Air Mobility Command Museum
Mission Statement

The mission of the Air Mobility Command Museum is twofold:
• To present the history and development of military airlift and tanker operations.
• In a goal closely aligned with the first, to portray the rich history of Dover Air Force Base and its predecessor, Dover Army Airfield.

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What is the Air Mobility Command Museum?
Located in Hangar 1301 on Dover Air Force Base, Kent County, Delaware, the AMC Museum is part of the National Museum of the United States Air Force’s field museum system.

Hangar 1301 was built in 1944 and used in World War II by the 4146 Base Unit as a secret rocket development site at what was known as the Dover Army Airfield. During the 1950s through 1970s, the area was home to various fighter squadrons serving the base. Following several years of inactivity, the facility was renovated to house the AMC Museum. The Museum consists of the former hangar, administrative offices, shop and heating plant, and now counts more than 30 planes as part of its inventory.

Hangar 1301 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

Although located on Dover AFB proper, entrance to the Museum may be made from Delaware Route 9, south of the base. Admission to and parking at the Museum is free and military identification is not required. The Air Mobility Command Museum is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. It is closed on Mondays, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For more information, call 302-677-5939.

The Hangar Digest is printed and mailed by Associates International, Wilmington, Del.

Cover: Three examples of the Air Mobility Command Museum’s most valuable resource — our volunteers — are featured in this issue, including World War II C-47 pilot Don Clark, who took a few minutes from his work escorting visitors around the Museum hangar to pose for a shot inside the cowling for the TF-39 engine that powered Dover’s C-54s and C-5Bs.
From the Director

A winter of no discontent — and apologies to the Bard

The winter that would not quit is over finally and I cannot believe how much progress our Air Mobility Command Museum team has made in spite of the weather. Even though our restoration crew is known for their excellent aircraft restorations there is much more to their work than just planes.

Our Link trainer “box,” the part the student sits in to “fly” the trainer has been completed after a long process of conservation and restoration and it looks first class. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force offered to transfer two very decrepit operator’s desks that control this type of simulator to us and our guys now are in the process of using parts from several desks to restore one complete control station.

Roy Brower, Mike Woods, Tom Calish, Ken Konesey, Marty Martel and Ron Garabowski have been working on this project for two years. Part of the time they had to stand down since large aircraft parts took up all the free space in our restoration hangar. We will move the simulator to the main museum hangar this spring and the desk will follow when it is complete.

Don Rynes has spent the winter treating corrosion and repainting all our tow bars. We have more than a dozen different specialized tow bars for our planes and they must be inspected and maintained to stay serviceable. More than a few of them are well over 50 years old. With some help from the base machine shop we’ve even replaced some axles and other parts that were worn out. Not glamorous but necessary work. Our supporting foundation has agreed to fund a carpentry-type shelter to keep these necessary tools out of the weather so they can continue to serve us another half-century.

The C-60 Lodestar, which arrived last year, has been reassembled in time for our prime visitor season. I enthusiastically thought we would have it together last fall but we just had too many ongoing projects to tackle a new one, and Old Man Winter put our plans on hold until things warmed up at least a little. During our open cockpit days we will allow folks to look into the interior but the Lodestar is too cramped to allow visitors to safely enter.

With the energetic support of Bob Leicht, a retired U.S. Army Airborne veteran, we have been increasing coverage of our air delivery mission. Several individual initiatives have come together to help our guides show and tell visitors how we have supported our airlift — and air drop customers from World War II to today. Our C-47 was upgraded to have an external pararack with a paracrate installed and after a 25 year search we are installing proper parachute pan seats inside. The C-119 has a properly rigged drop load for its internal overhead rail system. The C-130 has a properly rigged air drop pallet on the aft ramp and our C-5 and C-141 both have palletized cargo on board.

