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A Love Affair With The Starfighter

by Roger Seroo

How it started...well, it was more by accident. During my childhood, I lived in a low-flying area and saw many aircraft flying close overhead; it was commonplace here during in the 1970s. Airfields like Laarbruch, Brüggen, Volkel and De Peel were very active back then, and often routed their aircraft nearby, or even over my home.

My childhood was already filled with curiosity about aircraft, but when I visited Schiphol, the Netherlands' primary international airport near Amsterdam, all hell broke loose in my mind. Aviation became an all-consuming passion, and I started to collect photographs and newspaper clippings of all aircraft. I wanted to go back to Schiphol, but it was far from home, so my mom and dad suggested we go to De Peel Air Base instead. Unfortunately, on the day we visited, there were no flying activities taking place at De Peel whatsoever. But my dad didn't give up. He looked at the map, and found that Volkel Air Base wasn't too much further away, so off we went and the first plane I saw up close was an F-104 Starfighter!

F-104s were common in Holland back then, as the F-16 hadn't yet arrived in service with the Dutch Air Force. I got out of our family car and that coincided with the Starfighter starting her engine run up! I quickly ran back in the car again, as I was startled, and having never seen such a thing up close before, my young mind thought the aircraft was about to explode! There was no internet back then, so everything I knew about aircraft came from books or magazines. Shaken, but nosey, I gained a little courage and moved to where I could begin taking my first real look at this smokey, needle-like beast! It was love at first sight, so-to-speak! I soon started taking my first photographs of these 'Stars', placing one 'eye' of my binoculars in front of the simple camera I held in a crude telephoto arrangement. I shot my first pictures! I also brought a tape recorder to the airbase a few times to capture that beautiful, unique sound of the F-104! I loved replaying that tape at home – over and over – and full volume too. I regularly saw neighbors and visitors checking the skies from their windows to see what was 'flying'!

Then came September 20th, 1980; a really warm day. As De Peel airbase was just 10 kilometers away, we went to experience my first Dutch Air Force OpenDay! I could finally see my beloved Starfighters from up close! While they flew some individual demonstrations over the course of the event, the finale to the day involved a mass formation of 20 Starfighters flying overhead! Man...what a sight that was! Sadly, I didn't take any pictures, but my mind is still alive with that magnificent memory...



The first decent picture I ever took of a Dutch F-104! (image via Roger Seroo)

From that very moment I was already definitively 'in love' with the Starfighter! In those days, I was already saying, "If I ever get a chance to fly in a Starfighter, that would be AMAZING!!!" But how the hell would I know that this dream would come true 30 years later... The Dutch Air Force retired the last of their Starfighters just four years after that OpenDay, but I was destined to visit Starfighters wherever I could from that moment on! I traveled all over Europe, and even the United States, to visit F-104s. I also started to collect anything to do with F-104s: patches, movies, spoons and parts of the plane itself, like cockpit instruments and an ejection seat. (which I could later install in my own F-104, but we will come to that later!)

My dedication to Starfighters remains to this day! I just love going somewhere to snap photos of F-104s, preferably those examples I haven't see before, as I am a real number-cruncher for these things!

I found out about the '[International F-104 Society](#)' and fast became a major contributor to both the organization and its magazine since its founding in 1991. Presently, I serve as one of two moderators on the society's internet discussion forum.

The Italian Air Force was the last military air arm to fly the F-104 operationally, so of course I visited Italy regularly over the course of 15 years for that purpose alone! Every holiday was spent in Italy to hear/feel and smell Ef-one-oh-fours!!!

Together with a good friend who had a similar obsession, or 'disease' as we joke, for the Starfighter, I would brainstorm about ways we might buy an F-104 in Italy or Germany. We did find some in Rome, but they were way over our budget, sadly. And most of these examples had had their main

landing gear legs cut as well. However, we were very lucky, as I knew a guy who got museum rights. Thanks to him, we were able to bid on VEBEG in Germany for the first Fokker-built F-104! She wore the Luftwaffe markings '23+27' and while our hopes of winning the bid were very dim, we buoyed our spirits by saying "Hey, who knows!"



