

Press Release

The BC Aviation Museum Reaches for the Stars

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The BC Aviation Museum has acquired a CF-104 Starfighter, a Cold War fighter-bomber that was a major Canadian contribution to NATO. It features very thin and stubby wings, a distinctive “T” tail and a powerful engine. While its small wing area resulted in a poor turning capability and high landing speeds, it displayed excellent acceleration and became the first production aircraft to achieve Mach 2 (twice the speed of sound), and to reach an altitude of 100,000 feet (30,480 meters) following a takeoff under its own power. Entering service with the United States Air Force in 1958, designer Kelly Johnson’s impressive Starfighter was the first aircraft to simultaneously hold world records for speed, altitude and time-to-climb. This led to it being widely touted as “A missile with a man in it”.

Due to its short range and limited agility the Lockheed Starfighter had a relatively short front-line career with the United States Air Force but saw long service in fifteen different air forces with 2,578 examples produced. Despite its design as a high-altitude interceptor, Canadair Ltd of Montreal, Quebec, produced 200 single-seat Starfighters optimized for a low-level, nuclear strike role. Designated the CF-104, the Canadian variant featured a strengthened fuselage and wings, robust landing gear and a special hard-point for either a nuclear weapon or a reconnaissance camera pod. While primarily a single-seater, the RCAF also purchased an additional 38 dual-seat Starfighters built by Lockheed for training purposes, designated the CF-104D.

Entering RCAF service in 1962, eight squadrons in Europe were equipped with the CF-104 as a major NATO commitment. At the end of 1971, Canada switched from a nuclear to a conventional attack role that saw the Starfighter re-equipped with conventional bombs, rockets and the M-61 Vulcan gatling gun. In either case, the high speed and low-level tactics enabled the Starfighter to survive in a high-threat environment. However, this also required great pilot skill and many accidents resulted from a demanding low-level mission profile flown at very high speeds combined with often poor European weather. The last Starfighters were withdrawn from Canadian Forces service in 1986 with the stand-down of 441 Tac (F) Sqn at CFB Baden-Soellingen, West Germany. They were replaced in theatre by the CF-18 Hornet.

The museum example, a single-seat CF-104 model, was produced in 1962 and based at RCAF Station Cold Lake, Alberta; initially with 6 Strike/Reconnaissance Operational Training Unit and then 417 Operational Training Squadron. The aircraft was flown into storage at CFB Mountain View in June 1983 until it was struck off strength in 1990. In April 1991 the Starfighter was transferred to the Comox Military Museum, where it remained on display until being donated to the BC Aviation Museum.

The CF-104 is the fastest aircraft Canada ever deployed and the only one that had a nuclear-strike role. It also holds the Canadian altitude record of 100,110 feet (30,513 meters), set in 1967 by Wing Commander Robert “Bud” White, a Vancouver resident. As such, it will complement the museum’s other jet aircraft from the Cold War era, the classic Lockheed CT-133 Silver Star trainer. The Starfighter will be a static display featuring the livery it sported in Cold Lake, Alberta, where it spent its entire career in a training role. There are a number of retired CF-104 pilots living in the Victoria area who flew Starfighter 731, including Major General (Ret’d) Ken Lett, the original commanding officer of 6 Strike/Recce OTU in Cold Lake.

The BC Aviation Museum is located on the grounds of the Victoria International Airport on Vancouver Island. It features aircraft and displays depicting 150 years of military, commercial and private aviation history in the Province of British Columbia. For information and hours of operation go to www.bcam.net.

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