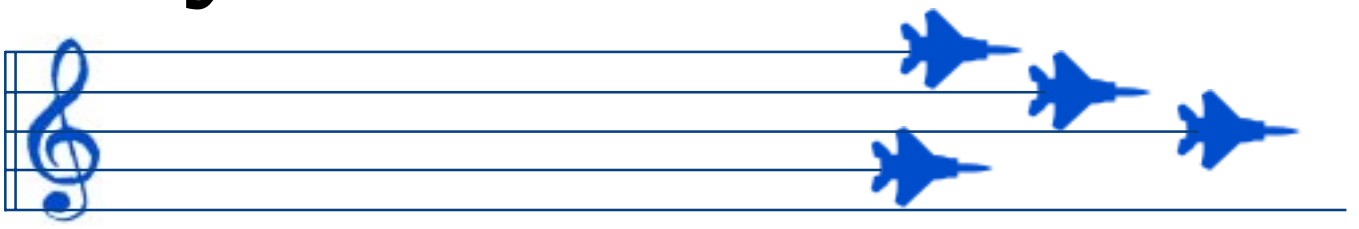
Songs tell the cultural history of the Air Force—and other services, too.

Rhythm and Blue



By Bill Getz

MUCH of the history of the Air Force and other services is captured in songs that airmen and other troops have sung or hummed as they carried out their duties around the world. "The songs tell the story of courage and dedication from the skies over Belleau Wood to the skies over Thud Ridge," wrote Gen. Jimmy Doolittle in 1981.

Music is an old military tradition. Around the campfires at Valley Forge, Gettysburg, and other battlefields at other times, in the ward rooms aboard ships at sea, in airmen's clubs and tents, fighting men of the armed forces joined in song.

Many of the songs enjoyed by the armed forces were also popular with the general public. George F. Root's "Battle Cry of Freedom," written in 1861, was sung by civilians as well as the Union's boys in blue. "Dixie" stirred the hearts of the Southern soldiers and civilians alike—even though it was written by a Northerner. Ohio-born Daniel D. Emmett wrote the song in 1859 in New York.

In World War I, American troops went off to France singing George M. Cohan's rousing "Over There." During World War II, when Kate Smith's crystal clear voice rang out with Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," the hearts of all Americans were stirred.

In World War II, top songwriters tried their hands at composing patriotic and military songs. A handful—like Jimmy McHugh's "Comin' In on a Wing and a Prayer"—became popular. Some—like Cole Porter's "Glide Glider Glide"—did not.

Most military songs provide new lyrics for an existing melody or are parodies of the original.

Early Military Songs

Troops often borrow and adapt songs from other military services and countries. The all-American "Yankee Doodle" is an example. The basic tune was sung by children in southern Europe before 1500. By 1699, the first military parody was sung by English cavaliers. The present version was written in prerevolutionary days by a British Army surgeon, Richard Shuckburgh. British troops sang the song during the American Revolution to ridicule the American colonists, who promptly appropriated the song.

A song that migrated from German forces to Allied troops during World War II was "Lili Marlene," based upon a World War I poem by German poet Hans Leip. "Lili" was set to music in 1938 by the German composer Norbert Schultze. German soldiers adopted it, defying a Nazi ban instituted because the song was deemed to be overly sentimental. It was the anthem for Rommel's Africa Corps, from which it soon migrated to British troops. Anglicized to "Lilli Marlene," it became a big hit among Allied forces.

British troops were the source of many American military songs. One classic is the pre-World War I song, "Stand to Your Glasses." It was originally a poem titled, "The Revel," written by British Army Capt. Bartholomew Dowling in India during the mid-1800s. Alfred Domett set the poem to music—an 1834 Beethoven dirge.

US airmen in World War I appropriated the song, changed the lyrics, and called it "We Loop in the Purple Twilight." Several variations were sung by American troops in the wars of the 20th century. (See "We Loop in the Purple Twilight," p. 80.)

A large number of military parodies are based on the American folk song "The Dying Hobo," a tune originally composed in the late 19th century. Beginning with World War I's "Beside a Belgian Water Tank" to the Vietnam War's "Beside a Laotian Waterfall," 16 Air Force parodies can be traced to the Hobo song.