My F-104G (D-8001/23+27) as she looked in storage at Fassberg in Germany during January, 1998.
(image via Roger Seroo)

A few weeks later I got a telephone call with the news that 'We got it!!!' Holy moly! ... Now what? Where are we gonna put that thing?!! We hadn't thought that far yet, as the dream had felt so inconceivable up to that point. Many people, of course, had their negative comments at the ready, haranguing us with, 'What you guys gonna do with a Jet?', or "You don't have experience at all!"

But enthusiasm and love for the F-104 would prove quite the opposite! Fortunately my friend Ton van der Zeeuw had an easy going demeanor and arranged a place for the F-104 inside a museum near Eindhoven, which also housed some WWII stuff. On Friday the 13th of December, 2002 (not a bad Friday the 13th after all!) we got our F-104, and transported her to Best (near Eindhoven) at the museum known as Bevrijdende Vleugels (Wings of Liberation).



A happy photograph of me standing beside our F-104 on the day we got her, Friday, December 13th, 2002 in Best (near Eindhoven). (image via Roger Serroo)

Then came the journey for parts to restore our beast. We visited scrap yards and some airbases where a few old 104s were hiding away in a corner. From different bases, we got the most wanted missing parts to complete our bird. We did most of the work at the museum in Best out in the open. After a few years, I had completed the cockpit rebuild and she more and more resembled an active aircraft! However, after a disagreement with the museum's CEO, I'd had enough of it. He wanted to get us out of there, and said so in plain sight! A few hours later he regretted what he'd said and withdrew his words. But the damage was done. I'd had all I could take and said, "If you want us to get out of here, FINE we go!!!" Perhaps that was pure 'blah blah blah' from me with a pokerface, but what the heck! I went to the airfield close to my home, the former RAF Germany air station at Laarbruch, which was still an active airfield, but now in civilian hands. I told them about my situation and showed them a picture of our F-104! Their mouths fell open and they said "Hell yeah!!! You can come anytime with this beauty!!!" Even cooler, they allowed us to pick a shelter at our own choosing! So, now I had to convince my friend in moving of our beloved F-104. He didn't take long to agree, as he was still unsettled by the argument with the CEO at the Wings of Liberation Museum, telling me, "Well, I guess you're right..., enough is enough!"

So in December 2004, exactly two years after our arrival in Best, we moved our baby to our new home at the former RAF Laarbruch, which is now known as Niederrhein/Weeze airport. Here we made our new base in an old RAF hardened air shelter and our bird was finally standing inside! I'd put so much work into this bird, during any weather, and any temperature – blood, sweat and tears for our Iron Tricycle! Even now I feel proud of what we achieved with this, the first Fokker-built F-104 – we returned this aircraft from a worn out hulk into her former glory. To be honest, I was a real lunatic about our F-104. After each excursion trip came to visit the shelter with our F-104 inside, she was always full of grubby fingerprints! I just hated that – and I couldn't stop myself from immediately wiping the marks away with a dry cloth, to keep the shiny look on my F-104! The plane looked so good that she often got booked for advertising or photography sessions, and even a video for some hip-hop artists!



Furthermore, it really felt like we were living in an authentic air base atmosphere. In May 2005, we attended our first air show at Niederrhein/Weeze airport. Our F-104 was a real eye-catcher and oh man, how proud we were of our bird!

