

DRAKEN INTERNATIONAL

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An aerial photograph showing two aircraft in flight against a backdrop of rugged, arid mountain ranges. In the upper portion of the frame, the tail section of an F-35A fighter jet is visible, featuring the tail code 'OT' and 'F-001'. Below it, the tail section of an A-4 Skyhawk is visible, featuring the 'DRAKEN' logo. The aircraft are flying at a high altitude, with the landscape below appearing as a patchwork of brown and green terrain.

Draken made the headlines in August when its A-4s supported Dutch F-35A trials out of Edwards AFB, California.

Draken International's impressive fleet makes it the largest private operator of tactical aircraft in the world. The company was founded as recently as 2011 when it evolved from the Black Diamond Jet Team, an airshow act owned by entrepreneur Jared Isaacman.

report and photos:

**Frank Crébas/
Bluelife Aviation**

DRAKEN INTERNATIONAL IS a privately-owned company, based in Lakeland, Florida, that provides contracted air services. The company owns a fleet of aircraft including 14 A-4 Skyhawks, nine Aermacchi MB339CBs, 27 MiG-21s, and soon 21 L-159s.

The company made headlines last August when it was contracted by the Royal Netherlands Air Force to furnish Red Air support during operational integration tests with F-16s and F-35s out of Edwards AFB, California. The event marked the first time that the new stealth fighter had flown sorties with third- and fourth-generation aircraft.

The idea to begin contracted air services came from collaboration within the Black Diamond Jet Team, Jared Isaacman told Defence Media Network in 2013. 'The present fiscal environment calls for cost savings. So the opportunity is right for the business model we provide,' he stated. In an interview with this magazine, he added: 'The commercial air services industry exists because of its ability to provide tremendous cost savings to our military customers while enhancing training. Draken is already meeting that critical need with the quantity of aircraft we operate, their unique capabilities and low operating costs.'

Kiwi Skyhawks

An important step in building the company was the acquisition of eight A-4Ks from New Zealand in 2012. This comprises nearly the full fleet of Royal New Zealand Air Force Skyhawks that became surplus after

the type's retirement in that country. Extra Skyhawks were added to the fleet in 2014 when Draken purchased six A-4Ns formerly flown by BAE Systems at Wittmund, Germany. Currently the L-159, bought from the Czech Republic, is entering the Draken fleet.

'We specifically purchased jets that are rich in modern capabilities', explains Isaacman, who is licensed to fly most of the types in his inventory. 'In the case of our A-4K Skyhawks, they are equipped with the AN/APG-66 radar, AN/ALR-66 radar warning receiver, countermeasures, electronic attack pods, head-up display, hands on throttle and stick [HOTAS] controls, MFD and a 1553 databus. For all purposes, our A-4Ks are outfitted similarly to an F-16A but at dramatically lower operating costs.'

'We also purchased 21 L-159E jets. The L-159E is equipped with the Selex Grifo-L radar and attack software suite. [It is] a modern, virtually brand-new fourth-generation fighter aircraft with extremely low operational costs. In both cases, the A-4 and L-159 enable Draken to provide tactically relevant adversary support but at dramatically lower costs than a comparable military F-16 or F-15 fighter.'

It's not just the impressive fleet that makes Draken a unique company. The pilot roster is equally impressive and includes top names in the industry like Lt Col Jerry 'Jive' Kerby (ret) and CAPT Dale 'Snort' Snodgrass (ret), both of whom were in from the beginning and were part of the Black Diamond Jet Team. Both are now among a group of experienced aviators, with backgrounds ranging from weapons school and TOPGUN graduates to those with a history of flying in aggressor squadrons.

Missions

Pilot experience is key in the type of missions the company offers to its clients. Next to Red Air support, similar to the work of aggressor squadrons, Draken supplies air-to-ground, fleet missile defense support, and aerial refueling via a 'buddy-buddy' system on the A-4s.

'Draken has been extremely busy supporting missions out of numerous operating locations', Isaacman continues. 'This includes USMC JTAC training, which involves releasing practice ordnance. We have been providing adversary support to the Air National Guard during large-force exercises. Most recently Draken

provided threat aircraft for a multi-national F-35 exercise out of Edwards AFB. We also work with overseas allies. In fact, our A-4 Skyhawks have been seen flying across the Atlantic Ocean several times during this past year. Our service is heavily in demand and we are really looking forward to the arrival of our L-159E fighters.'

