Library & Archives Receives Grant

The Library & Archives (L&A) has received a $6,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to purchase shelving and preservation supplies, including special archival boxes. Head Archivist, Katrina Pescador, says the one-year project will address the Museum’s serious lack of space by replacing existing inadequate storage fixtures with more space efficient equipment.

The SDASM Library & Archives houses one of the most significant collections of aviation-related research materials in the world and is the third largest collection of this type in the United States. Over the past year, the L&A has focused on consolidating this collection to address the space issue.

Outgrowing its primary space, the L&A spread to eight other locations throughout the Museum, occupying over 5,190 square feet. Because of the scattered locations of these collections, access for the purpose of research by the Museum staff and volunteers, as well as the general public, has proven to be both inconvenient and time prohibitive. To address this issue, as well as the increasing problem of lack of available space, the Museum’s library will be using taller storage equipment to more efficiently use all available space while reducing the current footprint.

VF(AW)-3 Fighter Squadron

On December 1st 1955, Vice Admiral Harold M. Martin, USN, and Major General Roy H. Lynn, USAF, moved together two sections of a cake, each decorated with half a set of wings, symbolizing the Navy’s entrance into the Air Defense Command. This marked the beginning of Naval Air Station North Island’s unique 8-year relationship with the United States Air Force.

Operating out of North Island, this new unit was a detachment of NAS Moffett Field’s composite squadron VC-3, flying the Douglas F3D Skynight. Assigned to the Continental Air Defense Command, 27th North American Air Defense Division (NORAD), it was the only US Navy unit included in this mainly Air Force division.

Receiving the new Douglas F4D Skyrays during the summer of 1956, this San Diego based detachment was commissioned as an independent, all weather, fighter squadron numbered VF(AW)-3, on May 2nd 1958. The squadron’s planes were very colorful, even by the standards of a time period noted for colorful aircraft. Their dark blue tails and spines were emblazoned with gold stars and lightning bolts. In service, the squadron operated with USAF F-101s and F-106s based nearby.

Pilot requirements for the unit were so stringent that only the best were accepted. Most of the pilots were veterans with two or more tours behind them. A World War II ace, Commander Eugene Valencia, was one of the executive officers leading this squadron.

The pilots were almost as colorful as their aircraft, competing for the most colorful nicknames and headgear. As a result of the concentration of talent, excellent leadership, espirit de corps, and plenty of training, this squadron earned a remarkable number of awards. These included the top USAF interceptor awards for 1958 and 1959, the Navy’s “Top Gun” award in 1959, a Flight Safety Award in 1960, and a Navy Unit Commendation in 1963.

Two aircraft were always kept on alert with four more on stand-by. The alert pilots slept in their flight gear. The squadron’s quarters, hangars, and aircraft were guarded 24 hours a day by an armed detachment. During the darkest part of the Cold War, the squadron’s primary mission was to intercept unknown inbound aerial traffic at any time, day or night.

By 1963, the Skyray had become obsolete, and NORAD’s radar reach dictated a general change of tactics. Consequently, on March 4th of that year, VF(AW)-3 was decommissioned, bringing an end to the Navy’s commitment to Air Defense Command and one of the most colorful squadrons of all time.

Message from the Head Archivist

Thank You for Your Donations! The Museum’s Library & Archives would like to thank the members of our Aviation Archives Preservation Corps for their generous support. The L&A raised approximately $3,500 during its annual appeal. Thanks also to the T. Claude Ryan Foundation for their $5,000 gift, which will be used to care for the Ryan Library housed at our Museum.
Valuable Volunteer

Dick Scheid decided he wanted to volunteer at the San Diego Air & Space Museum several years ago. After 35 years in the Bay area, he moved to San Diego, following his daughter and grandchildren. While in the Bay area, he was a volunteer at the Lawrence Hall of Science on the UC Berkley campus.

Looking for a similar volunteer opportunity, he visited the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center, but said “it didn’t quite click.” Wandering down the hill he decided to check out the San Diego Air & Space Museum. As he walked through the doors he realized, “this is the place.” He began his volunteer career working one day a week in the Library & Archives, and one day a week as a docent. Being new to San Diego, Dick found fellow volunteers “a built-in friend base.”

