

THE RAMP WENT SILENT

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN TF-86F TRANSONIC TRAINER

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The first TF-86F on the ramp. North American advertised the plane as the "transonic trainer" and the addition of a second seat gave the aircraft a more streamlined appearance.



The second TF-86F photographed during an airshow. The aircraft's two nose machine guns can be seen along with the additional underwing fuel tanks.

Early in 1954, while I was going through North American F-86 Sabre gunnery school at Nellis AFB in Nevada, a group of us stood down one afternoon to watch George Welch and Joe Lynch, both respected test pilots from North American, put on a couple of flight demonstrations for all of us young fighter jocks. Most of us had flown a mission that morning and we were still in our flight suits as we stood on the ramp to watch these two famous flyers.

George Welch, hero of the Pearl Harbor attack, flew first. He showed us what we could get out of a new T-28B Trojan fitted with the Wright R-1820-86

engine and three-blade propeller. His flight was very impressive but most of us felt that props were a thing of the past. We were, instead, looking forward to Joe Lynch's flight in the dual-seat TF-86F Sabre.

On 3 February 1953, NAA proposed a two-seat version of the F-86 to the USAF, hoping to capitalize on the success Lockheed had with the T-33. Given the designation NA-204, design work began on 9 April. NAA proposed that a stock F-86F-30-NA be modified by adding a student's cockpit ahead of an instructor in a lengthened fuselage and moving the

wing forward eight inches to compensate for the shift in center of gravity. Armament would be deleted but slatted wings would be used.

On 9 September, the USAF authorized — we must remember the Korean War was fresh in the minds of everyone involved — a contract to convert F-86F-30-NA 52-5016 to the dual control configuration. This aircraft was an early Sabre without the "6-3" wing and retained the leading-edge slats. Length of the fuselage was increased to 42 feet 9 inches from 37 feet 6 inches and the instructor and student were seated in ejection seats

under a huge clam-shell canopy. The new plane was designated TF-86F.

First flight was on 14 December 1953 and Ray Morris was the test pilot. Famed aviator Bob Hoover also did a great deal of the early test flying in the aircraft, which weighed just about 100 pounds more than the single-seat version. Performance was basically the same and an additional fuel tank extended the range by about 300 miles.

Prior to Joe's arrival to fly the TF-86F on 17 March, I was leaning against the wing and watching George do his stuff.

When Joe arrived, if he had asked me if I wanted to go with him, I would have climbed right in. As he approached the TF-86F, however, his mechanic said, "Joe, they topped off your tanks before I could stop them."

Joe replied, "That is okay but I don't want you to go with me today. Would you just secure the backseat straps and stuff?" In the meantime, George was ending his show with a perfect double Immelmann off the deck.

Joe taxied his TF-86F out while George

parked the T-28B. George and the Airfield Officer next

headed off toward Base Ops in the AO's Jeep. Joe was out of our sight as he started his takeoff roll — only the ninth flight of the new plane. There was a slight tail wind, but using this particular runway would put his first aileron roll after takeoff right in front of the crowd, which consisted of about 150 young pilots like myself. We spotted Joe on his takeoff roll when he cleared several buildings that had been obstructing our view of the first few hundred feet of the runway.