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Vintage fighter jets find a home at KSC

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A collection of vintage fighter jets will be flying from the Shuttle Landing Facility runway in January, bringing some 20 jobs to Kennedy Space Center and maybe a spark for the fledgling space tourism industry.

With a fleet of four F-104 fighter jets, Starfighters Inc. of Tarpon Springs plans to conduct training for would-be space tourists and testing for NASA.

"It's not a ride," Rick Svetkoff, Starfighters president and chief pilot, said. "(Participants) are going through a training evolution that will closely approximate the training for a suborbital flight. You will get a flight in an F-104."

It could be quite a trip: An F-104 can fly above 70,000 feet at twice the speed of sound.

"It's a beast," Svetkoff said.

Price tag: \$30,500 for four days of training.

The company has final approval from the Federal Aviation Administration and NASA and is waiting for customers to sign up.

"We've got several people on the line," Svetkoff said.

NASA will continue using the Starfighters to test high-performance equipment used on the space shuttle.

"We're tied in with NASA's Airborne Science Program," said Svetkoff, a former Navy pilot. "We've carried some telemetry items. We've carried a new digital camera. We've done a number of flights testing some GPS tracking equipment."

The Starfighters have also flown several classified missions.

The company makes its home in the 9-year-old Reusable Launch Vehicle Hangar next to the shuttle landing runway at Kennedy Space Center.

In an effort to bring commercial jobs to KSC, the state agency Space Florida invested \$1.8 million in a fire suppression system for the hangar so the fueled jets could be stored in the 50,000-square-foot facility.

"There's a strong emphasis to commercialize the facility," Svetkoff said.

Space Florida hopes to use this business as a model to lure other commercial and tourist-oriented aerospace companies to KSC after the shuttle stops flying in the next year or two.

Because the jets can simulate suborbital vehicle trajectories, they could provide training and technology development for the reusable launch vehicle industry. The company hopes to buy additional F-104s.

Starfighters has received financial support from Space Florida but will pay rent at the market rate for 15,000-square-feet of the hangar. The company will reimburse NASA the costs associated with using the runway.

"This activity also will help diversify our uses at the SLF in a manner compatible with NASA's operations, and help us sustain the (shuttle runway) as a unique asset supporting horizontal space launch and recovery after the shuttle retires," KSC Director Bob Cabana, a former shuttle commander, said in a statement.

Starfighters has 10 employees scattered across Florida but plans to bring all operations to Brevard County, ultimately employing about 20 skilled workers.

Space Florida hopes its investment in the hangar will attract other commercial operations, perhaps even Sir Richard Branson's SpaceShipTwo.

"It opens the door for some space adventure tourism," Space Florida President Frank DiBello said. "There's room in the hangar for more aircraft operations. This is the kind of company that can grow into something significant."

Before moving to KSC, Starfighters had performed in some 175 air shows, a business that proved unprofitable, Svetkoff said.

"This is a big transition for us," Svetkoff said. "We are basically stepping away from the air show industry and becoming a NASA platform and commercial operator for the development of the suborbital space program."

The jets will, however, continue to appear in the annual Titusville air show, he added.

While it is a remarkable aircraft in many ways, the F-104's short wings make it difficult to fly. It requires a long runway and takeoff and landing speeds near 200 mph. The isolated, 15,000-foot runway at KSC is perfect for the high-performance jets.

"We typically operate out of military fields," Svetkoff said. KSC "has none of the civilian contingencies. It's really made for our airplanes."

Starfighters' three other pilots, Mike Smith, Steve Ritchie and Geoff Hickman, all flew high-performance jets for the military and can handle the F-104.

"Clearly, to an unqualified fighter pilot, it's going to be a handful," Svetkoff said.

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