

# FLIGHT INTERNATIONAL INC.: SUPPORTING THE WARFIGHTERS

Story and Photos by Rick Llinares

Tucked away into a small corner of the Newport News-Williamsburg, Va., airport is a little known company that fulfills an important support role for the U.S. Navy's warfighting capability. Flight International Inc. (FII) provides realistic training for both air wings and the surface fleet.

Founded in 1976 as an airline training school in Atlanta, Ga., FII is an aviation services company which offers the government and the aerospace industry cost-effective and flexible airborne testing platforms that have a wide range of capabilities, including towed targets and decoys, electronic warfare (EW) systems and customer-specific payloads. The company is also an authorized Federal Aviation Administration repair station specializing in service and modification of Learjet aircraft. The company's global operations span the United States and Europe. It relies on a large fleet of aircraft, mostly Learjets, and an experienced staff of more than 150 employees.

Flight International provides airborne electronic warfare and electronic countermeasures support for training of aircrews and shipboard personnel, as well as for supporting research and development, training and evaluating programs conducted by government agencies such as NATO, the defense industry and the scientific community.



**Top, Flight International Inc. relies on a large fleet of Learjets to accomplish its global mission. Above, a towed target rests under the wing of a Learjet. Below left, a Strike Fighter Squadron 37 F/A-18 Hornet escorts a Learjet to NAS Oceana, Va.**



Its aircraft can be fitted with internal and external EW equipment for threat simulation and active and passive jamming systems covering a wide spectrum of frequencies, and can simulate the specific radar signatures of potential bad guys.

The company's flight crews and onboard electronic warfare operators are highly experienced in both the flight test and operational environments, and the crews are well versed in threat scenarios and tactics. Rather than take the more lucrative path of



commercial airline aviation, the small cadre of experienced pilots take on the challenging and diverse mission that FII supports. The average company pilot brings thousands of hours of military flying experience into the cockpit, including some combat.

Jim Pressick is typical of the aviators who fly for Flight International. He flew F-4 *Phantom IIs* in combat during the Vietnam War, as well as F-15 *Eagles* during his 22-year career in the Air Force. The former fighter pilot described some of the varied missions that he and the other FII pilots fly. "During air gunnery engagements with the Navy, we fly several profiles. The first is straight and level and the fighter pilots provide their own angle off the target. The other profile is more interesting. Called the 'squirrel cage,' it's a circular pattern and very dynamic in which three fighters attack the target banner at different times in a continuous manner."

After the mission, the Learjet typically flies back to NAS Oceana, Va., with a fighter escort. Since the banner trails the Learjet, an F-14 *Tomcat* or F/A-18 *Hornet* flies aft of it to ensure that no aircraft accidentally cross the path of the banner. Once over the airfield, the Learjet crew cuts the banner free and it floats harmlessly to the ground where it can be inspected for hit accuracy.


An equally important part of FII's mission is to support the surface fleet with towed targets. The Learjets carry tow reels under the wing that have a target connected to up to 22,000 feet of cable which is reeled out and back. The Navy ships fire their guns at the towed target which simulates a cruise missile. The Lear pilots usually keep the target anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 feet above the water, but in some cases present it at altitudes below 200 feet to

simulate a low flying cruise missile. This tests a ship's ability to locate and track these threats.

For true simulation of high-speed threat aircraft, the company relies on some interesting assets, including a pair of SAAB *Draken* aircraft and an Israeli *Kfir* fighter. In addition, mission-specialized pods are hung underneath the Lear aircraft which allow the jets to simulate the electronic signatures that potentially hostile aircraft represent to Navy ships and ground controllers.

Much of the Navy training done by the company in the Atlantic Fleet is over the large warning areas off the Virginia and North Carolina coasts. While FII owns the aircraft, the actual flight time is arranged and paid for by the Navy and managed by the Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility (FACSFAC), Virginia Capes in Virginia Beach. The facility monitors aircraft movements and coordinates assignments as well as the use of the offshore warning areas for all air, surface and subsurface units. It also handles many other tasks, from search and rescue operations support to range safety and control for live-fire exercises and supplying air intercept control services for fleet readiness squadrons. FII also maintains a base of operations at NAS North Island, Calif., where it provides similar services to its primary Navy customer in the Pacific Fleet, FACSFAC San Diego.

All of this support provides the Navy a valuable training capability that enables aircrews to remain the best of the best.

 Rick Linares is a professional photographer and writer specializing in Naval Aviation. The author is grateful to Flight International Inc. and FACSFAC VACAPES for their support of this article.