

New Air and Space Museum at Dulles: Stephen F. Udvar-Hazy Center Opens

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Vice Admiral Don Engen must have been smiling somewhere high above the snowy skies over the Washington, D.C., area on 5 December 2003. The opening of the Stephen F. Udvar-Hazy (pronounced OOD-var HAH-zee) Center, the National Air and Space Museum Annex at Dulles airport in Virginia, had become a reality. Even with the inclement weather that day, hundreds of journalists made their way to the IMAX theater for welcoming remarks by retired Marine Corps General John R. Dailey, Director of the National Air and Space Museum. The former F-4 pilot, one of only a handful of Marine aviators to reach four-star rank, succeeded retired VAdm. Engen, who died when his glider crashed in July 1999 in the California Sierras. Bringing the same dedication and forceful personality to the job, Gen. Dailey lifted Don Engen's dream to fruition and, now, it was time to show it off.

Even before the well-known National Air and Space Museum opened its doors in 1976, museum officials knew they needed more room to display a major portion of the aviation treasures the Smithsonian held. By 1980, proposals for a new facility were being considered, and within 10 years a 176.5-acre site south of the main terminal at Dulles International Airport, some 40 miles west of Washington, D.C., was selected.

Overall estimated cost for the new museum is \$311 million, with only \$8 million coming from the federal government for initial planning. By congressional mandate, no government funds were used for the construction of the facility. Pledged shortly after VAdm. Engen's death, Mr. Udvar-Hazy's incredibly generous gift of \$60 million propelled the new museum's schedule off the ground. The Smithsonian understandably felt that naming the new facility after its principal benefactor, who is president and CEO of a commercial aircraft-leasing company and a licensed pilot with more than 6,000 hours flight time, was the only proper way to show its gratitude. With Mr. Udvar-Hazy and his family attending, ground for the new center was broken on 25 October 2000. Actual construction began the following June.

The 760,000 square foot facility features a large aviation exhibit hangar which is complemented by a

smaller space exhibit hangar. At the December grand opening about 80 aircraft and dozens of space artifacts were on display. This will eventually grow to more than 200 aircraft and 135 spacecraft. In addition to the exhibits, visitors can enjoy films in the 479-seat IMAX theater, or observe air traffic at Dulles airport from the 164-foot Donald E. Engen observation tower.

Even from the outside, the huge hangar, looking like a massive quonset hut with its rounded roof, beckons enthusiasts to come in and be astounded. Many of the Smithsonian's most prized aviation artifacts, until now stashed in the Paul Garber facility in suburban Maryland, are displayed for the generations of personnel who flew them or



Peter Mersky

Above, an N3N-3 floatplane, left, and an F4U-1D Corsair represent U.S. naval aircraft of the past. Right, an F8F Bearcat, modified for civilian air racing, stands at right in the foreground of an Air France Concorde supersonic transport.



fought against them. An example is the B-29 *Enola Gay*, which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. The world's most advanced bomber of its time, it takes its place in history as one of only two aircraft (both B-29s) to drop an A-bomb in combat.

Grouped in general sections, a Korea/Vietnam-period collection features an F-86 and MiG-15, side by side, as well as an F-4 and MiG-21. Both displays highlight each pair's immortal relationship in their specific wars. Currently displayed in the colors of the Marine squadron with which it served at the end of its long career, the F-4 is a bona fide MiG killer, having scored against a North Vietnamese MiG-21 in June 1972 with Navy Fighter Squadron 31.

The incredible displays also include a huge SR-71 supersonic reconnaissance aircraft that retained astounding performance until its retirement. By way of comparison, another supersonic type is the gleaming white Concorde on display in Air France livery. This gorgeous aircraft towers over many of the nearby planes and one can easily walk under it to view the Concorde's massive engine nacelles.

Close by, nestled under the B-29, are a P-47 and P-38. Surprisingly, the P-38 is relatively small considering its twin-engine, twin-boomed layout; however, the P-47 is absolutely huge! One can imagine a 20-year-old second lieutenant honking that massive fighter around the sky

against a Zero or Focke-Wulf 190, or sending it into a dive against a German flak tower.

Readers of *Naval Aviation News* won't be disappointed because the Udvar-Hazy Center features several naval aircraft. Besides the previously mentioned MiG-killer F-4, the list includes a Grumman F6F-3 Hellcat, Vought F4U-1D, Curtiss 1A Gulfhawk, Grumman G-22 Gulfhawk II and Vought OS2U-3 Kingfisher. The Dash-3 Hellcat is quite rare; most F6Fs on display elsewhere are later models. The two Gulfhawks were air show aircraft of the 1930s and demonstrated maneuvers of well-known Navy and Marine Corps fighters of the period. Of course, the F4U Corsair needs no introduction to Navy and Marine Corps enthusiasts.

The WW I period also includes several interesting types, including a Nieuport 28. While having a combat history only with the U.S. Air Service, this elegant little fighter also served briefly with the U.S. Navy immediately after the war, flying from gun-turret platforms aboard battleships and cruisers.

Next time you're in the national capital area, make time to see the new museum. Plans include a shuttle bus that will move between the National Mall and the Udvar-Hazy Center. But it's not hard to reach from either local or interstate roads. The experience is well worth the trip. ✈

For more information log on to www.nasm.si.edu.



NASM