

PROFILE

Making history: NASM's Don Lopez is an icon of aviation

BY KATHLEEN HANSER
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The Air and Space Museum seeks to tell the story of flight through its collection of historically significant aviation artifacts. But history truly comes to life in the stories of those who helped to shape it.

One such icon of aviation history is NASM Deputy Director Don Lopez, 84, whose legendary status was recently acknowledged at the 2007 Gathering of Mustangs and Legends at Rickenbacker International Airport in Columbus, Ohio.

During World War II, Lopez was a fighter pilot in the 75th Fighter Squadron, the Tiger Sharks, of the U.S. Army's 23rd Fighter Group in China. He flew Curtiss P-40s and North American P-51 Mustangs under famous war heroes Col. Tex Hill and Gen. Claire Chennault.

Lopez was only 19 when he shipped off to China in 1943, but he looked much younger. In his memoir of his experiences, *Into the Teeth of the Tiger* (Bantam, 1986), he refers to his youthful appearance by writing, "I needed to shave only every other month or so."

Squadron leader Tex Hill thought he had lied about his age. "He looked like he was about 16 years old when he arrived," Hill recalls in the book. "But he became one of the great fighter pilots of World War II."

During his two years in China, Lopez flew 101 missions and qualified as an "ace."

Gen. Jack Dailey, NASM's director, observes, "Don flew in the most demanding arena and excelled. Being called an ace is validation that a pilot has the courage and the skills to be the best. It is the most prestigious recognition for a pilot."

Lopez wanted to be a fighter pilot since he was a young boy growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y. At age 3, he went with his family to see Charles Lindbergh in a parade through the streets of Brooklyn.

When Lopez was a teenager and his family was living in Tampa, Fla., he spent many hours watching P-39s fly in and out of Drew Air Force Base. In college at the University of Tampa,



Don Lopez recreates a photo taken of him when he was a young fighter pilot during World War II, left, by posing with a historic Curtiss P-40 at the Udvar-Hazy Center, right. (Photo on right by Carolyn Russo)

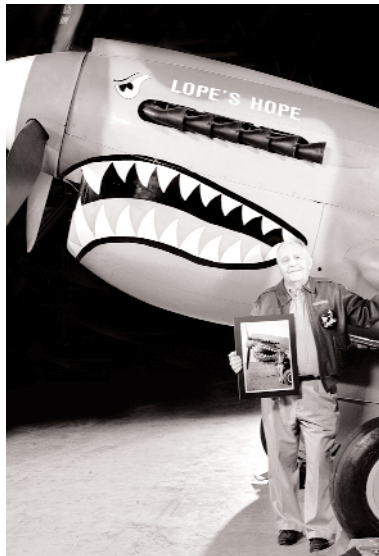
Lopez signed up for the civilian pilot training program, which was training pilots in case of war. Once war was declared in 1942, Lopez immediately joined up.

"Back then, everyone was pretty eager to fight," Lopez says. "I think everybody wanted to be a fighter pilot, and when you were selected, you were just overjoyed."

Lopez left China in March 1945 and spent the next six years testing fighters at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Lopez says it was an exciting era to be a test pilot. "I got to fly everything there was. I flew not only the fighters, but also the bombers and transports. It was the beginning of the jet age—fighter pilot heaven."

While in Florida, Lopez met his wife, Glindell. "The only thing I would change in my life is that I would meet my wife sooner," Lopez says. They now have two grown children—a son, Don, who is one of the world's leading experts on Tibetan Buddhism, and a daughter, Joy, who is an executive assistant to the head of a clinical economics and genetic research center. Lopez and his wife also have one granddaughter.

After his test pilot days, Lopez completed a short combat tour flying North American F-86s in Korea. Following a tour of duty at the Pentagon, he earned a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering at the Air Force



Institute of Technology and a master's degree in aeronautics from the California Institute of Technology. Apollo X astronaut Frank Borman was one of Lopez's classmates.

"He never lost his calm sense of humor—even at Cal Tech," Borman says. "The academic load was difficult

for everyone—most of us were climbing the walls, but he was always completely calm. He is technically very brilliant."

Lopez spent the next five years helping establish the aeronautics program at the new U.S. Air Force Academy as an associate professor of aeronautics and chief of academic counseling. After his retirement from the Air Force in 1964, Lopez worked as a systems engineer on the Apollo-Saturn Launch Vehicle and the Skylab Orbital Workshop.

Lopez came to the Smithsonian as assistant director of the Aeronautics Division in 1972. He was part of the team led by Apollo astronaut and then-museum director Michael Collins responsible for planning the new Air and Space Museum. Lopez was instrumental in developing the exhibits that welcomed visitors at the museum's opening on July 1, 1976. Since that day, NASM has been the most visited museum in the world.

