

Painter records history through brush strokes

Artist has worked for museums, books and private collectors

by Mariecar Mendoza

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As a child, he had jets flying through his dreams.

By day, he trekked to a nearby airport and used an old fighter plane, cobwebbed and rusty, as a jungle gym. Stan Stokes always dreamed of being a naval aviator landing on a rolling carrier deck riding the high seas.

But at 13, he was hospitalized for tuberculosis. He was never able to don a uniform.

"I would have loved to have flown in the Navy," Stokes said, now 56 and a La Quinta resident. "But I had a pretty good idea that the military would have nothing to do with me."

Now, years later, Stokes is navigating his life the way he always dreamed of - through a paint brush.

Recently commissioned by the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, Stokes is working on a 4-by-6 foot painting that depicts the USS Gerald R. Ford, a new carrier class set to hit the seas by 2015.

"I have it so that you can very plainly see USS Gerald R. Ford on the fantail," Stokes said of his plans. "The brightest thing on the ship is going to be the panel that will read 'Gerald R. Ford.'"

The painting also will feature a landing F-18 Super Hornet and a F-35 Lightning II's on the flight deck.

"I never dreamt I would be involved with all these historic pieces that as a kid were just models I built," Stokes said.

The second painting for the presidential library, which he hopes to begin by May, will be of the USS Monterey. President Ford served aboard the carrier from June 1943 to December 1944 as director of physical training, a gunnery officer and an assistant navigator, according to the presidential library Web site.

This will be the third presidential library to display Stokes' work.

"His paintings are very active," said Elaine Didier, director of the Ford presidential library and museum. "We like the sense of motion and vitality that he's able to convey in his paintings."

Painting famous subjects

In 2003, Stokes was commissioned to paint a 120-foot long mural titled "The History of the Flying White House" for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library's Air Force One Pavilion. He also painted the USS Ronald Reagan for the library's Legacy Room.

Soon after, Stokes did two paintings of the USS George H.W. Bush for the former president's library in College Station, Texas.

"What I'm doing is recording history visually," Stokes said. "You can read about things and look at old black-and-white pictures, but I'm putting it in vivid color."

As a painter, Stokes said he's gotten closer to the heart of the Navy than he has ever imagined, meeting surviving members of the Tuskegee Airmen to dive bombers from the Battle of Midway.

"As a kid really loving aviation, I've always tried being around it, have always enjoyed reading about it," Stokes said, "and much to my amazement and delight, through my work, I've gotten to know many of them."

His first aviation painting in 1977 jet-setted his aviation painting career. Since then Stokes has painted thousands, for museums, books and private collectors.

"He's just unbelievably talented," Joe Logeman of Palm Desert said.

Logeman, who served in the Navy in a crash crew for the USS Coral Sea during the 1950s, has been Stokes' assistant since 2001.

"Anywhere between here and New York," Logeman said, "people in aviation know Stan Stokes."