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## SwRI researchers begin Starfighters suborbital space flight training aboard F-104 aircraft

### PRESS RELEASE

**Date Released:** Monday, March 29, 2010

Source: [Southwest Research Institute](#)

 As part of the next phase in advancing suborbital research opportunities and their own flight preparations, Southwest Research Institute researchers and suborbital payload specialists Dr. Alan Stern and Dr. Dan Durda have begun a new element of spaceflight training with a series of jet fighter flights in F-104 aircraft operated by Starfighters Inc. at the Kennedy Space Center, Fla. The first SwRI Starfighters flights and the associated ground training, took place March 15-16.

The intensive, two-day course, which Stern and Durda took to inaugurate this element of their spaceflight training, included classroom instruction, aircraft cockpit familiarization, and actual flights flown from the Shuttle Landing Facility at Kennedy Space Center.

"The F-104 Starfighters training program allows us to move from laboratory centrifuge training to actual high-G ascent profiles rocketing us nearly 25,000 feet at 5 to 6 Gs, topped by zero-G parabolas. We each flew several of these ascent profiles in our initial flights, as well as various high-G turns and other training exercises that help us get acclimated to the expected launch and entry environments on suborbital research missions we plan to fly in coming years," says Principal Investigator Stern.

"The F-104 Starfighter is one of the few aircraft out there with a performance envelope that allows a realistic flight environment-like launch and glide-to-landing profiles of some of the next-generation suborbital vehicles we expect to be flying soon," says Co-investigator Durda. "The Starfighters team has done a great job of putting together a unique suborbital spaceflight training capability and making this resource available to future fliers," he adds.

Starfighters is the only commercial aviation organization that holds written permission from both NASA and the FAA to conduct this type of training.

Stern, who holds a commercial pilot license and is a certified flight instructor, has been principal investigator on seven unmanned NASA suborbital rocket missions, has flown numerous high-altitude research missions in NASA WB-57 and F/A-18 aircraft, and has participated in research expeditions in both the arctic and Antarctic. He was previously NASA's Associate Administrator for science.

Durda, a planetary scientist, is an experienced SCUBA cave rescue diver, a former F/A-18 and KC-135 research mission flyer, and an instrument-rated pilot.

Stern and Durda are operating under an SwRI-funded effort aimed at conducting in-space experiments using next-generation suborbital vehicles for various kinds of scientific research and public outreach. An earlier portion of this project included altitude chamber and centrifuge training at The NASTAR Center near Philadelphia.

Editors: Images to accompany this story are available at <http://www.swri.org/press/2010/starfighter.htm>. For more information about Starfighters, please visit <http://www.starfighters.net/>.

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*Caption: SwRI researchers and suborbital payload specialists are undergoing flight training aboard F-104 aircraft operated by Starfighters Inc. Courtesy Southwest Research Institute*

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*Caption: Dr. Alan Stern, Associate Vice President, Space Science and Engineering Division, Southwest Research Institute Courtesy Southwest Research Institute*



*Caption: Dr. Dan Durda, Principal Scientist, Space Science and Engineering Division, Southwest Research Institute. Courtesy Southwest Research Institute*

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