

For decades the Air Force has hosted field museums at bases around the country. They range from small buildings to elaborate parks with many large aircraft on static display. Their funding has often been precarious, however, and in recent years their money problems have been worsened by the long recession and shrinking defense budgets.

The museums are popular: In Fiscal 2013, the 14 field museums reported more than 1.5 million visitors, not including visitors at the five Air Force heritage centers for which attendance numbers aren't available. Combined, their attendance matches or exceeds that at the National Museum of the US Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

The field museums don't just restore and preserve scarce aircraft and

artifacts. They offer orientation for airmen and the public, serve local school districts, host base-level military functions, and provide a window for the public on Air Force missions and activities.

The program grew rapidly in the 1980s, as various commands and bases established museums, helped in part by Cold War budgets. From the outset, NMUSAF (then known as the Air Force Museum) cautioned local commanders and curators that it wouldn't fund or staff field museums. Still the field museums grew, fueled by dedicated staff, volunteers, and nonprofits.

Field museum funding is provided by the owning organization (typically an air base wing or operational wing) and supported by nonprofit foundations created specifically for this purpose. The local base entity provides staffing,

to include the director/curator, who is a government employee or military member. Major command history offices oversee the field museums and other heritage activities.

In three decades of operations, some trends have emerged. The most visited field museums are located on base property, close to the perimeter, allowing visits that don't affect base security. Nonprofit foundations have embraced their role as "the museum's ATM card," as one field museum foundation member put it, enabling staffs to plan and execute programs for the good of the museum and the service.

Sticking to a disciplined story line pertinent to each museum's mission statement has proved useful when funds are tight and the displayed aircraft must be maintained in a way that reflects credit on the Air Force. That obligation is codified in Air

Museums and Money

By Frederick A. Johnsen

The Air Force's field museums are under financial pressure as they explore new ways to use their amazing icons to engage the public.





Three B-25 bombers fly over the National Museum of the US Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, during a commemoration of the 1942 Doolittle raid over Tokyo.

USAF photo by TSgt. Jacob N. Bailey



Force Instruction 84-103, guiding field museums.

As the Air Force wrestles with downsizing and sequester, however, the field museums will likely come under increasing financial pressure. As official USAF entities, the museums don't charge admission to help cover their expenses.

Each museum's supporting foundation helps, but the level of fund-raising support varies from one to another.

The budget for the Air Force Flight Test Museum at Edwards AFB, Calif., was frozen last year—not counting facilities or salaries for two staff—and so was that of the Air Force Armament

Above: A modified Wright B Flyer is maintained at Texas Air Museum in 2010 in preparation for flyovers and festivities commemorating the Centennial of Military Aviation in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Below: The fuselage of the B-17 Swoose arrives at the restoration facility at NMUSAF near Dayton, Ohio. Swoose is the only B-17 D model in existence.



Museum at Eglin AFB, Fla. At Hill AFB, Utah, some \$239,000 that had been requested for maintenance of display aircraft and grounds, to comply with inspection demands, wasn't available. Sometimes, year-end fallout funds—dollars not spent elsewhere by the owning organization—get put back on the museum account, but this is no substitute for a reliable budget.