As custodian of over a million images, the Library & Archives staff became aware of the need to get these valuable images digitized for preservation purposes. With Dick’s technologically literate skills, it was apparent this tech savvy individual might be up for the task...and he was! Scheid started scanning these images, one at a time. As time passed, he discovered ways to perfect this scanning process and make it more efficient. Earning the nickname, “The Quickest Scanner in the West,” Dick scans and catalogs approximately 200 images every week. He began by scanning some of the most sought after and rare images in the collection first, and continues this task by scanning many images of aircraft, people, ships, and places. Thus far, he has scanned well over 30,000 images!

Our volunteers are worth their weight in gold, and this certainly is true in Dick’s case. Companies would charge tens of thousands of dollars for the work Dick does for only a smile! As an added bonus, the Library staff is rewarded and uplifted by his cheerful presence. Dick’s digitization work is invaluable for today’s researchers, and he has helped in supporting our mission to preserve history for future generations!

U.S. President Speaks to the World: The First Talking Satellite

By early 1958, the United States was seriously losing the Space Race with the Soviet Union. Led by Sputnik I and Sputnik II, the Soviet Union had placed 20 times more satellite weight into orbit than the United States. The U.S.’s Vanguard launch vehicle had a dismal record, and the Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program had only two successes in eight launches of the “A” series. There was no question the U.S. was behind in the Space Race; but because of the Iron Curtain, it was hard to tell exactly how far behind.

Eight of the first fifteen launches had failed during the initial four years of the U.S. Atlas program. Calculations indicated the vehicle was too heavy to make orbit so every possible ounce was removed in an effort to lighten the load. During a visit to Convair in early 1958, Ron Johnson of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), told Jim Dempsey, the Atlas Program Manager, “We have got to get something big up there.” Dempsey offered to place the entire Atlas into orbit, using a “B” series 3-engine Atlas, since the Atlas power was more than quadruple that of any other U.S. launch vehicle at the time. To provide the lightest possible vehicle, it would still be necessary to strip down all unneeded equipment and eliminate the simulated warhead.

Johnson took this proposal to President Eisenhower, who did not accept the concept. He perceived it as another high-risk launch that would further damage the U.S. image if it failed. Eventually, the proposal was accepted with two stipulations: first, the “B” series must successfully demonstrate its capability to meet defined ICBM objectives, and second, the mission was to be flown in total secrecy. If it was unsuccessful, it would be considered just another ICBM test flight. The plan to orbit the vehicle was not to become public knowledge: and if it ever leaked out, “heaven help the General-in-Charge,” Eisenhower commented, with a hard look at General Curtis LeMay.

Thus, Eisenhower set the stage for the project to become a cloak-and-dagger program. Project SCORE, an acronym for Signal Communication by Orbiting Relay Equipment, was on its way. Only 88 people were cleared for Project SCORE, with individuals selected from the thousands working on the top priority Atlas ICBM program.

The Atlas 10B was initially designed and built to fly as an ICBM. A number of changes were required to undo the ICBM capability, add an orbital flight capability, and add a new communications system. Initially, the program went well, but then a few failures occurred.
Eisenhower became increasingly unhappy with the U.S. missile program and was on the verge of terminating Project SCORE. In November 1958, the first full-range flight of 6,600 miles demonstrated flight objectives the President had established for the mission, but he was still reluctant to allow the project to continue.

The Atlas 10B was allowed to continue with preparations for launch at Cape Canaveral. Test conductor Curt Johnson, who had three successful launches with the Atlas, but was never to become one of the “88,” knew that strange things were going on with the Atlas 10B. The chief test conductor was focusing an excessive amount of attention to this vehicle, and a top electronics engineer arrived from San Diego to work on the antenna system. When an Army Signal Corps civilian named “Sam Brown” showed up to meet with the chief test conductor, Johnson asked if “Sam Brown” was related to “John Doe.” He received an icy, silent stare as a response. With a constant concern that the secret mission would be discovered, modifications proceeded.

The nose cone separation system, normally used on the ICBM but not needed for the orbital mission, was mysteriously removed late one night. Several checkout procedures for non-existent equipment, new unidentified antennas or transmitters, or a secret modification performed in the middle of the night had to be faked and/or bypassed.

