

1st Lady Volunteers

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Volunteers preserve Armament Museum's First Lady

Dennis Rowell (at top) and Paul Anderson apply a fresh coat of paint to The First Lady, an AC-130 Spectre gunship displayed at the Air Force Armament Museum. It was the first AC-130 to come off the production line in 1953.

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[Mona Moore](#)
Daily News

EGLIN AFB - Rick Andreozzi fell in love with the First Lady the minute he laid eyes on her.

"I guess it was just one of those things," he said. "When I heard about the gunship in 1972, I was determined to fly on it."

The AC-130 gunship is nicknamed the First Lady because it was the first of its kind. It began flying out of Duke Field's 919th Special Operations Wing before Andreozzi followed her there. The former aerial gunner finally got his chance to board it in 1980 and flew on the gunship for 15 years.

"They were all good times," he said. "I was on the last flight, the very last mission flown."

The First Lady now sits at the Air Force Armament Museum. George W. Jones, the museum's director, appreciates its significance.

"Of the 14 artifacts we have, I wish I'd flown on her," Jones said. "This is the first one and we have it here. That's just too cool."

Andreozzi continued his love affair with the First Lady when the plane arrived at the museum. He and Ken Moescher agreed to oversee the maintenance and conduct weekend tours of their favorite gunship.

In its heyday, the First Lady was hit three times with anti-aircraft fire. It flew in Vietnam and Bosnia.

When the plane retired from flying over enemy lines, she gained two new enemies: Mother Nature and apathy.

The First Lady, one of the museum's most significant exhibits, suffered from rust, leaks and neglect. When Jones started at the museum, he found three inches of water in the plane and thick layers of black mold.

"You could go with a putty knife along the walls and black mold would fall off," he said.

Jones and Gary Cornell, a museum employee, worked more than 500 hours to restore the plane. They removed the mold, recovered the seats and restored the First Lady to its original glory.

But Jones and the museum staff needed help to keep the First Lady and the museum's other aircraft pristine.

"The museum's budget is only \$35,000 a year, so we have to be creative," said Jones. "If we didn't have volunteers, we'd have to shut down the museum."

He started the Adopt-a-Plane program. Each artifact became the responsibility of a different unit on neighboring bases. Even the Civil Air Patrol and Boy Scouts took responsibility for the museum's "Iron Children." The aircraft are cleaned every four months and painted every five to six years.

Volunteers provide the labor and the museum provides the paint. With the exception of the B-47, all of the aircraft and munitions have been adopted.

"It's gone over pretty well. We've painted 23 airplanes over the last four years for less than \$30,000 a year," Jones said. "I get goose bumps when I see planes looking good."

The program has made it possible for the museum to scrape by with a skeleton crew. The museum went from 18 workers (12 federal prisoners, six staff members) to six. "There are just three of us and three federal prisoners," he said.

The Friends of the First Lady, all retired members of Duke's 919th Special Operations Wing, had a makeover party last week.

"Our two main functions are preservation of this aircraft and an annual gunship reunion here at the museum," said Dennis Rowell, founder of the 300-member group.

After two coats of primer last month, the First Lady received the first of two coats of fresh paint. With \$3,600 in donated paint from Lockheed Martin and free labor from the Friends of the First Lady, the museum saved thousands of dollars.

Jones believes the preservation of the museum's 29 aircraft is one of its most important missions.

"This is the only Air Force facility that's visible to the public," he said. "This is the face that people see as far as military."

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If you're interested in the significance this aircraft carries, it is predominantly mentioned on the front page of the New York Times and other major world newspapers today in regards to its involvement in killing terror suspects.
And on a side note, if we ever do find Usama bin Laden, the AC-130 would have either killed him or would have watched him be killed from the air.

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I drive past this museum twice a day and that plane looks ten times better than it did a few months ago. Great job!

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Can't wait to go see her again!
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