

Signs point to Skywarrior's return to Whidbey



Under the supervision of Ralph Estes, chairman of the Whidbey A-3 Skywarrior Memorial Foundation, fellow members and A-3 enthusiasts Phil Conley, Larry Irvin and Bill Burklow work to install signs advertising the aircraft's return to Whidbey Island.
Justin Burnett/Whidbey News-Times

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It's not the roar of the whale they've been waiting for, but members of the Whidbey A-3 Skywarrior Memorial Foundation are celebrating a small victory recently.

Foundation members met at the corner of Langley Boulevard and Ault Field Road to erect signs advertising the return of Whidbey Island Naval Air Station's first permanently assigned jet bomber.

The non-profit group has been [working for more than a year](#) to acquire a plane so it can create a memorial and display similar to the A-6 Intruder and EA-6B Prowler that decorate the corner of Highway 20 and Ault Field Road.

Putting up signs may not seem like much, and it's certainly not the homecoming they've been waiting for, but it put smiles back on the faces of several foundation members.

"It's a major milestone," said Bill Burklow, an association member and a retired Navy senior chief who once worked on A-3s. "Next is just get that airplane here."

A jet was expected to fly in this past November but contractual problems with the aircraft's holder, Raytheon Company in Van Nuys, Calif., have delayed its arrival. It was a disappointment for foundation members who had been hoping to have the piece of history

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here by Christmas.

The A-3 was originally designed to deliver nuclear weapons during the Cold War but was used for a wide variety of missions, from a bomber and in-flight fuel tanker to an electronics and photography platform.

It earned the affectionate nickname of "The Whale" by pilots and aircrews due to its massive size. The largest Navy jet ever to operate off an aircraft carrier, the A-3 measured 73 feet, from nose to tail, and weighs about 82,000 pounds when fully loaded.

The majority of Skywarriors operated out of Whidbey Island from 1957 to 1968. The jet was officially retired from Navy service in 1991.

But for many airmen, the A-3 flew into their hearts and never left. Oak Harbor resident Larry Irvin, also a foundation member, flew in Skywarriors for about 10 years and it's a time of his life he cherishes.

"The best part of my Navy career was in A-3s," Irvin said.

According to Ralph Estes, chairman of the foundation's board of directors, there is little doubt that the plane will get here eventually; it's just a matter of when. While the delay was unexpected, it shouldn't be too dispiriting.

"This will be the last fly in for an A-3," Estes said. "This is a historic event, especially for those who flew it."

It appears to be exciting for the community as well. Over the past nine months, the foundation has collected \$87,000 in donations. While Island Thrift and Boeing have each contributed \$10,000, the vast majority has come from individuals, Estes said.

The foundation needs about \$150,000 total. It will cost about \$70,000 to fly the jet up from California, and another \$80,000 to build the display. The goal is to have all the money and memorial built and in place by the end of the summer, Estes said.

For more information or to donate, visit the memorial foundation's website at www.a3skywarriorforwhidbey.org.

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