Bucks Co. Veterans Reflect On Love Of Flying As 'Wings of Freedom' Volunteers

During National Aviation Month, these military veterans and tireless volunteers continue to delight in flight.



Jeff Werner,Patch Staff

Posted Tue, Nov 10, 2026 at 4:05 pm ET|Updated Wed, Nov 11, 2026 at 12:58 pm ET



Gene Atwell with one of the planes he flew while in the military. (Wings of Freedom Museum)

DOYLESTOWN, PA — U.S. Marine Corps pilot Gene Atwell can't recall a time when he didn't want to fly aircraft.

Atwell, 71, of Doylestown, jokes that his love of aviation was born before he was.

"The day the egg and sperm met one another, I wanted to fly," he said. "There's nothing I wanted to do in my entire life other than fly. There was never any doubt what I was going to do."

Atwell, who's in his 50th year of flying, has served as a board member for the Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum since 2025.

He began his flight career in the Marines flying A-4 Skyhawks.

The Horsham-based museum features an A-4, but not one that he flew. Atwell spent 10 years serving active duty and reserves before transitioning from a Marine Captain to an airline pilot. After retirement, Atwell began working for a contractor that provides in-flight refueling for the military.

Like many veterans – especially current and former aviators – who serve in volunteer roles at the museum, Veterans Day and National Aviation Month hold greater meaning.

Dave Brown, a Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum docent for 13 years, enjoys sharing memories with visitors about the aircraft – including the actual Carrier Onboard Delivery aircraft he flew as a Navy pilot.

"A lot of people are interested in hearing actual stories," Brown said. "I flew over 100 hours in that plane."

The plane is equipped with eight removable seats and can carry eight passengers or high-priority cargo.

Brown recalled that during his four and a half years in Norfolk, Va., his U.S. Navy Fleet Logistics Support Squadron supported missions throughout the Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf.


RESCUE
62
DANGER
NAVY

Dave Brown with plane he flew in the Navy at the Wings of Freedom museum.

"It was kind of accidental how I found out about the Naval Academy," Brown said, noting that his choices were to drive a ship around, be in a submarine, or be a pilot. "A pilot was the most interesting. I never, ever dreamed that I'd be doing that for a living."
Buckingham resident Jack Beaver, who retired after 28 years from the Naval Reserves as a commander, has been involved with the museum for nearly 40 years. So long, in fact, that the museum did not exist when Beaver started planning and fundraising.
"I saw the aircraft sitting outside, but I really didn't pay much attention to them," Beaver said of serving at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove adjacent to where the museum would be built. "I got involved with the museum just because I wanted to help."

Beaver grew up in Philadelphia and joined the Navy in 1962 after graduating from the then-Philadelphia Textile. While serving, he flew several versions of aircraft that the museum has on display, including a P-3 Orion, the H-13 Sioux and H-34 helicopters.
In the early days of his beginnings with the museum, he and restoration volunteers spent time in the since-demolished Hangar 20 prepping aircraft for display.
"It was mostly just trying to help out wherever I could," Beaver said.
Once the museum opened, Beaver led the creation of the museum's annual golf outing fundraiser, which has continued for 22 years.
Looking ahead, Beaver said he'd like to welcome younger generations to lead the Wings of Freedom Museum into the future.
"I can't say enough about our great volunteers," he said.

About Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum
The 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 since 1972.

The museum, which opened in 2004, houses aircraft spanning various eras in the history of 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.
The museum is available for group day trips, scout troop visits, and birthday parties. Guests may use the pavilion for lunch or birthday celebrations. For admission pricing and other information, visit wingsoffreedommuseum.org/ or call 215-672-2277. Memberships, volunteers, and donations are always welcome as well.