

Horsham's Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum to unveil newly restored Marine One replica

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It's taken 2½ years and upwards of 5,000 hours to bring back to life a replica of the aircraft used to fly [President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) in 1957.

Later this month, the [Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum](#) will unveil its painstakingly restored version of the first helicopter used to fly a president.

The Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum's Marine One aircraft will be available for viewing by the public beginning on Oct. 22.

The museum obtained the Seabat in pieces in 1988. Volunteers assembled it and repainted it in the mid-90s.

In April 2023, a volunteer restoration team began undertaking a much larger project — converting the aircraft to replicate the helicopter that the late Col. Virgil Olson and his co-pilot, Major General Ronald Nelson, the museum’s chairman emeritus, used to transport President Eisenhower in the 1950s.

Nelson, 94, of Lower Moreland Township, while paging through his four logbooks, said he logged 1,500 hours of flying with the Marine Corps.

“I didn’t realize that at the time we were developing the HUS-1 (Sea Horse) that there was any thought for us taking over the helicopter duties for the president,” Nelson recalled. “We were given the message that we had to be at the White House lawn within 15 minutes of when we got an emergency message. It wasn’t always an emergency. Sometimes it was just to fly the president over to the Air Force base to get on Air Force One.”

Nelson, who served 36 years in the Marine Corps prior to retiring, and Olson, who flew combat missions in WWII, Korea and Vietnam, were unable to interact with the president during their many Marine One flights.

“If you notice in this helicopter, the pilots are up high. The doors where the president got in are down below,” Nelson said. “Today, there’s a much closer relationship. Now the pilots are at his level, so when he walks in the door, he almost always greets them.”

As part of the museum’s unveiling ceremony, the newly restored Marine One will be dedicated to Nelson, whose name will be displayed on the side of the aircraft, along with Olson.

The modest Nelson said co-piloting the presidential flights was just “part of the job.” Still, he noted that the helicopter looks just like the framed photo in his living room.

“What they have done is quite something,” he said of the museum’s restoration team. “I’m really proud of them. I think it will be good for the museum.”

The Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Museum is operated by the Delaware Valley Historical Aircraft Association, a nonprofit organization focused on preserving the aviation history of the greater Delaware Valley.

The museum, which opened in 2004, houses aircraft spanning various eras in history aviation: World War I through World War II, The Korean War, The Vietnam War, The Cold War Era, The Gulf War, The Balkan War, The Iraq War, and the War in Afghanistan.

The museum is located at 1155 Easton Road in Horsham and is open Saturdays and Sundays from 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Wednesdays-Fridays from 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

For admission pricing and other information, visit <https://wingsoffreedommuseum.org/> or call 215-672-2277.