Perhaps the all-time favorite song of fighter pilots originated in World War I. It drew its inspiration from an earlier song titled "Throw a Nickel on the Drum." There were many variations of the song. The most noteworthy and popular is "Throw a Nickel on the Grass."

The official songs of each of the armed services are original compositions. The official US Air Force song, though, is unique.

The Air Force Song

Between World War I and World War II, Brig. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold (who would go on to command US Army Air Forces in World War II) recognized a need for a song to express the identity of airmen as being separate from that of soldiers. Arnold recommended running a song competition with a monetary prize. In 1937, however, the Army Air Corps did not control its own budget. *Liberty* magazine volunteered to offer a $1,000 prize.

The contest attracted more than 700 entries. The judges had two years, until July 1939, to select four or five finalists. The process moved slowly, and none of the songs inspired the judges. In 1938, after Arnold became head of the US Army Air Corps, he began soliciting entries directly and even contacted Irving Berlin, who produced some songs for the competition.

On July 13, Robert M. Crawford offered to sing a song he had composed but not written down. He sang for judge Mildred Yount, who then made Crawford write down the words and notes on a blank music sheet. She dubbed the rough manuscript "The Army Air Corps Song." It was placed in the pile to be reviewed during the final selection two days later. Crawford was a pilot in addition to being a singer and composer. He often flew to his engagements.

"Beside a Belgian Water Tank"

Airmen created at least 16 parodies of a 19th century American folk song, "The Dying Hobo." These are the lyrics from the World War I version:

One cold and wintry day,
Beneath his busted engine,
A young observer lay.
His pilot hung from a telegraph pole,
But not entirely dead,
And he listened to the last words
This young observer said:

Oh, I'm going to a better land
Where everything is bright,
Where handouts grow on bushes,
And they stay out late at night.
You do not have to work at all,
Nor even change your socks,
And drops of Johnny Walker
Come trickling down the rocks.

The Air Force Song

By Robert Crawford

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;
Here they come zooming to meet our thunder,
At 'em boys, Give 'er the gun! (Give 'er the gun now!)
Down we dive, spouting our flame from under,
Off with one helluva roar!
We live in fame or go down in flame. Hey!
Nothing'll stop the US Air Force!

Minds of men fashioned a crate of thunder,
Sent it high into the blue;
Hands of men blasted the world asunder;
How they lived God only knew! (God only knew then!)
Souls of men dreaming of skies to conquer
Gave us wings, ever to soar!
With scouts before and bombers galore. Hey!
Nothing'll stop the US Air Force!

Here's a toast to the host
Of those who love the vastness of the sky,
To a friend we send a message of his brother men who fly.
We drink to those who gave their all of old,
Then down we roar to score the rainbow's pot of gold.
A toast to the host of men we boast, the US Air Force!

Off we go into the wild sky yonder,
Keep the wings level and true;
If you'd live to be a grey-haired wonder
Keep the nose out of the blue! (Out of the blue, boy!)
Flying men, guarding the nation's border,
We'll be there, followed by more!
In echelon we carry on. Hey!
Nothing'll stop the US Air Force!

His song was the unanimous winner. The Air Corps did not have enough money to underwrite copyrighting and publishing the song. However, it was produced commercially, and Crawford gave the Air Corps performance rights in perpetuity.

From 1939 to 1941, airmen performed the song at every opportunity. New aviation cadets found the lyrics inside their service caps and sang them as they marched to chow or to the classroom. Post exchanges were ordered to put the song on the jukeboxes and told to play it whenever someone had not paid for another song.

When the Army Air Forces, in 1947, became the Air Force, the lyrics and title were changed. (See "The Air Force Song" on this page.)

During World War II, as in the first World War, troops gave voice to traditional yearnings in such songs as "I Wanna Go Home," a tune written at the Battle of Ypres in 1915 by Lt. Gitz Rice of the 1st Canadian Contingent and promptly adopted by American forces when they arrived two years later.

The troops also sang about romance, complained about the chow, berated the brass, cussed their equipment, cursed the enemy, and bragged about their own unit—in verse and melody.

Military men were not alone in their singing endeavors. Military women often had their own songs and

"We Loop in the Purple Twilight"

This is the original first verse and chorus:

We meet 'neath the sounding rafter,
And the walls around are bare.
As they shout back our peals of laughter,
It seems that the dead are there.

