

The Southern Museum of Flight

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The Southern Museum of Flight, located in Birmingham, Alabama is dedicated to presenting civilian, military, experimental aircraft, and memorabilia from the earliest history of powered flight. The 68,000 square foot facility houses over seventy-five aircraft, as well as engines, models, artifacts, photographs, and paintings. In addition, the Southern Museum of Flight is home to the Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame with over sixty-five biographical plaques presenting Alabama aviation history through collective biography.

Notable aircraft on display include a Wright Flyer, a Curtis Pusher, a WWII Fokker D-VII, an Alexander Eaglerock once owned by the first deaf pilot, WWII trainers, and F4 "Phantom" jet, Soviet built MIGs, an A12 "Blackbird" spy plane, the "Lake Murray" B-25 Bomber, and a vast array of experimental aircraft.

Featured on display at the Southern Museum of Flight is a diorama exhibit honoring Alabama's famed Tuskegee Airmen. A state-of-the-art theater with surround sound, realistic flight simulators, tours, and a children's "Little Pilots Room" are also available.

The Southern Museum of Flight truly has something for everyone! I cannot stress enough how much I enjoyed my visit to the museum. It is a rare jewel that we have in Birmingham that is often over-looked; but should not be missed. On my visit, I saw every kind of plane from the earliest attempts of flight - to aircraft and choppers flown in Viet Nam- to the latest aircraft used for spying purposes. To be up close and personal with so many aircraft is something very special and everyone is sure to take away something new that they have learned.

Below is just a sampling of what you will see and learn...

Wilbur and Orville Wright are the Fathers of Aviation. After years of experimenting with gliders and aerodynamics, the Wright brothers launched the first successful flight of an engine-driven, heavier-than-air, man-carrying flying machine on December 17, 1903 at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Basic principles of that first airplane are used today in every plane that flies. In 1910, they established the United States' first flying school at the current site of Maxwell AFB, Alabama. The world's first night flights were conducted that same year. Based on their Alabama experience, the brothers were the first aviators selected for induction into the Alabama Aviation Hall of Fame.



Wilbur and Orville Wright and their Wright Flyer

VIETNAM WAR HELICOPTERS EXHIBIT

Originally built as a (LOH) Light Observation Helicopter for use in the Vietnam War, the OH-6 or “Loach” (below) was used as a scout ship in “Pink Teams,” paired with the awesome AH-1 “Cobra” attack helicopter. The pairing was referred to as a “Pink Team” in reference to the existing terminology of “White Teams” for light observation helicopters and “Red Teams” for attack helicopters. During the Vietnam War, Pink Teams were combinations of a Loach flying at treetop level and a Cobra attack helicopter flying above. When the Loach found the enemy, the observer would drop a red smoke grenade and the Cobra would swoop down and engage.



The (LOH) Light Observation Helicopter used in Vietnam War to observe the enemy at treetop level.



The AH-1 “Cobra” Helicopter used in Vietnam War to engage the enemy.

My personal favorite aircraft to view is the SR-71 “Blackbird.” The Lockheed SR-71 is an advanced, long range, Mach 3+ strategic reconnaissance aircraft developed from the Lockheed A-12 and YF-12A aircraft by the Lockheed Skunk Works as a Black project. The SR-71 was unofficially named the Blackbird, and called the Habu by its crews, referring to an Okinawan species of pit viper.

Clarence “Kelly” Johnson was responsible for many of the design’s innovative concepts. A defensive feature of the aircraft was its high speed and operating altitude, whereby, if a surface-to-air missile launch were detected, standard evasive action was simply to accelerate. The SR-71 line was in service from 1964 to 1998, with 12 of the 32 aircraft being destroyed in accidents, though none were lost to enemy action. Since 1976, it has held the world record for the fastest air breathing manned aircraft, a record previously held by the YF-12.

The SR-71 was the first operational aircraft designed around a stealthy shape and materials. These were a number of features in the SR-71 that were designed to reduce its radar signature. The first studies in radar stealth technology seemed to indicate that a shape with a lattered, tapering, sides would avoid reflecting most radar energy toward the radar beams’ place of origin. To this end, the radar engineers suggested adding chines to the design and canting the vertical control surfaces inward. The aircraft also used special radar-absorbing materials which were incorporated into saw tooth shaped sections of the skin of the aircraft, as well as cesium-based fuel additives to reduce the exhaust plumes’ visibility on radar. Despite these efforts, the SR-71 was still easily detected on radar while traveling at speed due to its large exhaust stream and air heated by the body (large gradients in the atmosphere are detectable with radar.)

The first flight of an SR-71 took place on December 22, 1964, at Air force Plant 42 in Palmdale, California. The first SR-71 to enter service was delivered to the 4200th (later 9th) Strategic Reconnaissance Wing at Beale Air Force Base, California, in January 1966. The United States Air Force Strategic Air Command had SR-71 Blackbirds in service

from 1966 through 1991.

SR-71s first arrived at the 9th SRW's Operating Location (OL-8) at Kadena Airbase, Okinawa on March 8, 1968. These deployments were code named "Glowing Heat", while the program as a whole was code named "Senior Crown". Reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam were code named "Giant Scale".

On March 21, 1968, Major (later General) Jerome F. O'Malley and Major Edward D. Payne flew the first operational SR-71 sortie in SR-71 serial number 61-7976 from Kadena AB, Okinawa. During its career, this aircraft (976) accumulated 2,981 flying hours and flew 942 total sorties (more than any other SR-71), including 257 operational missions, from Beale AFB; Palmdale, California; Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan; and RAF Mildenhall, England. The aircraft was flown to the National Museum of the United States Air Force near Dayton, Ohio in March 1990.

From the beginning of the Blackbird's reconnaissance missions over enemy territory (North Vietnam, Laos, etc.) in 1968, the SR-71s averaged approximately one sortie a week for nearly two years. By 1970, the SR-71s were averaging two sorties per week, and by 1972, they were flying nearly one sortie every day.

While deployed in Okinawa, the SR-71s and their aircrew members gained the nickname Habu (as did the A-12s preceding them) after a pit viper indigenous to Japan, which the Okinawans thought the plane resembled.



The SR-71 "Blackbird"

NOTE:

Please join the Southern Museum of Flight in 2010 as they celebrate the 100th anniversary of powered flight in Alabama (from March 13th - December 31st 2010.) This is a special centennial exhibition of 1st powered flight in Alabama.

The Wright Brothers established the country's first civilian flight school outside of Montgomery, Alabama in 1910. The Southern Museum of Flight will honor this contribution to aviation history throughout 2010 with "Those Daring Wright Brothers and Early Flyers" Exhibit, featuring a Wright Flyer, Curtis Pusher, rare photos and items from the early period of flight. Flight simulators will feature the Wright Flyer, where visitors can test their skills on the world's first successful engine driven aircraft.