

Old planes 'in our blood'



The newly restored C-46 was on display during Wednesday's dedication ceremony honoring the C-46 and Joe Michiels, which was held at Joe Davies Heritage Airpark in Palmdale. Troy Harvey/Valley Press 11/24/2010

By: Samantha Macconnell

AV Press, Oct 24, 2011

PALMDALE - In the crisp early morning hours Wednesday, a couple of volunteers huddled around a historic flight simulator, doing what they do best - restoring remarkable aircraft and various other components for display.

The majority of volunteers at Joe Davies Heritage Airpark at Palmdale Plant 42 is made up of retired aerospace workers, who work hard to rebuild planes and maintain friendships.

"A lot of these guys worked together while they were over at Lockheed and since they've retired, for two days a week they can still see some of their old co-workers," said Rod Holtz, Palmdale's assistant maintenance supervisor.

"They're just guys that have a talent and want to come out and help, and we don't deny anybody to come out and help," he said.

Volunteers at the Heritage Airpark, open to the public since 2002, assist with disassembling donated aircraft, transporting them to the airpark from various locations and piecing them back together for display.

The flight simulator, a device that artificially recreates aircraft flight and various aspects of the flight environment, had initially arrived at the airpark without any of its components, including a seat and flying stick.

After six months of hard work, however, the flight simulator has been fully restored with a fresh coat of paint, new interior seat and an instrument panel. After a lock is installed on the simulator, it will be ready for display.

Rod Kersten, a retired general building contractor who has been volunteering for five years, stood nearby as volunteers came in and out of the facility's workshop, preparing for the day ahead.

Kersten already has an idea of what he will be doing each week.

"I'm the safety guy. That's my responsibility," he said. "Making sure there are no slippery floors, no general misuse of tools, just general safety, so they don't hurt themselves."

Kersten retired about five years ago and said he was looking for something to get involved in.

"One of the guys I knew invited me out one day and I stayed," he said. "I look forward to coming here."

Also inside the volunteers' workshop was Mike Hamm, who is called the jack of all trades by everyone he works with.

"I know a little about a whole lot of stuff, and I know a whole lot about a few things," he said with a laugh.

Hamm, a volunteer for two years, said after he retired he too searched for something he would enjoy doing. With a background in the Marine Corps and aviation industry, he has found a home at the airpark, working and joking around with the guys.

"That's where I learned a lot of stuff, because you gotta make do with very little," Hamm said, referring to his previous work and what it takes to restore outdated aircraft.

Much of the equipment used to piece together the planes is donated by Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Co., but some of the parts must be manufactured by the volunteers themselves.

"One of the things they do is they see a need and they manufacture and create whatever it is that we need to go on there," Holtz said.

"It's innovation. It's doing what needs to be done, that kind of attitude, and everybody in here has the same attitude," Holtz said.

Holtz added that manufacturing needed parts is virtually done on every project.

"A lot of the aircraft are outdated," Hamm added. "They're not manufactured anymore, so if you need a part, you're probably going to make it."

Because each volunteer is different, some may be more specialized, such as in milling or welding, according to Hamm, but it is this type of collaboration that gets the job done.

Laughter from retired Lockheed employees Les Keute and Larry Downey floated into the workshop from outside, another indicator of the camaraderie and bond that keeps these men coming back.

Keute, a volunteer since 2002, only volunteers two months out of the year because he often travels in his recreational vehicle.

One of the projects he worked on was restoring the F-100 Super Sabre, which volunteers recently completed.

Volunteer Bill Blackwood, who was given the nickname Dark Bark by his fellow volunteers, joined Keute and Downey and added to the evident camaraderie.

Blackwood compared the trio to The Three Stooges. They even joked that it was the doughnuts and free coffee that brought them to the airpark.

What really brought them to the airpark, though, is special to them.

"It's in our blood," Blackwood said. "We like old cars, old airplanes."

"We like old cars, old comrades," Keute added.



Volunteer Les Keute sands the Escape System Test Vehicle Space Shuttle Thursday morning at Joe Davies Heritage Airpark, Plant 42, in Palmdale.



Volunteer Louie Provencio works on the wing of the B-52 Thursday morning at Joe Davies Heritage Airpark, Plant 42, in Palmdale. CHRISTINA RAMOS/Valley Press/Oct. 20, 20112

Fellow comrade and pioneer Louie Provencio, 85, is one of the original workers at the airpark after work began on it in 1998.

Provencio was on a platform repairing one of the panels on the wing of the B-52 Stratofortress, the largest airplane at the facility.

He has been in the aircraft industry since he was 17 and went to work at Lockheed in 1972, where at one point he was a flightline supervisor.

Provencio retired in January 1993 and volunteered at Lockheed the following year. He helped to restore an F-117 and some years later, began volunteering at the airpark.

Besides putting in time at the airpark once a week, four times a week Provencio takes

Zumba classes, a Latin-inspired dance fitness program.

"It's not easy, and I'm really proud I can keep up with it," he said. "I try to stay active. That's all I have because my wife passed away about a little over four years ago."



Volunteers David Macias, left, and Louie Provencio works on the wing of the B-52 Thursday morning at Joe Davies Heritage Airpark, Plant 42, in Palmdale. CHRISTINA RAMOS/Valley Press/Oct. 20, 20113

The B-52 Stratofortress that Provencio was working on won't be complete for at least another year or year and a half, according to Jay Tweed, a volunteer since 2002 and historian at the airpark.

The Heritage Airpark features 18 aircraft displays, including the F-100 Super Sabre, C-46 Commando, which required some volunteers to go to Alaska to retrieve parts, and a scale model of the B-2 stealth bomber, created especially for the airpark.

Other aircraft include the F-86 Sabre; C-140 JetStar; A-4C Skyhawk; T-33A Shooting Star; T-38A Talon; A-7D Corsair II; F-4D Phantom II; F-104C Starfighter; F-105 Thunderchief; F-5E Tiger; F-101 Voodoo; Triumph 143; F-14D Tomcat and AGM-28 Hound Dog Missile.

When fully developed, the airpark will showcase more than 40 retired military and civilian aircraft on static display.

The Joe Davies Heritage Airpark at Palmdale Plant 42 is at 2001 East Ave. P.

Guided tours with airpark volunteers are available from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays. To schedule a tour, call (661)267-5300.

smacconnell@avpress.com