By Barrett Tillman

Last year was the centennial of John M. Browning’s timeless, matchless M1911 pistol, which has only gained in stature over the last 10 decades. (My dad’s light-equipped bump-in-the-night gun is a slightly modified Colt made in 1913.) But other tools in the military cabinet have passed the half-century mark, and some not only remain in service, but also – like the 1911 – remain in production.

If you stop by Dillon Aero you’ll notice a variety of intriguing machinery, especially their UH-1H helicopter. It’s more than a classic warbird – it remains a working aircraft as a test bed for the M134D Minigun and other DA projects.

The Bell Model 204 first flew in 1954 with initial U.S. Army deliveries in 1961. The Army’s last Hueys retired only last year – a full 50-year career. Meanwhile, other UH-1s remain flying with as many as 40 other nations. Thus, the Huey belongs to an elite club of military aircraft dating from the Eisenhower administration (1953-1961). Here’s a quick look at others from the era of hula-hoops and Mickey Mouse ears:

**Boeing B-52 Stratofortress** (First flight 1952, operational 1955) *THE* Cold War icon, the eight-jet intercontinental bomber remains in front-line squadrons fifty-seven years after original introduction. According to its Air Force Fact Sheet, the BUFF (Big Ugly Flying... Fellow) may still be flying in 2045. No, that’s not a typo for 2025. And yes, that would mean a service career of NINETY years; 80+ years for individual aircraft. In stunning comparison, the Forrestal class aircraft carriers – also from the Ike era – were active for “only” 43 years.

**Lockheed U-2** (First flight 1955, operational 1957) The world’s most famous reconnaissance aircraft made global headlines when Francis Gary Powers’ CIA bird was downed over Russia in 1960. Nearly half of the 86 airframes were lost in accidents or shot down over Russia and Communist China. However, the high-flying spyplane remains a valuable asset, and the Air Force plans to keep it until 2015, a service life of 58 years.

**Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker** (First flight 1956, operational 1957) If you have a fleet of jet bombers, you need a fleet of jet tankers. That’s why Boeing adapted its 707 airliner for in-flight refueling and made one of the most remarkable conversions in aviation history. From first flight to operations took less than a year. Boeing built 800 Stratotankers to support 744 B-52s, and both will remain in service for years to come.

**Northrop T-38 Talon** (First flight 1959, operational 1961) Nearly 1,200 were built through 1972 as the world’s first supersonic trainer, and it’s still the lead-in trainer for USAF fighter pilots. Talons were used by four other nations: Nationalist China, Germany, Portugal and Turkey. The derivative fighter, the F-5 Tiger, may still be used by 20 or more of 30-some air forces that have purchased it.

**Boeing Vertol CH-47 Chinook** (First flight 1961, operational 1962) Almost 1,200 Chinos have been flown by 16 nations, and just one helo kept the Brits in business in the Falklands in 1982. Today the big chopper remains in low-rate production, meeting the need for heavy lift, especially in Afghanistan where the floor can be 8,000 feet and uphill in all directions. Apparently a successor is not even on the drafting