

Ike's bird

The smallest Air Force One

BY BARRY SCHIFF

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

DESIGN BY ELIZABETH Z. JONES





The call sign Air Force One is assigned to any U.S. Air Force aircraft in which an incumbent U.S. president is traveling. The first such airplane was *Columbine II*, a Lockheed Constellation used by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and named after the state flower of Colorado, the adopted home of Eisenhower's wife, Mamie. This now iconic call sign was created in 1954 after *Columbine II*—which had been called Air Force 8610 because of its tail number—crossed paths over Richmond, Virginia, with a similarly numbered Eastern Airlines Flight 8610 at a time when the president was aboard the *Connie*. The subsequent use of “Air Force One” was and remains intended to prevent future call sign confusion and hazard.

Eisenhower had purchased a 189-acre working farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, when he left the Army, a retreat for himself and Mamie. The farm is on the southwest edge of the battlefield where Pickett's Charge took place against the Union Army on the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg (July 3, 1863) during the Civil War.

After winning the 1952 presidential election, Eisenhower asked his pilot, Col. William Draper—Ike's pilot since World War II—to find a way for him to regularly travel between the White House and his 150-mile-distant farm while in office. A motorcade was ruled out because it would be too expensive and logistically difficult. The Secret Service would not yet allow a sitting president to fly in a helicopter because it was not yet considered safe. Draper recommended using a light twin capable of operating from the farm's 2,500-foot-long grass strip even though the Secret Service had previously insisted that a presidential airplane should have four engines. Four general aviation airplanes were considered: an Aero Commander 560A, a Beechcraft Twin Bonanza, a Cessna 310, and a Piper Apache.

The Aero Commander won the competition and became known as an L-26B, the airplane's military designation. It was the smallest airplane ever to carry a sitting president and obviously the smallest airplane to be called “Air Force One.” Factory drawings of the airplane were labeled Ike's Bird, a nickname for the airplane that stuck. Fifteen of these airplanes were eventually procured by the Air Force. The first seven were assigned to the White House, and the remaining eight were intended for VIPs and other uses. All the Aero Commanders rolled off the Bethany, Oklahoma, assembly line without any modifications whatsoever except for the Air Force color scheme. The Polar White and Baltic Blue colors were borrowed from the 1954 Oldsmobile. The airplanes were then based at Bolling Air Force Base in southwest Washington, D.C.

Originally based at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., Ike's Bird now resides at the headquarters of the Commemorative Air Force (above left) at Dallas Executive Airport (RBD). The logo for Ike's Bird (above) was designed by the CAF.



If the basic design of the Aero Commander looks familiar, it should. It was designed by Ted Smith, who designed two famous warbirds during World War II, the Douglas A-20 Havoc and the Douglas A-26 Invader. Both were ground attack aircraft and light/medium bombers. The twin-engine, high-wing Aero Commander with the underwing engines is essentially a miniature version of these warplanes. The prototype of the Aero Commander attracted much attention when in 1951 it took off from Oklahoma City and flew nonstop to Washington, D.C., with the left engine shut down. The two-blade propeller of the inoperative engine was stowed in the cabin.



Above, left to right: Instructor pilot Allen Benzing, author Barry Schiff, and aircraft director Gerald Oliver. Following page, left to right: Gerald Oliver, camera ship pilot Paul Downing, instructor pilot William Goeken, and crew chief Matt Pedron.

Eisenhower was the only president to have been a certificated pilot. (Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush were military pilots but neither became civilian pilots.) While serving under Gen. Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines in 1939, Eisenhower not only helped to create the first Philippine air force, but he also fulfilled a lifelong dream in a Stearman; he earned a private pilot certificate. According to one of his instructors, celebrated Filipino pilot Jesus Villamor, Eisenhower was “a poor pilot but a good student.” (In 1957 Villamor said in a letter to Eisenhower “how that ‘poor pilot’ had made a great president.”) Eisenhower often took the controls of his L-26B and maneuvered the aircraft during many of his flights to and from the farm, but he apparently and thankfully was not allowed to make takeoffs or landings. (Eisenhower also was the only sitting president to be an AOPA member.)