Our exhibit of the airborne-sized tractor, dump trailer and bulldozer has been joined by a 75 mm pack howitzer that was completely overhauled by Bob Leicht, John Zistl, Eric Cerwinski and Bill Lee. The Army Center for Military History transferred the howitzer, which was developed for airborne forces, to us so we can continue to develop the airlift story. A single C-47 could drop a disassembled pack howitzer in one pass, delivering six crates and three bundles, providing a gun and ammunition that could be assembled and put into action in 20 minutes. It was the heaviest gun the lightly armed paratroops had until they linked up with advancing infantry and artillery units.

We are trying to give visitors a broader view of what airlift and air refueling mean to the mission of our U.S. Air Force. Let us know what you think.

— Mike

Up Close

Bob Leicht — AMC Museum’s Volunteer of the Quarter

The Newark, N.J., native came to the AMC Museum in 2013, shortly after moving to Middletown from Tennessee.

“After being gone for 40 years, my wife Nancy and I said we wanted to go home,” Leicht said. “We’ve found a home in Delaware, and we think we’re done moving.”

Leicht was commissioned an infantry officer, served in an infantry and airborne division, and later completed Special Forces training, serving the rest of his career in Special Forces and other special operations assignments. He’s been stationed all over the United States as well as Korea and Okinawa.

Following his retirement as a colonel after 27 years of service, Leicht worked at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory before returning to the East Coast.

At age 64, Leicht stays busy with projects that have included installing equipment on the Museum’s C-47. The pararack now on the Skytrain show what it would have looked like when the aircraft flew on D-Day.

“It helps the Museum tell the story of aerial delivery across time as a component of the air mobility mission to deliver people and equipment,” he said.

As a paratrooper, Leicht also can tell of experiences jumping out of some of the many aircraft in the Museum’s collection.

“It’s a personal issue to me because I used to be some of the stuff being delivered from the back of those airplanes,” he said.
Bill Hardie is perhaps one of the AMC Museum’s most visible volunteers. It’s not because he’s there every day – he’s not. It’s not because he clammers over and around our aircraft, giving little known details about each one – he can’t. It’s his smile, his nothing-keeps-me-down attitude, that impresses people.

It’s a good bet Museum visitors remember that attitude more than they remember Hardie greeting them from a red motorized scooter, or that his effusive greetings might have been difficult to understand.

From his earliest days in his native Michigan, to his recovery from a surgery that saved his life but impaired his speech and motor skills, Hardie has approached life with a positive attitude that transcends the negative. “There’s really a lot more to him than meets the eye,” said fellow Museum volunteer Harry Bright. “He just maximizes everything he does.”

‘I wanted to fly’

Hardie and his wife, Kay, live in a comfortable retirement home in Dover, Delaware. Their house is set up to give him the room he needs for his scooter, and he maneuvers with little trouble around the mementoes of a 30-year Air Force career and a marriage now in its fifth decade.

Hardie was an accomplished swimmer in high school and first year of college. “He would have made Esther Williams cry, he was so good,” Kay said.

Unfortunately Hardie didn’t become the standout in college he had been while in high school. “It’s easier being a big frog in a small pond than a small frog in a big pond,” he said.

Hardie’s love of the sport led him to take it up again after retirement when his knee started giving him trouble while running. He won silver and bronze medals at the national 2005 Senior Olympic Summer games and still holds the Delaware state record for the 200-yard backstroke, which he set in 2002.

Hardie graduated from Michigan State University in 1959 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics, and earned his commission through the school’s ROTC program.

“They had two programs, Army and Air Force, and I wanted to fly,” he said. “That was the avenue to get there.”

Along the way, he met Kay, and the two clicked.

“He was engaged to someone else, but she didn’t like the military life,” Kay said. “I didn’t know anything about the military, but I didn’t give a damn. I wanted him!”

Assigned to pilot undergraduate training at Lackland AFB, Texas, he arrived in a Class A uniform, which had been given him by his brother-in-law. Unfortunately, Hardie wasn’t prepared for the sweltering Texas weather.

“But it was so hot there, compared to Michigan, that we just about died,” Kay said. “It must have been 120 degrees.”

