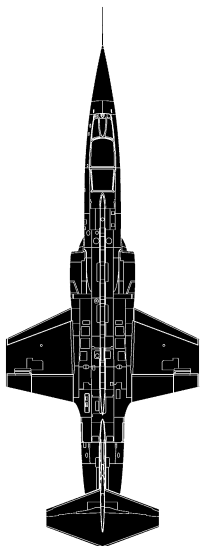


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

F-104 Starfighter



It was called “a missile with a man in it.” Radically new for its day, Lockheed’s slender, stubby-winged F-104 Starfighter was the first of USAF’s Mach 2 fighters. It was designed by the legendary Kelly Johnson and his Skunk Works team, which produced a lightweight, high-speed fighter unlike anything seen before.

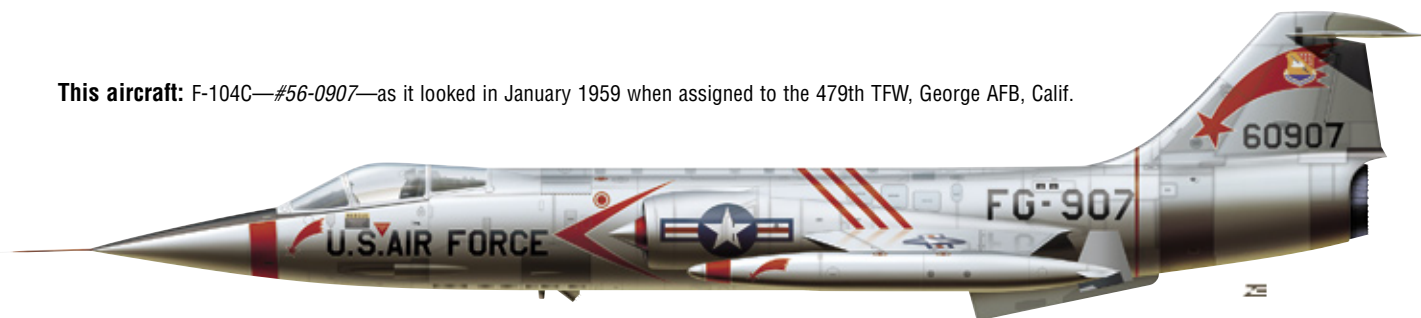
The spur for development of the Starfighter was the debut, in 1950, of the swift MiG-15 in the Korean War. The F-104 design emerged in late 1952, and it entered service in 1958. It soon set world records for speed (1,404.19 mph), altitude (103,395 ft), and time-to-climb. Though extremely fast, it was unforgiving and hard to fly. Also, USAF was never entirely sold on the lightweight idea. It bought fewer than 300 copies for itself. Indeed, the F-104 was more numerous overseas—especially in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Turkey. However, the German F-104 force was

hampered by an alarming accident rate—292 of 916 crashed, killing 115 pilots—and controversy dogged it for years.

Truth to tell, F-104s were never a significant factor in combat. USAF deployed some to Florida during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, Starfighters flew 5,206 sorties in Vietnam, where 14 were lost. It was used in a variety of roles, including interceptor, air superiority, weather recce, Wild Weasel escort, and close air support. Despite a slender combat record, however, the F-104 is remembered as one of the most distinctive air weapons of the entire Cold War.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: F-104C—#56-0907—as it looked in January 1959 when assigned to the 479th TFW, George AFB, Calif.



Starfighter in action.

In Brief

Designed by Lockheed ★ built by Lockheed, Canadair, Fiat, Fokker, MBB, Mitsubishi, SABCA ★ first flight March 4, 1954 ★ crew of one or two ★ number built 2,578 (296 USAF) ★ **Specific to F-104C:** one GE J79 turbojet engine ★ armament one 20 mm cannon; two 1,000-lb bombs or four air-to-air missiles ★ max speed 1,320 mph ★ cruise speed 575 mph ★ max range 1,250 mi ★ weight (loaded) 27,853 lb ★ span 21 ft 11 in ★ length 54 ft 10 in ★ height 13 ft 6 in.

Famous Fliers

World record setters: USAF Capt. Walter Irwin (speed), USAF Maj. Howard Johnson (altitude), USAF Maj. Robert Smith (altitude), USAF Capt. Joe Jordan (time-to-climb). **Other Notables:** Neil Armstrong, Thomas Delashaw, Iven Kincheloe Jr., Robert Lawrence Jr., Steve Ritchie, Chuck Yeager, Joseph Walker.

Interesting Facts

Awarded 1957 Collier Trophy ★ first to hold altitude and speed records at same time ★ nicknamed Zip 104 and Zipper in USAF; *Eikou* (Glory) in Japan; *Fliegender Sarg* (Flying Coffin), *Erdnagel* (Ground Nail), *Witwenmacher* (Widowmaker) in Germany; *Spil-lone* (Hatpin) in Italy ★ used for astronaut training ★ featured in films “The Starfighters” (1964) and “The Right Stuff” (1983) ★ flown in combat by Pakistan in 1965 Indo-Pakistani War ★ built with downward-firing ejection seats, later switched to upward-firing ★ influenced later U-2 design.