

OLD MEETS NEW

at a Southern New Jersey Aviation Museum



Kevin McKinney

The Naval Air Station Wildwood Aviation Museum in Rio Grande, NJ, boasts an impressive collection of some 19 classic flying machines in its historic 1943 hangar. There's the Boeing-Stearman PT-17 Kaydet, one of the most widely used basic trainers during World War II.

Also, housed in the museum's 92,000 square-foot, all-wooden hangar is the "Huey" helicopter, which first appeared during the Vietnam War. Perhaps, the museum's most prized possession is the TBM-3E Avenger, a World War II torpedo bomber -- one of just seven aircraft in the country to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

But what seems to be getting the payload of attention lately, is the museum's newest attraction that sits directly behind the impressive shiny black Avenger.

A Wii game.

"The whole idea is to spark an interest in the science of flight at a young age," says museum educator Bruce Fournier, who had the game installed last month as an interactive educational tool for kids of all ages. "So far, the game's has been a big hit."

Wii, of course, is the latest rave in video game technology that enable players to interact with the on screen action through a combination of hand motions and by pressing buttons on a remote control. Any number of game themes can be plugged into the Wii.

Presently, the aviation museum's Wii is offering a WWII dogfight contest that pits the might of the Allied air forces against the powerful German Luftwaffe. Players can either play each other or challenge the Wii computer.

"Awesome" and "Cool" were among the responses from a group of Sandman Elementary School fifth graders recently as they flew their fighters, bombers and fighter bombers, engaging in air combat with one another.

"They key is to find something that kids are familiar with, something they can relate to," says Fournier. "I had asked that group school kids at the start of the tour if they

had ever heard of Wii. They all raised their hands. Then I asked if they had ever played Wii and 99 percent of them raised their hands."

But the Wii game is just the latest in an array of interactive gadgets at the aviation museum designed to educate the public on the fundamentals of flight. The museum, which first opened in 1975 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, also offers instructive visuals and displays that demonstrate basic flight-related scientific laws, like aero dynamics.

Originally, the Naval Air Station Wildwood was commissioned on April 1, 1943 as an active dive-bomber squadron training facility from 1943 to 1945. During WW II, 42 airmen lost their lives while training at the station. Today, that property is divided up between the aviation museum and the adjacent Cape May Airport, an uncontrolled airport.

Fournier says the museum takes its cue from the federal government which encourages educational facilities such as the museum to promote the learning of science, technology, engineering and math -- the keys to successful aviation.

In keeping with its hope to educate and reach out to America's aviation future, the (NAS) Wildwood Aviation Museum has two new exhibits planned for early 2010. A single-engine Cessna recently donated will be restored in full measure and offered as a hands-on exhibit.

"You'll actually be able to get into the cockpit and operate the

controls and see how they work," said Fournier. Also, the museum plans to unveil this spring a restored flight control with tower.

As for the Wii game, Fournier hopes the interest will only grow and that he'll be able to add to that exhibit soon. After all, it seems to be what the kids want.

"Kids want hands on all the time," said Fournier with a smile. "They want all their senses working at the same time. Apparently, this is how they learn these days." ■ K.M.



EDUCATION DIRECTOR: Bruce A. Fournier with NASW Chairman, Joseph E. Salvatore MD at the Naval Air Station Wildwood Aviation Museum



▲ Fifth graders from Sandman Elementary rave over the new Wii game that features World War II dogfights between Allied air forces and German Luftwaffe forces at the Naval Air Station Wildwood Aviation Museum, in Rio Grande, NJ. The Wii was purchased as an educational tool.

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After a decade in the daily newspaper business, McKinney opted for a less conventional lifestyle to explore the adventurous side of life -- and write about it. He lives in a boat yard bungalow where he also pursues his interests as a blues musician, artist and carpenter.