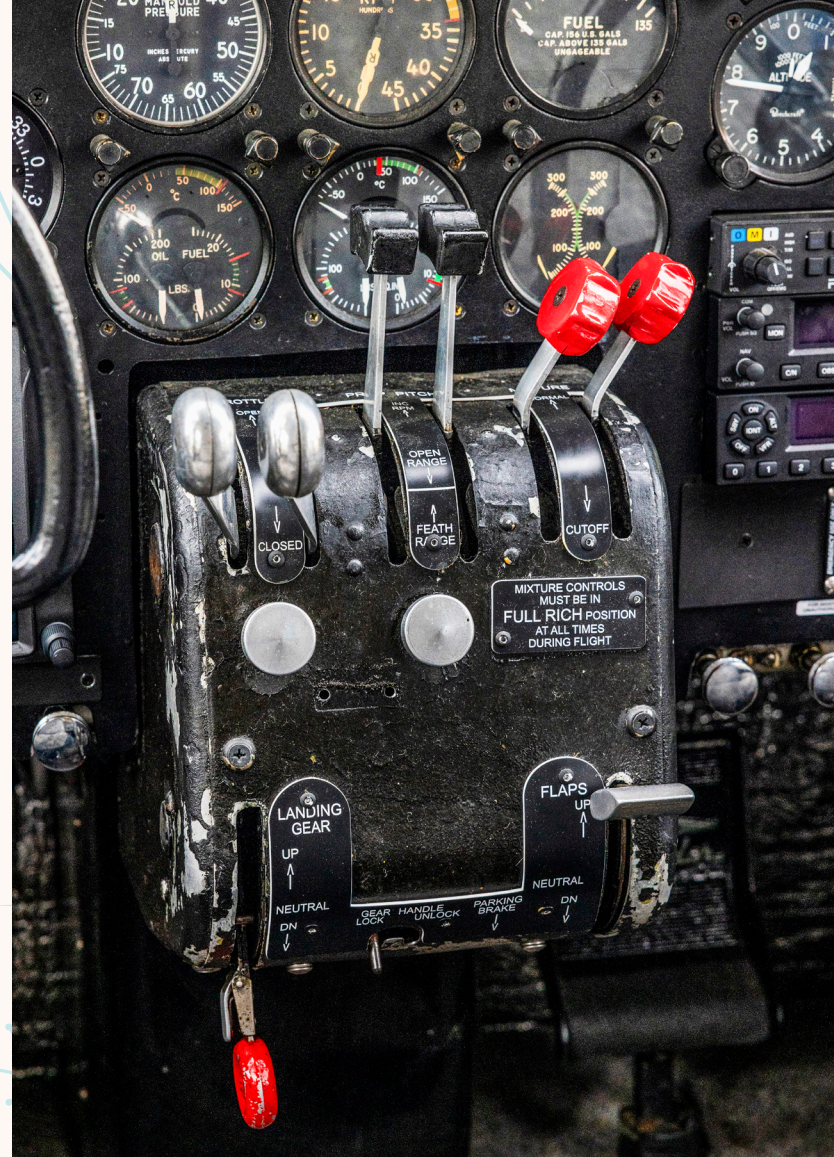
Whenever Eisenhower flew to the farm, his airplane was part of a gaggle of four or five L-26Bs. Visitors who flew to the farm during Eisenhower’s administration included Nikita Khrushchev, Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, Bob Hope, Billy Graham, Ronald Reagan, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, Richard Nixon, and John F. Kennedy. Following his presidential service—1953 to 1961—Eisenhower used the farm in retirement.

Following a heart attack during his first term in 1955 and after being released from the hospital, Eisenhower spent 38 days convalescing at his farm. This resulted in the “Gettysburg Airlift,” multiple daily round trips of the L-26 fleet carrying administration officials, cabinet members, world leaders, and family members between Washington, D.C., and the grass strip that became known as “Gettysburg International.”

