

UNIFORM OF THE AIR TRANSPORT AUXILIARY (A.T.A.)

BRIEF BACKGROUND

The A.T.A. was a civilian organisation formed by Gerard d'Erlanger, Director of British Airways and later BOAC, at the outbreak of WW2. His idea was based on the principle that there were many civilian pilots capable of flying but, for a variety of reasons, could not join the fighting services.

The original plan was for the service to ferry V.I.P.s, mail and urgent supplies using available civilian aircraft not needed elsewhere. As the RAF became more desperate for manpower the job of ferrying aircraft from factory to frontline was handed over to the A.T.A. to free up RAF personnel for other jobs.

From 1939 until the end of the war in 1945 the A.T.A. ferried anything from basic trainers (de Havilland Tiger Moths and Miles Magisters) to four engine bombers (Short Stirling, Handley Page Halifax, Avro Lancaster) and everything in between.

A.T.A. operated from a variety of airfields designated as Ferry Pilots Pools. Each was located in a strategic location for factories or dispersal and numbered, with numbering going up to sixteen though there may not have been this many pools (13 **may** have been left out for superstitious reasons and 11 is also not listed). Each pool would have had its own resident pilots and engineers.

Uniquely that A.T.A. featured women in both flying and ground roles and at peak strength the women's section was around 10% of the organisations personnel. This was the only British organisation that permitted women to fly aircraft during WW2.

Before starting out

Before setting out on getting an A.T.A. uniform of any description think of the following questions:

- Do you want a uniform for 40s events/dances?
- Do you want a uniform to complement your partner at 40s events?
- Do you wish to be part of a living history group or display or portray the A.T.A. accurately for educational reasons?

All of them are legitimate reasons to put on a uniform but some require more attention to detail than others. Any living history portrayal should be as near to the real thing as absolutely possible, but for all of them it is worth remembering that by wearing the uniform you are (whether intentional or not) representing those who served their country (and in some cases died for their country) during World War 2. Therefore there are many people who find it disrespectful when they see a bodged job. You don't have to be perfect but with a little research you can get quite near to the real thing.

A word of warning. Once in uniform be prepared for any number of comments, criticism and in some cases unwanted and unsolicited attention. People will take photographs of you - by the hundreds. So if you don't like having your picture taken, don't wear a uniform. Others will be downright rude. Even if you are wearing an authentic wartime uniform there will always be someone who 'thinks' they know better and will try to pull holes in it. The main thing is do your research well and aim to be as authentic as your budget will allow (easier than you might think if you are handy with a needle and thread). Be prepared for criticism and learn how to shrug it off when it comes.

UNIFORMS

Born in the heat of the moment when war was declared the ATA was initially without uniform, though this situation was to last less than a couple of months. When uniform was issued and due to the services nature as a civilian airline administered service the uniform was unique though had similarities to other services uniforms, particularly that of the RAF.

ATA uniforms were made by tailors on the high street to a handed over specification and paid for by the service making them almost semi-private purchase. Therefore there are some minor discrepancies in the details between some uniforms on photos, notably pocket flap shapes, but it is known that at least one member requested, and got, a red lining to her jacket showing that the individual had got some sway, albeit probably unofficially, in the design and manufacture.

As the service featured both male and female members, with variations I have divided this guide into two sections.

Male uniform

Service Dress

The RAF style field service cap (side cap) was issued to all male ATA members as formal dress. Whilst the design was identical to that used by the RAF the colour was a deep ultra-dark blue, almost black, similar to that used in civil defence uniforms. Whilst traditional caps of the same design as those used by RAF Officers (fabric peak) in the ultra-dark blue were also permissible for male ATA personnel they were not permitted for use in ceremonial occasions.

Initially both types of cap carried a gold metal badge of the ATAs insignia, a oval containing the letters ATA with a taller T surrounded by a wreath with an eagle mounted on top, in the same positions as worn by the RAF. These metal badges were later replaced by fabric badges of woven wire, which were worn in the same place.

The male ATA tunic is identical to that used by RAF officers, except it is in the ultra-dark blue. It is single breasted with lapels, four buttons and a fabric belt that buckles between the bottom two buttons whilst it has flapped pockets on the breast and lapels. The buttons were always black and often featured the ATA initials underneath a coronet (there were two versions of these types of

buttons with a different number of ridges behind) though there is evidence to suggest that, sometimes, plain buttons were used. The buckle on the belt was brass.

High waisted ultra-dark blue trousers identical in design to those worn by RAF officers were supplied and worn with black socks and shoes. The light blue shirts, with separate collars, and black ties were RAF issue. Greatcoats were supplied, again in the ultra-dark blue, to the RAF officer pattern. Thus they were double breasted with five rows of black buttons and belted with a fabric belt, which belted through a brass buckle.

Raincoats to the RAF officer pattern were also provided in the ultra-dark blue colour.

Female uniform

Service Dress

The RAF style field service cap (side cap) was issued to all female ATA members as formal dress. Whilst the design was identical to that used by the RAF the colour was a deep ultra-dark blue, almost black, similar to that used in civil defence uniforms. A peaked ski-cap design in the ultra-dark blue was also permissible for female ATA personnel although they were not permitted for use in ceremonial occasions.

Initially both types of cap carried a gold metal badge of the ATAs insignia, a oval containing the letters ATA with a taller T surrounded by a wreath with an eagle mounted on top, in the same positions as worn by the RAF. These metal badges were later replaced by fabric badges of woven wire, which were worn in the same place.