In late March 2005, we finally got some neighbors. A Dutchman and a Belgian guy managed to buy a former Belgian Air Force F-104, this being FX52, and I agreed to help them! It was a lot of work as FX52 was a definitively corroded ghost; a sad reminder of her longterm storage in the salty sea air at Koksijde, on the Belgian coast. As anyone who works on aircraft knows, salt and aluminum are a killer combo, and this plane had been slowly eaten alive by the weather. This 'Tiger project' lasted

for three years and was in the final stages by mid-2008, exactly 30 years after this F-104 flew in the exact same livery we repainted her. This was an all-over tiger stripe livery, as this aircraft had taken part in one of the annual Tiger Meets. These were legendary gatherings where military aircraft whose squadrons bore a tiger emblem would send a representative airframe wildly painted in a tiger-themed livery. These aircraft were magnificent! Man, although not my plane, I am proud to have been a part of this project to return this F-104 into her Tiger Meet markings! I spent many many hours at the airbase restoring both F-104s – from 06.00h until 01.00h the following night was almost like a normal working day at the airfield. In april 2008, even more F-104s arrived at the airbase, but I just helped take care of these aircraft and rarely helped the owner in restoring those birds.



My hobby has taken me far, and besides just my friends, people in the US saw my involvement in the F-104 too. Because of my activities concerning the Starfighter – of arranging things, fixing things, writing small articles and working so much on 104s, my nickname soon became 'Mr.Starfighter'! It felt very heartwarming to receive a 'nickname' like that! Besides a few jealous looks by some, all of my 104-adventures were very positive and I received many thumbs up in feedback!

And so it was that one day I had a telephone call from [Starfighters-Inc.](#) in Florida who operate a small fleet of F-104s, and they invited me to take a flight in one of their aircraft! For a moment, I couldn't believe what I'd just heard! ME??? To fly in a one-oh-four?? This is what I had always dreamt about! Of course I agreed, and for the next months I could barely sleep, because of the thought that my long-held dream might come true. For homework, I studied all of the F-104 Check-lists and emergency procedures. Also, that 'Kicker-drill' I had to know. Due to contacts with one of the squadrons at Volkel airbase, they refurbished my HGU-55 flying helmet; it was like new again after their attentions! After some medical checkups, I was ready to go!

So towards the end of 2007, I was flying with KLM from Schiphol, with my flight gear, to Washington, DC. But when I arrived in DC, I got a telephone call; one I really didn't want to receive! My Starfighter-flight was cancelled! Incredulous, I said, "This can't be, I'm just here!" I thought it was a bad joke, but then I heard that they were very sorry, it was true. There was a problem with the ejection seats, and we were not allowed to fly... I saw my dream falling apart, and after just 2 days in America, I went home again in great sadness.

But at the beginning of 2008, another telephone call came from the States... 'Do I still want to fly in the Starfighter?' OF COURSE I DO – but what guarantee do I have that it will happen this time? Well, not for the full 100%, but three planes had to be flown home to the Cape (Cape Canaveral) in Florida from NAS Oceana in Virginia – where they were scheduled to be. So in September 2008, I again flew to the States with my flight gear packed – and some strange looks from the customs officers asking me, 'What do you have in your bags?'

But the long-awaited day came when I got strapped in to my favorite airplane. I had sat in one sooo many times, and practiced all the procedures until I could dream my way through it in my own F-104 cockpit in our shelter back at Niederrhein/Weeze airport. Now it was for real! I connected my 'spurs' into the C-2 ejection seat, connected the oxygen and checked the 'white blinker' on the oxygen panel. All belts are connected and an unreal feeling starts to sweep over me. The hose from the air-starter is plugged in between the main landing gear of the CF-104D, our aircraft that day, and pilot Rick Svetkoff circles his index finger in a request to the ground crew for them to begin feeding the much needed, high-pressure air to spin up the J79 engine. The plane comes alive. Clocks give their specific messages, the gyros are humming, and the plane begins to vibrate. My adrenaline starts to pump up! All three CF-104s are ready for take off, and because we were flying in a two-seat CF-104D dual, the internal fuel capacity is much less than the single-seaters so we went up first! After two howling engine run-ups, we slip into afterburner. It was like a giant hand shoving your backside – pushing us down the runway! Man what a feeling! We lifted off, and I immediately felt at home inside this one-oh-four! Along the way, I shot some air-to-air pictures of these beauties flying beside me and I felt like a god as two of my dreams had come true at once! I wondered how steady this aircraft was in the air – well, it was like a train on a railroad track! We pulled some 'G's, and all of a sudden the camera became VERY heavy. This was a really strange feeling for an untrained 'pilot' like me, but I didn't get sick one bit! Then Rick calls me over the intercom saying, "Hey Rog, do you have your hands on the throttle and stick?" I replied, 'No, of course not!' He replied, "Well, do it!!" He then asks, "Do you have it?" I replied, "Yes, I have!" Then he pulls up both his hands, saying, "Well Rog, you have it! You are now flying an F-104!" I can't describe the feeling I had back then, but all I can say is that it's the best thing you can do with your pants on!





