Untitled document

The XF8U-2 Crusader once broke the sound barrier; now it will sit on display

By Ray Duckler
The Concord Monitor; December 14, 2011

The XF8U-2 Crusader once flew at supersonic speeds. Yesterday, though, at the McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center, the retired jet moved a bit slower, inching its way into a new home.

The single-engine aircraft, built in 1956, is the newest exhibit at the museum named for Alan Shepard, the late astronaut from Derry, and Christa McAuliffe, the Concord teacher who died trying to become the first citizen in space.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, a Democrat, and Rep. Charlie Bass, a Republican, worked in concert with the U.S. Navy's National Museum of Naval Aviation to bring the plane here on a long-term loan.

Shepard, who commanded Apollo 14 and landed on the moon in 1971, served as a test pilot for the Crusader, which was the fastest of a series of jets built in the 1950s and flew at speeds of more than 1,000 miles per hour.

Trucked up from Texas on consecutive days - the wing arrived Monday, the fuselage yesterday - the jet was the fifth of its kind off the assembly line 55 years ago, the Discovery Center's staff said.

But once the main section got to the planetarium, rolling onto the New Hampshire Technical Institute campus shortly before 4 p.m., the process of moving 8,000 pounds from flatbed to lobby took patience and precision, as the sun disappeared and the temperature dropped.

"I've never done this before, so it's a new experience for me," Mike Larochelle, the facility's maintenance mechanic, said before the procedure began. "But these riggers have been doing this type of work for a long time."

Shepard's career has already been partially chronicled at the Discovery Center, which features a model of the Mercury Freedom 7 he piloted in 1961. There are also plans to bring a recreated Apollo 14 capsule to town.

But while it's doubtful Shepard piloted this particular jet (former pilot Joe Engle's name is printed up high, near the cockpit), the 53-foot-long aircraft with the 36-foot wingspan is not a remake.

"We always wanted to have his full career shown here, from his test pilot days to his Mercury astronaut days to his Apollo days," said Jeanne Gerulskis, the Discovery Center's executive director. "We have models, like the (92-foot-tall) Redstone Rocket out front, but this is the real McCoy."

The Crusader, built by a company named Vought, was used by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps and flew missions in Vietnam. Shepard had flown propeller planes "before they started working on the fast stuff," Gerulskis said.

Through fundraising, the Discovery Center paid $24,000 for transportation costs and another $20,000 for the rigger company, which had a crane outside the main lobby, taller than any building downtown.

The flatbed and its escort were delayed due to permit problems in Connecticut, which allows loads of this size on Tuesdays through Thursdays only.

A giant window facing the campus's student union was removed so workers could move the wing and fuse-lage in.

"This is the first time we've done that, but that window was designed like that to be taken out," said Jennifer Jones, marketing director for the planetarium. "We were anticipating getting a plane, and finally we got one."

With the news media, Discovery Center staff and workers from the rigger company waiting, someone suddenly shouted, "It's here."

The white star on the side of the jet could be seen in the distance, passing behind bare branches. The truck carrying the plane moved by the front doors of the student union and stopped near the open space left by the replaceable window. The back of the plane would be moved in first.

From there, a two-hour process began, with straps, pulled tightly by giant hooks attached to the crane's cables, wrapped around the plane's belly, lifting it 30 feet in the air.

Workers used radio to guide the crane operator, helping him fit the vertical tail fin under a low hanging catwalk by inches. Eventually, the landing gear, tucked tight against the plane's sides, had to be lowered so the fuselage could be wheeled inside, pulled by a forklift, inches at a time.

Finally, after the front of the plane made it inside, workers clapped for crane operator Carl Hatfield.

"Let's hear it for Carl," one worker said.

"He was real smooth," said John Cote, whose family owns the rigger company. "It's all in your fingertips."