But while Hardie was properly resplendent in his silver tans, almost everyone else was wearing the Air Force’s Bermuda shorts and pith helmet combination.

“We saw a lot of guys wearing them,” Kay said. “That always cracked me up.”

Things were tough for the young couple, particularly because a second lieutenant’s paycheck was a whopping $310 a month.

“I remember thinking, ‘If I can make it to 20 years, and maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll make major,’” Hardie told the Dover AFB Airlifter shortly before his retirement.

Graduating in September 1960, Hardie spent almost nine years flying the C-124 at Charleston AFB, S.C., taking on missions to trouble spots all over the world, including Operation New Tape, where Globemasters delivered United Nations troops to help keep the peace in the troubled Congo.

After nine years at Charleston – “We arrived with just our wedding pictures and left with three children,” Kay said -- Hardie was assigned to the C-7A Caribou flying out of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

A typical day at the AMC Museum finds Bill Hardie handing out Museum coins, this time to Bonnie McCann, of Milford, Del.
‘Right off the ramp’

It was during his one-year tour in Vietnam Hardie earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for actions on June 21, 1969.

Then a major, Hardie volunteered to fly relief supplies to a besieged Special Forces camp at Ben Het, where Army Rangers were running low on supplies and ammunition. The Caribou was subject to intense ground fire while making its low airdrops, but Hardie’s flying skills ensured the beleaguered soldiers received some of the more than 200 tons of badly needed provisions airlifted in during the siege.

And there were darkly humorous moments during his tour as well. On one mission, the Caribou was flying some villagers and supplies when a pig escaped from its carrying crate. The plane was flying with its rear ramp open and the pig, spotting daylight after being cooped up in the cage, ran for it.

“Zoom – he went right off the ramp,” Hardie said.

Hardie followed his Vietnam assignment with a three-year tour at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, where he continued to fly the Globemaster II. After his assignment to Air Command and Staff College, Hardie was sent to McGuire AFB, N.J., again to fly the C-124.

But by that time the Globemasters were being retired, so Hardie transitioned to the C-141 Starlifter and took on additional challenges as commander of the 18th Military Airlift Squadron.

It was a good experience, he said.

“I enjoyed command,” Hardie said. “I liked being in charge of everything.”

He really did, Kay added.

“I would say that because he loved his men, and they loved him,” she said. “The camaraderie of flying crews is very, very strong.”

Hardie was promoted to full colonel the day he was assigned to Dover as chief of supply and commander of the 436th Supply Squadron. He closed out his 30-year career as base director of resource management.

But Hardie was working with the AMC Museum even before he wrapped up his Air Force career, said AMCM Director Mike Leister.

“When Bill Hardie was a very few months from retirement, he traveled with us to the United States Air Force Museum and helped take apart the B-17G we have in the Museum now,” Leister said. “He was there as a mechanic and he worked long hours there with the rest of us.”

Kay said her husband is the kind of man who needed to keep busy.

“I came home one day and he said, ‘Do you have any idea how many water chestnuts you have in the pantry?’” she said. “That’s when I knew we had to find him a job.”

Back then, the Museum was in its infancy and many of the staples people see today were just getting underway. One was the Museum’s store, Leister said.

“It was barely a blip on the Museum Foundation’s budget and Bill built it into a professional-looking store with good inventory,” he said. Hardie also set up the store to use credit cards, doubling the sales within two years.

Hardie also worked on restoring the Museum’s C-54, and was to head the C-124 restoration team when he was sidelined by aneurysm surgery. But his condition was much worse than first thought – “He was a walking time bomb,” Kay said -- and Hardie ended up in intensive care for a month.

He accepts his limitations because of the complications following the operation, and they haven’t dampened his enthusiasm for life.

“I’m doing all right,” he said. “I can’t talk very well, I walk with a walker, I can’t play golf and I don’t drive anymore.

“But I’m not angry,” Hardie said. “It doesn’t do any good to be angry.”