I flew her for about 10 or 12 minutes before giving the 1-0-4 back to Rick. Because of some nearby thunderstorms, we had to fly around them, and our flight time was not the planned 45 minutes, but rather 1 hour and 9 minutes! My first flight-hour in the 104 was now a fact! We made a nice 'Echelon left' formation above Cape Canaveral and flew into the circuit around the base. While we were turning onto final, some really big birds, perhaps Pelicans, rushed past the canopy and I briefly thought, "Whoa, what if we have to use the ejection seat now?" But everything went just fine, and with just 400 pounds of fuel to spare, we landed our CF-104D on the big runway at Cape Canaveral, and without drag chute too, as the runway was more than long enough for us to slow down – it did, after all, have to cater to the Space Shuttle! We parked our 'Zippers' in front of a gate and shut down our engines. We opened the canopies, unbuckled from our seats, and reached for each others' hands. Rick asked me, "Did you have a nice time up there?" What a question...It was fantastic!!! I was about 3 to 4 kilograms lighter than I was when I left NAS Oceana too! I had sweated like an ox! Also, breathing 100% oxygen makes you feel very clearheaded! A small mini-van drove up to us, and one of the head guys from the NASA station came to welcome me, as I was apparently the second Dutchman ever to land at the Cape! The first one was the Dutch astronaut Wubbo Ockels in Space Shuttle 'Challenger' during November, 1985... I was the second Dutchie, but came to the Cape in my spacecraft, the Starfighter!!! I spent the week as part of the staff at NASA, as Starfighters have some

test work for the organization. Many times I said to myself: "I wish my mom could see me," because she had died suddenly at the RIAT airshow at RAF Fairford in July, 1991. She always told me to "do what you love to do." So I kept my promise, I guess...Maybe on a cloud somewhere she was smiling at me during my flight, my dream for 30 years, had come true for me! My hobby-circle was round! There was not much else to do. I'm proud what I've achieved so far!!



The patch I

am most proud of. It symbolizes one flight hour in the F-104. (image via Roger Seroo)

After that wonderful adventure, a short time later I started a totally different life, as I now had a family to take care of and there was simply no time for working at my first love, the one-oh-four, any more! So I had to sell it. It was my own choice and nobody pushed me to do it, but it felt like selling my child, which in fact she really had been for me! Blood, sweat and tears I gave for that tricycle. I sold her to a car-dealer, and he in turn sold her to someone near the Stuttgart in Germany. Sure, I miss her every day, but I feel very, very grateful that I got this far inside the 104-community,

for 'just' a hobby. What I had always wanted since childhood was to: 'Work on an F-104' – CHECK!; 'Own an F-104' – CHECK!; and, top of the cake, 'Fly in an F-104' – DOUBLE CHECK!!!! For me, the Starfighter is a part of my life, and every chance that I get to see one, I feel exited! Every now and then I will go to her, my first love, caress her smooth lines, then walk around her, checking every little detail and think back to the old times...Life can be good!

Roger 'Kicker' Serroo

Many thanks to Roger Serroo for this terrific story. It's not often that someone gets to live their dream, but he certainly proved it's possible for an ordinary person, through determination, and a little luck, can fulfill life-long ambitions! Bravo for all he has done to preserve the F-104!