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CENTERPIECE

First Class Tour — Eisenhower's Granddaughter Recalls Flying In First Air Force One

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Karl Stoltzfus, founder and chairman of Dynamic Aviation, gives a tour of the first plane to be called Air Force One to Mary Jean Eisenhower, granddaughter of former President Dwight Eisenhower, at the company's headquarters Friday.

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By TONY BROWN

Daily News-Record

BRIDGEWATER — The four-engine prop plane never left the hangar, but touring the first aircraft to be called Air Force One was a “moving” experience on Friday for Mary Jean Eisenhower, she said.

As one of only four grandchildren to Republican President Dwight Eisenhower and his wife, Mamie, Mary Jean pretty much had the run of the White House from the time she learned to walk until “grandpa” left it in 1961.

And Mary Jean, now 61, also remembers wandering at age 3 or 4 into the cockpit of the 1948 Lockheed C-121 Constellation — which flew President Eisenhower around the world — and bothering a man in the cockpit.

“We were in flight, and I drove that engineer crazy,” Mary Jean said, standing next to what is left of the board of dials that was the engineer’s station, right behind the co-pilot’s seat. “But before shooping me away, he explained everything, not that I understood a word.”

The plane, named Columbine II but designated Air Force One for air control purposes, now resides in a hangar at Dynamic Aviation.

The company, south of Bridgewater, modifies, maintains and leases fleets of aircraft for a variety of specialized purposes, including defense, intelligence-gathering, firefighting and mosquito-control. Its global clients include the U.S. Department of Defense.

But for the next year or so, a small crew of engineers and mechanics from the 600-employee staff will concentrate its skills on restoring the plane. Dynamic founder and board Chairman Karl Stoltzfus bought it for just under \$1.5 million from an Arizona man who had scavenged it for parts before realizing its heritage. Stoltzfus then had it flown to Bridgewater Airpark last March.

After being restored to the best semblance of its former self possible, Stoltzfus envisions taking it to air shows to show off its 250 mph cruising speed in the air and offer tours on the ground. But he admits a lot of work is still left to do to make it worth touring.

Dressed in black slacks and a black top with leopard-print cuffs and collar and wearing sensible but subtly sequined flats, Mary Jean followed Stoltzfus around as he led a tour of the plane. The tour snaked through the stateroom where Ike and Mamie would have sat, two VIP rooms, a galley and a navigation room before arriving at the cockpit.

"I was 4-ish and was just taken on a little ride," said Mary Jean, president of People to People International, a Missouri nonprofit founded by the 34th U.S. president. It promotes public diplomacy, educational and humanitarian initiatives and offers travel programs for students and adults.

Mary Jean — who coincidentally lives in Independence, Mo., hometown of Democratic President Harry Truman — is the daughter of John Eisenhower, ambassador to Belgium under President Richard Nixon, who was Ike's vice president. Her brother is David Eisenhower, namesake of Camp David and husband to Nixon's daughter Julie. In other words, she needs a flowchart.

"I knew I was old when I went to pick up my son at a day care, and they called me his mother," said Mary Jean, who was christened in the White House Blue Room. "I had always been the president's granddaughter or the ambassador's daughter or David's sister."

"When I'm on this plane or in the White House or at Camp David, he's still alive for me," Mary Jean said of her grandfather, who died in 1969, eight years after leaving the White House. The World War II Supreme Allied Commander Europe spent two terms in Washington — where Mary Jean was born. It is remembered as an idyllic era but one during which he warned of what he called the growing "military-industrial complex."

Mary Jean recounted a number of Ike stories, like the time he was driving her around and nearly got arrested when he got stopped by a police officer and did not have a license to show.

She called the family "close-knit" and said her family lived next door to Ike and Mamie's "vacation White House," the Eisenhower Farm in Gettysburg, Pa.

"I spent enough time in the White House to remember that I thought all these heads of state were just more friends of grandpa's, like Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill," Mary Jean said, referencing the French World War II general and statesman, and the wartime British prime minister.

Mary Jean told a couple of stories off the record — Ike was after all a product of the Army and knew a choice swearword or two. She did let one tale slip, though.

When the "red phone" rang at the Gettysburg farm in 1960 alerting her grandfather to the crash in the Soviet Union of Gary Powers' U2 spy plane, she said she overheard from the next room. "He picked it up and said, 'Well I'll be G.D.,'" she said, using the initials and not the word itself. "He did have a military vocabulary."

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