oxford, miss., sept. 30 --- uncle sam came to mississippi today.

With him came a "showdown" atmosphere that sent tension screaming through oxford's green and pleasant streets. It was a tension mirrored in the faces of silent men gathered around car radios. You could see it in the faces of the hundreds of folks--white--who gathered at the tiny local airport to watch the unbelievable become reality.

Uncle sam--in the form of more than 200 U.S. marshals--had come to town. It was on the faces of the ranks of marshals themselves. They stood in rows on the airstrip, silent and grim-faced, some hefting clubs.

No one smiled. No one had anything to say. It could have been unreal, like any other pleasant sunday afternoon at a small town airport except that parents weren't pointing out the planes landing and taking off to their children instead, they were speculating about the equipment carried by the marshals.

Each marshal wore a white helmet liner. Some carried riot guns in their hands.