



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Artifact Backgrounder

Aviation Scarf

DEFINITION

The **Aviator's Scarf** was a scarf, most often silk, worn by airplane pilots during the First World War.

DID YOU KNOW?

Scarves became so integral to flight during the First World War that many Second World War aircrew, though they flew in closed cabins, were given standard issue aviator scarves to facilitate their scanning the skies by preventing chafing and to keep them warm.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since Canada did not have its own air force in the First World War, thousands of Canadians served in the British Flying Services as pilots, observers and ground crew. Founded in 1912, the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was part of the British army and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), founded in 1914, formed part of the Royal Navy.

Only 11 years after the world's first powered flight, aircraft in 1914 were rudimentary and dangerous even for basic flight. Flying such machines, the RFC undertook various roles that increased and diversified as the war progressed. Tasks included aerial reconnaissance, aerial photography, harassing ground troops with bombs and machine gun fire, and strategic bombing of targets such as railway lines and production centres. Similarly, the RNAS conducted reconnaissance, attacked enemy ports and vessels, acted as the navy's "eyes in the sky" and also patrolled Britain's coasts searching for enemy Zeppelins or heavy bombers which often bombed London.

Pilots of both the RFC and the RNAS also engaged in aerial combat in order to gain air superiority over enemy aircraft. This was important to ensure freedom of movement and to allow the important reconnaissance and bombing work to proceed without fear of being shot down. These air crews operated in open cockpits in very cold conditions at altitudes up to 15,000 ft. Many of the rudimentary engines threw oil into pilots' faces, while some gave out completely in mid-flight. Such conditions, not to mention the constant risk of being shot down by the enemy, meant that war in the air was gruelling, terrifying, and highly dangerous.

DID YOU KNOW?

Modern flight suits and materials have eliminated the need for the silk scarf. However, aviator scarves remain important as they have become largely traditional pieces of flight gear emblazoned with unit insignia, which helps create *esprit de corps*.

EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

Because flight training was expensive (initially the military did not provide basic flight training), many pilots were wealthy members of the "upper class", whose habits and attire followed them into the service. The silk scarf was a fashionable accessory that many airmen wore in civil life before the war. Once the war began, various problems of flight were solved by turning these former fashion accessories into essential pieces of military kit.

- First World War aircraft cockpits were open to the elements and cold winds tended to blow down the neck of pilots' coats. Rather than wearing a high leather collar to stop the wind, which restricted movement and vision, a pilot would use the silk scarf to plug the gaps around his neck and keep his body warm.

- Silk, unlike wool or cotton, prevented the leather collar from chafing the neck which was a considerable problem given that pilot and observer were constantly scanning the sky through 360 degrees. Tightly woven silk was lightweight, durable, compact, and smooth enough to facilitate movement and stop drafts. They were typically worn inside the jacket, and sometimes pinned down.
- Pilots also sometimes used the scarf as a cleaning cloth in the sky, for example, to wipe rain or condensation from their goggles. However, they also used their scarves to wipe away the oil thrown off from the early airplane engines, which sometimes sprayed in their faces.

VOCABULARY LIST

Aerial reconnaissance:

Searching for enemy troops, fortifications, artillery positions and supply depots for military or strategic purposes using airplanes or balloons.

Strategic bombing:

A military strategy conducted from the air with the goal of defeating the enemy by destroying their morale and their ability to produce and transport material to theatres of military operations.

Zeppelin:

A type of German airship, floated using Hydrogen and propelled with large engines, commonly used for the purposes of scouting and bombing the Allies during the First World War.