

Takeoff



STAR POWER: Pilot Dennis Quaid (above) hosted the NAHF's '04 gala; (from left) inductees Frank Borman, Chuck Yeager and Bob Hoover with their Mustangs



DAYTON WITH HISTORY: Jimmy Stewart, (above, with wife Gloria), was a 1977 inductee; (left) the learning and research center today

THE COMMUNITY

THE PRICE OF FAME

In 46 years, the National Aviation Hall of Fame has grown from a star-studded awards ceremony to an exhibit-packed museum. But it's been a bumpy ride. By Cristina Velocci

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uring the 1960s, a veritable who's-who of aviation and Hollywood would congregate in their black-tie best at the Biltmore Hotel in Dayton, Ohio. Screen siren Maureen O'Hara would mingle with actor and pilot Jimmy Stewart, while across the room, Eddie Rickenbacker and fearless aviatrix Jackie Cochran would socialize with Air Force general Jimmy Doolittle.

These elbow-rubbing luminaries gathered to honor America's air-and-space pioneers at the annual enshrinement gala of the National Aviation Hall of Fame. Since its first induction — a ceremony honoring the Wright brothers on December 17, 1962 — the organization has annually ushered in a new class of four or five people who have significantly contributed to the history of manned (or womanned) flight.

Forty-six years later, the event, held on the third Saturday of July, continues to draw top-flight talent, such as Sally Ride, Steve

Fossett and FedEx chairman Fred Smith — and those are just this year's inductees. "It's the Oscars of aviation," says David Vornholt, a Board of Nominations member for the past 10 years. "It's a rare opportunity to meet living legends."

But the other 364 days of the year the NAHF is very much a work in progress, just as it has been for much of the past four decades. Part of the problem is that despite having been chartered by Congress in 1964, the NAHF is not Congressionally funded. Instead, it relies on membership dues, foundation grants and contributions. "Without such support we cannot survive," notes

NAHF executive director Ron Kaplan. Throughout the '70s and '80s, financial difficulties threatened to ground it.

Even today, its major asset, the 17,000-square-foot learning and research center — the product of a 1990s capital campaign that raised \$6 million in member dues, private donations and local and state funding — remains a payload the institution is still struggling to figure out how to support.

"What we have realized since opening in 2003 is that there are expenses our board had not anticipated," Kaplan says. That includes rehabbing old exhibits used by thousands of visitors each year, installing new ones to keep the center relevant (such as the four new Microsoft flight simulators that arrived this summer) and funding SkyReach, its character-education program that uses inductees as role models. "Enshrinement is the heart of the National Aviation Hall of Fame," Kaplan says. "But education is its soul." Until sufficient funds are raised, however, those education initiatives, originally intended for grades

K through 12, will have to be limited to grades four and five.

Another problem is the restrictions placed on the NAHF by its big-sister museum. In 2003, when it built its facilities in Dayton, the original home of the Wright brothers, the NAHF chose to share property with the United States Air

Force Museum, to piggyback on its visitor attendance. That part of the plan worked — the Hall of Fame draws some 600,000 people a year. "Teaming up with the military was a key turning point for the organization," Kaplan says. "If it were to have been free-standing, it would have been shut down by now." But as part

of the deal, the NAHF agreed not to compete with the USAF by opening a museum gift shop — traditionally one of the primary source of revenue for museums. Kaplan has tried to be resourceful, starting an e-museum shop instead, with limited-edition signed photos of aviation war heroes along with the usual assortment of posters and shirts. He's also looking into other sources of funding, including corporate sponsorships for programs and exhibits. "The organization is 46 years old, but as a freestanding institution, it's only four," he says. "We've gone from a once-a-year event to being open 350-plus days a year. It's an abrupt transformation adjusting to life as a destination."

In other words, you're probably safe scheduling that Dayton fly-in. "Oh, I don't think we would ever go out of existence," Vornholt says. "I mean, just think about the opportunity and potential this place has." And lest you ever need a reminder, all you have to do is drop by on the third Saturday in July. ■

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE AVIATION HALL OF FAME; PAUL BOWEN (TOP LEFT)

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