

# WHY DO RAF EAGLES FLY TO THE REAR?

by John Murdoch

John Haynes asked why RAF shoulder eagles fly backwards. Strictly speaking, they are facing the rear and not necessarily flying to the rear. Perhaps the simplest and most glib answer is to say because that is what the Air Ministry determined when the badge was introduced in 1918. That said, the direction was not actually stated in Air Force Memorandum No 2 of March 1918, which specified the uniform for the newly formed Royal Air Force. In practice, many airmen wore the eagles the other way round (facing the front) and so the issue was clarified in Air Ministry Weekly Order 931 of 1921. This, in itself, required a bit of interpretation, but stated:

## *EAGLE ARM BADGES – MODE OF WEARING*

- 1. Badges, arm, embroidered, eagle, are supplied in pairs. The correct method of wearing them on jackets and greatcoats is with the eagle flying away from the wearer, i.e., with the eagle's head facing to the right and left on the right and left sides respectively of the wearer.*
- 2. In cases where this badge has been incorrectly sewn on the garments in wear, the necessary alteration should be made.*

The instruction would have been even clearer if it had described the eagle as facing its right or its left, to avoid the possible and opposite interpretation of facing the right or left of the badge. However, the instruction was definitely intended to require the eagles to face the rear and this tradition also required eagles on opposing collar badges to face to the sides, away from the centre.

There is a little more background history and a bit of folklore connected with this question. The eagle emblem itself originated in the Naval Wing of the Royal Flying Corps, later designated the Royal Naval Air Service. It was first authorised in Admiralty Weekly Order No 2 of 23 June 1914 as a means of distinguishing naval airmen from seamen when they changed to Class III uniform. The emblem was also incorporated into the trade badges for ratings in the RNAS which were worn on the right sleeve with the eagle facing the front. A similar eagle in gilt was worn by RNAS officers above the rank lace on the left sleeve and a smaller eagle in silver replaced the anchor in the cap badge for officers recruited directly into the RNAS. These eagles both followed the pattern of the ratings' sleeve eagle, with the head facing its left, and so the officers' sleeve eagles automatically faced the rear. These gilt eagles were later worn in opposing pairs on both sleeves, but they still faced the rear. Smaller eagles worn on RNAS officers' shoulder boards also faced the rear.

On the formation of the Royal Air Force in April 1918, the eagle badge was adopted as an embroidered shoulder badge in red silk to be worn on the first RAF khaki uniform by all ranks below Warrant Officer Class 1. These red silk shoulder eagles were replaced by light blue eagles on the introduction of the horizon blue uniform in late 1918 and 1919 and continued in use, essentially unchanged, for more than fifty years until 1973. Warrant Officers Class 1 were to wear gilt crowned eagles close to the shoulders on both sleeves as a badge of rank. Crowned eagles in gilded metal were also specified to be worn by officers, above the rank lace on both sleeves. It was logical for all ranks to



*RNAS Artisan showing his sleeve badge with the eagle facing the front.*



*Flt Cmdr J. G. Struthers RNAS showing his sleeve eagle facing the rear and his silver cap eagle.*

follow the practice of RNAS officers and this is the most likely reason that RAF sleeve eagles always face the rear in opposing pairs. Another possible explanation, which probably owes more to post hoc rationalisation than to fact, is that aircrew needed to have all round vision and one of the key elements of survival was to watch out for, and be aware of, enemy aircraft approaching from behind. Maybe this justifies a difference in the subtle design and hidden messages in badges worn by soldiers and by airmen.

Wherever RAF eagles have been worn in opposing pairs, such as in the WRAF (1918-1920); aircrew rank badges (1946-1950); band and Works & Buildings collar badges; officers' field service caps; and air rank officers' ceremonial shoulder boards, they have always faced the rear. This convention also means that opposing eagles on collar badges face away from the centre towards the sides of the wearer. The only Air Force situation where uniformity seems to have been ignored is in the case of inter-war cap badges for officers of the Royal Australian Air Force, where eagles face randomly to right and left. It is also interesting to note that the collar badges of the RAFVR Education Officers were not made in opposing pairs and only face to their left. Many of the post-WW2 (1947-1950) aircrew rank badges are stamped left or right on the reverse to ensure that they are worn with the eagles facing the rear.

An interesting endnote to this story is provided by the short-lived Women's Royal Air Force, which only existed for two years between 1918 and 1920. There were no formal dress regulations published for the WRAF and AMO 290 of 1919 simply states that the shoulder eagles "will be worn on each sleeve of tunic and greatcoat". The Imperial War



*RAAF 3rd type Officer's cap badges showing the Southern Cross in the background and with eagles facing left and right. (Australian War Museum Heraldry Collection.)*

Museum description states: "Shoulder eagles were worn in facing pairs and, as with the male RAF, they faced the rear." As with their male counterparts, this does not seem to have been strictly followed in practice. All but one of the few WRAF photographs in my own collection in which it is possible to discern the direction of flight, have the shoulder eagles facing the front. Other photographic evidence seems to support the conclusion that this was a common practice, although it is probably too bold to conclude that the WRAF shoulder eagles were more frequently worn facing the front than to the rear. However, the WRAF was disbanded before the definitive and corrective AMO of 1921.



*RAF Observer Officer in the 1918 khaki uniform showing a crowned sleeve eagle facing the rear and rank bars on either side of the cap badge.*



*WRAF (1918-1920) wireless mechanic with her shoulder eagles facing the front. (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum).*