

Skywarrior Foundation rushes to 'Save the Whale'

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Whidbey News Times Reporter

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The Whidbey A-3 Skywarrior Memorial Foundation's fundraising efforts have kicked into overdrive.

A small but growing group of former A-3 pilots, engineers, mechanics and enthusiasts are ready to do what it takes to bring an A-3 jet to Whidbey Island.

Foundation member Bill Burklow describes the jet as "a bomber originally assigned as a nuke carrier that was designed and developed for the Cold War."

The Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla. was to announce the recipients of the remaining six airworthy A-3s in June; however, the Navy's contracts with Raytheon, a leader in the development of defense technologies, expire in May. Once that agreement ends, all unclaimed A-3s will be scrapped. Those assigned to a museum, flown out or stored by a private entity will be spared. There are no plans for renewal, which means the end of an era has arrived for the Skywarrior.

Now the race is on to raise enough money — a minimum of \$50,000 — by May to fly an A-3 from Raytheon in Van Nuys, Calif., to Whidbey Island Naval Air Station. So far, the current donation tally is \$14,700.

"A Skywarrior display would be a witness to its history here and a visible tribute to the men and women who flew A-3 missions worldwide," said Jim VanderHoek, a member of the foundation. "It will remind people of how the A-3 was instrumental in keeping the air station open as a key part of Pacific Fleet support when they were first assigned here in the mid-1950s."

Aviators flew the A-3 out of Whidbey Island Naval Air Station from 1957 to 1968. The Navy officially retired the jet from service in 1991.

NAS Whidbey is first in line to get first pick of the remaining flyable A-3s, according Helen Watson of the Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla., but the fine print requires foundations and museums in line for an A-3 to raise the required funds immediately.

If and when NAS Whidbey receives the jet, members of the Skywarrior Memorial Foundation plan to celebrate the aircraft's arrival with a "fly-in" ceremony before the plane is converted to a static display on the corner of Langley Boulevard and Ault Field Road.

The A-3 Skywarrior Memorial Foundation aims to have this static display in place and dedicated by the 100th Anniversary of Naval Aviation in 2011.

The Whidbey A-3 Skywarrior Memorial Foundation held its first meeting at Flyers' Restaurant and Brewery in Oak Harbor last month to establish a local charter membership. The foundation will accept charter members until June 1, said Burklow. The membership fee is \$125, all of which will go toward the "Save the Whale" campaign to bring an A-3 to Whidbey island. The next meeting will take place in April.

Donation forms are available at the Command Display in building 12 on the Seaplane Base, or on the Skywarrior Foundation Web site www.a3skywarrior.com under the tab "Whidbey Project."

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An artists' rendition of an A-3 static display, which appears on the foundation's letter head. Members bring the original framed piece during their PowerPoint presentations, which are available to any local organization that wishes to learn more about the "Save the Whale" project.
Submitted image

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