

INCOMING? SUPER HORNETS

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When the news story broke in *The Australian Financial Review* in mid December last year about the government's plan to acquire up to 24 F/A-18E/F Super Hornet fighters it took most observers by surprise. Surprise because for a year or more the RAAF and the Defence Minister's office had been consistent in quashing rumblings and rumours that Australia needed an interim combat aircraft to ensure a 'capability gap' did not open up between retirement of the F-111 fleet and introduction of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) next decade.

The article's content or accuracy was not subsequently refuted by Defence, normally a reflex reaction when a newspaper gets it wrong. While neither the Department nor Mr Nelson's office has since issued a press release verifying or providing further details about the Super Hornet buy, it has been confirmed that the information for the article came first hand (that is, directly) from Brendan Nelson himself. It doesn't get any higher up the food chain than that in Defence circles.

So if we are to go ahead and acquire two dozen Super Hornets, what exactly will their intended purpose be?

Firstly, they would presumably replace the medium strike role to be left vacant once the 30 or so remaining F-111s are retired around 2010-2012.

The strike role is a capability that provides a recognised strategic deterrent, particularly in our near region of interest.

Then there's the matter of bridging the gap between withdrawal from service of the F-111s and introduction of the first full squadron of JSF (about 20-25 aircraft).

In the face of constant denials from JSF prime contractor Lockheed Martin, the US Air Force and the Federal Government, most analysts agree that there is almost

the first Australian Super Hornets enter service around 2010; although an initial tranche of half a dozen or so aircraft may be pulled from the US Navy Super Hornet production line and delivered as early as 2008. This would enable instructors, crews and maintenance personnel to develop an initial operational capability well before the F-111s leave town.

Combat proven over both Iraq and Afghanistan, the Super Hornet is oft described as a 'Hornet on steroids'. It is bigger, heavier and can carry more ordnance than the Hornets currently serving our nation.

See the table below for further detail, but essentially the Super Hornet will have twice the mission radius of, and a greater weapons load than, the stock model Hornet. It will also permit RAAF commanders to switch between air-to-surface and air-superiority roles at will as mission and operational threat parameters dictate.

What can taxpayers expect to fork out for such capability? A rough-order-of-magnitude figure being bandied about is at least \$2 billion, with upper estimates nudging the \$3 billion mark.

That's a lot of folding stuff no doubt, but it may actually work out nicely for the

RAAF, as it could result in fewer JSFs being required than the currently projected 80-100 platforms, effectively offsetting the cost of the Super Hornet buy.

How long will the Super Hornets be in RAAF service? Based on the numbers involved and the likely price tag and complexity of the acquisition and associated through-life support package, this has all the hallmarks of a serious purchase – one intended to provide a capability (predominantly strike) over the longer term, rather than an interim measure of a few years duration.

It would not surprise this author at least, if the Super Hornet was still listed on the RAAF's inventory two, maybe even three decades from now.

PERFORMANCE AND WARLOAD COMPARISON

	F-111C	F/A-18E/F Super Hornet	F/A-18A/B Hornet
Empty Weight:	21,537kg	13,864kg	11,200kg
Max Take-Off Weight:	44,896kg	29,900kg	25,400kg
Internal Fuel:	15,454kg	6352kg	4926kg
Dry Engine Thrust:	120kN	124kN	98kN
Thrust w/Afterburner:	186kN	196kN	158kN
Max Speed:	Mach 2.5	Mach 1.8	Mach 1.8
Combat Radius (strike mission)	1475km	1080km	535km
External Weapons Load	11,500kg	8032kg	7030kg

certain to be slippage in the production and delivery timetable of these fifth-generation multi-role aircraft. Some believe the RAAF will be lucky to receive its first batch of JSF by 2014/2015 – others think 2017/2018 is more realistic.

The current plan, according to the article in the *Financial Review*, is to see

