it in place. If you have a local tailor he/she can add the buttonhole for you. The blank one under the belt then becomes redundant but I would keep it as it can't be seen.

A little local advertising here, Notions in Bewdley (just up from the Church at the top of Load St) will add you a button hole for a very reasonable sum. Dawn also does clothing repairs/alterations and did a really nice job on an RAF raincoat for me.

Kings Crown brass WW2 RAF buttons are easy to find – you will need 8 - 4 large and 4 smaller pocket buttons. There were only 3 sizes – the very tiny ones were for the front of the forage caps. There was a different pattern of button for the No5 Dress with separate raised eagles & crowns (not stamped) but these are uncommon.

WWII belt buckles were brass – the (horrible) Staybright later ones can be changed over like for like. It is up to you as to be honest they only look that different if you don't polish the brass!

If you want to keep buttons and brass from tarnishing too quickly after the Brasso (or even instead of) use some car wax like Turtle Wax Original (other good products are available). Otherwise the buttons can look dull only a couple of hours after you do your tunic up! Buy a button stick (brass plate with a slot and other cut outs) it protects the cloth when polishing. WW2 ones are more expensive but post War ones are quite cheap and you are not displaying them, it's just a tool!

RAF trouser braces were not Grey. Grey ones are later. They were a sort of off white I believe and not made with stretchy elasticated material – I have some repros but I find them uncomfortable & pretty damn useless (not a fault of the repro manufacturer I might add!) Braces are probably an essential for some with high waste repro trousers but I still use later pattern for mine, because they work!

Later RAF ties are of a shiny man made material that must be Teflon coated because the knot always seems to slide down no matter what you do. They are better than no tie at all but look to replace ASAP with a cotton/wool one. (not cottonwool, that's all white and fluffy).

### **Other Ranks**

Tricky one this – WWII No1 dress was cut in a broadly similar way to the modern one (Internal lower pockets with an outer flap) – but the material was totally different and it stands out a mile. Warrant Officers wore Officers tunics so this comment does not apply but it is likely that if you want to represent an NCO or Airman you will end up going to a repro source. Original Airman's No1s are out there but I sure as hell will not find one to fit me so as soon as I pluck up the courage this is where I will be heading. See comments above for Warrant Officers. WAAFs are different, to state the blindingly obvious, but see comments below.

Beware the Wartime Battledress is different to later versions so have a good look at photos before you buy. Look at the breast pockets. War BD has concealed buttons. See the Canadian one – right hand picture above.

#### The Girls – sorry - Womens Auxiliary Air Force

Basically the tunics were as per RAF – some tropical tunics buttoned female side but just get a male one that fits and add some A's (brass to the collar for Officers). What I did not realise until recently was that the WAAF other ranks tunic was of Barathea, like the officers! Also similar in pattern to later OR tunics so clocking back a later OR tunic may be a good option for a WAAF NCO or Airwoman, just make sure you get the badges and buttons sorted. See below.

Hats are a major issue & a good original if you can find one will cost you 3 figures! – good and bad repros are about so look at photos before you buy. Don't go for a later pattern one as it just does not look right, especially the cute little air hostess style! So in summary, later WAAF/WRAF head gear is to be avoided.

Skirts were longer in the 40s – if you are short you can get away with a later one OK but if you have lovely long legs.....repro to cover them up.

Issued stockings were thick grey Lisle – horrible things (I think that is a commonly accepted male and female view). Officers could get away with whatever they could extract from the nearest

American Serviceman so I am told .....just do not go for anything daft. I am aware that this is a hot topic for female re-enactors of all divisions and as I am a bloke I will just draw attention to the picture below of RAF Duxford Operations Room personnel before departing the subject. Anyone see regulation hosiery in evidence here? Not sure the footwear is that "uniform" either!



#### Shirts

Wedgewood blue current pattern RAF shirts really do not look right. The WW2 ones were an end over end blue/grey weave. You can find passable modern shirts that look better if you can't afford a decent repro or an original (and they do get really pricey in big sizes). Personally having put up with the things for a few years back in the early 70s I hate detached collar shirts as much as I hate Great Coats so......shop around. BHS (Jack Reid Menswear range) used to do a good one. M&S have stopped doing theirs as well. Debenhams have only short sleeve (no they didn't issue them in WWII sorry) at the time of writing and Primark have one that is just a little too pale so I'm still on the hunt.

