



Dressing for Altitude: U.S. Aviation Pressure Suits, Wiley Post to Space Shuttle (NASA Sp)

Dennis R. Jenkins

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The definitive story of pressure suits began long ago and has involved a great many people to obtain the present state of the art as this book well chronicles. Many of these people were visionaries who anticipated the need for such highly specialized equipment long before it could actually be employed in any practical application. A remarkable number of pressure suit designs were developed early on, the vast majority of which never made it into flight, amounting to little more than science projects. Nonetheless, these early “experiments” informed later work, which led to practical pressure suits when they were needed for high altitude flight.

All successful pressure suit designs have been the result of efforts to address a specific need in a specific application, beginning with Wiley Post’s pressure suit designed for use in his Lockheed Vega, the *Winnie Mae*. Long considered the granddaddy of modern pressure suits, interestingly, Post’s suit was employed principally for protection from hypoxia rather than decompression sickness, since his Lockheed Vega’s altitude ceiling was 50,000 feet.

The first operational full-pressure suit employed (in the D-558-2 Douglas Sky-Rocket) for flight above 50,000 feet was also the result of a collaboration between suit designers and pilot (Scott Crossfield). This close collaboration continued on for the development of the landmark full pressure suit for the X-15 program. The X-15 suit first employed link-net material, originally conceived for the neck section of early U-2 pilot

Helmets to aid pressurized mobility, for the entire restraint layer of the suit. This unique material greatly facilitated custom suit fitting and enhanced pilot comfort and remains in use to the present. Thus, the X-15 suit is really the granddaddy of modern-day pressure suits as it led directly to the standardized military full-pressure suits that followed and continue in service to the present. Further, the X-15’s high performance required that the pressure suit be capable of withstanding exposure to extreme altitudes, temperatures, and high-Q ejections, thus setting the stage to satisfy similar requirements for later programs, namely the A-12, SR-71, XB-70. and Space Shuttle.

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