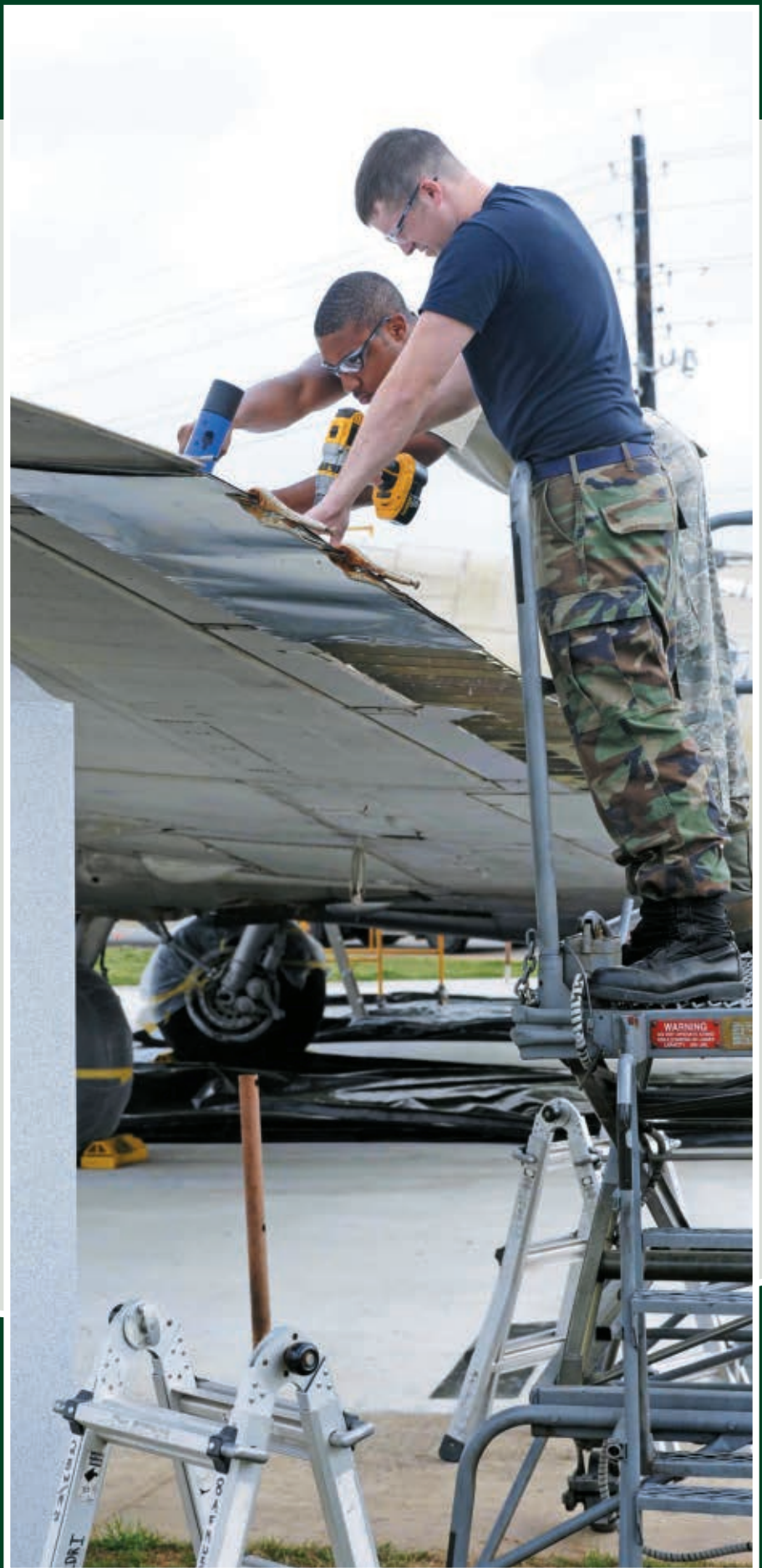
The largest of the field museums, the Museum of Aviation at Robins AFB, Ga., had its 16-member government staff halved in 2011, under an Air Force Materiel Command-wide downsizing of 4,500 civilian billets under the Global Base Support initiative. When the Robins staff was cut, it was necessary to tag a third of its 32 aircraft as “excess.”

REHOMING CLASSICS

NMUSAF owns the hundreds of aircraft and thousands of historical items housed at the field museums and steps in at times like these and tries to find new homes for the excess aircraft. An HH-43 helicopter from Robins, for example, was transferred to the McChord Air Museum at JB Lewis-McChord, Wash., and an F-94 was loaned to the civilian Castle Air Museum, adjacent to the former Castle AFB, Calif. A group of three jets and a helicopter went to the civilian Pacific Aviation Museum on Ford Island at JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, and a WB-57F was actually returned to operational use with NASA.

Shifting budget priorities threaten the artifacts, however. NMUSAF can't afford to take on the additional cost and responsibility of maintaining all the field museum collections if field museum funding dwindles too much.

A1C Bronson Bohannon (r) and A1C Avondries Green install rivets on a new sheet of metal for the B-17G they are restoring for the Global Airpower Museum at Barksdale AFB, La. The museum was formerly known as the Eighth Air Force Museum.



USAF photo by SSGT. John Gordinier



While selective downsizing can be accommodated by placing historic aircraft with other museums, a draconian budget cut could overwhelm this process, putting at risk both valuable aircraft and the goodwill and reputation of the Air Force.