Female shirts, sorry, blouses, had pleats to the shoulders – you will have to go repro for that I guess but I still don't have a source to direct you to at this point.



#### Fabric comparisons shirts from M&S & BHS

#### Shoes

OK – I am going to be shot down in flames anyway but as far as I can see from looking at the photos WAAF and RAF No1 dress shoes were not that different to later patterns for us to be too concerned – officers would have had private purchase ones anyway – guys I'd say DMS will do fine! I shine my toecaps but I am told by some that they didn't bother much with bull in 1943 and by others that you'd have trouble getting past the "Snowdrops" looking shabby on some stations. Ladies, I have seen several different patterns purporting to be genuine vintage WAAF shoes, some plain tops and some with stitching, some smooth leather finish, some dimpled, again I'd say find something that looks about right, later pattern WRAF issue is reasonable starting point.



Believed to be original WAAF OR pattern

#### Badges, Insignia etc

This is where it often goes a bit "Pete Tong" folks. The uninitiated are often "helped" along the wrong road by some ignorant traders. I mention no names as life is too short to try and convince them that if they did copy it directly from an "original uniform" the uniform must have had the wrong badges on it! See comments below under "**notable issues**".

Good information is to be found in Malcolm Hobart's appropriately named book "Badges and Uniforms or the Royal Air Force" - £20 from Pen and Sword Books. There are some omissions but it is still the best reference out there (unless anyone has a better suggestion). I have seen "incorrect" badges portrayed in recent guide books – the auxiliary badges for WAAF Officers is a common one. They should be a plain A with no flourishes and approx 11mm (or so) high.

Remember that other ranks fabric badge backing was different to later pattern – black backing to stripes and eagles please (probably of more relevance to WAAF portrayals at this level). Good repros are available but lots of the printed Austerity pattern originals are still about.

#### Accessories

Personally I don't carry a gas mask, but I do carry the bag (usually with a camera and other paraphernalia in it). WAAF personnel were noteworthy non-compliers by all accounts. There was after all no (other) regulation handbag at that time. A MkVII canvas gas mask bag with a tommy helmet slung from it adds something to the portrayal. The bags are not too difficult to find – try to get one with the metal clips on the webbing strap (military as opposed to civvy issue I am told but looking at some old films I think it's not that important).

Helmets – the colour is often discussed. Don't vandalise an important piece of history just get a run of the mill home front or a sad looking specimen and renovate it. There are plenty about. New liners can be bought (Soldier of Fortune) and the Rover Tempest Grey is as close as I have found to RAF helmet colour – move the spray can away from the helmet in the final coat to just dust it over and it will give you a semi-matt finish. New chin straps are still available and not expensive (unless I was lucky). Home front helmets (the ones with the 3 holes in the rim) are also lighter to carry that the hardened steel battle helmets and they look the same unless closely inspected!

I have done another info guide for you on helmet restoration.

#### When it gets HOT! - RAF No 6 Dress (Army No 4)

OK again same issues ref clocking back but its close enough in my view. Most would rather wear a No6 (Tropical) officers dress than melt/expire in a regular home front uniform on the really hot summer days we get once in a blue moon. Wouldn't do this with a specific display like our Ops Room but if just out at an event, why not? Dead easy to get hold of, even has the right number of buttons and if you can get an older pattern detachable shoulder boards (which have the rank sewn onto for officers). You will need a KD shirt but that's it – same hat, tie, shoes. Buttons are on slip rings so just swap to KC – best to remove before polishing as the fabric marks really easily – but it's washable!

#### A few words about Medal Bars

It's up to you what you do but whatever you wear be sure that you know <u>exactly</u> what it is (and what it was awarded for)! You WILL be asked (sooner or later) and it saves embarrassment.

If you want a taste of the debate a VR Officer of my age in 1940 would likely be a survivor of WW1 and have that grouping at least but I have also seen photos of an operational Wing Co in Bomber Command looking – shall we say, equally mature and with no medals. So, I rest my case.

I didn't win them so I don't wear them. I should show them given the uniform I wear as a portrayal but I prefer to just carry my Great Grandfathers medal bar inside my top pocket. Personal choice.

