



**Defense Media Network
Unveils New Cutting-Edge
Website**

Draken International Commercial Air Services

**Interview with Jared
Isaacman, Draken
International CEO and
Sean Gustafson, Vice
President of Client
Relations**

BY JAN TEGLER



**Draken International's large and
diverse fleet of aircraft for**

contract air services allows them to fill a variety of roles for customers. Draken International photo by Jose Ramos

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The market for [commercial air services \(CAS\)](#), alternately known as outsourced flight support, contract adversary support, or commercial Red Air, seems to be gaining altitude. Cutbacks in defense budgets dating back to the mid-1990s have left the [U.S. Air Force](#), [U.S. Navy](#), and [U.S. Marine Corps](#) with little organic adversary support.

Several private firms fielding fleets of third-generation fighters and trainers, as well as support aircraft, have attempted to fill the gap, offering a range of commercial air services. Defense Media Network has [profiled two](#) – [ATAC USA](#) and [Omega International](#). Now, we take a look at one of the newest and largest entrants into this unique business –

Draken International.

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Led by Jared Isaacman, founder of the successful payments-processing firm **Harbortouch**, Draken is now physically the largest player in the CAS business, with a fleet of more than 50 tactical aircraft. Comprised of ex-**Royal New Zealand Air Force** A-4K Skyhawks (11), ex-RNZAF MB-339CB trainers (9), Aero L-39s (5), ex-Polish MiG-21bis/UM (25), and **Beech** Baron and **Cessna** Citation 650 support aircraft, the group also represents the world's largest privately-held fleet of tactical aircraft.

Headquartered in Lakeland, Fla. at **Lakeland Linder Airport**, Draken International was launched quietly at the end of 2011, but has made considerable noise in 2013. In April, **Florida Governor Rick Scott** held a press conference to announce that Draken would create 55 jobs and invest \$67 million in its Lakeland

facilities over the next three years.

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The firm aims to be the leader in CAS, and along with its large fleet, counts a roster of experienced pilots among its executives and management, and recently retired general/flag officers on its board of advisors. The L-39s that formed the core of its fleet derive from the six-ship L-39-equipped **Black Diamond Jet Team** that Isaacman formed as the "Heavy Metal Jet Team" in 2011.

To date, the company has won one small contract with the Navy, which it has been flying in support of since July 2012, according to Sean Gustafson, Draken's VP of Client Relations. We spoke with Draken

CEO Jared Isaacman and Sean Gustafson
for details on the new firm.



Jan Tegler: How did the idea for Draken International arise? Apparently, the Black Diamond Jet Team members were instrumental in its formation. Was this an

inspiration Mr. Isaacman had, an opportunity recognized by the team members, or did it evolve more broadly?

Jared Isaacman: Draken International did evolve from the Black Diamond Jet Team. The idea was a collaboration throughout the team and ultimately came to fruition after our first major aircraft acquisition. While we all enjoyed our time flying with Black Diamond, the organization is now extremely focused on our rapidly growing enterprise at Draken.

Why launch Draken now?

The demand for the work we perform, CAS, has never been stronger. The present fiscal environment calls for cost savings. So the opportunity is right for the business model we provide. That stated, we weren't going to enter the industry unless we could differentiate ourselves from those that have tried to create this model previously. That is why we searched the world and purchased the best aircraft to exceed the requirements of our important **Department of Defense** customers.

What is it about the current defense landscape and the market for contract air support that Draken finds attractive?

The present budget constraints are forcing the Department of Defense to find innovative ways to save money. Utilizing CAS such as Draken positions the government to save upwards of a billion dollars over the next decade. As an example, we can put five of our A-4K Skyhawks in the air for the price of a single F-16 on an hourly basis. In today's environment, that type of savings can't be ignored.

In addition, delays with the F-35 program have put a premium value on the remaining flight hours on legacy fighters such as F-16, F-15 and F-18s. That puts Draken in a unique situation where we can save the government tens of thousands of dollars per flight hour and preserve the valuable life remaining on the legacy fighter force.



In terms of physical size, Draken International is the largest player in the commercial air services (CAS) market. Draken International photo by Jose Ramos

How will the company differentiate itself from other firms in this

space?

We feel there are a lot of things that differentiate Draken International. This includes our organizational infrastructure, financial resources, and maintenance practices, but without a question our aircraft are what truly sets us apart. We own over 50 tactical fighter jets – the largest privately owned fleet in the world. The quantity and more importantly the capabilities our jets have are unmatched.

Our Douglas A-4 K Skyhawks underwent a several hundred million dollar upgrade program in New Zealand to include the radar, avionics, data bus and other capabilities typically found in the F-16. This gives our customers a tactically relevant adversary with generation-four capabilities while at the same time saving substantial dollars.

What is the range of services the company will provide?

Draken provides a wide range of services, from “Red Air” adversary support to research and development. Other missions include fleet defense training, JTAC [joint

terminal attack controller] training, and chase services, as well as air to air refueling.

Our A-4K Skyhawks have buddy stores which are able to pass fuel to any probe-equipped aircraft or refuel ourselves. This provides an incredible cost-savings to our customer versus using a tanker aircraft or a Navy asset. It also extends our own capabilities, providing the customer with more training instead of wasted time going back and forth to the base to refuel.

