



Fifty years ago the F-104 Starfighter entered service with the Aeronautica Militare Italiana, marking the start of an illustrious era in Italian military aviation.

report: **Marco Rossi**

NOthing in 42 years of service with the Italian Air Force, no other air arm in the world utilized the F-104 Starfighter for as long as Italy. In that time, the Lockheed fighter achieved a legendary status among pilots and aviation enthusiasts alike. The F-104 — which local pilots dubbed "Spillone", meaning needle or stiletto — was arguably the most significant and controversial aircraft in world military service.

With the introduction of the F-104, English language began to be spoken within the Aeronautica Militare Italiana (AMI — Italian Air Force) and squadron exchanges with foreign air arms became commonplace. These latter led the way to modernization of practice and increased international cooperation.

When, at the beginning of the 1960s, the AMI required replacement of its aging and obsolete fleet of 100 series' jets (P-106, F-104, F-105, F-106), many aircraft were evaluated.

Among the most promising candidates were the Lockheed F-104, Northrop F-5, Dassault Mirage III and English Electric Lightning. The Italian requirements called for a multi-role aircraft, with performance and capabilities such that the number of different airframes to be acquired could be minimized, while at the same time populating almost all of the AMI's fighter, bomber and reconnaissance wings.

'Standardization' and 'versatility' were the key words in Italy aimed at reducing to a minimum the purchasing, logistics and operating costs. Simultaneously, however, the industrial and social aspects were kept in consideration when making the final choice. The result of these requirements and evaluations led, not without disputes and

controversies, to the F-104, a type already selected and about to enter service with a number of other NATO operators. In Europe, a consortium of aerospace, avionics and engine companies from West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy formed the NATO Starfighter Management Office (NASMO) in order to manage the design and complex production and logistical effort required to build, under Lockheed license, most of the aircraft required. The result was the largest and most ambitious collective relationship that Europe had ever seen.

NASMO had the challenging task of co-ordinating and leading the colossal production apparatus involved. Bringing together European and American industry, NASMO established five multi-national working groups known under the German terms Arbeitsgemeinschaften, or ARGEs. Each of these was to produce a complete aircraft. Furthermore, the 179 engines were also manufactured under license by the Italian section of the consortium, by FIAT and Alfa Romeo (Arli).

The Italian manufacturing group was composed of Aeritalia, Aeritalia MAC, Macchi, Piaggio, SACA and SMI and produced an initial 200 aircraft, 125 for the AMI, 50 for the Luftwaffe and 25 for the Royal Netherlands Air Force.

In total, the five working groups manufactured 1,127 F-104s, 220 TF-104s >

1977. This job offered improved performance compared to the basic common requirement of the F-104. The last of 20 F-104s that equipped the various units of the AMI were withdrawn from use in 1983.

Two-seaters
The first Italian example of the dedicated training version was an aircraft assembled by Lockheed and delivered to the AMI on 23 February 1965. Another 113 followed, these being assembled at the Torino Caselle plant using components and parts provided by Lockheed. The first of these was the only Italian TF-104 to have flown in two missions. All two-seaters lacked the Vulcan cannon.

The very first group of Italian pilots attended a training course with the US Air Force's 478th Tactical Fighter Wing at George AFB, California. Meanwhile, pending the establishment of a dedicated training unit in Italy, most of the most famous of aircraft were trained in Germany, with Wilhelmsen 10 of the Luftwaffe at Nörvenich.

In order to provide adequate training for pilots destined to fly such an advanced aircraft, a dedicated unit was created, as the 20th Gruppo Autonomo Addestramento Superiore (Superior Autonomous Training Group) based at Grosseto, this unit maintained the same role until the very end of the operational life of the Starfighter in Italy.

In 1960 the AMI received another 12 TF-104s, followed by further six examples in 1964. All had previously been operated by the Luftwaffe, in total, 19 Starfighter trainers flew in Italian colors.

'Widow maker' and 'flying coffin' were among the apocryphal nicknames assigned to the Starfighter by an ill-informed media during the early period of its career. Although the ratio was high, it was no worse than those of other AMI aircraft, such as the F-105, F-106, F-107, F-108, F-109, F-110, F-111, F-112, F-113, F-114, F-115, F-116, F-117, F-118, F-119, F-120, F-121, F-122, F-123, F-124, F-125, F-126, F-127, F-128, F-129, F-130, F-131, F-132, F-133, F-134, F-135, F-136, F-137, F-138, F-139, F-140, F-141, F-142, F-143, F-144, F-145, F-146, F-147, F-148, F-149, F-150, F-151, F-152, F-153, F-154, F-155, F-156, F-157, F-158, F-159, F-160, F-161, F-162, F-163, F-164, F-165, F-166, F-167, F-168, F-169, F-170, F-171, F-172, F-173, F-174, F-175, F-176, F-177, F-178, F-179, F-180, F-181, F-182, F-183, F-184, F-185, F-186, F-187, F-188, F-189, F-190, F-191, F-192, F-193, F-194, F-195, F-196, F-197, F-198, F-199, F-200, F-201, F-202, F-203, F-204, F-205, F-206, F-207, F-208, F-209, F-210, F-211, F-212, F-213, F-214, F-215, F-216, F-217, F-218, F-219, F-220, F-221, F-222, F-223, F-224, F-225, F-226, F-227, F-228, F-229, F-230, F-231, F-232, F-233, F-234, 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