

A rich history can be seen in some of the most common things.

# Pieces of 50

**T**he history of the Air Force is short but vivid—rich in color, tradition, and personality. The rare items portrayed on these pages came from the US Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio; National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.; and 8th Air Force Museum, Barksdale AFB, La. The museums gave Air Force Magazine unusual access to their treasures and knowledge, helping provide glimpses of some of the significant people, places, and moments—as well as everyday artifacts—in the 50-year life of the nation's youngest and most vibrant armed service.



Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the most famous of postwar airmen, left his mark as the legendary, hard-charging commander of Strategic Air Command. Items at left are classic LeMay—flight jacket, service cap, and trademark cigar. Always a man of action, then—Vice Chief of Staff LeMay on Nov. 12, 1957, completed a record-setting three-day flight from Westover AFB, Mass., to Argentina to Washington, D.C., flying the new KC-135. On Nov. 13, Chief of Staff Gen. Thomas D. White pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on LeMay's jacket (above).



Memorabilia photographed by Paul Kennedy

Sometimes, you didn't want camouflage at all but something bold and conspicuous. Looking like jockeys at the Kentucky Derby, ground crews in the 1950s sometimes wore jackets like this one when they needed to stand out on busy flight lines, where large numbers of aircraft marshaled for taxiing.



War and Peace. "Red Phone" (left) was the nickname given the US Primary Alerting System, a telephone hookup carrying orders from the President and Secretary of Defense to SAC bases. The Soviet-era aqua phone was used by Russian officers to set up a March 1992 B-52 bomber visit, symbolizing the end of the Cold War.

Cold War tensions are embodied in this newly declassified communications package that contained two radio transmitters as part of the Emergency Rocket Communication System, the ultimate US nuclear backup system. ERCS payloads, fitted in the nose cones of special Minuteman III missiles, were designed to be sent aloft in wartime and, at the right moment, transmit emergency messages to nuclear weapon sites. The idea was to convince Moscow that US communications—and the power to strike back—would always survive a Soviet attack. The 510th Missile Squadron at Whiteman AFB, Mo., operated ERCS until 1991. This ERCS transmitter can be found in the US Air Force Museum.





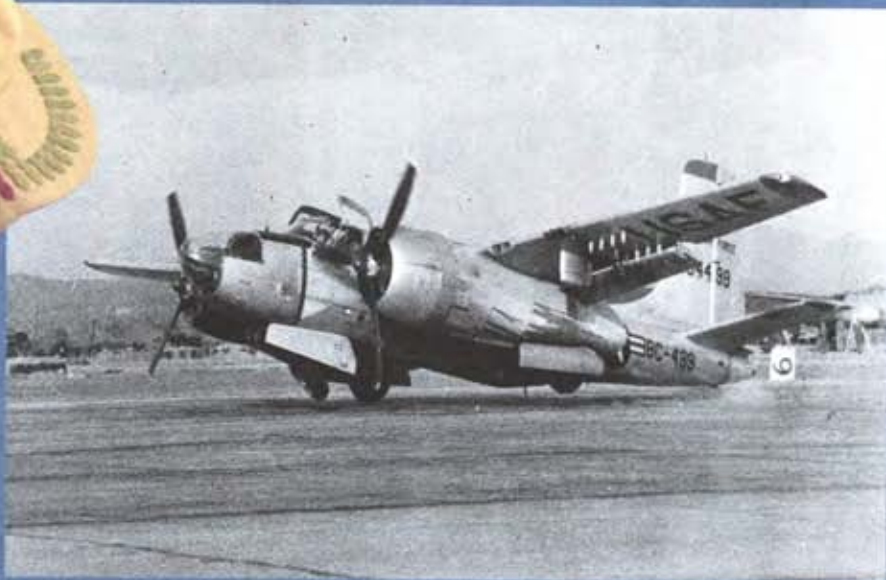
As USAF reached ever higher altitudes with aircraft like the U-2, sustaining life in a high-altitude, low-pressure, no-oxygen environment became vital. In the long-ago test shown at left, liquid in a beaker explodes, demonstrating what might happen to the human subject were he not wearing a MC-2 partial pressure suit and MA-2 helmet. The suit at right, looking like something from a 1950s B movie, is housed at Wright Lab, but its original purpose can no longer be determined.

Blast art. Below left, a pressure suit for a four-legged R&D pioneer shows features similar to suits for a human counterpart.





The 1951 photo at right was snapped an instant before this 5th Air Force B-26 Invader belled in for an emergency landing after a low-level bomb run in North Korea. Enemy fire had disabled its landing gear. Air crews took care to display mission counts on their caps. The one shown above suggests its wearer had to have skill, training, and luck to have flown so many missions.



