

Wings of Freedom Aviation museum seeks volunteers

Soon after beginning his volunteer work at the Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum, Chief Docent Tom Doerr had a memorable interaction with a visitor to the Horsham-based museum.

“He walked up to one of the cabinets and he was looking at it very intently,” Doerr, 80, of Warminster, recalled. “He pointed to the cabinet and said ‘there’s one of my uniforms. There’s a picture of me in my Hellcat. There’s a model of the plane I flew.’ I got to meet the real deal.”



The chance interaction still stands out for Doerr, who’s in his 11th year volunteering at the museum and whose love of aviation was inherited from his father, a B-26 gunner in Europe during WWII.

Doerr, the other museum guides, as well as the 15-member aircraft restoration team, form the foundation of the volunteer-run Delaware Valley Historical Aircraft Association. The nonprofit organization's board of trustees ensures historical artifacts and aircraft are displayed at the modest space on Easton Road in Horsham Township, adjacent to Willow Grove Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, which closed in September 2011.

Not just during National Volunteer Month, but each and every day, Doerr and the other docents make an impact on the thousands of annual visitors to the museum.

Museum Manager Ron Whetstone of Horsham, a retired 32-year Navy veteran, enjoys seeing wide-eyed expressions as he shares aviation milestones like that Amelia Earhart set a world altitude record in Horsham on April 8, 1931, in a Pitcairn autogiro.

"We always swap the stories," said Whetstone, a museum volunteer of 10 years. "We get people from everywhere. We learn about them and their background and their culture. Sometimes they don't speak much English, but somehow, we make it clear."

Docents are constantly learning as well. A Japanese visitor recently told Doerr that a Japanese flag hanging in the museum was upside down and explained how battle flags are given to military prior to battle in an effort to keep soldiers safe and healthy.

"We still learn," Doerr said. "We want to tell the right story."

Gift Shop Manager Fred Herr enjoys making an impression on visitors, especially kids who are excited to learn more about aviation.

"You can really feel the connection," Herr, of Montgomeryville, said. "They really appreciate the history, the knowledge and the technology that I'm sharing."

In addition to the shared love of aviation and military history, the docents – whose ages range between 70 and 80 on average – share a camaraderie with fellow volunteers and museum visitors. According to Whetstone, the goal is to enlist more volunteers. Additional docents could allow the museum to open Mondays and Tuesdays as well as its current Wednesday through Sunday schedule.

"If we had staff, we could open those days," he said. "We're getting older, most of us. We're really out there, shaking the bushes, trying to get some young folks."

Get involved

Volunteers are welcome to serve in a variety of roles at the Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Museum, as well as on the museum's aircraft restoration team. If interested in getting involved, please email museummanager@wofmuseum.org

About Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum

The Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation 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 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, please visit <https://wingsoffreedommuseum.org/> or call 215-672-2277.