We are the only CAS provider that operates buddy store refueling tanks. In all cases, our missions are about training and threat replication. Our role is not to replace U.S. military aggressors but to augment and compliment them in a pure training role.



Draken International's

former New Zealand Air Force A-4K "Fighting Hawks" (background) are equipped with the APG-66 radar and other advanced equipment never seen on typical Skyhawks. One of the company's Macchi MB-339s is in the foreground. Draken International photo by Jose Ramos

What is the makeup of Draken aircrew and maintainers?

They are primarily ex-Navy and Air Force pilots and maintainers. Each one has been hired for their specific expertise. We have **Fighter Weapons School** and Top Gun Instructors, and our maintainers have attended the best schools in the world. For aircrew specifically, we tend to look towards part-time U.S. Navy/**U.S. Air Force Reserve** and **Guard** pilots that are able to make Draken their full time job and continue their military service part-time. This ensures we have the most current and experienced pilots possible.

How is the company finding talent?

The company has continued to grow through word of mouth and recommendations. The governor of Florida held a press conference in our hangar in April and that gave us a flood of resumes of highly talented individuals. We are fortunate to be able to pick the best of the best to work with us.

How significant is the inclusion of APG-66 radars and RWRs on the firm's A-4Ks?

The APG-66 Radar and RWR are certainly a differentiator in today's market. The ability to target aircraft or "spike" them provides a realistic threat. Our ability to be a RWR aware threat and react is unmatched. America's fourth and especially fifth-gen fighters need more than just a piece of metal in the sky to target. Draken provides a great deal more.

The A-4Ks were equipped with the

APG-66 while still in RNZAF service, correct?

Yes, the A-4Ks were equipped with APG-66 while in RNZAF service and maintained at a high FMC (mission-capable) rate. We have all the equipment needed to support these radars as well as the spares. It is an outstanding radar and is excellent in the aggressor role. In fact, the U.S. Navy F-16 aggressors operate very similar radar, as well as numerous other militaries around the world. We're fortunate to benefit from the several hundred million dollar upgrade program that New Zealand felt these aircraft deserved.

What's the reasoning behind the mix of aircraft Draken is fielding currently (presumably the availability of ex-RNZAF aircraft had a lot to do with it) and how are pilots trained on the different aircraft types (particularly the MiG-21s)?

While we operate three different aircraft types, it's important to see the role they fill for the customer. Having aircraft that fit specific mission sets helps ensure we are providing the best service.



One of Draken International's A-4Ks in the hangar. The company has a commitment to a strong infrastructure and logistics as much as to acquiring the best aircraft and personnel. Draken International photo by Jose Ramos

The A-4K Skyhawk is a true multi-role platform that can fulfill A/G, A/A and R&D mission sets. The Mig-21 is our optimal supersonic platform, equipped with a **NATO** "JAY BIRD" radar. The **Aermacchi** MB-339 is clearly the best JTAC training platform in the A/G role available in the CAS industry. Our pilots are full time pilots trained on one airframe, becoming experts on the platform and its related missions. This increases safety, professionalism and ensures the best service for our customer.

Does the company plan to operate from facilities other than the Lakeland headquarters?

Sean Gustafson: We currently have two A-4Ks at **BAE System's** facility at **Mojave Air and Spaceport**.

Draken's executive team and its board have considerable tactical aviation experience, but Mr. Isaacman does not. What does his leadership bring to the company?

Sean Gustafson: Mr. Isaacman brings incredible business savvy and an unmatched passion for aviation to the company. His successes over the past decade as CEO of Harbortouch give him the experience needed to take Draken to the highest level in the industry.

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Draken has executed a strategy we call “Field of Dreams –if you build it they will come.” As such, we purchased the best jets and built an unbelievable infrastructure to

support them. We have the expertise to pilot and maintain these aircraft and we have an indigenous supply line that ensures maximum sortie rates. We believe we have put all the pieces together to be a true asset to the U.S. government and taxpayers.

He has thousands of hours of flying private and tactical aircraft and continues to excel in every airframe. His confident and approachable attitude motivates every person in Draken to perform at his or her very best. The Draken “culture” stems from Mr. Isaacman and it is certainly a winning attitude.

Other firms in this space, working primarily with the Navy via commercial air services contracts and the Air Force through MIPR (military interdepartmental purchase request) money have come and gone. How will Draken sustain itself?

Jared Isaacman: We have the best-equipped fleet and the ability to sustain these aircraft for many years. We made a commitment when we went out and purchased these aircraft. Others have simply leased a few jets with little support behind them and were destined for failure from the beginning.

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Does Draken see potential in providing its services outside CONUS to foreign air forces?

Jared Isaacman: Contract air services are continuing to grow on a global scale. The same savings the U.S. government is starting to enjoy will be recognized globally. Our immediate priority is to tackle

the domestic workload, but we do anticipate future international expansion across NATO nations.

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BY JAN TEGLER

Jan Tegler is a writer/broadcaster from Severna Park, Md. His work appears in a variety...

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