After USAF came into its own, it launched countless experiments with service clothing, striving to establish its new identity as a separate and independent service. It designed and redesigned, changing everything from dress uniforms to specialized clothing for specific jobs. At left one can see a tiny portion of the mountain of reports and samples contained in the collection of the US Air Force Museum. It continues to grow.

After WW II, USAF realized a growing need to provide its aircrews with more protection than the soft leather headgear (immediate right, from National Air and Space Museum) of postwar vintage. An early transitional "hard-hat" style helmet (far right), with padding and wire bracing, was developed primarily for bomber crews. It is in the 8th Air Force Museum.





At left are prepared foods from various eras. In the beginning, there were K rations. During the Korean War airmen ate C-rations. The space program brought new packaged meals, which were the forerunners of today's Meal, Ready-to-Eat. Early astronaut fare can be seen in the clear packages.

From the beginning, USAF has been at the forefront of the space program. Thomas P. Stafford, then an Air Force brigadier general, wore the suit at right as commander of Apollo 18 during the July 1975 Apollo-Soyuz mission, which culminated in the first meeting in space of US astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts.



In March 1965, when the photo above was taken, Stafford was a backup pilot undergoing a pressure suit preflight checkout in the crew's ready room at Cape Kennedy, Fla. Nine months later, he piloted Gemini VI for the first-ever rendezvous in space, a harbinger of the historic US-Soviet linkup 10 years later.





*Nomex jackets, nav bags, and maps. In 1961, USAF began flying Vietnam War combat missions on a limited scale. During 1964-73, a time of full-scale war, some 1.7 million Air Force members served in Southeast Asia. More than 3,500 died. This jacket and navigation kit belonged to Capt. Ben Allen, who flew F-105s like the one above during Vietnam. Allen kept his Vietnam-era gear and donated it to the NASM for its collection.*



*Highly individualized and custom-tailored clothing—known as "party suits"—became popular in Vietnam. The one displayed in the center of this photo belonged to Maj. Robert A. Lodge, F-4D pilot of the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron. Lodge and his backseater, 1st Lt. Roger C. Locher, downed three MiG-21s in early 1972.*



At the US Air Force Museum, technicians restore some of the larger pieces of service history. Above, David Robb works on a one-of-a-kind XF-92, which paved the way for the delta-winged F-102 and F-106 fighters. Delivered in 1949, it exceeded Mach 1 once—in October 1953. That was its last flight, and Maj. Chuck Yeager was in the cockpit. In the early 1960s, when Yeager donned the flight suit and helmet at right, he was a colonel and director of flight testing at Edwards AFB, Calif., and wore the Air Force Flight Test Center patch.



Even the smallest artifacts can tell powerful stories. The tiny metal spoon pictured at right was used—and brought back to the United States—by a Vietnam War POW. The clothing, worn by brave men once held long years in Communist prisons, are an important part of the Air Force story and are held with care at the US Air Force Museum.







*Though a mere seven years have gone by since the first desert deployments, the Persian Gulf War already is history. For airmen who wore "Chocolate Chips" fatigues on deployments to the Gulf region, a bottled-water container evokes memories of time spent in blazing desert heat that could average more than 100 degrees. Things that evoke strong memories don't always seem important at the time. Case in point: Frisbees that the troops used to pass the time in Desert Shield and Desert Storm.*



*The US Air Force Museum collects some of the largest artifacts, such as the Cessna LC-126A in the foreground and F-15A fighter in the background. In 1948, USAF bought 15 of the Cessnas, equipped with interchangeable wheel, float, and ski landing gear, for Arctic rescue work. The museum restored this one to its condition during service with the 10th Rescue Squadron based at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. The F-15 first flew in July 1972. Though it is still the top operational fighter in the world, the F-15 has already become a classic.*



*In his Presidential office aboard the C-54 Sacred Cow, President Harry Truman on July 12, 1947, signed the National Security Act of 1947 officially establishing the US Air Force as a separate service. Soon after, the Douglas DC-6 Independence replaced it in Presidential service. Sacred Cow is often considered the first "Air Force One" and is now displayed at the US Air Force Museum.*

*At right is the flight suit and jacket of then-Lt. Col. Kathy LaSauce. She was a member of the first cadre of USAF female pilots in 1977, the first female C-141 pilot in USAF, the first woman to fly Presidential support for the 89th Airlift Wing, Andrews AFB, Md., and the first woman to command an aerial port squadron.*



*It has gone by many names: B-4 Bag, "Air Force luggage," and so forth. Whatever it may be called, the humble sage-green suitcase provides a perfect symbol for the on-call, go-whenever-needed nature of service in the United States Air Force during its first 50 years. ■*