

Published in the Halifax Chronicle Herald, Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2013

## **RCAF aircraft debate missing key point** by Tim Dunne



A Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter aircraft is shown in this undated photo.

Canadians are engaged in a very public and very divisive debate about the purchase of Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning to replace the CF-188 Hornet fighter aircraft. Advocates against the purchase focus their arguments exclusively on the cost of the fighter, without looking at any other crucial factors.

Our current jet fighter, originally purchased in the 1980s, will be approaching military irrelevance when it is finally replaced. The only aircraft that qualify for their "golden years" lie in museums and collections. The Hornet's replacement will have to meet the new challenges presented by weapons that have not yet been invented, in conflicts that have not yet begun, against adversaries that may not yet be born.

Critics of the F-35 have blinded themselves to several brutal realities which the pilots and technicians, not the detractors, will have to face. These realities are missing from the debate.

### **Life-cycle manageability of the aircraft and aerial systems:**

Canada squeezes every drop of productivity out of our aircraft. Like many of its predecessors, the CF-188 Hornet will be 40 years old when it is finally retired, provided Canada purchases the F-35. A new competitive process will require redundant evaluations of aircraft that have already been dismissed as inadequate by the RCAF, adding years to the replacement program and pushing the Hornet further into obsolescence.

### **Supply chain requirements for the life of the aircraft:**

Simply stated, the aircraft that could be likely candidates for a new competition are already in production and their current supply chains, while established and in operation, have limited life expectancies. Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning's production line is expected to continue until at least 2036, assuring extended access to spare parts and capability enhancements. By comparison, Boeing's Super Hornet, touted as the next-best aircraft, is expected to close its assembly line by 2019.

### **Mission capability:**

The aircraft will have to deliver their payloads and meet their assigned tasks — such as show of force, disruption of adversary operations, aerial combat and support to ground troops — in environments that will become progressively more challenging as anti-air weapons become more advanced, more widely proliferated and less expensive. These capabilities will have to endure for the life of the aircraft. Older fighters lack the newest weapon systems, sensors, avionics and design features.

### **Pilot survivability:**

A jet fighter that is unable to accomplish its mission and falls prey to an adversary will mean dead Canadian pilots, victims to inadequate government attention to operational and ethical requirements to provide our military personnel with the best equipment to get the job done. When this nation sends its personnel into harm's way, they must go with the best equipment to afford them the greatest possibility to survive in hostile environments while achieving their objectives.

Lockheed Martin's unit price tag for the conventional take-off and landing version of the F-35, which Canada would be purchasing, is the least expensive of the three and remains at approximately US\$67 million.

Those who criticize military procurement programs, and advocate that we acquire cheaper fighter aircraft and generally spend less on defence, will never have to defend those perspectives if Canadian security is ever breached. The accusing fingers of the Canadian public will be pointed at the military and at the government, which will be forcefully told that they should have known better.

To purchase an inferior aircraft, without the same stealth qualities, electronic interoperability and armament and capabilities as the F-35, the only fifth-generation fighter aircraft realistically available to Canada, would jeopardize mission success for our air force, and would reduce the potential for pilot survivability. A Super Hornet or a Eurofighter might be good enough for today's strategic and operational demands, but we would be effectively using yesterday's technology to meet future challenges that have yet to be even hypothesized.

The 21st century has already proven to be unkind and unpredictable, and we cannot know what threats the future holds. Whatever happens, we have learned from hard experience that it will be a "come as you are party" and we, as a nation, must anticipate this eventuality.

Our political decision-makers should also be mindful that those who oppose this purchase will never have to fly a combat aircraft into harm's way. They will not have to defend their claims whenever Canada faces domestic or international adversity. They will not be held accountable if the Canadian Forces fail to meet their mission objectives because this nation purchased an inferior aircraft with inadequate capabilities to achieve the mission aims and provide pilot survivability.

**Tim Dunne retired from the Canadian Forces with 37 years service. He is a Halifax-based communications consultant and military affairs writer.**