NOVEMBER 24, 2025

www.castleairmuseum.org

CASTLE AIR MUSEUM

NEWSLETTER

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **Christmas Tree Lighting - Nov 29**
  Join us to for the lighting of our official Christmas tree lighting ceremony. Enjoy free hot chocolate, delicious cookies, and festive fun!

- **Membership Dinner - Dec 6**
  Join us for the annual Castle Air Museum Foundation Membership Dinner on Saturday, December 6, from 6:00 - 9:00 PM at the Merced Elks Lodge.

CASTLE'S MOST WANTED

Here's a new section for our newsletter. This is where we are going to put the job most in need of a special volunteer. Hence, our most wanted! If you have the desire and ability to fill this need, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator to start your journey to help make Castle the most desired destination in Central California!

SPECIAL EVENTS COORDINATOR - Organize vendors, food, and guest services for the Bombs Away Car Show, Spring Open Cockpit Day, and Fall Open Cockpit Day. Estimate 2-4 hours a week starting in January. We have a good checklist and template to get started. Requires phone and computer skills.

FROM THE BOARD CHAIRMAN

MAJ GEN CLAY GARRISON USAF (RET)

Wow! Time flew by this month. But I like November because it means Veterans Day. This is right up our alley at the Museum. Connecting our visitors to the aircraft so many Veterans flew, maintained, and supported, is our bread and butter. Remember, preserving military aviation history for future generations is our reason to exist, and we couldn't be successful without your interest and investment.

I think we had our most impressive showing ever at the Veterans Day parade in Merced. Thanks to the efforts of the Pharaohs Car Club and our restoration team, we entered four restored vehicles/tugs, three drones, and one missile in the parade. It was most impressive! A big thank you to the volunteers, staff, and directors who made this happen.

We also placed the Black Bunny back on display this month. We weren't happy with the finish when we first rolled out our F-4S in May, so the restoration team redoubled their efforts, and they hit it out of the park. You need to visit and see the results for yourself. The Black Bunny looks sweet!

Speaking of visits, don't miss the Christmas Tree lighting on Nov 29th at 6pm. Lights, Santa, free cocoa for the kids, and live music. Come by the gift shop and get some unique gifts for the aviation enthusiast on your list. Until next month - Clay

RESTORATION HANGAR

GREG STATHATOS, RESTORATION MANAGER

As we near the end of 2025, major changes are underway in the Restoration Hangar, and we invite you to stop by and see the progress.

Aircraft Movements & New Layout

Several aircraft are being relocated to prepare for a refreshed hangar arrangement:

- F-117 — moving into the storage hangar
- SBD Dauntless — relocating to the Hiller Hangar as components are crated for a potential move to New Jersey
- UH-1 Huey — moving to the display pad; rollout on December 8—all are welcome
- MiG-17 — being reassembled and returned to display after more than eight years in storage
- A-7 Corsair II — coming indoors following the successful China Lake recovery of a vertical stabilizer and full wing

The new hangar layout will feature the TF-102, A-7, and MiG-17, providing active restoration work for volunteers of all skill levels.

Hangar Cleanup & Reorganization

The team has been cleaning and reorganizing the hangar, removing clutter and creating a proper motor pool area for our car club volunteers. Special thanks to the Pharaohs Car Club, Atwater Chapter, for helping make the Veterans Day Parade a success, with eight museum artifacts participating.

Volunteer Highlights

We're excited to welcome new talent:

- Aaron, grandson of a volunteer, rebuilt the cleaning cart—now sturdier, functional, and great-looking thanks to his welding and painting work.
- Esase, a former UC Merced intern, has returned as a volunteer and is restoring the TF-102 ordnance bays. When complete, Castle will have the only functional ordnance bay on any T-102 or TF-102.

Join the Restoration Team

If you want to help preserve aviation history, the Restoration Hangar welcomes you. We're open Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 7:00–4:00 (ish), with flexibility for additional volunteer days if needed.

A Shining Star

The YT-34 is now the brightest aircraft in the collection, thanks to volunteer Julian and his students, who brought a new shine to this historic trainer.

Thank You to Our Core Crew

A special thank-you to Bruce, Bill, Frank, Richard, Jeff, Steve, John, and Pat, who contribute more than 150 years of combined aircraft experience to Castle Air Museum.

VOLUNTEER SERVICES

BOB SCOBLE, VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

The museum welcomed six new volunteers in September and October, who are currently completing their training and becoming familiar with museum operations. Each new team member brings valuable skills and interests. Our Crew Chiefs have stepped up to support Tour Guide volunteers as tour group sizes and frequency continue to increase. The Gift Shop has also been actively promoting tours of the VC-9 Presidential Aircraft and the aircraft display grounds, resulting in more tour days for the VC-9—one of our most popular attractions.