Not so busy at the moment are the 'Fishbeds' as Isaacman observes: 'We do not operate our MiG-21s. They are very low-time airframes and they include the latest bis models. Unfortunately, there has been very little demand from our customers for this type series. The MiG-21 is not known for its maneuverability or endurance, not to mention the radar capabilities are very limited. That stated, they are an extremely low-cost supersonic fighter and Draken has nearly 30 of them! They would make a great platform for various saturation scenarios, but, as of now, there has been almost no demand for them. They are all stored in our Lakeland facility.'

Bright horizon

The purchase of the light but capable L-159 is an interesting

This image:
Draken operates a pair of two-seat TA-4K Skyhawks.

Right: Former RNZAF A-4K N146EM on the Edwards flightline in August.





move. While a rival company is considering ex-Israeli F-16s, Draken continues to offer a cheaper solution with aircraft that it says offer similar fourth-generation capabilities. When asked why Isaacman isn't aiming for the 'Viper', he explains: 'We are very familiar with these aircraft [Israeli F-16s] and have inspected them several times. Most of our pilots have a lot of experience and admiration for the F-16. It is a great fighter aircraft. That being said, there are many reasons why an F-16 is a terrible platform for the commercial air services industry. Primarily, our industry only exists based on cost savings. That is why militaries from around the world want our service. Globally, the government budgets are shrinking and it doesn't always make sense for F-16s, F-15s, Eurofighters, etc to train against each other.'

'With Draken we can provide fourth-generation adversaries [electronic attack pods, radars and so forth] for a fifth of the operating cost of an F-16 or F-15. That is the value of our service. We deliver enhanced training for a much, much lower cost. If we were to purchase F-16s, we would not be able to offer any cost savings at all — not to mention, the F-16As for sale in Israel are some of the oldest ones still in service and have

virtually no upgrades. That would mean our military customers would not be saving any money. They would be paying essentially the same cost as they do for their own F-16s, but with dramatically lower capabilities. It really just doesn't make sense. If the US government wanted to keep flying against F-16s, they would not need to turn to private industry to accomplish the service. They could simply use any of the hundreds of F-16s that are stored in the boneyard that are all better equipped than the F-16As that are for sale in Israel. Draken already operates fourth-generation fighter aircraft in our A-4K and L-159E Advanced Light Combat Aircraft [ALCA], but at dramatically lower costs than old F-16As. We deliver the best value in terms of capabilities and price. That is what is really driving the demand for commercial air services in the global market.'

The outlook for contracted air services seems very positive, given that governments continue to invest in next-generation hardware while still axing training assets like the 65th Aggressor Squadron, disbanded at Nellis in 2014. 'The future is definitely very bright', states Isaacman. 'This has been our most demanding year in terms of flight hours and contracts served. In August, we were



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Top left:
The Skyhawk nearest the camera is a former Israeli A-4N with extended jet pipe and a jammer pod under the centerline, with an ex-RNZAF A-4K leading the pair.

Above: A pair of Draken A-4s operate in the R-2508 ranges near Edwards AFB in August.

Left: Draken received its first L-159E in September. These aircraft are likely to head straight to Nellis AFB to support the company's latest contract. Aero Vodochody/ Jakub Fojtík

generating sorties from five different operating locations at the same time. That includes locations in Europe. So, we already have expanded heavily in the US and internationally. We are continuing to procure additional aircraft that provide tactically relevant training while still achieving our primary mission of cost savings. It has been an unbelievable year and we do not anticipate things slowing down anytime soon!

Shortly before this article went to press, Draken announced a new adversary support contract from the USAF, using its A-4Ks and new L-159s to save the Air Force money by preserving its F-16s and F-15s. 'Personally, I am really looking forward to integrating with and complementing the USAF Nellis-based aggressors,' said Col Terry 'Stretch' Scott, a recently-retired USAF F-22 pilot and Nellis detachment commander for Draken. Isaacman added: 'We feel we are absolutely ready and fortunate to have this monumental opportunity. This is our time to demonstrate the capabilities of our service while still achieving considerable cost savings for the US Air Force.'

This September 30, Aero Vodochody Aerospace handed over a first L-159E ALCA to Draken International. The ALCA is the first of eight single-seat jets that will be delivered before the end of 2015 — part of a total of 21 on order.

'For our purposes, which [are] commercial air services and threat simulation training, this was the optimal airplane for us,' said Isaacman. 'We ran right after it and spent a lot of time to arrive to this point, which is why we are all so excited.'

'We anticipate [that] the L-159 ALCA will head right to Nellis AFB, which is home to 'Red Flag', a worldwide combat training environment, and participate as part of the aggressor force. It's going to have a big stage.' ☈

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JARED ISAACMAN