#### Notable issues to "head off at the pass" – Sorry if I am offending anyone here.

I saw someone at a 40s do with a "Joe 90" zipper (1970s I think) at one event but anyone reading this shouldn't make that mistake should they?

**Wrong hats** – this stands out a country mile if they are <u>very</u> wrong. Modern WRAF hats instead of 40s style WAAF for instance. Get a repro, there really is no alternative! OR hats (with a shiny peak) worn by Officers basic schoolboy error but you see it. Group Captains with a standard Officers hat - ditto.





This is a (rather tatty and moth eaten) original WAAF Officers cap

This is the WAAF OR Cap

Wrong size/position "VR" and "A" brass insignia. Sorry – pet hate folks.

The VR badge was worn by Officers of the Volunteer Reserve (most of Bomber Command were staffed by VR). Although WAAF officers all wore the Brass A this was also worn by male officers from the Auxiliary Air Force. There was an attempt to withdraw the VR but I am told there was just a bit of resistance to this so......

The larger ones are the pattern for Great Coats NOT tunic lapels. The correct letters measure 12 to 14 mm (3/8 in) high. They do vary a bit in pattern – some quite roughly stamped. Position is also important – above the seam is correct and although the angle did vary over time I'd keep them more or less horizontal.



There were 2 basic attachments on the back of the VRs. The lugs through which a wire springclip was slid and the flat bend over tabs (which break eventually). If you lose the bend over tabs on the

back cut off both, file flat and solder a bent piece of wire from a paperclip in place – much better and you can get this through the material without damaging it before folding them down flat.

The WAAF officer's auxiliary A is often misrepresented; it should be to the same plain pattern as the VR and also quite small in size – about 11 mm. or so high. I have 2 originals that are genuine and again they vary, mainly in that they are of slightly different sizes but don't be fobbed off by the later lacquered ones or big repros the size of the Greatcoat VRs and no A's with fancy bases to the A-frames.



NOT to the correct pattern (even though it appears in an otherwise good reference book).

**Eagle badges (and others) on officers tunic sleeves** – RAF officers wore nothing on their sleeves other than the rank rings (applies to WAAF as well as RAF).

**Wrong pattern wings** – again look at some old original photos and pick a repro that looks right – some just do not & it's not just a case of KC right & QC wrong. Be careful of Canadian pattern Observers wings unless you are portraying Canadian aircrew.



🐨 This is the correct one for the RAF.

**Inappropriate trade brevets** (half wings) – Make sure you use one that relates to a Wartime discipline **please**! Not too many AEs, LMs or FCs about in the 40s folks! (*AE* = *Air Electronics Officer* - *1963*. *LM* = *Load Master* -*1970 FC* = *fighter Controller* -*1983*). Oh yes, I have seen them!

**Later composite Officers rank braid** – bit picky this I know but separate braid looks so much better. Hand and Lock London is an excellent (and very helpful) supplier.

**Dodgy Officers Cap badges** – there were differences in wartime as they didn't all drop off the same production line (far from it) but there are some really awful ones out there – look at some photos and get one that looks about right. Again, Hand & Lock are highly recommended (no I am not on commission).



Original

**WAAFs did not fly planes.** So no wings on WAAF uniforms please (seen that too!). You will need to portray someone in the ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) Service to do that ladies and the uniform is quite different, as are the badges. You may know this but Amy Johnson lost her life whilst ferrying a plane for the ATA. It was not a job without risk.

### Finally

I know I have not covered the Regiment or RAF Police etc. One has to draw a line somewhere so apologies. If someone else wants to do the honours and add a bit or do a parallel guide for flying gear and clothing then feel free to email me.

If there are any howlers (as opposed to minor differences of opinion) arising from the above also feel free to email me at <u>gcorner@btopenworld.com</u> and I will do a correction.

Have fun but wear the uniform with pride. I always polish both shoes & buttons. I am told that they were not ALWAYS so during Wartime but in my view it looks bad if they are not.

Tally Ho Chaps (and Chapesses)!

Graham

References:

Badges and Uniforms of the RAF – Malcolm Hobart - Pen & Sword Books

Men at Arms – Andrew Cormack – Osprey Publishing – Available via the RAF Museum

I also hope also that those selling items on Ebay wont mind my having acquired one or two pictures from that source.