"Don is the creator of this museum from the aeronautics standpoint," Dailey says. "Because of his vast knowledge, he was able to select the

right artifacts to tell the story of aviation."

Lopez became deputy director in 1983, a position he held until 1990. He served as senior advisor to the director before retiring in 1993. From 1993 to 1996, Lopez served as senior advisor emeritus. He was again appointed deputy director in 1996.

When pressed, Lopez says that one of his greatest achievements at NASM is the Pioneers of Flight Gallery. "Originally, it was supposed to be a temporary exhibit, but I filled it with such great airplanes it hasn't been changed all this time," he says.

"I've been fortunate," Lopez continues. "I've gotten to do lots of good things in my life. I saw the beginning of the jet age, helped establish the aeronautics program at the Air Force Academy, worked for eight years on the space program and helped found this museum."

People who know Lopez say they are the fortunate ones. As Dailey points out, "I have never heard anything about him that wasn't complimentary. He is universally loved by everyone." ■

ON THE JOB *Extending a warm welcome*

When Anyi Cruz accepted a job checking coats at Cooper-Hewitt in New York in 2002, she assumed the job would be temporary—and she was right. It wasn't long before Cruz's talent for customer service was recognized and she was offered a full-time position on the Admissions staff. Last July, Cruz was promoted to visitor services manager, and she now leads the Admissions team in their effort to ensure that all museum visitors have a memorable and pleasant experience.

Before coming to C-H, Cruz spent several years working in sales at high-end retail establishments, such as Saks Fifth Avenue. This background prepared her well for the one-on-one interactions with the public that are part of her daily routine. She also is fluent in Spanish, a skill that has come in handy on many occasions when Spanish-speaking tour groups have visited Cooper-Hewitt.

Recently, Cruz took some time out of her busy day to talk with writer Katie Vagnino about what makes her job both challenging and rewarding.

Q. Describe a typical day.

A. I supervise the welcoming of visitors to the museum and I make sure that all public spaces look polished and professional. My other duties include overseeing ticket sales, operation reports and cash deposits.

I am fortunate to work in an extremely positive environment with a focused day-to-day agenda. I'm grateful for how cooperative the Admissions staff are—they are a great group to lead.

Q. What do you hope visitors get out of a visit to Cooper-Hewitt?

A. My aim is for visitors to get energized about design, and to create new fans in the design community. This mission is achievable; we are a wonderful design museum and we're fortunate to be housed in the beautiful former home of Andrew Carnegie.

In an effort to engage visitors, we often provide explanatory booklets and other materials to accompany exhibitions. We also distribute post-

cards advertising upcoming programs and shows. We try to present these materials attractively so that visitors will take them and refer to them—another way of incorporating good design into our presentation.

Q. What is the most difficult part of your job?

A. Sometimes, visitors have complaints or are unhappy about some-

ing with visitor complaints?

A. I listen carefully and try to address what it is that they are upset about. If they are angry or confused about museum rules or policies, I explain the reasoning behind these rules and policies. Usually, I ask them to fill out a complaint form and I often offer a guest pass as a way to show we are responsive to their concerns.



Anyi Cruz makes sure each visitor to C-H wants to return. (Jill Bloomer photo)

thing. They may not like an exhibition or they object to the cost of admission, since SI museums in Washington, D.C., are free. General admission to the Cooper-Hewitt is \$15; there are discounts for seniors and students and children under age 12 are admitted free.

One woman left an angry message on my voice mail, complaining about the garden being closed during the winter and demanding that there be benches on the grass, as opposed to around the perimeter of the garden.

The challenge is addressing these matters calmly and courteously.

Q. What is your strategy for deal-

Q. What are your goals as visitor services manager?

A. Above all, I want visitors to have a positive experience. Customer service is paramount—the Admissions staff conducts all personal interactions with a healthy dose of approachability, patience, good manners and smiles. If we do our job well, people will want to keep coming back to see our exhibitions and maybe even become members of C-H. It's also important for us to emphasize that we are the National Design Museum. I want visitors to be inspired by that as much as by the quality of our exhibitions and programs. ■

Comfort food for cold winter days?



Elizabeth Bridgeforth
Marketing Assistant
Freer/Sackler

Homemade vegetable soup. I use my mother's recipe. It's nice and hearty on a chilly day.



Merrell Smith
Museum Protection Officer
Natural History

A grilled cheese sandwich and a nice hot cup of cocoa are perfect on a cold day.