

IAF SYMPOSIUM ON COMMERCIAL SPACEFLIGHT SAFETY ISSUES (D6)
Enabling safe commercial spaceflight: vehicles and spaceports (3)

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A SECOND GENERATION SUBORBITAL RESEARCH PLATFORM FOR LARGE SCALE
MICROGRAVITY FLIGHT EXPERIMENTS AND POINT TO POINT SPACE TOURISM

Abstract

Rocketplane Global, Inc. is continuing its preliminary engineering and development effort for its Mach 12 spaceplane design, based on a 20 year legacy of systems engineering for a variety of high Mach suborbital spaceplanes. The first stage reusable launch system is capable of delivering up to 2,000 kg to a 800 km polar orbit and can deliver over 2,500 kg to the ISS orbit. A key enabling technology for this system is the use of a KDC-10 tanker aircraft to transfer the majority of the propellant load to the spaceplane once the vehicle is in the air and flying at normal subsonic jet speed. The tanker carries the 64,000 kg of LOX plus the kerosene fuel. This enables the disruptive reduction in launch price to less than \$20 million for a 2 ton LEO satellite or deployment of multiple 150 kg microsats from a dispenser.

While the first stage spaceplane is 100% reusable and designed for daily flight operations, the second stage needed to get payloads to orbit is expendable. Consequently, the internal payload bay of the Phoenix spaceplane is quite large at 3m diameter x 9m long – about the same size as a large business jet interior.

The key enabler for low cost orbital launch is getting as much of the energy to orbit as possible provided by the reusable first stage. The Phoenix launch system stages at Mach 12 (half orbital velocity) and about 150km altitude. Therefore, the Phoenix spaceplane has the ability to greatly expand the microgravity operating environment with this high Mach flight profile and more than double the duration of high quality microgravity flight time. Preliminary estimates are between 6 and 7 minutes of 10-3 or better microgravity, or a 1,500km range for P2P tourism flights.

The large payload bay will be configured with a reusable pressurized payload bay laboratory module which would be equipped with standard ISS rack systems and experiment hardware. Researchers will be able to fly tended experiments inside the research module, since the spaceplane is piloted and therefore human rated from the beginning. The system could be available for daily flight operations should customer demand support this. Because of the large volume and payload mass capabilities of the system and 100% reusability, ROM pricing for a 6+ minute high quality human tended microgravity could be as low as \$200/kg for large volume customers, with service beginning in 2024 or 2025.