

AC-119K model takes to the skies



Mike Plummer adds fuel to a model AC-119K Stinger

that he restored for owner John Hupe.

NICK TOMECEK / North Ft Walton Daily News **By TRACY CONNER / Contributing Writer** *Published: Friday, October 5, 2012 at 11:13 AM.*

NICEVILLE – It’s midmorning on a Saturday on the Mullet Festival grounds, and there’s a lot of activity going on. Soccer is being played on a couple of the fields, and baseball on another. A group of grandfatherly types has gathered there too, anticipating the second-ever test flight of a model airplane with a lot of history behind it.

“A lot of us are very emotionally involved in this,” says Ron Van Putte, who has been in the Eglin Aero Modellers club, building and flying remote-control model aircraft, for 40 years. “It’s not even my airplane and I’m really shaking. We just want this to work so badly.”

The airplane is a radio-controlled model of an AC-119K Stinger gunship. It belongs to 69-year-old John Hupe of Wamego, Kan., who designed and built it from scratch in 1972, while he was flying the real thing out of Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand as part of the 18th Special Operations Squadron.

Hupe spent a year building his model airplane, flew it once, and crashed it.

“One engine quit and it fell into a mud hole,” he recalls all these years later. “Honestly, though, it didn’t bother me a bit. I was done with my year in Vietnam, and I was going home. I was smiling all the way.”

Hupe’s model came home to Kansas too, and there it sat, boxed up. It became part of the lore of the AC-119

Association, whose members started having annual reunions a dozen years ago. An idea was floated: How about this time, we get the thing fixed, and fly it at the 2012 reunion, to be held Sept. 26-30 in Fort Walton Beach?

Hupe himself was thrilled at the thought. “I’ve had it at my house 40 years,” he points out. “It has a 6-foot wing span. I was debating what to do with it, donate it to someone? Put it in a museum? I have three sons but they don’t have room in their homes for something that size.”

So in July, Hupe carted his prized possession to Fort Walton Beach – a 1,100-mile-drive from Kansas – and handed it off to the Eglin Aero Modellers Club, whose members had agreed to restore the airplane and make it fly again. Last weekend, Hupe was in town again, to see them make good on their pledge.

And it wasn’t just any flight. Back in its heyday, the AC-119 flew over the Ho Chi Minh Trail “to try and stop the movement of ammunition, troops, guns and everything else the NVA was moving from North Vietnam to South Vietnam,” explains reunion attendee James Dunn, a 75-year-old retired lieutenant colonel from Michigan.

So the model airplane’s demonstration flight would be a simulation over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, circa 1972. There was a mission checklist (in large print), a target vehicle and even special effects (a bit of fireworks to look like gunfire from the aircraft).

It went off without a hitch.

“It was very much a success,” reports Hupe, who was even able to be at his plane’s controls for a short while. “I can’t tell you how good I felt, how moved I really was, to see it up and flying.”

Afterward, members of the AC-119 Association formally presented Hupe’s model airplane to their modern-day counterparts at the 18th Flight Test Squadron at Hurlburt Field, who plan to put it on permanent display.

“It seems to me to be the best spot in the world for it,” Hupe says. “They know the history of it. It pretty well made my day, doing that. It’s such a fitting place for the model to go.”