



EISENHOWER'S GRANDDAUGHTER VISITS HIS AIR FORCE ONE IN ARIZONA

News / Personalities



The nation's first Air Force One, which sat abandoned in the Arizona desert for more than a decade, is almost ready to take flight again.

Columbine II, a Lockheed VC-121 Constellation 48-610, which once ushered President Dwight D. Eisenhower, received a VIP farewell reception Friday night.

Among the attendees was the president's granddaughter, Mary Jean Eisenhower, who was born in Washington, D.C. during her grandfather's first term. She was christened in the Blue Room of the White House and grew up in nearby Gettysburg, Pa., in a home with property abutting the Eisenhower Farm, where President Eisenhower eventually retired.

"I remember sitting with the pilots and jabbering," she said as she walked through the aircraft at the Marana Regional Airport. "This is like going through a time warp."

Eisenhower said she was about five-years-old when she got to fly on the presidential plane and pointed to where Secret Service agents used to sit.

"I'm am very happy it's going to be restored."

Dynamic Aviation Inc. of Bridgewater, Va., bought Columbine II last year and has a team of mechanics working to get it flight ready for a trip to Virginia.

Company founder Karl D. Stolfus Jr. plans to restore the plane to the exact shape it was in when Eisenhower flew in it.

As he walked through the plane with Eisenhower, he told of his plan for the restoration.

"Those buttons that your grandfather pushed are the original ones," Stolfus said, pointing to a communications console at what once was the president's desk.

He said the sideways sofas and swivel chairs would be reinstalled.

"Oh, I remember the swivel seats," Eisenhower said. "I made myself sick on one."

Eisenhower is the CEO of People to People International, which her grandfather founded in 1956.

Columbine II became the first Air Force One after a near-collision over New York City in 1953.

With President Eisenhower on board, Columbine II -- identified as "Air Force 8610" -- almost crashed with a commercial plane also numbered 8610. The Federal Aviation Administration then designated the call sign Air Force One to any aircraft the president of the United States was aboard.

Columbine II was retired and flown to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in 1968.

When the plane was stripped of its identity, it was also fitted with mismatched landing gear and mistakenly sold in a 1970 surplus auction.

Mel Christler unwittingly purchased Columbine II, along with four other decrepit planes. He planned to use the fleet as crop-dusters.

A decade later, after Christler had stripped the plane to a shell, he got a call from a Robert Mikesh, Curator of the Smithsonian Institute who had uncovered the plane's history.

Christler tried to restore the original Air Force One to its former glory. By 1990, he had refurbished the plane to flying condition, and flew it to Abilene, Kansas, Eisenhower's hometown, to join the centennial celebration of this community's favorite son. After that, the plane moved from home to home across the Southwest, until it reached the Marana Regional Airport, where it has been since 2005.

Once Columbine II leaves the desert and gets its restoration in Virginia, the new owners plan to take the aircraft on air show circuits.

An exact date of departure has not been set. Stolfus said when it does take off, it will land every few hours for a check-up.

"An airplane like this tells you when it's ready to fly," he said, "you don't tell it."

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