Many of the engineers in San Diego, always possessive of their hardware, learned of the unauthorized changes to the 10B missile at the Cape and asked the San Diego crew chief to investigate. He immediately got on the phone and severely chastised the chief test conductor in Florida, placating the San Diego engineers. He later called him back to explain his outburst. By December 18th, the day of the launch, there were more than a few suspicious individuals, both in San Diego and at the Cape.

The Atlas 10B roared into the sky at 6:02 PM on December 18th 1958. About 2 minutes later, the booster engines jettisoned, and the sustainer and vernier engines drove the vehicle into orbit around the earth at 17,300 miles per hour. The vehicle remained in communication until December 31st, and its re-entry occurred on January 21st 1959.

Within 2 hours after the Atlas was in orbit, President Eisenhower interrupted a diplomatic gathering in the White House to announce that a U.S. Air Force missile was circling the earth. On the 13th orbit, a radio signal was sent from Cape Canaveral, starting the broadcast of a prerecorded tape from outer space with words written and recorded by President Eisenhower.

Project SCORE was a resounding success. With the Atlas leading the way, the United States would soon surpass the Soviets, propelling Americans into space with Project Mercury. In just over a decade, the Apollo project would place Americans on the moon, making the U.S. victorious in the Space Race.

NOTE: The SDASM Library & Archives houses the Consolidated/Convair Corporate papers. The collection consists of documents, articles, books, and photos on nearly every Atlas launch. The Museum also displays an Atlas missile at its Gillespie Field Annex, with talks of moving it to Balboa Park.

SDASM Oral History Project

The purpose of the Oral History Project of the San Diego Air & Space Museum is to record and preserve, in their own voices, the historical accounts of those who have made an impact on aviation history. We are currently developing a list of interview candidates, and volunteers are conducting interviews as time permits. The project relies on qualified volunteers to collect, interview, and preserve stories of men and women responsible for contributions to all areas of aviation, with a focus on the history of those from the geographical area of San Diego, California. More than 200 original taped interviews and transcripts have been obtained and are kept in the Museum’s archives.

The Museum has been working with five other institutions to raise awareness of the aviation history peculiar to San Diego and the contributions of individuals who reside here. Our other partners include the Distinguished Flying Cross Society, the U.S.S. Midway Museum, the Flying Leatherneck Museum, the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center, and the Naval Helicopter Historical Society.

These organizations are participating in the planning, development, acquisition of funding, and presentation of a traveling display that will be exhibited in libraries, schools, airports, universities, and other local facilities. The traveling display will emphasize the role San Diego has played, and is continuing to play, in aviation through the use of photographs, documents, and interviews. The cooperative group is also consolidating an index of their respective institutions’ collections, to be listed on SDASM’s online catalog, AeroCat.
Archivist to Lecture at SOHO, June 18th

Author Katrina Pescador, SDASM Head Archivist, along with coauthor Mark Aldrich, Aviation Historian, will speak at the SOHO-operated city museum’s Adobe Chapel on June 18th at 6:00 PM. The authors will discuss their book, Consolidated Aircraft Corporation. This 1-hour lecture includes a 15-minute question and answer period, followed by a book signing. Light refreshments will be served. The Adobe Chapel is located at 3950 Conde Street, in historic Old Town San Diego.

The $25 fee ($35 at the door) includes lecture and a copy of the book. Lecture-only tickets are available for $15 (at the door or in advance).

For more information or to purchase tickets, please contact Save Our Heritage Organization (SOHO) by phone at (619) 297-9327 or online at http://sohosandiego.org/main/authors.htm#series. Make your reservations early to receive the $10 discount.

Open for Research

The SDASM Library & Archives collection is available to Museum staff, volunteers and docents, academic researchers, students, and aviation enthusiasts. Access to these collections is included in the SDASM membership fee. All other visitors and researchers pay the small Museum admission fee. Staff and/or volunteers are available for assistance. Appointments should be made in advance by calling 619-234-8291, x125, or emailing arenga@sdasm.org, to ensure someone is available. Information can often be pulled prior to your visit if we are aware of your research request. Contact the Library & Archives staff for research rules and regulations.

SDASM Library & Archives

Hours of Operation

Tuesday to Friday, 10:00am – 4:00p.m.
(Closed on Mondays, weekends, federal holidays, and for some special Museum functions)