



Allwohn's dog, Rex, rounds up sheep and forces the flock to stay together while grazing on the long grasses of Fliegerhorst Airfield. The 10-year-old dog was once a family pet, but was given away for being too rough with children, Allwohn said.



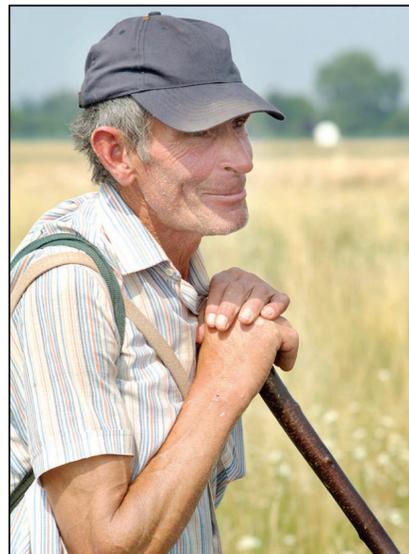
Helmut Allwohn and his dog, Lucy, guide the flock through the fields on Fliegerhorst Kaserne, a job the shepherd has done for more than 40 years.

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Shepherd's flock trims fields of Army airfield for more than 40 years

Working in all kinds of weather for more than four decades takes its toll on a man's face and imprints its own special character. Helmut Allwohn, who said he has always loved being outdoors, looks surprisingly youthful despite his many years exposed to the elements.

PHOTOS BY
KARL WEISEL



By Anemone Rueger
104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

It's somewhere around Day 14,600 in Helmut Allwohn's professional career. And it's pretty much like Day One.

Allwohn, a shepherd who has been tending sheep for some four decades on Fliegerhorst Airfield, said he has never regretted his career choice. "I'm a free man. There is nothing better."

The shepherd is not easy to spot from a distance on this warm July afternoon. The flock is blending in well with the yellow grass of the Fliegerhorst prairie. But the dogs give them away.

Allwohn doesn't take notice of visitors unless he has to. He is watching the sheep as he has done for 40 years now, leaning on his shepherd's staff, yelling something incomprehensible to the dogs from time to time. Sun, wind and snow have made his skin look like tanned leather.

"He's been here as long as I can remember ... more than 20 years," said Jay Stotzky, Fliegerhorst airfield manager. "He is on the

property book now," Stotzky added, jokingly. "Every new commander signs for him."

The grazing flock is a welcome help in taking care of some of the vast area, said Stotzky. "But it's not really an issue of cutting the grass. DPW (the Directorate of Public Works and the BOS firm) is doing that."

It's also not an issue of making much money nowadays for Allwohn and his boss, Helmut Schuppe from Bruchköbel, who owns the sheep. It's just that he has always been a shepherd and always will be, Allwohn said. "I have to be out here, out of doors. I'm a child of nature."

Still what makes a young man choose a job such as tending sheep with little variation and almost no human companionship?

"That's easy to answer," said Allwohn. "I had polio when I was a baby." That was in 1940, in the middle of World War II. His brother was hit by the same fate and barely survived. "Our parents died early. We grew up with Grandma."

Then came the time when he had to decide what to do with his life. As a result of

his disease his left side remained paralyzed. "I went to a career counseling center. The man there told me, 'You should walk a lot. The best thing for you would be to become a shepherd.' And that I did," said Allwohn.

He moved from his birthplace, Wölfersheim near Friedberg, to Hanau and started an apprenticeship as a shepherd. "You study it like any other agricultural occupation," he said. "They taught us all kinds of skills like how to shear sheep. The most important thing was what we learned about diseases. I need to know what to do when a sheep doesn't eat. Going to the vet is too expensive. We get medicine from the vet and we do the shots ourselves, and the next day everything's fine."

After Allwohn finished his training and apprenticeship with another shepherd, he went to work for Schuppe. He also became a member of the Schuppe family. "I'm all alone, no parents. My brother died in a car accident long ago. The Schuppe family is my home."

Every day from the beginning of April

through the end of September, the Fliegerhorst back gate swings open for Allwohn, his 300 sheep and two dogs around 10 a.m. and closes behind them again around 8 p.m. When the summer is over and the farmers have brought in their harvest, Allwohn takes the sheep to graze in the fields of Bruchköbel.

"I used to ride my bike here every morning," said Allwohn. "But lately Schuppe insisted that he would take me by car and pick me up."

The helicopters don't seem to bother the sheep. "They are used to it," said Allwohn. "When someone is going to use the runway, they come and tell me beforehand, and then I get out of the way. That's not a problem at all."

Does he remember President John F. Kennedy's visit to Fliegerhorst in 1963? "Yes, sure. I was out there with the sheep. Yes, that was nice ... I liked it."

One thing the sheep don't have on Fliegerhorst is water. "They have to drink in the morning before they enter the gate. In

the evening they race through the gate like firefighters," Allwohn said.

Rex and Lucy, his two dogs, make sure the flock doesn't wander too far. Allwohn loves them above everything else. Rex has served him for 10 years now. Lucy, the younger, got her training through learning by doing side by side with Allwohn.

Allwohn never takes a day off. Spare time? "I don't want it," he said. "I'm always out here. Sunshine, rain or snow — that doesn't matter to me."

His rucksack contains his lunch and a cell phone. "You never know," he said. "Lightning killed two sheep from the flock last week — struck them down, just like that. I was lucky that the sheep were standing pretty much apart from each other, otherwise the lightning would have killed more."

Once a year the sheep are sheared. And twice a year they have lambs — about a hundred, he said. Schuppe and Allwohn sell them. But neither lambs nor wool make for wealthy living these days. "The business is not what it used to be," said

Allwohn. "The boss has sold all his other herds. There is construction going on everywhere — not enough farm land. A couple of times he has wanted to sell this flock, too. I told him, if you sell the sheep, you can just as well bury me."

"I've never been anywhere else. I'm not interested," said the shepherd. "My only desire is to spend some time in the Allgäu (southwestern Bavaria) ... from time to time, not every year. There I'm also out in the nature. There are animals there, and no one bothers me."

Three hundred sheep, two dogs and the sky above 365 days a year — what does he think about all day long? "Thinking? What should I be thinking about?"

"It's going to rain," he said. "You see? The sheep don't like eating in the rain, so they are hurrying up."

"There's nothing better," the shepherd calls after us as we say our goodbyes. "I wouldn't want to learn anything else."