Then stand to your glasses steady,
We drink in our comrades' eyes.
One cup to the dead already,
Hurrah for the next man that dies.

This is the airmen's version created in World War I:

We loop in the purple twilight,
We spin in the silvery dawn,
With a trail of smoke behind us,
To show where our comrades have gone.

So, stand to your glasses steady,
This world is a world full of lies.
Here's a toast to those dead already,
And here's to the next man to die.

songbooks. There was even an official *Women's Army Corps Song Book*, published by the War Department in August 1944.

There were the patriotic songs, such as "The US Army WAC," and gripe songs, such as "GI Blues." There were funny songs, with lyrics such as "Yes, by cracky—I'm a little WAC-y," and marching songs, such as "Salute to the WAC."

Military songs captured the mood of the times. Songs of World War I varied from sadness to exuberant humor, as exemplified by the tune "Look at the Ears on Him."

World War II brought a treasure trove of songs covering the spectrum of emotions. There were humorous songs, such as "Give Me Operations" ("Don't give me a P-38, the props they counter-rotate"). There were dignified songs, including "God, Guide Those Who Fly." There were songs in between, but the dominant theme was humor.

The Mood Changes

Many songs during the Korean War continued in that vein. An all-time favorite from Korea was "Itazuke Tower" ("I'm turning on the final, I'm running on one lung").

However, the lack of public support for the war and dissatisfaction with the way it was being conducted led to more songs expressing troop frustrations. By the Vietnam War, humor often was replaced with satire and cynicism. Protest songs included "Strafe the Town" and "Chocolate Covered Napalm."

The award for the most prolific writer of original songs of war belongs to a Vietnam-era Air Force F-4 pilot, now retired Lt. Col. Dick Jonas. He has written more than 30 songs about combat, sorrow, love, and patriotism.

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Among his many songs is this 1969 piece "Thud Pilot," an ode to the F-105 Thunderchief and its pilots:

I'm a Thud pilot, I love my plane.
It is my body, I am its brain.
My Thunderchief loves me,
And I love her, too,
But I get the creeps,
With only one seat,
And one engine, too. ...

Jonas also wrote more somber tunes. One such song was "Blue Four" from 1971. It dealt with the crash of an aircraft:

There's a fireball down there on the hillside,
And I think maybe we've lost a friend,
But we'll keep on flying,
And we'll keep on dying,
For duty and honor never end. ...

Military songs often capture sentiments and moods that troops normally would not openly express, and the songs of the Vietnam War were prime examples. Like folk songs, they tell a story. One is a song that vented the frustration of airmen over a Pentagon project called "Rapid Roger."

The project ran from August 1966 through February 1967. The Pentagon had directed the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, commanded by Col. Robin Olds, to "investigate the desirability of increasing sortie rates per aircraft," wrote Ralph F. Wetterhahn in *Air and Space* Magazine. At the time, Wetterhahn was a captain in the wing.

He said that the same aircraft that flew missions by day were to be turned to fly other missions by night. That entailed heavy work for maintenance crews. The maintainers had to reconfigure the fighters, swapping day fuel tanks and weapons for those used at night. They also had to repair the aircraft. During this period, the operational ready rate dropped from 73.8 percent to 54.3 percent. One reason for the decline was that additional men and spare parts never arrived.

Olds' "Wolf Pack" persisted, but, when the test was over, the wing "marked the occasion with a wake, ... complete with a black casket," wrote Wetterhahn.

Two of the wing's fliers, Col. George Halliwell and Col. Bill Savage, wrote a song to mark the event, "On the Day That Rapid Roger Died." They set it to the melody of the song "Paddy Murphy."

The entire Wolf Pack held a funeral procession, led by Olds and Col. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., to bury the thousands of IBM punch cards created by the project. Olds drove a silver spike through the coffin as they buried it.

On the day that Rapid Roger died,
The Eighth Wing had a riot.
The Four Nine Seven made the grave,
The Four Three Three the casket.
The Five Five Five the epitaph,
And Colonel Olds approved it,
On the day that Roger died.

This is history not found elsewhere. ■