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Bellingham's Heritage Flight Museum reopens in shiny, new digs

PETER JENSEN / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

After a six-month hiatus, Bellingham's Heritage Flight Museum reopened Saturday, Jan. 17 in its brand-new building on the 4100 block of Mitchell Way at the Bellingham International Airport with its collection of historic fighter planes, pilot memorabilia and a visit from the museum's founder - a walking piece of history himself.

Bill Anders, who founded the museum in 1996, was one of the first people to orbit the moon as one of three astronauts who flew on the Apollo 8 mission in 1968.

Now retired and living on Orcas Island, Anders donated most of the planes featured in the museum, said Hal Beatty, a mechanic with the museum.

After a small ceremony to designate the museum's opening, Anders boarded a T-6 Texan "Hog Wild Gunner" with his son Greg, a retired pilot for the Idaho Air National Guard, in the pilot's seat and flew back to Orcas Island.

"For me, it's awe-inspiring," Beatty said. "The guy in the back seat went around the moon."

The new location will provide the museum with new opportunities for its future, program director Kate Simmons said. The group had lost its lease at its former site.

Currently, the museum is only open on the third Saturday of every month, but its staff and volunteers are considering opening more frequently if they can attract the foot traffic to justify the longer hours, Simmons said.

Being on the main road in and out of the airport should help that, Simmons said.

"This is kind of a soft opening so people know where we are," Simmons said. "We want to get a read on when people are coming. (The museum) certainly hasn't been tapped into its full potential."

For now, the staff and volunteers that operate the museum will be adjusting to life in the new facility, Simmons said. She said she expects there will be a grander celebration when everything's settled, possibly by this spring.

Until then, Whatcom County residents will have the opportunity - albeit a limited one - to enjoy the museum's collections, soak in a small slice of American aviation history and enjoy demonstrations of pilots taking off and landing in the historic planes, Simmons said.

"It's unusual to have a flying collection that's regularly flown," Simmons said. "I can't wait. It's going to be a real museum"

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