



Submission No 5

Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

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The Secretary of the Committee on PH
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Subject: Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

As a former F-111 Weapon Systems Officer in the USAF (and the lead navigator for two F-111 wings) I have monitored from afar your deliberations regarding the future of your F-111 force. I realize that many factors will go into your decision, but will favor you with some observations that may be useful.

After the 1991 Gulf War, our Air Force fell all over themselves divesting their F-111s before it could be widely publicized just how valuable they had been in that conflict. I believe they were successful in doing this because, unlike the A-10s that they also wanted to rid themselves of, not many reporters were at Taif AB with the F-111Fs and most F-111 missions were flown at night when there were no “good visuals” to put on CNN. Furthermore, while almost all of the smart bomb videos shown by General Schwarzkopf were from F-111Fs, virtually all of the verbiage sang the praises of the new F-15Es and stealthy F-117As. Even when the F-111Fs were “tank plinking”, making the start of the ground war possible, they were given no credit. The bottom line was that the USAF needed more money for the F-22 and the F-111 was the sacrificial lamb of the day to provide it. One excuse I heard was that there was a feeling that the Cold War was over and there wasn't a need for an airplane with such range and payload anymore—after all how many long range wars could we expect to be fighting... In short, just because we got rid of our F-111s, it doesn't automatically follow that that was a smart thing to do.

Range/Payload: From what little reading is available in the American press, it appears that the proposal before you is to replace your F-111s with F-35s. While the F-35 will eventually be an excellent replacement for your AF/A-18A/Bs, F-111s are an entirely different matter.

A short story that I'm sure your own aircrews can relate to. I vividly remember taking off first for a Red Flag mission, holding at low altitude and watching the F-16s refueling high overhead before the mission began. Once we “pushed”, our F-111s flew faster, deeper, and with a greater payload than the F-16s. We egressed transonically at low level before climbing out and returning to Nellis... watching as the F-16s scrambled to tankers to refuel again before they could follow.

The real F-111 replacement for our Air Force has been the B-1B. The F-15E is really more of an F-4 replacement in terms of range and payload. Whatever you decide to replace your F-111s with, you need to acknowledge that you are going to be giving up a capability that seems to be uniquely suited to your country's range and payload requirements. Unless you're willing to buy LOTS of tankers, don't be fooled into thinking of the F-35 as an F-111 replacement.

Cost: Yes, F-111s are pretty expensive to operate. However, when our Air Force set out to use this argument to get rid of their F-111s they did a study and discovered to their horror that the most expensive aircraft to operate was their beloved F-15C. That study quickly disappeared! But, you also need to think about something else. As a mature weapon, your F-111s are able to employ a wide variety of weapons already and you have an autonomous capability to qualify new weapons quickly. It will be many years before F-35s have a similar capability and (at least in the near term) you will be very dependent on the US as to which weapons are cleared and in what order. No matter what the “bag men” may tell you, clearing new weapons on new aircraft is a time consuming, expensive proposition. One of the nice things about the F-111 is that their pylons are long enough that they have pretty clean store separation characteristics. Don’t blindly assume that the same will be true of the F-35.

Force Experience: Last, but not least, I hope you appreciate what a unique group of professionals your F-111 aircrew force is (not to mention your maintainers). As their recent experience at Red Flag showed, these guys (and gals) *really* know their business. Also, the only thing that F-111 crews care about is getting bombs on target. Their attention is not diluted worrying about becoming aces and no one knows more about the attack mission than your F-111 community.

Good luck with your deliberations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JE Rotramel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Jim Rotramel
Major, USAF, Ret.