While NMUSAF owns the artifacts, the Air Force History and Museums Program, working through curators in each major command, oversees the field program. Local commanders are responsible for keeping their museums and heritage centers in shape. While each of these agents places expectations on the field museums, their day-to-day survival depends on the professionalism and dedication of the staff—often only one or two deep.

NMUSAF dedicates some staff to helping the field museums acquire appropriate aircraft and displays on loan from its own holdings, but the field museums have to pay for the transportation. In an effort to equip newer field museum staff with fundamental curatorial, collections management, and exhibiting skills, NMUSAF schedules workshops

for field staff on behalf of the Air Force History and Museums Program.

What does the future hold for these outposts of Air Force heritage?

James R. Frank Jr., of the Air Force History and Museums Program, doesn't see any radical shifts in the field museum activities.

"The Air Force heritage program structure is likely to remain unchanged as we look forward," said Frank, who is manager for field museums. "When we address budgetary and resource issues, we need to get creative in how we overcome those obstacles."

PRESERVING HERITAGE

Frank lauded the "commitment and contributions our historians, curators, and archivists show ... in our museums and heritage centers throughout the Air Force. These folks are essential to ensuring the Air Force story is told not only to our airmen but also the public."

Some in the field program have lobbied for stronger advocacy and even central funding for key field museums as regional adjuncts to the Air Force

Museum. Retired Lt. Gen. John L. "Jack" Hudson, director of NMUSAF, said it's a partnership effort between his central organization and the field museums to collect, preserve, and interpret.

"Both the NMUSAF and the field museum program perform a vital mission in communicating the Air Force story to internal [USAF] and external [public] audiences," he said. "Our collaborative stewardship allows field museums and heritage centers to focus on highlighting local and regionally based missions while the NMUSAF presents the comprehensive Air Force story from its beginnings to today."

Though operationally and administratively separate, "we work together to present Air Force history and heritage," he said.

To adapt to leaner times, various approaches are being examined. One alternative is to model the museum enterprise after the National Park Service. It has limited story line exhibits for the public and active programming, but doesn't have to curate large collections that demand manpower, resources,

Above: The Strategic Air & Space Museum, adjacent to Offutt AFB, Neb., has 3,000 square feet dedicated to promoting aviation and aerospace education.



and space. Under this model, the field museums would focus more on supporting the local command and on-base population.

That approach doesn't sit well with Kenneth R. Emery II, director of the Museum of Aviation at Robins. While Emery sees service to the Air Force as vital, he said, it's only one part of what the museum does.

"Our airmen are woefully ignorant of their rich heritage," he said. "We need to show them their lineage, show them where they come from and what they're capable of doing. Aircraft, equipment, and personal items that were actually used in Air Force operations offer powerful, tangible connections to the courage, tenacity, ingenuity, skill, and sacrifice of our airmen."

Such objects "and the people stories associated with them" can inspire and educate "in ways that photos, text, and video alone cannot," he said. It's just as crucial to tell the Air Force story to the public.

"Many people simply do not know what the Air Force has done and is now

doing. So it's not just about telling Air Force history. We have to show and tell about current roles, missions and contributions," he explained.

While NMUSAF's sprawling facility at Wright-Patterson tallies as many as 1.3 million visitors annually, Emery argues that that's not enough to get the Air Force story out.

"The reality is that, for most people around the nation who visit an Air Force field museum, it is the only Air Force museum they will ever visit," Emery said. "Many airmen can go an entire career without ever visiting NMUSAF. The field museums offer a great opportunity for the Air Force to bring our story to more of our airmen and the public."

Museum staffs will have to find a new balance, tempering the urge to acquire new aircraft and artifacts with the sobering cost of maintaining them during lean times. Field curators and

directors will have to find inventive and economical ways to maintain their collections so they can grow and adapt to best tell the museum's story.

Hudson sees some opportunities amid these challenges. One of them is online. NMUSAF uses the Internet to bring a virtual museum presence to millions of visitors; nearly four million visits were tallied in 2013. Field museums can put exhibits and educational opportunities online inexpensively, "and most are within the reach of each and every field museum and heritage center," Hudson said. Going online offers "a totally new dimension to the field programs."

The cautions from NMUSAF at the inception of the field museum program—that the field facilities needed to be self-sufficient—were unequivocal. Sequestration forced the museum itself to curtail operations; it was closed during the 2013 government shutdown. ■

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Above: A massive YC-15 arrives at the Air Force Flight Test Museum at Edwards AFB, Calif. in 2008.