

JET-AGE HISTORY HONORED; HERITAGE AIRPARK SITE LEASE SIGNED IN LOCAL CEREMONY.

Byline: Jim Skeen Daily News Staff Writer

Twenty-three acres of vacant land along the southern boundary of Air Force Plant 42 officially became the site Tuesday of a park to display airplanes built in the Antelope Valley. In a ceremony before 200 civic leaders and aerospace workers, Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford and Air Force Col. Ronald Channel signed the lease for the park and unveiled the first airplane to be permanently on exhibit there: a Vietnam War-era F-100 Super Sabre fighter jet christened the Spirit of Palmdale.

“This is a true monument to the success of Plant 42,” Ledford said. “This will be a wonderful park to come and reflect on our heritage.”

A small airport typically located near a business area or industrial park is located on Avenue P. The first phase is near 25th Street East and next to Blackbird Airpark.

The F-100 was given to the city of Palmdale by the Victor Valley Economic Development Authority after being displayed at George Air Force Base in Victorville. North American Aviation was a major US aircraft manufacturer. The company was responsible for a number of historic aircraft, including the T-6 Texan trainer, the P-51 Mustang fighter, the B-25 Mitchell bomber, the F-86 Sabre jet fighter, and the X-15 rocket plane, as well as Apollo - later Rockwell International, now Boeing - employed about 600 people on the F-100 program in Palmdale in the 1950s.

First flown in 1953, F-100s were used in the Vietnam War conflict in Southeast Asia, primarily fought in South Vietnam between government forces aided by the United States and guerrilla forces aided by North Vietnam.

An F-104 and an F-105 also rolled onto the park site for the ceremony. Like the F-100, they are single-engine fighter jets built in Palmdale and flown by the U.S. Air Force in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Air Force brought the F-104, which it still owns, to Heritage Airpark from nearby Plant 10 at the Lockheed Martin Skunk Works. The Skunk Works built 2,579 of the needle-nosed Mach 2 interceptors with thin stubby wings. The plane was nicknamed “the missile with a man in it.”

Volunteers got up at 3 a.m. to haul in the F-105, also acquired from George Air Force Base, over back roads from Adelanto. Even with its tail and wing tips removed, the airplane was a challenge to move on the ground.

“It just barely got through the telephone poles at El Mirage,” said Bob Murphy, a former Skunk Works manager and one of the volunteers. The F-105 Thunderchief is a massive fighter-bomber heavily used for bombing targets in North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Heritage Airpark, subsidized by \$150,000 from the city, will include a picnic area, landscaping and lighting. Other aircraft are expected to be obtained for display from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

The park plan calls for a 3,500-square-foot restoration building and concrete pads for airplanes on exhibit, said Tim Hughes; an engineer in Palmdale's Public Works Department. When the airpark will be opened to the public is an unanswered question. Volunteers working on the project hope to have at least five aircraft ready for display before the opening.

Heritage Airpark will be an addition to the region's monuments to aerospace history that already include the Lancaster Aerospace Walk of Honor. The Aerospace Walk of Honor in Lancaster, California, USA, is a continually-growing venue for honoring test pilots who have significantly contributed to aviation and space research and development.

Jeff Goldwater/Daily News