

F-111 retires



Farewell old Friend

The retirement of the F-111 fleet marks a significant milestone in the history of Australian military aviation. The long-range strike bomber has supported Australia's national security interests by providing a potent strategic deterrent for nearly 40 years.

Since its introduction in 1973, the F-111 has undergone numerous airframe, engine, weapons and avionics upgrades to keep it at the front line of Australia's defence strategy – but, in the end, the cost of maintaining the ageing aircraft simply became too high.

Befitting an icon, a 'Pigs Tales' memorial service and formal retirement parade were held at RAAF Base Amberley in south-east Queensland to farewell an old friend and workhorse on 2 and 3 December last year.

The parade was hosted by Air Commodore Chris Sawade with Group Captain Steve Robertson, Officer Commanding Number 82 Wing, as parade commander.

Air Vice Marshal Mark Skidmore, Air Commander Australia, and Air Vice Marshal Geoffrey Brown, Deputy Chief of Air Force were official guests, while the reviewing officer was Air Marshal Mark Binskin, Chief of Air Force.

While the names mean little to the average reader, Wing Commander Glen Braz, commanding Number 1 Squadron and Wing Commander Micka Gray, commanding Number 6 Squadron, will certainly remember their part in this historic event for a long time.

The Air Force component of the Australian Federation Guard from Canberra acted as the Escort Squadron on the parade and the Air Force Band from Melbourne provided the necessary and poignant musical accompaniment.

The efforts and dedication of hundreds of RAAF air crew and thousands of ground-based support personnel who have worked hard to fly and maintain F-111 capability during the past 37 years were also recognised on the parade.

Those who lost their lives in F-111 crashes and who died or have suffered serious health effects from working with dangerous chemical on the deseal/reseal programs were also remembered.

Australia was the last remaining operator of the American-built F-111s anywhere in the world for more than 10 years. The F-111G models were withdrawn from service in 2007 and 3 December's parade marked the F-111Cs and RF-111Cs retirement.

Just about everyone in Australia with the slightest interest in airplanes or aviation – in fact, millions who didn't pay much attention to anything that flies – became familiar with the F-111 and its famous and loved 'dump-and-burn' display over the years. The dump-and-burn lit skies above events as diverse as airshows and car races, football games and carols-by-candlelight. Day or night, all over Australia, the sight of the supersonic jet trailing a tongue of fire in its wake became a staple, much anticipated element of many high-profile events for many years.

But of course, for those who know and care and worry a good deal more about the real reason we maintained the F-111 fleet for longer than anyone else in the world, the spectacle of the dump-and-burn was nothing more than a heart-warming sideshow.

The real reason we maintained the F-111 was for its capacity to rain fire of a much different kind on places very far away.

As a strategic bomber, the F-111 had the legs and the speed to reach out and touch far-off places – like Jakarta, for example – if the need ever arose. And some would say the need never arose because the F-111 was capable of doing just that. After all, that's what strategic deterrence is all about.

The aircraft could fly at two and a half times the speed of sound at high altitude, or even at supersonic speeds at very low levels, using its terrain-following capabilities, to avoid detection.

Australia never entered the 'nuclear age' in terms of weapons. So why was the F-111, with its conventional-munitions carrying capacity of less than 14,000kg and with the limited and slowly diminishing numbers in the fleet, such an effective deterrent?

Well, while it may never have been capable of 'levelling' anything bigger than a hamlet, the psychological effect of its range and, especially in latter years, its increasing precision, was very great indeed.



Above Darryll Macklin, Site Manager for Rosebank Engineering at RAAF Base Amberley, had the honour of marshalling in No 6 Squadron F-111 A8-125 after its final flight on December 3, with Commanding Officer 6 SQN Wing Commander Michael Gray at the controls. Mr Macklin was an Airframe Fitter in June 1973 when the first F-111 landed at Amberley from the USA. That aircraft was A8-125, the same one he marshalled for the last time 37 years later.



The Pig

Originally known as the TFX (Tactical Fighter Experimental), the F-111 was conceived to meet a US Air Force requirement for a new tactical fighter-bomber.

In 1960, the Department of Defense combined the Air Force's requirement with a US Navy need for a new air superiority fighter, then launched a competition among aircraft manufacturers for the final design.

In 1962, General Dynamics and Boeing were selected as finalists with the General Dynamics TFX design eventually winning out. The Navy version was known as the F-111B and the Air Force version the F-111A. Eventually the Navy's F-111B program was cancelled.

The first flight of the F-111A took place in December 1964, and the first production models were delivered to the Air Force in 1967. In all, 566 F-111s of all series were built.

The aircraft was produced in seven different variants until the last delivery in September 1976.

Unofficially nicknamed the Aardvark, the F-111 was retired in the US on 27 July 1996 – and only then was the name made official.

The F-111 was a twin-engine swing-wing aircraft that could take off and land at relatively low speeds with the wings swept forward, then fly at more than twice the speed of sound with its wings tucked back. It could also fly close to the ground at supersonic speeds, following the terrain to avoid detection.

Its Pavé Tack targeting system was capable of locating targets at night and in bad weather and provided laser designation for laser-guided weapons.

A radar warning system could detect incoming radar emissions and alert the crew to potential surface or air attacks.

It was affectionately known as the 'Pig' for its ability to hunt at night with its nose in the weeds, thanks to its terrain-following radar and ground-avoidance systems.

Highly controversial during its development, the F-111 saw many upgrades during its long service life, making it even better at retirement than when it was introduced to the Royal Australian Air Force in June 1973.

During its 37-year service life as Australia's primary strategic deterrent, the F-111 was the fastest and longest-ranging combat aircraft in the Asia-Pacific.