“On the Road” in Nebraska

By

De. Bob Ditch, Lt Col, (CAP)

Wyoming Wing – Chief of Staff

Mesa, AZ – What stands taller than a cornstalk in a Nebraska farm field? How about an Atlas Centurion Missile?

Tucked away along the mid-point of Interstate 80; 30 miles south of Omaha and 30 miles north of Lincoln, Nebraska; lies the small farming community of Ashland, Nebraska. Surrounded by unharvested farm fields and swollen creeks, from winter snowstorm runoff, proudly stands an Atlas Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM); welcoming visitors to the Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum. And what a fitting tribute to both the former Strategic Air Command (SAC) and the nation’s aerospace mission; the Atlas stood both vigil as the nation’s first ICBM -personifying SAC’s *Peace is our Profession* promise during the Cold War; while offering the nation a booster to launch the former Senator and Astronaut John Glenn’s *Friendship 7* space capsule into space for his historic orbiting mission.

But wait for even a bigger surprise; enter the museum lobby doors and come literally “nose to nose” with the pitot tube of a fully restored Lockheed *SR-71 Blackbird* reconnaissance aircraft.

The museum, a national treasure, opened at Offutt Air Force Base, Omaha, Nebraska in 1959 as the Strategic Aerospace Museum. General Curtis E. LeMay's, then SAC’s legendary Commander’s vision of a museum; preserving historic aircraft had become a reality. Over the years, the outdoor museum's name changed to the “SAC Museum.”

On May 16, 1998, following an unprecedented $33 million massive donations campaign, the museum moved indoors to its current location between Omaha and Lincoln; offering more public access and protection of the aircraft from the elements to which they had previously been exposed. Later, on June 15, 2001, the name was changed to the Strategic Air & Space Museum. This change incorporated the museum's rich U.S. Air Force heritage; reaching a larger audience; capturing the expansion of Aerospace Education; and captivating the interests and imaginations of everyone. On June 25, 2015, the museum announced another name change to the Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum, to reconnect to the museum's original mission of preserving the history of SAC while still promoting public interest in aerospace and science.

The museum is a $29.5 million, 300,000-square-foot three-piece structure, featuring a glass atrium, two aircraft display hangars, a traveling exhibit area, a children's interactive gallery, a 200-seat theater, a museum store, an aircraft restoration gallery, SAC Combat Crew Alert Facility quarters, and a flightline snack bar. The glass atrium is constructed of 525 glass panels that encase the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird. The two aircraft display hangars protect the three dozen historic aircraft collection and exhibits from harsh outdoor elements. The museum participates in an exhibit exchange program with other national museums and displays them in the traveling exhibit area. Three large missiles are displayed vertically outdoors in front of the museum.

Constantly growing, the museum is always restoring heritage aircraft, like the recently completed T-29 navigator trainer and a EC-135 *Looking Glass* – Tail # , SAC Airborne Command & Control Center; formerly flown by (CAP member) Lt Col Dave Mickle, USAF-Retired. He served multiple years as a Command Pilot on that aircraft.

So, if you ever find yourself driving someday between Omaha and Lincoln Nebraska and think that it all looks alike (corn, corn, corn, and more corn); stopover in Ashland, NE for a wonderful Aerospace Education and Air Force Heritage experience. Where else can you view the largest plane ever built in the nation, the B-36 bomber; snuggle up to a fully restored H-Bomb mockup; crawl into a B-52 bomber cockpit, fly multiple flight simulators, and study the science of space travel. All, while “***On the Road***.”