

NICK ALLEN & THE OLD GEEZER

One summer evening over a half a century ago a chance encounter between a janitor and a photo lab technician resulted in a photograph that has been reproduced more often and seen in more places than perhaps any other aviation photo since the famous shot of Orville Wright lifting off the sands of Kitty Hawk.

The shot of the "Old Geezer," as we've come to think of him, is one of the most quickly recognized and most popular photos in USAF circles. Copies can be found hung on office walls, in flight line hangers, deep in missile silos, in personal lockers and countless other locations not just in the US but throughout the world.

The photographer was Nick Allen, then working for the Hughes Aircraft Co., Culver City, Calif. The Geezer was a janitor at the same plant. On the night in question, back in 1957, Mr. Allen happened to walk into the pilots' ready room, and there ran into the janitor.

As Mr. Allen recalls it, "We just talked for a while, just shooting the breeze, and somehow the conversation turned to the pilots' helmets hanging on the wall. I said, 'I'll bet you'd look good in one of those.' At that, and just for laughs, he took one off its hook and put it on.

"The helmet was way too big for him, and that was funny enough, but then he took out his teeth and started hamming it up, and I couldn't resist any longer. I told him to stay put and I went and got my camera.

The result was the classic picture that has been bouncing around the Air Force ever since. Of the dozen shots he took that night, Mr. Allen printed only the one that has become the classic. He made a print for the janitor and one for the Co. paper, The Hughes News. During the next couple of years, Mr. Allen gave away about 150 prints to anybody who asked for one. "I sent several to officers in the pentagon, gave some to a group of test pilots, and many to friends and co-workers," Mr. Allen remembers.

The Old Geezer has traveled widely since then. He's been enlarged, *reduced*, copied, Xeroxed, captioned, tinted, colored, and even given a background. "The photo has been retouched many times, Mr. Allen says, "but I haven't seen them change the face." The photo has had many titles too, since Mr. Allen's original: "Sleep tonight! Your Air Force is Awake!"

In the 1980's Mr. Allen filed the photo away and forgot about it until recently when he was doing some housecleaning. "I dug it out and showed to an Air Force officer at Mather AFB, and was amazed that he immediately recognized it," Mr. Allen says. "That's what made me feel that people might be interested in the story behind how the photo was taken." And that's what promoted Air Force Magazine to reprint the classic shot along with—seen here for the first time—some of the other poses from that portrait session.

No one knows the name of the helmeted janitor, or what his fate has been, but he's won immortality of a special kind in this one photo—a photo that has universal appeal and that never fails to provoke laughter. And what of photographer Allen? He continued to work as a photographer in the aerospace industry until twelve years ago, when he switched to carpentry, the trade he now practices from his home in Orangevale, Calif. He's pleased by the success his photo has enjoyed through the years and throughout the Air Force.

"I'm *quite* flattered that so much interest has been shown in it over the years, and am happy that it's brought a few smiles to servicemen the world over," Mr. Allen says.