At the beginning of his second term in 1957 Eisenhower became the first president to fly in a helicopter, a single-engine, piston-powered Bell UH-13J Sioux, which was developed from the Bell 47 made famous some years later to viewers of the popular television series *M*A*S*H*. The thirty-fourth president also saw “Air Force One” brought into the jet age. In August 1959 he became the first president to fly aboard a VC-137A, a Boeing 707-120 Stratoliner



Power quadrant for Ike's Bird controls a pair of Lycoming GO-480-G1B6, 295-horsepower engines. The instrument panel (far right) was modified to contain a suite of Garmin avionics donated by Gulf Coast Avionics.



nicknamed "Queenie" that had been part of the administration's air fleet.

The presidential airplane featured here bears factory serial number 55-4638. It left its Oklahoma birthplace in August 1955 and was assigned to the White House. Five years later, however, helicopters took over the role of providing short-distance travel. This was near the end of Eisenhower's second term. The Aero Commanders were dispersed to other Air Force units as well as the U.S. Air Force Academy, where it was used for parachute jumping. Aircraft 55-4638 was declared surplus and became known by its civilian registration, N30U. It was then used for charter and freight hauling in the Midwest but eventually fell into disrepair. It was put up for auction in 1997 and purchased by Scott Main, an American Airlines captain of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He had recognized the historic significance of the airplane and spent almost 20 years restoring N30U to its original White House configuration.

The airplane was once again emblazoned with Air Force markings. While on the ramp at Sun 'n Fun in 2019, it attracted the attention of Gerald

Oliver, a volunteer with the Commemorative Air Force. He recognized that this would be a wonderful airplane in which to honor deserving veterans by offering them rides in a former presidential airplane. Because of its ease of entry, the Aero Commander would be particularly beneficial to those vets with mobility difficulties. Oliver spearheaded an effort that resulted in 22 contributors purchasing the airplane and then donating it to the CAF.

N30U is based at CAF headquarters at Dallas Executive Airport and is the only remaining airworthy member of the original 15 Aero Commanders purchased by the Air Force. N30U can be seen at airshows throughout the United States fulfilling its new role of providing veterans with "victory flights," a way of saying "thank you for your service." Ike's Bird also flies veterans at no charge to medical facilities or to reconnect them with family members.

I, too, felt honored when CAF instructor Al Benzing offered me the left seat of Ike's Bird. The airplane immediately felt comfortable and familiar even though I had not flown



The Aero Commander 560A was chosen to serve as Air Force One partly because of its spacious cabin (left). President Eisenhower sat in the right rear seat, designated as the DVC—the distinguished visitor's chair—when Ike was not on board.

an Aero Commander for many years. The airplane has outstanding control responsiveness and maneuverability, feeling much like a Beech T-34 Mentor. There is an exciting sensation of speed during takeoff because you are sitting so close to the ground. Being so low also can lure new Aero Commander pilots to begin the landing flare prematurely. Ground handling is a little tricky until you get used to the toe-operated hydraulic steering. Ted Smith seemed to have a “thing” about ground steering. His Aerostar design had a similarly quirky system. I once asked Smith why he didn’t employ conventional nosewheel steering in his lightplanes. He just smiled and shrugged, “It’s a trademark, I guess.” And finally, the airplane has geared, 295-horsepower Lycoming engines, which requires them to be operated with a bit of additional care.

During the return flight to Dallas Executive, I found myself glancing at the right rear seat where Eisenhower normally sat. It was empty, of course, but I began to imagine what it must have been like to see the president of the United States sitting there, possibly reading a newspaper. Eisenhower was more than a president, of course. He had also been the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, the man responsible for launching Operation Overlord, the Normandy Invasion, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Eisenhower had unleashed 2.8 million men, 7,000 ships, and 11,590 aircraft to liberate Europe and signal the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany.

Once the invasion had begun, Eisenhower wrote, “If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.” Leadership came naturally to him. In 1946 he was honored with a fifth star and became General of the Army.

After listening to the ATIS, I was tempted to pick up the mic and say, “Dallas Exec, this is Air Force One, eight south with Information Charlie.” That would have been a hoot. I instead played it straight and acknowledged our clearance to enter the traffic pattern. But the cockpit seemed filled with ghosts. As I turned onto final approach, I could almost hear the president cautioning me, “Don’t screw up the landing, kid. The world is watching.” ■ BarrySchiff.com

► IkesBird.org

► CommemorativeAirForce.org

