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Journal of the Company of Military Historians





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Master Signal Electrician: The United States Army Air Service during World War I

Michael Strauss

Following the end of World War I, the United States Army went through a period of restructuring and consolidated the series of enlisted ranks. This would condense the military ranks structure for enlisted personnel to seven grades effective on 19 June 1920.¹

Prior to the change the Army had more than seventy enlisted pay grades including specialties with complex work descriptions. One of these enlisted grades with multiple variations in the United States Army was the rank of master signal electrician that included the Coast Artillery Corps, Signal Corps, and in the Air Service. Insignia designs varied slightly from others and externally might seem rather confusing. The additional change was for Air Service was added the previous year in spring 1918 with specific responsibilities with aero squadrons.²

This uniform belonged to Omaha, Nebraska, native Arthur Glenn Coe who enlisted in the United States Army on 11 March 1918 almost a year into World War I. After his enlistment, he was sent overseas as part of the American Expeditionary Forces in the Radio Mechanics Detachment, Aviation Section with the rank of private bound for France, 9 August 1918, onboard the USS *Olympic*.³ In September 1918, Coe was transferred to the 186th Aero Squadron in France. He was promoted to the rank of corporal in February 1919, and after several months was again promoted April 1919 to the rank of master signal electrician.⁴

In the headquarter and supply detachments of each aero squadron this included two master signal electricians (often referred to as “MSE” rating) and at the company level one additional assigned position. As one of the senior

noncommissioned officers this position was awarded to qualified men who had technical, electronic experience. In the other divisions men with real experience in photographic and armament knowledge.⁵

Coe’s tunic is of tailored quality and in excellent condition. It is the 1918 British version of the contract service style coat. The inside is unlined and has an extra row of stitching sewn above each pocket typical of this style along with the stamped marking of the British War Department “W D” with the broad arrow in between. Below the letters are displayed the letter “L” indicating the tunic was likely manufactured in Leeds, England.⁶

Other markings of sewn insignia on the uniform include two service chevrons on the lower left sleeve confirming that he served overseas with the American Expeditionary Forces for at least one year, and less than one and half years.⁷ Above the overseas chevron was the red discharge stripes or chevron, likely sewn on the uniform after his separation from service.⁸



FIG 1. Arthur G. Coe tunic, front. All photos courtesy of author.



FIG 2. Arthur G. Coe garrison cap and breeches.



The uniform also has the distinctive patch design for the III Army Corps on the top of the left sleeve at the shoulder. Patches were first authorized for uniforms from a memorandum dated 15 October 1918 from the General Headquarters of the AEF. Coe likely sewed on the patch during period of occupation following the end of the war on 11 November 1918.⁹

Arthur G. Coe remained in Europe for several more months into 1919 after the war as part of the military occupation forces. Coe returned to the United States leaving Brest, France, on the USS *Pocahontas* on 22 July 1919, arriving in Hoboken, New Jersey, nineteen days later.¹⁰ The final muster roll for the 186th Aero Squadron was dated 11 August 1919 from Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York, listed him in the same rank of master electrician with his home address as 3217 N. 25th Street in Omaha, Nebraska.¹¹

Following the last muster roll he was transferred to the Casual Detachment Number 1243 in preparation for his discharge from the military in August 1919. Coe returned to civilian life where he lived until his death on 17 January 1934 in Omaha, Nebraska.¹²

Notes

1. War Department (WD), GO 36, dated 19 June 1920. Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 65, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC.
2. WD, CAR (Change of Regulations) 73, dated 10 June 1918 and

CAR 76, dated 31 July 1918; and WD, GO 51, dated 24 May 1918.

3. U.S. Army World War I Transport Service, Passenger Lists, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92 (RG92), NARA, Washington DC.
4. Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, Muster Rolls & Rosters, 1912-1943, Record Group 64 (RG64), NARA.
5. Mauer Maurer, ed., *The U.S. Air Service in World War I* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 89.
6. Royal Army Clothing Factory (RACF) with the acceptance stamp during World War I shows the manufacturing information. The number above the arrow was most notably the factory identification number.
7. WD, GO 53, dated 27 May 1918; WD, GO 110 GHQ, AEF, dated 7 July 1918.
8. WD Circular 85, dated 19 February 1919. The red chevron was adopted in order to distinguish persons in service from those who were discharged.
9. Robert J. Dalessandro and Michael G. Knapp, *Organization and Insignia of the American Expeditionary Force, 1917-1923* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2008), 56-58.
10. U.S. Army World War I Transport Service, Passenger Lists, RG92, NARA.
11. Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, Muster Rolls & Rosters, 1912-1943, RG64, NARA.
12. *Omaha World-Herald*, 18 January 1934.



FIGS 3, 4. Arthur G. Coe tunic, left and right sides.



FIG 5. Broad arrow marking.



FIG 6. Insignia.