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Aviation Heritage Park Museum takes off

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1 of 25



Visitors look upon a 1943 Ford GPW Jeep from World War II era on display at the new Aviation Heritage Park Museum during the museum's grand opening ceremony on Saturday. A young child is seen in a stroller in the foreground.

What began with lofty ambitions five years ago was celebrated Saturday with the grand opening of the Aviation Heritage Park Museum, and the enthusiasm from the people who piloted this project was sky-high.

“Once you enter this place, you’ll learn more about where you came from and, hopefully, be inspired to look upward at where you may go,” museum executive director Bob Bubnis said at the grand opening ceremony.

Designed to look like a 1930s-era airplane hangar, the \$2.5 million, 12,000 square foot museum houses artifacts and mementoes from the many people of this area who have distinguished themselves in the skies.

Visitors looking upward could see a yellow 1940 Piper Cub suspended from the ceiling, much like the plane flown by Glasgow native Willa Brown, the first Black woman to earn a commercial pilot’s license in the U.S.

At the rear of the museum sat a NASA T-38 Talon two-seat supersonic jet trainer, displayed to illustrate the story of Russellville native Col. Terry Wilcutt, a veteran of four Space Shuttle missions.

Dressed in a blue NASA jumpsuit, Wilcutt was on hand Saturday to dedicate the facility and hold a question and answer session with visitors during which he discussed his career in the U.S. Marine Corps and with NASA.

“This museum honors some Kentuckians that had stellar aviation careers, but its purpose is to inspire the next generation of Kentuckians to pursue aviation careers,” Wilcutt said.

Visitors marveled at the displays of uniforms, medals, scale models of various aircraft and a wall filled with pictures of distinguished aviators with ties to the area.

Bubnis said that organizing the displays of artifacts donated by family members of local aviators was a powerful moment for him.

“Here I am taking this artifact and positioning it just right in this case, for me it’s almost like a sacred experience,” Bubnis said. “What I do is help people remember what happened so they can think about what can happen.”

Ground was broken on the museum in 2018 at the Aviation Heritage Park at Smallhouse Road and Three Springs Road, and the park’s board of directors envisioned the facility to be a dynamic companion to the seven historic aircraft on static display outdoors at the park.

Bubnis referred to what visitors saw in the museum Saturday as phase one.

Interactive displays are expected to go live next month on three video monitors, and classroom space at the site will be dedicated to a number of educational opportunities that Bubnis said are being planned.

Two FAA-approved flight simulators are also expected at the museum in the near future.

“You can actually log your hours if you’re trying to become a pilot and a lot of pilots need those when they haven’t flown in a little while to knock the rust off,” Bubnis said.

Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott, a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel, donned the uniform Saturday to speak about the potential the museum holds to educate both local residents and people the world over about the area’s contributions to aviation and to drive the local economy.

“Today our community is literally walking on Cloud Nine,” Alcott said. “The ground we’re standing on symbolizes a love letter to aviation, but more importantly, it’s a historic reminder of the rich history of our commonwealth and our contributions to aviation around the world.”