Museum volunteers stepped up during Hardie’s hospitalization and recuperation, even coming out to the house to help with yardwork, and Leister used his carpentry skills to build a ramp for Hardie’s scooter.

“They were so good to us, they were really wonderful,” Kay said.

Leister turned the compliment right back.

“I have enormous respect for Bill Hardie and his service to the country and to our Museum,” Leister said. “He truly is one of the reasons for our Museum being what it is.”
During the Cold War, wherever the B-47 went, the KC-97 was not far behind. Actually, it was the KC-97 in the lead whenever B-47s were launched, the re-doubtable “gas stations in the air” flying ahead of the Stratojets, providing the much needed fuel that kept the bombers aloft long after their fuel tanks would have run dry.

The AMC Museum’s KC-97 has been amazing visitors since it went on display in 2007 after almost eight years of restoration work.

The aircraft, a later variant designated the KC-97L, differs from its earlier cousins with the addition of two jet engines. That addition gave the piston-driven ship the extra speed needed when refueling faster aircraft.

The KC-97 evolved from Boeing Aircraft’s C-97, a cargo aircraft known as the “Stratofreighter,” that was built using numerous components of the B-29 “Superfortress,” including its wing and tail section. The C-97 first flew in November 1944, with Boeing eventually providing 74 of the planes to the Air Force.

It was as the KC-97, however, that the airframe came into its own. The U.S. Air Force ordered 816 planes, in various designations and modifications throughout its lifetime.

Boeing introduced the KC-97 with its flying boom refueling system in 1950, and the Air Force kept the aircraft in its inventory until 1973, although a number remained active beyond that time in service to Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve units.

Despite its new mission as a refueler, the KC-97 retained its predecessor’s designation as “Stratofreighter” throughout its lifetime.

**The Flying Boom**

Emerging in the days before intercontinental missiles, the B-47’s mission was to fly into enemy airspace — namely that of the Soviet Union — and deliver nuclear weapons to strategically selected locations. But since the aircraft could not carry enough fuel for the kinds of extended missions envisioned by the Strategic Air Command, the Stratofreighter was built with a refueling capability.

The result was a teaming of the KC-97 and the B-47, and later the B-52 that replaced it, so that Air Force bomb wings were manned with Stratofreighter units and matching refueling squadrons. A number of other bases also boasted refueling units, such as the 11th Air Refueling Squadron, stationed at Dover from 1960 to 1966.

The concept of aerial refueling was proven feasible as early as 1923, when Lts. Lowell H. Smith and John P. Richter set a world’s record of 37 hours and 15 minutes of continuous flight by using a hose to transfer 75 gallons of fuel to their de Havilland DH-4B.

In October of that year, Smith and Richter flew from the Canadian border to Tijuana, Mexico in an aircraft that had a normal range of 275 miles, having been refueled four times along the way.

Six years later, Capt. Ira Eaker, Maj. Carl Spaatz and their team kept a Fokker C-2A aircraft aloft for more than six days by using fuel supplied from a C-1.

The development of aerial refueling took a back seat to other concerns during World War II, where developing fleets of refueling aircraft was considered a logistical impossibility.

Additionally, the development of the B-29 Superfortress, with a range of 3,700 miles, temporarily at least, overcame the need for refueling shorter range aircraft such as the B-24 and B-17.

The actual practice of aerial refueling did not become part of the Air Force until July 1948, when the 43rd Air Refueling Squadron and the 509th Air Refueling Squadron were activated at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., and Roswell AFB, N.M. These units flew modified Superfortresses, designated the KB-29M, which delivered fuel through a hose trailing the aircraft, the same way Smith and Richter had done a quarter-century earlier.

But this procedure proved inadequate during tests conducted by Boeing and the Air Material Command in 1948, and instead engineers turned the concept around: instead of the receiving aircraft extending a probe to hook up to the refueling plane, the delivery aircraft instead would use a long, tail-mounted boom that would lock into a receptacle on the receiving aircraft.

