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'Proud to be among 'em': Vietnam vets among 12 aviators honored at Hangar Party

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com

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Four pilots release a spray of biodegradable smoke oil while flying in a d. planes during the Aviation Heritage Park's annual Hangar Party at the Bc go to [bgdailynews.com](https://www.bgdailynews.com).

photos by Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com

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INFORMATION**



April open house planned for aviation park's museum

Charlie Browning's journey to being honored for his service in the Vietnam War has taken more twists and turns than one of the UH-1 (Huey) helicopters he once flew.

That service wasn't always appreciated, even for a pilot like Browning who was decorated for bravery in the largest helicopter assault mission of that war.

"Coming back from Vietnam wasn't a pleasant experience," Browning recalled Saturday. "There was a lot that happened and a lot of things that were said to the returning soldiers.

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"It hurts to remember, but that's a good thing because hurting means you're still alive."

The hurt, though, was tempered Saturday as the 75-year-old Browning was joined by 11 other accomplished aviators in being honored at the Aviation Heritage Park Hangar Party at the Bowling Green-Warren County Regional Airport.

Normally an occasion to unveil a new aircraft to add to the collection at the AHP in Basil Griffin Park, this year's event was an opportunity to introduce a dozen aviators who will be included in the museum building being constructed at the park.

Browning, a graduate of both Bowling Green High School and Western Kentucky University, was joined by highly decorated veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars in being recognized Saturday.

"I'm proud to be among 'em," said Browning, who has owned Bowling Green's Building Systems business for nearly 40 years. "It's quite an honor. It's good to be acknowledged."

Those who joined Browning in being acknowledged Saturday read like a "who's who" of local aviators.

The other 11:

- Navy Lt. Commander David Render Berry, who flew dive bombers in the Pacific during WWII and won the Navy Cross (the Navy's highest decoration for fliers) three times before being shot down at age 30.
- Air Force Maj. Todd Moore, who flew P-51 Mustangs in the Pacific during WWII and became the leading "ace" of the 7th Air Force with 12 confirmed victories.
- Air Force Lt. Col. Charles "Buck" Jones, who served as an instructor pilot during WWII and later flew the F-86 Sabre in Korea.
- Air Force Lt. Gen. Steve Basham, a command pilot with more than 3,400 flying hours in the B-1, B-2 and B-52 aircraft. He is now deputy commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Africa.
- Air Force Maj. Jackie Carwell, who flew the P-47 Thunderbolt during WWII and flew 96 missions over Germany.
- Marine Corps Lt. Col. John Capito, a combat aviator who flew 105 missions in the F-4 Phantom in Vietnam and also flew the F-8 Crusader and the AV-8 Harrier.
- Air Force Maj. Jesse Birchett, who flew the P-40 Warhawk and the P-47 Thunderbolt in combat during WWII.
- Army Chief Warrant Officer Bill Basham, who flew the H-1G Cobra attack helicopter in Vietnam and was decorated for heroism five times.
- Air Force Col. Greg Smith, who flew the EC-135 "Looking Glass," the

airborne command post for the U.S. nuclear forces.

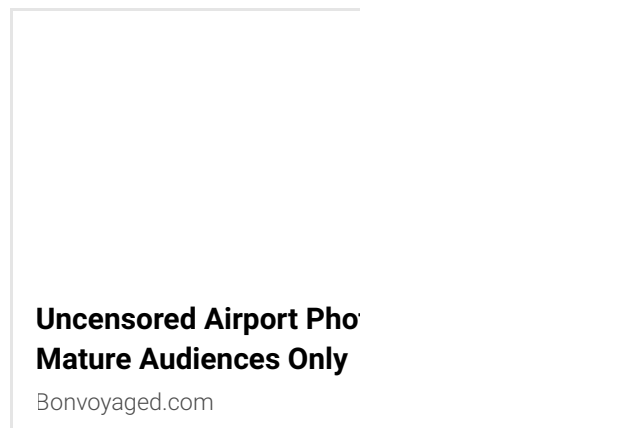
- Air Force Lt. Col. Jim Cooper, who flew the O-1 Bird Dog as a forward air controller in Vietnam and was decorated for bravery.
- Air Force Lt. Col. John Carmichael, who flew 60 missions in the P-51 Mustang and F-86 Sabre fighters during the Korean War and served as an instructor during the Vietnam War.

While Saturday's Hangar Party honored those aviators who all have ties to the Bowling Green area, it also served as an introduction to the 11,000-square-foot museum that will house aviation artifacts and memorabilia.

A small collection of artifacts, including pilots' helmets and uniforms, were on display Saturday as a taste of what's to come at a museum that AHP board of directors member Larry Bailey said is scheduled to open in October 2023.

That museum's opening will be the latest in a rapid series of additions to the park since it opened in 2009 with a single aircraft, an F-4 Phantom honoring retired Brig. Gen. Dan Cherry.

“What we wanted to do originally was honor Dan Cherry,” Bailey said. “Then one thing led to another.”



Eight aircraft are now on display outdoors at the park at the intersection of Three Springs Road and Smallhouse Road, and the museum building is under roof.

AHP board member Joe Tinius said the 12 aviators honored Saturday were discovered through research done primarily by local historian Ray Buckberry.

“These are important stories that need to be told,” Tinius said. “We’ll never have room out there for 12 more aircraft, and that’s why the museum is important.”

“All 12 will be recognized in some format, either through an aircraft on display or through a place in the museum.”

Saturday’s event will help museum construction move forward, Tinius said.

With all 500 tickets to the event sold, the Hangar Party is expected to be financially successful.

“This event really is more for operational costs each year,” Tinius said. “But anything raised over our budget will go to the museum. We could get \$25,000 to \$30,000 to help fund the museum.”

The Hangar Party should also raise awareness of and interest in the museum, Tinius said.

“I hope this helps push us forward,” he said. “We have a handful of potential donors we’ll be working with this summer.”

Tinius said about \$1.8 million has been raised toward the museum’s construction, which he estimates will

come with a final price tag of about \$2.6 million.

Despite the shortfall, work is continuing on all utilities in the building.

“We’ll probably wrap that up by late summer or early fall,” Tinius said.

“Then the only phase left will be finishing the walls, doors and cabinets inside and all the landscaping outside.”

Tinius and Bailey said the goal is to have the museum ready by October 2023 in time for the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Association (“River Rats”) to hold their annual reunion in Bowling Green and view a museum that will house River Rats artifacts.

In exchange for having a home for displaying their memorabilia, the River Rats have helped raise funds for the museum. Cherry said the group has raised more than \$250,000.

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