

Lovingly restored aircraft prepares for landing

CF-104 Starfighter finds new home

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A record-breaking aircraft has found its next home at the new Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada in light of the upcoming closure of the Canadian Starfighter Museum this August.

Peaking at 120,800 feet, with the ability to scale half of that distance in less than two minutes, the CF-104 Starfighter also holds the record for being the fastest plane in the Royal Canadian Air Force. The supersonic aircraft can reach Mach 2.5 speeds or 2,500 km/h.

It's currently on display at the Canadian Starfighter Museum in St. Andrews.

The plane first streaked across museum curator Steve Pajot's skies while living in Baden-Soellingen, Germany, in 1964. Pajot's father was a Royal Canadian Air Force member and was stationed there during this period.

Pajot, who now lives in Southdale, said the airplane sounded like a wounded moose because of the way it howled through the air.

"I had to find out what it was," Pajot said. "I kind of fell in love with the airplane there."

Not long after, he found out what he'd seen that day was a Starfighter and decided one day he would pilot one. Pajot went on to earn his commercial pilot's license and worked with Air Canada as an aircraft mechanic for 18 years.

He opened the Canadian Starfighter Museum to show enthusiasts how Canada participated with NATO during the Cold War.

"It was something many Canadians don't know ... that Canada actually carried



The CF-104 Starfighter is one of the few airplanes to hold three simultaneous world records. The plane pictured above will be on display at the Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada when it opens in 2022.

nuclear weapons — we didn't own them, the Americans owned them, but we carried them," he said.

Pajot is a self-described CF-104 fanatic, so naturally, he solely dedicated the museum to this one aircraft. As a result, visitors can expect to learn the whole history of this singular invention.

Pajot's CF-104 was built in Canada in 1961. It came across his radar in 2009 from a fellow aficionado in the U.S., who notified him of an available Canadian-made CF-104 in Denmark. The plane flew in the Royal Danish Air Force until the early 1980s. Then, after being displayed in a museum for a time, it ended up outside a base in Aalborg, Denmark.

"If we hadn't bought it, it would probably have been sold as scrap at the time," he said.

When Pajot took ownership of the plane, it needed work done before it could be displayed. It sat on the ground for a time, accumulating corrosion damage from the salty, damp air of the North Sea.

Pajot replaced the landing gear and fixed the airframe.

"It took us seven years and about 16,000 man hours to get it to where it sits now," he said.

NASA used a similar model — the NF-104 — to train astronauts. Today, the agency still uses CF-104 Starfighters. Pilots manoeuvre the plane to maximum altitude and launch satellites off the wingtips into outer space.

Designed in 1954, military forces around the world used the CF-104 from 1958 until 2004.

"It's a very iconic aircraft. It was well ahead of its time," Pajot said.

Kelly Johnston, the brains beyond the plane's design, also dreamed up the celebrated Lockheed F-104 Starfighter.

The hangar hosting the museum — and Pajot's Starfighter — has decided to sell the facility. But Pajot knew the museum wouldn't be permanent.

"It's a labour of love for me," Pajot said. He and Terry Slobodian, president and

CEO of the Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada, discussed housing the plane at the new museum sometime in the future — which happened sooner than both of them expected.

Slobodian said the plane blew him away when he saw it for the first time.

"It's my favourite aircraft. It's so beautiful. It looks fast just standing still," he said.

Slobodian added that Pajot and his team did a meticulous job restoring the plane. He expects it to be a "show-stopper," and one of the most exciting planes in the museum's collection.

The Aviation Museum of Canada will display the plane in the Military Skies exhibit when it opens in early 2022.

Visitors can still see the CF-104 at the Canadian Starfighter Museum at 604 Club Road in St. Andrews until Sun., Aug. 15. Tours can be booked in advance by calling 204-795-4109.

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