

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader Ever wonder what it's like to fly an aircraft? On June 4 through 6, visitors to Liberal will get a chance to find out.

On those dates, the Mid-America Air Museum will be hosting its first ever Crawl Thru and Helicopter Rides.

The crawl thru, which will be available from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. June 5, will feature 10 historical aircraft which will be open for airplane enthusiasts to crawl in and experience the excitement of being in the pilot's seat.

Planes included in the crawl thru are the B-25 Mitchell bomber, also know as the "Iron Laiden Maiden," the Beechcraft Starship and the Grumman TBM Avenger.

The Grumman is a torpedo bomber similar to the plane Lieutenant, and former President, George H.W. Bush was flying when he was shot down off the coast of Chichi Jima during World War II in 1943.

MAAM's Cindy Chance said the crawl thru will give the public more of an idea of what it is like to actually fly one of these planes. The admission for the event is \$2 per person, and the crawl thru will be available from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. June 5.

"That also includes the tour through the whole museum," Chance said. "The planes are going to be scattered through the whole museum. We're going to have the B-25 opened up – top and bottom. They'll be able to crawl in that. We've got an SE-5, a World War I bomber, where we're going to have photographs taken. The P-51 is another one that we're going to have. It'll be lots and lots of fun."

Chance added there will also be many concession stands available for those wanting a refreshment and snack.

"Schwan's is going to have their ice cream truck out here," she said. "We're going to have Eagle Net with their new plane. That's going to be out back. The fire department's going to have their new fire truck out here displaying it. We're supposed to have the EMS out here with one of their trucks."

This is MAAM's first event of this kind, and Chance said the museum hopes to continue the event on an annual basis.

In addition to the crawl thru, helicopter rides will be available all three days.

"Their fee to take the ride includes a tour through the museum and the crawl thru on Saturday," Chance said.

Visitors to the museum can take a ride in a R-44 helicopter, starting at \$30 per person for day

flights. Custom flights are also available by appointment only, which includes night flights and extended flights, starting at \$40.

Chance said working on the event has been fun thus far.

“I think we’re going to have a blast,” she said. “I’m getting really excited about it. It’s getting close.”

MAAM director Jim Bert said the choice of aircraft for the crawl thru was based on a number of factors.

“It was based on the general interest and diversity of the aircraft in our collection so that there will be some civilian, some military aircraft open,” he said. “It was based on accessibility. We had to look at these aircraft and decide which of them could be used for closer public inspection. Those were some of the criteria that I used. They had to have good generally recognized histories. They had to be accessible.”

From June 3 to 5, the Liberal Harley Owners Group will be hosting the Kansas State HOG rally, and Bert said having MAAM’s event the same weekend is a happy coincidence.

“We at the museum feel strongly about serving the community,” he said. “It was time that we got out and reconnected with the community by having a general event like this. The fact that we have a large group in town due to the efforts of Sally Fuller and Greg and Alicia Bird and others is a happy coincidence.”

Bert said MAAM officials are excited about the chance to serve the community, both as an attraction to people who are coming into town as well as “reinviting the community back into their museum.”

“We’re keeping our fingers crossed as far as the weather,” he said. “We’re hoping for a large turnout and a lot of interest.”

For more information or to schedule a custom helicopter flight appointment, call MAAM at 624-5263, or go by 2000 W. Second Street in Liberal.