

NEWS

Santa's sleigh meets jet in couple's Christmas display in St. Michaels



Barbara Haddock Taylor, Baltimore Sun

Tom and Alice Blair's Christmas display in St. Michaels features Santa's sleigh caught on the nose of an F-104 jet.



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Santa didn't get run over by his reindeer, but he appears to have had a dust-up with an F-104 jet, in an elaborate Christmas display on Tom and Alice Blair's farm in St. Michaels.

The tableau depicts the aftermath of a midair collision involving Santa's sleigh full of toys and a Cold War era "Starfighter" from the fictitious St. Michaels Air National Guard, piloted by "Captain Scrooge."

An elf retrieves a tricycle from the jet's tail wing as Santa notices that Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer, is stuck in the fuselage and the pilot sits off to the side fixing a broken Radio Flyer wagon. Santa's sleigh has been pierced by the jet's nose, reindeer wander nearby, and presents are strewn all over the ground. A sign on a nearby fence reads "Oops!"

The scene is the latest in a series of unconventional displays that the Blairs put on their property throughout the year, to mark various holidays such as Halloween and Memorial Day.

Tom Blair, an author and retired businessman who collects and flies World War II planes that he keeps at the nearby Easton Airport, said he mounts the displays for his friends, neighbors and 16 grandchildren to enjoy.

"It's inspired by the fact that Christmas is coming and my friends and neighbors were expecting me to put out something noteworthy, and I can't put out the same thing" year after year, he said.

For this season's display, he wanted to incorporate one of his vintage warbirds.

"I was thinking, 'What could I do with this?' and I had the idea of it impaling Santa's sleigh and Santa pulling Rudolph from the air intake," he explained.

While it may sound a bit dark, no people or animals were harmed in the making of this display.

“It’s a happy thing,” Blair said. “I meant for it to be humorous and non-offensive. I’ve probably got 99 extremely positive comments and one slightly critical comment.”

It’s also a traffic-stopper, with drivers pausing day and night along the 26000 block of St. Michaels Road to gawk and take photos with their cellphones. Images have begun to show up online.

“It’s gone viral,” Blair said. “It’s gone around the Internet.”

It stands out because of the jet, the attention to detail and the sense of humor, said Laurence “Laurie” Driggs III, a retired TWA captain who lives four miles away and is one of many Eastern Shore residents who have stopped to photograph it.

“They have certainly outdone themselves,” Driggs said.

Driggs said he “did a double-take” when he first saw the display from the road, with the jet appearing as if it had made an emergency landing that would have impressed American Airlines pilot Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger.

“When you look at it, you think, ‘Wow!’” Driggs said. “The airplane is the centerpiece, and the details are wonderful. They’re all quite funny.”

Now 67, Blair gained attention last year as the author of “Poorer Richard’s America: What Would Ben Say?” a book describing what Benjamin Franklin would think if he were alive in America today. Former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw wrote the preface, and it appeared on the New York Times bestseller list.

Blair said making the display on St. Michaels Road took him and his wife about a month and they finished it in early December. He transported the jet, sans engine, from the airport in Easton on a flatbed truck and positioned it to look as if it had landed there.

He made the sleigh out of plywood and the reindeer legs out of baseball bats covered with old carpeting. The pilot is a mannequin, dressed in his own flight suit. His wife made the elf's costume. They plan to leave it up at least until the end of the year.

Blair estimates that the entire display cost “in the hundreds of dollars” because he already owned the jet and most of the other materials.

“More brain cells than sweat cells went into this project — how to build Santa's sled, how to come up with all the parts of it,” he said. “I literally had everything.”

He admits that mounting elaborate holiday displays every year means that people tend to expect them, but he likes the reaction. Just this week, he said, someone from the National Air and Space Museum called seeking permission to use photographs of the display in a newsletter.

“There's a certain level of expectation,” he said. But “it's fun. People enjoy it. ... I enjoy other people enjoying these displays.”

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