The female ATA tunic is identical to that used by WAAF officers, except it is in the ultra-dark blue and fastens on the female side¹ instead of the male side (WAAF fastened on the male side). It is single breasted with lapels, four buttons and a fabric belt that buckles between the bottom two buttons whilst it has flapped pockets on the breast and lapels. The buttons were always black and often featured the ATA initials underneath a coronet (there were two versions of these types of buttons with a different number of ridges behind) though there is evidence to suggest that, sometimes, plain buttons were used. The buckle on the belt was brass.

Ultra-dark blue versions of WAAF officer skirts were supplied which were to be worn with black stockings and flat black shoes. Trousers were also supplied, though were to be used 'on base only', and were identical to the design of WAAF officer trousers but in the ATA colour. Again they were to be worn with black socks/stockings and black shoes.

Greatcoats were supplied, again in the ultra-dark blue, to the WAAF officer pattern but like the ATA service dress fastened on the female side. Thus they

¹ In her early days in the service Pauline Gower (founder of the female section) was given a male jacket, this however does not seem to have lasted very long.

were double breasted with five rows of black buttons and belted with a fabric belt, which belted through a brass buckle.

Raincoats to the WAAF officer pattern were also provided in the ultra-dark blue colour. However no documentary evidence has been found to suggest that they didn't break the ATA trend of buckling on the female side.

War Service Dress

War service dress does not come up as a piece of issued uniform in ATA documents. However there is evidence of both male and female personnel wearing this uniform although it is always in an extreme minority on informal group photos and may therefore be private purchase.










The War Service Dress is identical for both male and female and evidence shows that the design of the pockets again altered. This makes some of the War Service Dress blouses used by the ATA identical to civil defence blouses whilst others are an ultra-dark blue version of the RAF blouses. There is also evidence to suggest that war service dress trousers were worn but even less so than the blouses, the Service Dress trousers being used instead.

Badges

Badges in the ATA were similar to the civil airlines and the RAF in the way they were displayed and worn.

Ranks and colours

The ATA used gold rank lace, both Navy and Civil Defence versions were used, to indicate rank. This was worn on the shoulder with the band(s) running chest to back and was mounted on a piece of backing fabric. The bands usually curved under this fabric at the ends.

	Commodore
	Senior Commander
	Commander
	Captain
	Flight Captain
	First Officer
	Second Officer
	Third Officer
	Cadet

Only one person ever held the rank of Commodore of the ATA (Gerard d'Erlanger) whilst only one woman ever held the rank of Senior Commander (Pauline Gower). Women held all ranks up to Commander.

The ATA used a colour code system where the rank stripes would feature an additional colour to denote the wearer's role. This is identical to a similar scheme used in the merchant navy and uses the same colours. For a single stripe (e.g. third officer) the colour is placed above (nearer to the head) whilst for multiple stripes it fills the space between.

The colours used in ATA are as follows

Dark blue (identical to uniform so no additional colour added) – Pilots and anyone holding ATA wings such as senior HQ staff

White – Operations

Purple – Flight Engineers

Green – Adjutants

Red - Medical

Flight engineer ranks

Flight engineers were the only area in the ATA that appears to have had a version of NCOs. Whilst many, including three women (women never got higher than third officer flight engineer), rose to the rank of a flight engineer officer and gained rank stripes as above there were two sub ranks.

Ordinary flight engineers would wear three black chevrons on a grey background² on each upper sleeve whilst Senior Flight Engineers would wear the ATA insignia in grey on the lower sleeves in a way akin to RAF Warrant Officers. Rank stripes would not be carried by Senior Flight Engineers.

Wings and brevets

All qualified ATA pilots were issued with a set of golden wings which were worn above the left breast pocket like RAF wings. These were available in wire weave or stitched. The wire wings were considerably smaller than the width of the breast pocket, however the stitched ones came in both this small size and the size of the pocket. Although regulations state that the wire versions were for higher ranks surviving original uniforms prove that they were worn by ranks as low as third officer.

Flight engineer officers would wear a golden half wing (With the letters ATA in) and these were worn in the same place as the pilots wings. Again they were available in wire weave and stitched and surviving jackets again prove wire weave was worn by the lower ranks. None officer flight engineers would wear stitched a half wing in grey in the same location, apart from the colour it was the same design as the golden half wing.

Ground based motor transport drivers would wear a 'medallion' in place of the wings or brevets which was essentially the circular inner section of a pair of

² Grey has not been confirmed but is most likely

wings. This was worn in the same place. ATA ambulance or rescue drivers did not wear it.

Unusual badges

For a period of time early in its life the ATA employed air gunners on its taxi aircraft for self-defence. They were issued with a golden half wing with AG in the brevet. This role did not last long in a civilian organisation and little else is known about the air gunner uniform.

Nationality titles

The ATA, being a civilian organisation, could, and did, accept nationalities from everywhere – including countries that were neutral such as Eire whilst more exotic nations such as Chile and Siam were also represented in ATA.

The nationality titles featured the name of the country the wearer was from in golden wire weave and was worn on the upper sleeves just under the shoulder.

None flying staff

Many ground staff on operations would wear small eagles, identical to that found on a RAF cap badge on their lapels. No flying ATA member or member issued with wings ever carried these collar eagles. Likewise it appears that Motor Transport drivers were never issued with them.

Medical staff

Although little is known, or seems to exist, about the ATA medical division a single grainy photo which shows the Chief Medical Officer shows that he is wearing collar dogs that are not the eagles but look more like the RAF medical staff and eagle insignia. With the exception of this his uniform is standard ATA service dress.