

Final frontier: Crowd sees spaceship launcher fly

July 28 2009, By TODD RICHMOND , Associated Press Writer



WhiteKnightTwo follows two photos planes as it circles Monday, July 27, 2009 above the Experimental Aircraft Association's annual AirVenture convention in Oshkosh, Wis. British billionaire Sir Richard Branson hopes to use WhiteKnightTwo to carry a spaceship into the upper atmosphere. The spaceship would then detach and rocket into space. Branson hopes to use the system to create a commercial space travel business. (AP Photo/Mike Roemer)

(AP) -- Hundreds of earthlings turned their faces to the sky Monday to see an airplane built to launch a ship into space, watching the gleaming white craft soar overhead.

The twin-fuselage craft named WhiteKnightTwo, looking like two planes connected at the wing tips, circled the runway several times before touching down at the Experimental Aircraft Association's Air Venture annual gathering.

It was the first glimpse the public had of the plane, which was made by Virgin Galactic as part of its effort to jump-start commercial space travel. Its designers, engineer Burt Rutan and British billionaire Sir Richard Branson, watched and smiled from the edge of the tarmac.

It was "majestic," said 13-year-old Alura Law of Reddick, Fla.

Her mother, 45-year-old Kim Law, is blind but aimed her camera at the sound of the WhiteKnightTwo. She said it offers hope that scientific experiments in weightlessness might someday restore her sight.

"I'm telling you, (I'm) real hopeful. Inspired," she said.

Virgin Galactic's plan calls for WhiteKnightTwo to lift SpaceShipTwo, a pressurized spacecraft, into the atmosphere from a base in New Mexico. When they reach 50,000 feet, the spaceship would detach and blast into space at four times the speed of sound.

The six passengers would experience about five minutes of weightlessness and get a glimpse of Earth. The spaceship would glide back to Earth much like the [space shuttle](#). Take-off to landing is expected to take about 2 1/2 hours.

Virgin Galactic doesn't have a launch date yet, but has taken 300 reservations at \$200,000 each and is holding \$40 million in deposits. Customers include scientist [Stephen Hawking](#) and "Superman Returns" director Bryan Singer, according to Virgin Galactic President Will Whitehorn.

"Superman Returns" even features a sequence involving two aircraft much like WhiteKnightTwo and SpaceShipTwo. In the movie, Lois Lane boards a launcher jet with a space shuttle-like vehicle attached. The jet lifts the shuttle into the atmosphere, but the plane ends up plunging to

Earth and Superman must race to save it.

Virgin Galactic officials say safety will be their "guiding star."

"We not only have to do it safely, we have to give (passengers) a good time," said Virgin Galactic's commercial director, Stephen Attenborough.

The plan came about after Rutan partnered with Virgin Group chairman Branson. Rutan had made history in 2004 when his SpaceShipOne became the first private manned craft to reach space with help from launcher plane WhiteKnightOne. The feat earned him the \$10 million Ansari X Prize.

WhiteKnightTwo has now made 16 test flights, Attenborough said. The company will keep testing it until fall, when tests will begin on SpaceShipTwo. Branson himself plans to take the first trip and bring his 92-year-old father and 89-year-old mother with him.

The WhiteKnightTwo, nicknamed "Eve" in honor of Branson's mother, sports a painting of a woman in a space helmet on both fuselages and looks like nothing so much as a gleaming white half of the letter "E."

"Most people never really believed it would be a reality," said Branson. "By just trying these things, new things come out of it."

Matthew Pritzker, a science fiction fan since his youth, has his trip booked. The 27-year-old from Chicago, who runs his own investment firm, is looking forward to being weightless and said he's no more nervous that he would be getting on a roller coaster.

Pritzker said he wants to walk on the moon someday, and SpaceShipTwo marks a step toward that.

"This venture will prove to be a huge, huge turning point in the world of travel," he said. "It means so much to people who grew up looking at the stars."

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