

Northrop T-38A Talon

1963

General History

White Rocket

As America’s fighter industry created the sleek, heavy, supersonic aircraft of the mid-1950s, pilots continued to learn and train with the late 1940s-era T-33 *Shooting Star*. It was a big (and dangerous) step from the little, subsonic, straight-wing *Shooting Star* to the world of the heavy, front-line “super jets” like the F-100 and F-104. The U.S. Air Force needed a trainer that flew more like their big jet fighters.

At the time, Northrop was studying the possibilities of a lightweight, simple fighter and trainer plane. The result was the safe and forgiving T-38 *Talon*, which had enough speed and power to act like the day’s modern tactical aircraft.

Nicknamed “White Rockets,” T-38s have trained more than 42,000 pilots. They are inexpensive to maintain and have the best safety record of any plane in the Air Force inventory. The last of the 1,189 *Talons* was delivered in 1972. With no plans for a replacement, T-38s continue to fly today.

Diversity

Like other successful aircraft designs, the capable T-38 has performed a multitude of different roles for various services. When fuel was scarce in 1974, the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds switched from the gas guzzling F-4 *Phantom II* to the *Talon*. Four T-38s can fly for the price of one F-4.

T-38s are small and maneuverable like Soviet MiG fighters, and were used by both U.S. Air Force and Navy “Aggressor” squadrons. These *Talons* simulated enemy aircraft in “Top Gun” training dogfights to teach front line fighter pilots.

The T-38 is also the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA’s) aircraft of choice on “maintenance of proficiency” flights for astronauts, who take to the skies in *Talons* to keep their flying skills sharp.



About This Aircraft

The Museum’s T-38 was built in 1964 by Northrop Aircraft in Hawthorn, California. Accepted into U.S. Air Force service on September 14, 1964, the *Talon*’s first assignment was with the 3550th Pilot Training Wing at McCoy Air Force Base in Florida. Starting in 1965, the plane served the Air Force in Texas for nearly 18 years, with various Air Training Command wings at Randolph and Reese Air Force Bases.

In 1993, the T-38 served with the 4th Wing, Air Combat Command at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base near Goldsboro, North Carolina. The aircraft’s final Air Force assignment was with the 49th Fighter Wing at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico in 1995. In December of that year, the aircraft was stored at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. The Museum acquired the *Talon* on loan from the U.S. Air Force Museum in August of 1996.

Specifications

- Type: Military Trainer Aircraft
- First Flight: YF-38 on April 10, 1959
- Wingspan: 25 feet 3 inches
- Length: 43 feet
- Height: 11 feet 11 inches
- Wing Area: 170 square feet
- Weight, Empty: 7,164 pounds
- Weight, Loaded: 10,960 pounds
- Power: Two General Electric J85-GE-5 3,650 pounds static thrust (with afterburning) engines
- Normal Crew: Two
- Typical Armament: None

Performance

- Cruise Speed: 590 miles per hour
- Top Speed: Mach 1.25 at 35,000 feet (One and a one-fourth times the speed of sound)
- Range: 1,200 miles
- Service Ceiling: 55,000 feet



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