This “flying boom” system is used Air Force-wide today on the KC-135 Stratotanker, the successor to the KC-97, on the KC-10 Extender and KC-46A Pegasus, which is slated to replace the Stratotanker beginning in 2017.
A long career

The AMC Museum’s KC-97L was built by the Boeing Airplane Company at its Seattle plant and delivered to the U.S. Air Force on July 28, 1955.

The basic C-97 airframe had gone through a number of changes and upgrades by the time the Museum’s Stratofreighter was built. Constructed as a KC-97G with tail number 53-230, the aircraft carried four Pratt & Whitney R-4360-59B engines, the largest aircraft piston power plants to be mass-produced in the United States. The G model also carried two external fuel tanks mounted on under wing pylons.

The newly-built Stratofreighter was assigned to the 384th Air Refueling Squadron at Westover AFB, Mass., one of the first aircraft to be delivered to the unit, which had been activated only three months earlier.

Assigned to conduct refueling missions for the Strategic Air Command, the aircraft was transferred first to the 4050 Air Refueling Squadron and then to the 499th Air Refueling Squadron, both at Westover. Although records are incomplete, it was during this time, from 1962 to 1964, that it could have seen service at with the 11th Refueling Squadron at Dover AFB, a geographically separated unit based out of Westover.

In May 1964, it was transferred to McGhee Tyson Airport, Knoxville, Tenn., as part of the Tennessee National Guard.

A little less than a year later, the external fuel tanks were replaced by two jet engines, and the aircraft was redesignated as a KC-97L.

For obvious reasons, airmen often referred to this arrangement as “four turning, two burning.”

The Stratofreighter remained with the Tennessee Air National Guard until 1976, when it was sent to the Boneyard in Tucson, Ariz., and declared excess.

The plane’s history might have ended there, with it being disassembled and its parts melted down, but after four years in the Arizona desert, the -97 was rescued and moved to Beale AFB, Calif. There it stood on static display until 1999, when it was transferred to the AMC Museum.

It took about a month to take the airframe apart, after which it was loaded on C-5s and brought to Dover AFB. Six years later, reassembled and restored, the -97 debuted as the AMCM’s first example of the Air Force’s aerial refueling capability.

‘Greatest experience’

Stratofreighter crew members pretty much sum up the aircraft in one word: “Dependable.”

“I flew lots and lots of hours on that thing, and I never once was in fear of anything,” recalled former Airman 1st Class Ken Tarwater, 77. Assigned to the 307th ARS at Lincoln AFB, Neb., Tarwater crewed the -97 from 1957 to 1960.

“It was a very forgiving, wonderful airplane, but it was a real gas hog and it guzzled oil,” he said. “There were lots of places that it leaked oil. Someone said after our squadron left Lincoln, it took forever to for the oil spots on the ramp to go away.”

“It flew just fine on three engines and it had been known to fly on just two,” Tarwater said. “I was never on board with two engines out, but I was several times when we flew with one feathered. You’d never have noticed it unless you looked out the window.”

Former Airman 1st Class Harold “Smokey” Beucus flew with the 307th as a radio operator from 1955 to 1959.

“We didn’t have a lot of mechanical problems,” he said. “We’d lose an engine once in a while, but it was pretty reliable.”

Because they flew with the B-47, Stratofreighter aircrews stood alerts with their bomber counterparts. Usually lasting a week at a time, the crews, officer and enlisted, had to stay together 24 hours a day in case the siren went off.

“[SAC] kept us on our toes,” recalled AMC Museum volunteer Charles Grant, a retired flight engineer.

“We had to go everywhere together,” he said. “It was like we were joined at the hip.

“We always had an alert vehicle ready to go. We had Bravo alerts a lot, where we’d actually go out to the airplane, start engines and taxi.

“It was like a job,” he recalled, “but a job where your wife raised the kids.”

When not on alert or sent on temporary duty with their B-47 squadrons, crews flew refueling missions over mid-America and did additional training after the Stratofreights flew away, Beucus said.

