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Air Force Museum A Local Touchstone For Veterans

by Matt Bauer

The National Museum of the United States Air Force is the oldest and largest military aviation museum in the world, and for many local men and women, it holds an enduring significant. Air Force veteran and Wright State student, Matt Bauer of Vandalia, has today's Veterans' Voices story.

When I was a kid, my dad would take my brother, David, and I to the National Museum of the Air Force. We marveled at the size of the planes and dreamed of one day becoming pilots ourselves. David became an engineer for Honda, but I joined the Air Force, and was stationed at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, where I deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar.

I've been back to the museum several times over the years, and I've seen exhibits about both the World Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, but I wanted to go back now as a veteran, and see how my military service is represented.

I met museum curator and Air Force veteran, Doug Lantry, who said people come here from all over because this place isn't just a museum.

"This place is valuable because it serves as a memorial," says Lantry. "People want to come here to memorize the service and sacrifice of their relatives that have died in service, or have served and gone elsewhere. So we need to pay attention to both of those things. We're both a museum and a memorial."

One of our favorite games as kids was to see how different license plates we could see in the parking lot, and I remember on one trip in the summer we actually got all fifty states.

"I think this is not only a very important community asset, but also a state, regional, national and international asset," says Lantry.

There are no major exhibits about post-9/11 conflicts now, but curator, Jeff Duford, assures me that are already artifacts here that I can relate to.

"From a museum perspective, from a curatorial perspective, we find is that there's commonality in the human experience of war," he says. "For instance, one often finds good luck charms. It could be World War I, it could be World War II, it could be Korea, Vietnam, it could be now, it doesn't matter, there's this tendency for veterans to carry good luck charms. We have diaries where someone in a combat zone talks about how horrible the food is, or how grateful they are

for a Thanksgiving meal, they talk about the weather being cold, about being tired, they write letters home talking about how much they miss loved ones, so I'm sure that the ongoing conflict is very much the same as it has been in past conflicts."

Jeff says there are challenges to creating exhibits about an ongoing conflict, and lot of the things that could be displayed are still being used in secret operations.

"We've talked to people who have been involved in classified operations and before they answer questions, they actually look around," says Duford. "Even though it's declassified, they look around before they make a statement because they've spent decades ensuring that no one hears them talk about these things openly."

It's going to be a long time, maybe even decades, before I see my war experiences on display here.

"It normally takes years and years for historical judgment and closure on these events that in museum time are still current events to have a full story," says Doug Lantry.

Today when I visit the museum, it makes me proud and I feel like I made the right decision to join the Air Force. I look forward to the day when my service is memorialized here, and I can share it with my family.

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Photo:

caption: Doug Lantry and Jeff Duford at the National Museum of the United States Air Force
credit: Matt Bauer