

Fighter squadron unit emblems evolve over years

From eagles to falcons, hats in rings to Indian heads and death's head to flying fists – heraldry changes with times

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Distinctive flying squadron emblems tell an immediate story about a unit. With three legendary fighter squadrons in the 1st Fighter Wing, a look at their emblems is a look at history.

The 1st Pursuit Group, the World War I predecessor to the wing, consisted of the 17th, 27th, 94th, 95th and 147th Aero Squadrons. When they arrived in France in the spring of 1918, as fairly new units, the men quickly started preparing themselves for initiation into combat. One of the first steps was to consider a squadron insignia.

The pilots of the 27th AS discussed several possibilities before Lt. Malcom Gunn suggested a design he'd seen in New York City. The Anheuser-Busch Brewery used, and continues to use, an eagle for its corporate logo, and a similar design was drawn by a Corporal (First Name Unknown) Blumberg on May 18, 1918. The other members of the squadron decided it would make an ideal insignia, so the eagle with the outspread wings and talons diving on its prey was accepted.

However, in 1924 a falcon replaced the eagle. According to wing history sources, the War Department did not want to give the appearance of endorsing a brand of beer. During World War II, the falcon was all black. By 1971, the heraldry mentions the bird

as still a falcon, albeit with more gray and with a white head. Today that doesn't stop members of the 27th Fighter Squadron from calling themselves the Fightin' Eagles.

The 94th Aero Squadron also developed a one-of-a-kind emblem. Although at first glance it does not look like a warrior-inspired insignia, the Hat-in-the-Ring design is one of the most well-known squadron insignias in the world.

As flight training operations continued during the spring of 1918, the pilots gained proficiency and morale increased. Members of the 94th AS began to discuss the design of a unit emblem. Maj. John Huffer, the squadron commander, suggested Uncle Sam's stovepipe hat. Lt. Paul Walters, the squadron's medical officer, suggested a variation on that theme.

War had raged in Europe since 1914. America had remained neutral until 1917. Walters' proposal symbolized Uncle Sam throwing his hat into the ring, and this design would let everyone know the United States was now a part of the fray. Lt. Paul Wentworth drew up some tentative sketches, one was approved, and the Hat-in-the-Ring design started appearing on the squadron's Nieuports.

According to custom, the brim of the hat should always be pointed up. It's considered unlucky if the brim of the hat is towards the bottom, because then "all the luck flows out."

As with the 27th's eagle, the War Department also had commercial sponsorship reservations when it came to the 94th's emblem. In the 1920's, Eddie Rickenbacker, the 94th's top World War I ace and Medal of Honor recipient, produced a line of automobiles with the Hat-in-the-Ring as the company's logo. To avoid appearances it was promoting the automobiles, in 1924 the unit started using the Indian head symbol formerly used by the 103rd Aero Squadron, which was a part of the Lafayette Escadrille. The 94th continued to use the Indian head until 1942, when Rickenbacker successfully lobbied for its return to the 94th.

The 71st Fighter Squadron was activated at Selfridge Field on Jan. 1, 1941 and assigned to the 1st Pursuit Group. Late in the year, the Ironmen had their new symbol; a bleached skull was the center of the insignia. Three yellow bolts represented the three flights in the squadron. Death, with its red eyes and a gruesome smile, rides out of the clouds against a bright background of blue.

The symbol was used throughout the war, but not long after peace was declared, the unit's familiar "Flying Fist" replaced the death's head, as part of an Air Force decision to do away with morbid characters in unit emblems. Examples of the old "death's head" patch are on display in the wing headquarters and in the 71st FS. Look closely and you'll notice the three yellow lightening bolts loosely spell out 7 1.

After 85 years, emblems of the wing's flying units have morphed and changed into the familiar symbols known worldwide today. And now as then, they foster unit cohesiveness, loyalty and esprit d'corps.