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Aviation Hall of Fame honors veterans

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AVIATION HALL OF FAME

Visitors to the Aviation Hall of Fame's "Wings & Wheels Expo" can walk among vintage aircraft and meet the men and women who flew the planes. The event is held in June.

As the nation observes Veterans Day on November 11, New Jerseyans have a unique resource that salutes its own home-grown heroes, is open most days of the week, hosts interactive activities throughout the year and, best of all, is located right here in Bergen County.

It's the Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum (AHOF) of New Jersey, 400 Fred Wehran Dr., Teterboro. Founded in 1972, the facility is dedicated to the preservation of the Garden State's distinguished, two-century aviation and space heritage.

"New Jerseyans have made a profound contribution to human flight since 1793 when the first balloon to fly in America touched down in Deptford," said Shea Oakley, the facility's executive director. "The ensuing 222 years have seen our state exert an influence on air and space flight that is completely out of proportion to its relatively small size. Just the fact that over 15 American astronauts have been New Jersey residents alone bears testimony to that truth," he added.

Among the state's contributions Oakley cited is the U.S. Air Force's Bell X-1, the first aircraft to break the Sound Barrier with famed pilot Chuck Yeager at the controls in 1947. It was powered by a rocket engine built in Denville by Reaction Motors. In the 1960s, the NASA/USAF X-15 rocket-plane became the world's fastest aircraft, with another Reaction Motors engine. Its speed record of Mach 6 (4,200-plus mph) remains the world record for a manned aircraft.

Oakley is quick to add the state, and its citizens, have a rightful claim to fame in military history, as well.

"The state produced over 20 flying aces (five kill minimum) who flew in World War I, World War II, and Korea," Oakley said. "The second greatest American ace of World War II, Thomas McGuire, was born in Ridgewood, and McGuire Air Force base in central New Jersey bears his name.

"Tens of thousands of New Jerseyans [also] worked to produce combat aircraft and engines for the U.S. war effort during World War II. The Curtiss-Wright company alone produced over 100,000 engines for warplanes in four New Jersey plants — Paterson, East Paterson, Wood Ridge and Fair Lawn."

Oakley cited the accomplishments of the legendary African-American Tuskegee Airmen, several of whom hailed from the Garden State. He said in 1983, the first all-female military flight crew departed from McGuire Air Force base, flying a cargo plane on a trans-Atlantic

medical-evacuation flight.

On November 8, the AHOF held its annual "Salute to Veterans." On November 14 and 15, the facility will hold its final "Open Cockpit Weekend" for the season. During the event, the public can sit at the controls in the cockpits of all the museum's aircraft to get a first-hand feel of the pilot experience.

The AHOF also hosts a variety of programs and events throughout the year to pay tribute to veterans, said trustee Fritz Rethage.

The annual "Wings & Wheels Expo" is held in June over the Father's Day weekend at Teterboro Airport. During the event, the public can expect to see several authentic aircraft from World War II, including one of the few remaining flight-worthy B-17 bombers. They can also meet and talk with veteran American combat pilots and crew members, including the Tuskegee Airmen, as well as WASPs (Woman Air Service Pilots), as part of "Heroes Row."

The annual Induction Dinner is the highlight of the year for the Aviation Hall of Fame. Every year three notable individuals involved with aviation in New Jersey are inducted in the Hall of Fame. Prior inductees include Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart.

In addition to hosting programs and events to educate the public about the rich aviation, space and military heritage of New Jerseyans, the AHOF also strives to be "one of the most vet-friendly institutions in Bergen County," said Oakley.

"Many of our volunteers and trustees are veterans, which is one of the reasons we fly the POW/MIA flag below the American flag on our front lawn," said Oakley. "We are very proud of our men and women in uniform, both past and present."

This Veterans Day, the public can learn about New Jersey's contributions to the aviation, space and military fields by visiting the Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum.

"Veterans Day is an opportunity for Americans to recognize that millions of men and women interrupted their lives for several years to serve their country in some fashion," noted Rethage, a veteran who served with the U.S. Army 7th Infantry Division, DMZ, Korea, from 1966-'67. "They returned with a wide range of experiences that ultimately enhanced America."

Examples include Korean War combat pilot Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, from Montclair, who was the second man to walk on the Moon on the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, and Mark and Scott Kelly, the famous "astronaut twins" who are both U.S. Navy pilots and grew up in the Oranges. Scott is currently on the International Space Station where he is setting a space endurance record for U.S. astronauts.

The Aviation Hall of Fame and Museum (AHOF) of New Jersey offers visitors an opportunity to view historic aircraft, a number of unique exhibits, air and space artifacts, photographs, fine art and an extensive model collection. The museum's custom-built "Fundamentals of Flight" interactive aerodynamics exhibit is now operational in the Great Room. The museum is open to the public Tuesday-Sunday, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Admission is \$6 to \$8.

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