Some of those refueling missions were not easy, he added. Because the KC-97’s maximum speed was barely above the B-47’s stall velocity, Stratofreighter pilots sometimes flew at a slight dive to give the aircraft greater speed. The addition of the J-47 jet engines finally solved this problem.

Eventually, however, all three men moved on, Beucus and Tarwater to civilian careers, and Grant to other aircraft and other assignments.

“I would say we were pretty elite crews,” Beucus said. “A lot of us were just young kids, 18 or 19 years old. The pilots respected you for what you did and we were more of a team than a flight crew.

“I don’t know of anyone who wouldn’t say it wasn’t one of the greatest experiences of their lives.”
Phil White and his crew are hard at work on our 11th Annual Golf Tournament Fundraiser scheduled for Friday, June 5, 2015. Registration will be from 10:30 to noon. The four-person scramble tournament will begin with a shotgun start at noon. Tournament prizes include hole-in-one CASH prizes, hole-in-one CAR prizes, closest-to-the-pin CASH prizes, putting contest CASH prizes, and lots of door prizes that will be awarded at dinner. Join us for fun, food, and prizes! Your entry fee includes your greens fee, cart, dinner, beverages and snacks. You can organize/make up your own team or team up at the course.

For those who want to Sponsor a hole for $100, a 24-by-18-inch sign will be placed on the golf course tees or around the greens noting you as a sponsor. Further recognition is given to hole sponsors and door prize donors in our handout brochure at the dinner following the round, highlighted in our Museum eNewsletter (which goes out on the Internet to thousands of folks) and on our Museum FACEBOOK page. Finally, recognition will also be in the following quarterly Hangar Digest and on the AMC Museum website, amcmuseum.org before, during and after the tournament. Hope to see you there – Fore!

Save the date! Once again, we’re planning our Veterans Day celebration for November 11. Ed Perkowski and his team continue to do an outstanding job of coordinating this annual patriotic event. The Milford Community Band is looking forward to performing again. A scheduling issue precluded retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Bill Welser from being here last year, but this year he’s excited about coming back to Dover to be our event speaker. Many of you may recognize him as commander of Dover’s 436th Airlift Wing from 1992 to 1994. Gen. Welser has flown more than 3,500 hours in KC-10s, C-5s and C-141s. Watch our website for more info.

NEW: On-line multi-year memberships! The Board has recently approved “multi-year” memberships to The AMC Museum Foundation. This new offer will save you 10 percent for three- or five-year memberships. Currently we’re only offering it online at store.amcmuseum.org/collections/memberships. The “multi-year” memberships are available for memberships for Crew Member (individual), Flight Crew (family), and Squadron Commander memberships. Note that offering the multi-year membership above Squadron Commander Level wouldn’t be practical for you, since Life Membership is only $500. Besides saving YOU money, it reduces Foundation costs, letting us apply more dollars to our charge to “Support the Air Mobility Command Museum in its mission as an aviation and aerospace, education, scientific, cultural, historical and inspirational facility for the general public and the Air Force community.”
We have more than 165 active volunteers at the Museum – they are our lifeblood. Without them, it would be impossible to complete our mission. The following info is on our website, but I’m repeating it here:

**Any of the following apply to you?** Looking for an interesting way to spend some free time? Miss having the opportunity to use your special skills? Interested in planes? The AMC Museum is the perfect place to put your enthusiasm and interest to work. We’re always looking for people to support us, including helping hands for restoration projects and administrative needs. But before you make up your mind, browse through these frequently asked questions:

**Is there a training program for volunteers?** Yes. We will provide you with a book of background information concerning the history of the museum’s aircraft and the history of Dover Air Force Base. We’ll arrange for you to attend a briefing on safety and operating procedures as well as updates posted in the volunteers’ office.

**How often do I have to work?** We prefer that volunteers come to the Museum at least four hours per month so they can stay up to date on changes that occur here. We will work with you to accommodate your schedule.

