

## 'Top Gun' plane retired by Navy finds home at Plant 42

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PALMDALE - One of the Navy's last remaining F-14D Tomcats made its final landing Thursday, not on a carrier deck, but at Air Force Plant 42 in Palmdale. The newly retired jet fighter is the latest addition to the Palmdale Plant 42 Heritage Airpark, adjacent to the Air Force production test facility.

An unusual sight in the Palmdale sky, the Tomcat made several passes over Plant 42 before landing and taxiing to a stop before numerous cameras and officials outside the Palmdale Regional Airport terminal.

"This community really does appreciate what you do," said Palmdale Councilman Tom Lackey. "It's a trophy here. We'll showcase it and take good care of it."

The Navy retired the venerable carrier-based fighters - familiar to fans of "Top Gun" - in favor of the newer F-18E/F Super Hornet fighters.

Built by Grumman Corp. (now Northrop Grumman Corp.), the F-14 Tomcat spent more than 30 years in service. The fighters were officially retired on Sept. 22.

Palmdale's specimen arrived from Fighter Squadron Three One (VF-31) at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia.

For pilot Lt. Cmdr. David "Superfly" Faehnle the flight was a cause for powerful emotions.

"It's sad, saying goodbye to an old friend," he said. "I spent a lot of my life sitting up in that cockpit. It's been my office."

Faehnle has been flying Tomcats for more than eight years.

Faehnle and Radar Intercept Officer Lt. Bill "Tank" Frank - who accompanied Faehnle in the Tomcat to Palmdale - have flown together for about three years, much of that time spent deployed. Most recently, their squadron was at sea aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt.

"It's neat to go out this way, flying the jet together," Faehnle said.

With the squadron transitioning to single-seat F-18s, teams such as theirs are breaking up.

"Every other week we're saying goodbye" to squadron members, Faehnle said. Before it may go on display at the adjacent airpark, the Tomcat will undergo demilitarization - removing equipment such as the engines, electronics, fluids and all cockpit equipment.

That process will be performed on the tarmac behind the Palmdale Regional Airport terminal by a four-man team from Titan Group-L3 Communications, the Navy's contractor for such work. It is expected to take about a week to complete.

Like the aircraft itself, the team hails from Virginia Beach. Combined, the men have more than 60 years of experience with the aircraft, from their previous service in the Navy.

"They won't have to do anything except park it once we're done," said John Brooks of the demilitarization team.

The fighter jet is on loan to the airpark through 2010, with an option to renew, from the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Fla.

The F-14 was a last-minute acquisition for the airpark, said Saynne Redifer , assistant to the Palmdale city manager.

The aircraft - one of the last available for museum display - was originally slated for a museum in Galveston, Texas. The runway nearest that facility, however, was not long enough to land the Tomcat, Redifer said, and Palmdale became the recipient.

"We were very lucky to get it," she said. "We have people calling from all over."

The F-14 is expected to join the 14 other aircraft on display in mid-October. The Palmdale Plant 42 Heritage Airpark is at 2001 East Ave. P.

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