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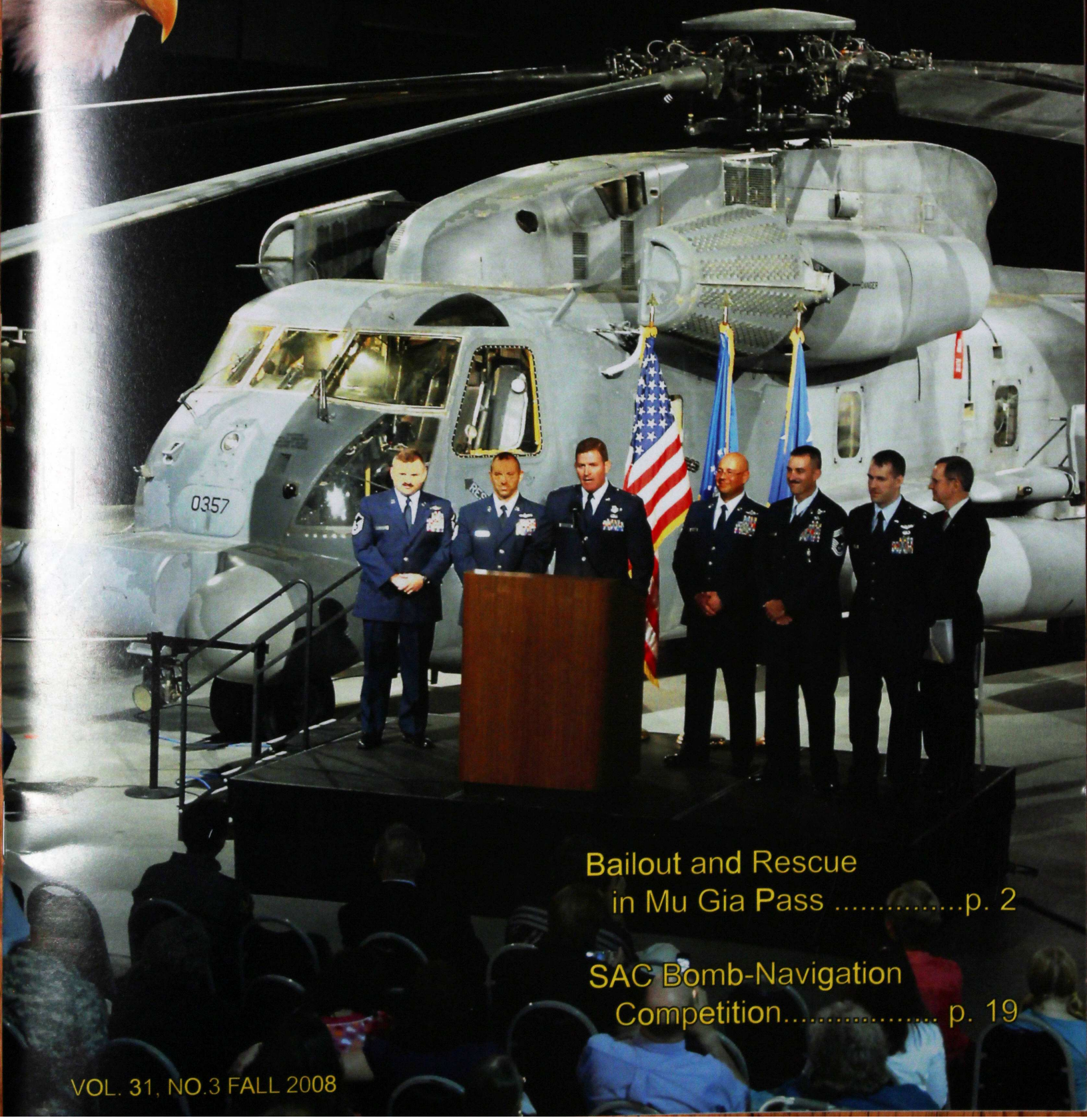
What's New From the Curator

by

Terry Aitken, Senior Curator

Picking out "special" donations is a lot like choosing which of your children you love the best. I must say, however, one donation that does seem to be very special was a series of paintings donated to us by Wilson Hurley. The series is on display in our Kettering Gallery and have been enjoyed by thousands of our visitors. The paintings are a result of his tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968-1969 while he was on active duty as a pilot with the New Mexico Air National Guard. They are reflective of his involvement with the F-100 and with Forward Air Controllers (FACs).

I certainly do not present myself as having great expertise in art but, like all of us, I know what I like, and I really like Wilson Hurley's work. Judging from the comments of Southeast Asia vets and visitors alike, I am not alone. To my eye, Wilson Hurley's work is among the very best of aviation art.

Sadly, Wilson Hurley passed away after a courageous struggle with ALS on the 29th of August, 2008, at the age of 84. He was a great friend and benefactor of the National Museum of the Air Force. An amazing thing about him was that, despite this great talent, he was *not* an aviation artist.

He was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and schooled in New Mexico. He was a graduate of West Point Military Academy in 1945 and, after completing flight training, he spent 30 months on active duty in the Philippines. At the conclusion of his active duty obligation he earned a law degree from George Washington University in 1951. He returned to his home in New Mexico and established a law practice as well as continuing his military service with the New Mexico Air National Guard.

In 1964 Hurley followed his heart, closed his successful law office, and devoted the rest of his life to art.

An obituary in an Albuquerque newspaper described him as "a noted American landscape painter." And that he was.

He received numerous awards for his landscapes and more than 800 of his paintings have gone into private and corporate collections. Most notably, his paintings hang in the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma State Capitol, and the Albuquerque Museum.

As all of the obituaries commented on his skill as a western landscape artist and none commented on his aviation works which are on display here at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, I feel it only proper to do so. He was not only a great landscape artist, he was a great aviation artist also. In conversation, Hurley noted how overwhelmed he was by the sights and emotions of his tour in Vietnam. These personal experiences were later translated into the powerful and masterful works that we all appreciate today. Once that part of his life was documented and complete, he returned to the magnificent landscapes of his western homeland.

This series of paintings at the museum were his paintings. They were not painted on commission for others or for sale. His memories were not for sale. He painted them for no one other than himself. As the years went by, it was his wish that his memories be preserved, intact, as a collection, and he entrusted them to us. Among all that he was: engineer, lawyer, banker, and artist, he was an Air Force pilot. He wished that his memories be among other similar ones. We have honored his trust and I, personally, pause for moments of enjoyment and appreciation each and every time I pass by.

On your next visit to the museum, do make a point of also pausing and appreciating the works of Wilson Hurley which were freely gifted to the American people. I guarantee that you will find it worth your time.

As always, you can reach me via e-mail at terrill.aitken@wpafb.af.mil and many thanks again for your continued support of our National Museum.
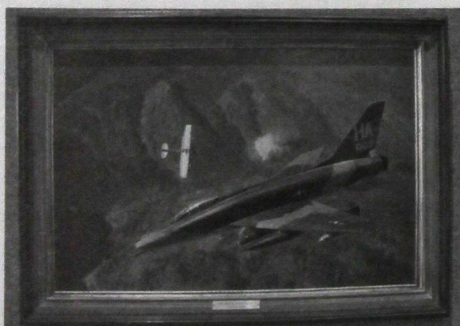
Three of the fourteen Wilson Hurley paintings that are displayed in the Museum's Kettering Hall (Fisher)