**What kinds of jobs do you have for volunteers?** You might want to work in the Museum store or restore and repair our aircraft. Many of our volunteers give guided tours for our visitors. Several volunteers have specialized jobs such as our librarian and our photo archivist. Bottom line is we will attempt to match your interests with our needs to provide a mutually beneficial situation. You should be having FUN!

**I’m not a military person or a mechanic. Can you still use me?** Sure, we can find a job that you already know how to do or teach you a new skill. We even taught a pilot how to work with tools. I know that’s hard to believe but it’s true!

**Does volunteering here count toward school community service programs?** Yes.

**Who do I work for?** As a volunteer you work for the AMC Museum. The store is a fund-raising operation of the AMC Museum Foundation but the store clerks are still museum volunteers.

**What do I get out of it?** Primary benefits seem to be the satisfaction of helping to preserve our aviation history and keeping active – but there are a number of other benefits. We provide each volunteer with a distinctive AMC Museum shirt after 100 hours of volunteer work. There are incentive awards all the way up to 10,000 hours, and we do have several people that have earned those levels. Volunteer hours are logged and each year we recognize our volunteers’ contributions. We take our own group tours from time to time – last one was to the National Air & Space Museum. We have a volunteer recognition luncheon and a holiday dinner banquet every year. And last, but not least, you can’t help but learn more about our history while meeting some really interesting people.

**How do I get started?** Get in touch with our volunteer coordinator, Jan Caldwell. Call her at 302-677-5994 or email her at volcoordinatoramcm@comcast.net.

Hope to see you around the Museum soon.
AMCM’s Don Clark: a farm boy takes to the skies

Airman 1st Class Zachary Cacicia
436th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

It was January 1945, the Battle of the Bulge was coming to an end and 21 year old Lt. Donald Clark found himself piloting a C-47A Skymaster over the Western Front. Its cargo bay, loaded with gasoline and ammunition, was on its way to Lt. Gen. George Patton’s 3rd U.S. Army and its tanks, as they began their push into Germany.

Flash-forward 70 years, and you will find the now-91-year-old Clark at the Air Mobility Command Museum most Wednesdays, sharing his experiences with younger generations.

Clark’s story started on a quiet family farm in the heart of Delaware. As a child, Clark’s passion for all things aviation began to sprout.

“I was a farm boy and I always wanted to fly,” said Clark.

In school, Clark’s passion for flying continued even as he focused on an agricultural vocation.

“When I was in high school, the war was already going on,” said Clark. “I would skip classes, take my grandfather’s car and come out [to Dover Army Air Field] and sit on the west side of the field. I’d watch the B-25s as they flew in and out of here while they were going on patrols over the Atlantic.”

As a high school senior, he applied for and was accepted into an aviation cadet program.

But because he came from a farm family, he was exempt from military service. To make his acceptance official, he needed his parents’ permission — and their signatures.

“I only lied to my parents one time,” said Clark. “I told them that I had to go, even though I didn’t.”

After telling this white lie, all he had to do was wait for his May graduation and he would be sent off for cadet and flight training.

“It was February 1943 and the principal called me down to his office,” said Clark. “He said, ‘get out of here, you’re supposed to report on the 13th of February.’”

Clark had believed he wouldn’t be called up until after he graduated, but the principal told him the Delaware legislature had passed a law allowing schools to give students in good standing an early diploma in an effort to support the war.

Within a few weeks, Clark was in Birmingham, Alabama for pre-cadet training, after which he was sent to a classification center in Nashville, Tennessee.

“It was three days of physical, academic and psychological tests to determine if I would be a pilot, a navigator, a bombardier or wash out,” said Clark. “I was selected to be a pilot.”

Clark was to fly A-26 Invaders, but was transferred to the newly activated 1st Troop Carrier Command to pilot C-47s. He racked up more than 200 flight hours and was selected to become a first pilot, today known as a command pilot. His next stop was Europe.

Clark arrived in France on Jan. 1, 1945. Stationed just outside Paris, he and his crew were broken up and assigned to different aircrews.

“It was a real big letdown, but after flying two or three resupply missions, we realized we weren’t as smart as we thought we were,” he said. “It was a good thing we went through that period with the older people.”

