

RAF pilot seconded to Virgin Orbit space programme

The partnership between the RAF and Virgin Orbit was unveiled at the Air and Space Power conference in July. Following a tough selection process, Air Vice-Marshal Simon 'Rocky' Rochelle and Virgin Orbit CEO Dan Hart have announced that Flight Lieutenant Mathew 'Stanny' Stannard had been selected.

Flt Lt. Stannard is currently a Typhoon pilot with one of the RAF's test and evaluation squadrons and is expected to join the pioneering Virgin Orbit programme next year, pending final US and UK regulatory approvals.

The secondment is expected to last three years and will see Flt Lt Stannard join the fleet of expert 'test pilots' trialling Boeing 747-400 aircraft from which cutting-edge satellites will be launched.

Flt Lt Stannard will return to the RAF with considerable skills and expertise gained from the secondment which will improve the UK's understanding of the military uses of small satellites.

Defence Minister Annie-Marie Trevelyan said:

The UK and the US already have an incredibly close defence relationship and now we're working together to forge new frontiers in space.

This exciting partnership will see Virgin Orbit benefit from the skills and expertise of our personnel while propelling the RAF's space ambitions to new heights.

Air Vice-Marshal Rochelle, the RAF Air Capability Chief of Staff, said:

It's great news that the RAF can now confirm the secondment of Flight Lieutenant Stannard to the Virgin Orbit team. This move comes through our close collaboration and formal partnership with Virgin Orbit within Team ARTEMIS.

Having one of our Test Pilots working at the heart of such a cutting-edge programme is a significant step in the RAF's space journey. It also reinforces the close relationship we have with industry and with the US, we expect this to further enable UK satellite launch capabilities.

Flight Lieutenant Stannard said:

I've flown Tornado and Typhoon fighter jets in the RAF but being involved in Virgin Orbit's space programme is a truly unique opportunity.

This programme is pushing the boundaries of our understanding of space so it's a real privilege to be part of it and I'm looking forward to bringing the skills and knowledge I gain back to the RAF.

Virgin Orbit have recently commenced their first launch campaign, developing a new small satellite launch vehicle called LauncherOne which is to be released from a modified Boeing 747-400 named Cosmic Girl.

Virgin Orbit CEO Dan Hart said:

As an American Company with British ownership and a company guided by Sir Richard Branson, a truly legendary British entrepreneur, it is perhaps within our DNA to help the United Kingdom and the United States collaborate in space.

As part of Team ARTEMIS, we've been working with the RAF and the U.S. Air Force to demonstrate the utility of small satellites and responsive, resilient space launch and operations. We are thrilled to welcome Flight Lt. Matthew Stannard to our team of hugely talented pilots where I know his presence will move us further, faster and to new heights.

Virgin Orbit aircraft and launch vehicle.

The announcement was made in California aboard the iconic RMS Queen Mary ship—a fitting venue given the ship's history as Winston Churchill's floating headquarters in World War 2 and a symbol of the US/UK special relationship.

The Royal Air Force's Red Arrows display team flew over the ship as part of the event, which is one of the last on their North American tour over the last three months.

In July, the MOD outlined an ambitious space programme, committing £30m to fast-track the launch of a small satellite demonstrator within a year. The small satellite demonstrator, also known as Programme ARTEMIS, is being delivered by a new transatlantic team of UK and US defence personnel and industry partners including Virgin Orbit.

The MOD also announced the UK as the first formal partner in the US-led Operation Olympic Defender – a multinational military effort formed to strengthen deterrence against hostile actors in space, enhance resilience and preserve the safety of spaceflight.