In November, the museum participated in Merced College's inaugural Professional Development Event, where volunteers provided information about opportunities at Castle. More than a dozen applications were distributed, and the event opened the door to a potential partnership with the college's Director of Technical Education to explore student internships or volunteer pathways.

The volunteer program is also strengthening its use of digital management tools. PastPerfect now includes all recorded volunteer hours for 2025 and is fully prepared for the transition into 2026, allowing for efficient reporting and better quality control. Additionally, the online volunteer application system continues to expand awareness of opportunities at Castle and streamlines the entire process—from application to on-boarding.

Volunteer Julian and his students after polishing the Beech YT-34 Mentor. It's truly a shining star!

CURATOR'S CORNER

RUSTY WYNN, CURATOR

Collections Care Training

This month, Pat Holloway and I were invited to attend a three-day Collectionsm Care Workshop through the California Inclusive Preservation Program (CCIP), hosted at the Oakland Museum of California. The training was highly informative, and we have already begun implementing several of the practices we learned.

The workshop covered a wide range of collections care topics, including:

- Preventive conservation and environmental monitoring
- Artifact storage and display best practices
- Materials used for protecting and storing artifacts
- Building custom storage containers
- Proper handling, labeling, cleaning, and maintenance of artifacts
- Emergency preparedness for fire, flood, and earthquakes
- Assessing both storage spaces and artifact condition

Ongoing Projects

Below is a partial list of current projects underway in the curator's office:

- Accessioning artifacts in the Castle Museum collection
- Relocating magazines and periodicals out of the curator's office
- Moving aircraft technical manuals into the curator's office

F-4S Phantom II BuNo 155539 during its heyday with Test and Evaluation Squadron 4 (VX-4) at Naval Air Station Point Mugu, California in 1982.

GIFT SHOP

LUCY SILVA, RETAIL SALES MANAGER

Did you know your museum has a banquet room available for rent? Great for meetings, receptions, birthday parties, or family reunions! Tables, chairs, and sound system available. Call the Gift Shop for details. Special rates for members. 209-782-2182

The "Black Bunny" under restoration in the Restoration Hangar.

MEMBERSHIP SERVICES

JOHN SUNDGREN - MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

Renewals: Go online to complete the form or contact Janie Sundgren at: membership@castleairmuseum.org

Membership Credentials: Stop by or contact the Gift Shop at 209-723-2182

Guided Tours: Stop by the Gift Shop or contact our retail sales manager, Lucy Silva at 209-723-2182. Email at: giftshopmanager@castleairmuseum.org

The F-4S Phantom II "Black Bunny" on display at Castle Air Museum.

AIRCRAFT OF THE MONTH

RUSTY WYNN, CURATOR

Plane of the Month: "Black Bunny" - F-4S Phantom II (BuNo 155539)

Now that the legendary "Black Bunny" has reached its final display location at Castle Air Museum, we're proud to feature it as our Plane of the Month for November.

Built in 1968 by McDonnell Aircraft in St. Louis, BuNo 155539 first flew on February 22, 1968 and entered service with the U.S. Navy. Its early assignments included VF-102 "Diamondbacks" aboard USS America (CV-66) and USS Independence (CV-62), though it did not deploy to Vietnam.

The aircraft later served with VF-101 "Grim Reapers" and VF-33 "Tarsiers", operating from the USS Independence, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, and USS America. In 1981, it was upgraded from an F-4J to an F-4S, extending its service life.

Its most famous chapter began when it joined VX-4 (Air Test and Evaluation Squadron 4) at NAS Point Mugu. Renumbered XF-1, the aircraft received the striking all-black livery and iconic Playboy Bunny tail marking—eventually approved by Hugh Hefner himself. As Vandy 1, the Phantom tested advanced systems and became a crowd favorite at airshows, earning the nickname "Black Bunny."

As the Navy transitioned to newer aircraft, 155539 made its final flight on May 2, 1986 to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center (AMARC) in Tucson, where it remained for 36 years and was nearly scrapped.

Castle Air Museum stepped in to save the aircraft in 2016, raising the $50,000 required to move it from AMARC. After temporary storage with Pima Air & Space Museum, the Black Bunny was transported to Atwater in July 2024. Volunteers then spent hundreds of hours restoring the Phantom to its VX-4 appearance.

Today, Vandy 1 "Black Bunny" gleams proudly on display, where visitors can learn about its role in naval aviation testing and its unique place in U.S. Naval history.

(BuNo 155539) VF-33 Tarsiers was assigned to Carrier Air Wing 7 (CVW-7) aboard USS Independence.

July 24, 2024 Vandy-1 ready for transport from the Pima Air & Space Museum to the Castle Air Museum. Photo: Dan Rivera

November 5, 2025, Black Bunny's second roll out to be displayed on the museum grounds.