For the next five months, Clark flew 81 missions, 27 being credited as combat missions. Most saw Clark and crew flying to the front lines carrying ammunition and gasoline. On return flights, they usually flew the wounded back to France or England.

“We did most of our supply work for Patton and his 3rd Army,” said Clark. “The armies were moving so fast that the trucks couldn’t keep up with supplies.”

Clark recalled one of his most unforgettable and adrenaline pumping missions.

“The clerk came to me and told me to unload my cargo of gasoline, that I’ve got a special mission,” said Clark. “Oh, Jesus, right off the bat, we thought this is good; maybe we’re going to fly to Yugoslavia and drop off supplies for the partisans.”

Clark and his crew were instructed to fly to a field just outside of Reims, France, and wait. “We landed and there we waited about a half an hour, and finally a couple of trucks came down the road,” he said.

“An officer jumped out of one of the trucks and said, ‘Are you guys on special mission 1-2-3-4 or whatever,’” said Clark. “Yeah, that’s us, I said. ‘OK, we got a priority load here,’ he said, ‘Your orders are to load this as quick as you can and waste no time in getting to your destination.’”

Clark could not believe what his cargo was. “A whole load of toilet tissue!” he said. “We had to take it to the 1st Army up north. They had dysentery.”

With the war in Europe ending in May 1945, Clark continued flying for the newly created European Air Transport Service.

Clark eventually was offered a civilian pilot job flying a converted C-47 out of Geneva, Switzerland. But he decided against it. “It had been over two years since I’d been home,” said Clark. “I was homesick, so I went home in August 1946.”

Clark then went on to a successful business career. “Being a farm boy, I started a crop dusting business,” said Clark. “I did it for 10 years and had six airplanes.”

He sold the business to start a seed business that still operates to this day, Clark Seeds in Clayton, Delaware.

In addition, Clark has served on the board of directors for two Delaware banks, on the board of directors for the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia, on two school boards and eventually served in the Delaware House of Representatives for 12 years.

However, he always maintained a love and interest in aviation. This is what brought him to the AMC Museum.

“I brought my grandchildren out here one day, about 10 or 12 years ago, and I was taking them around,” said Clark. “This guy was following me around and asked me, ‘Why don’t you come out here and volunteer?’”

After retirement from his seed business, Clark began volunteering at the Museum.

“I love airplanes,” said Clark. “And I love to talk to about them, especially to people who are interested.”

The man who had asked him to volunteer was Mike Leister, AMC Museum director. “Don Clark is an American original,” said Leister. “He’s one of two remaining World War II veterans who work here at the museum. Here, you get to actually talk to the people, like Clark, who lived that history. To get the first hand experiences is awesome.”
Marc and Mary Faith Ferretto drove over from Baltimore, Md., to visit the Museum, bringing along a cousin, Bill McFarland, a former volunteer at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force.

Members of the Ferraris family came down from Fulton, N.Y., to visit family in Dover, and decided to take a trip to the AMC Museum. Resting from a moment under the B-17 “Sleepy Time Gal,” are, from left, Gideon Deveraux, Dillon and Nicholas Ferraris, Gabriel Deveraux and Hayden Ferraris.

Nicholas Tribbett, 6, of Milford, Del., tries to strike up a conversation outside the Museum’s new Vietnam exhibit.

About 30 Cub Scouts and parents from Pack 182, Seaford, Del., visited the AMC Museum Jan. 31. In addition to touring the planes, exhibits and control tower, they enjoyed a lunch in the Museum’s Canteen.

Mom Jessica Starnes points out to son Dylan and husband Bryan a patch in the interior cabin of the Museum’s C-47, showing where a bullet came through the fuselage on June 6, 1944.
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JUNE 5th

Check-in: 11:00 | Tee-off: 12:00

Jonathan’s Landing, Magnolia

$55 for Active Duty, Guard and Reserve
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Sign up forms available at amcmuseum.org

Additional information:
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