



## What is Missing from the Jet Fighter Replacement Debate?

By Major Tim Dunne (retired)

There is a very public and divisive public debate among various interest groups, corporate entities and centres of advocacy about the purchase of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning. Arguments include:

- There was no competitive process;
- The aircraft is too expensive for Canada; and
- Canada does not need a fifth generation fighter aircraft.

However, missing from the debate are three foundational arguments for the purchase of the best fighter aircraft that we can acquire:

a. **life-cycle manageability of the aircraft and aerial systems:** Canada squeezes every drop of productivity out of our aircraft. The CF-188 Hornet will be about 40 years old when it is finally retired, provided Canada purchases the F-35. A new competitive process will add years to the replacement program, pushing the Hornet further into obsolescence before it is replaced. Regrettably, this could require Canada to either (a) “sit-out” military intervention operations in which we should be engaged, or (b) send dangerously outdated fourth generation airplanes into fifth generation conflict.

b. **Mission success:** the aircraft will have to deliver their payloads or meet their assigned tasks (air superiority, combat air patrol, interdiction intelligence-gathering, show of force, disruption of adversary operations, etc...) in environments that will become progressively more challenging and dangerous as anti-air weapons become more advanced, more widely proliferated and less expensive;

c. **Pilot survivability:** if the jet fighter is unable to accomplish its mission and falls prey to an adversary, this will mean dead Canadian pilots, victims to inadequate government attention to operational, moral and ethical requirements to provide our military personnel with the best equipment to get the job done.

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 who will be forcefully told that they should have known better.

The world is becoming less kind, increasingly complicated and more dangerous, and we have a very thin military shield to protect us from the vagaries of an unpredictable world.

To purchase an inferior aircraft, one that does not possess the same stealth qualities, electronic interoperability, armament, and capabilities as a fifth generation fighter aircraft that is 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 tactical and strategic demands, but we would be effectively using yesterday’s technology to meet challenges in the coming decades that have yet to be even fully hypothesized.

When Canada sends its sons and daughters into harm’s way, they must have the best equipment that is available. The world of the 21st Century has already proven to be unkind and unpredictable, and we cannot know what threats and dangers the future will hold. However, 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 fails to meet its mission objectives because

this nation purchased an inferior aircraft with inadequate capabilities to achieve the mission aims and provide pilot survivability.

In aerial combat, there is no second place. You win or

you die; you have the best aircraft and weapons or you die; you meet your mission objective or you die trying.

We give our fighter pilots the best aircraft or we give them flying coffins.

*Major Tim Dunne was a Canadian Forces Public Affairs Officer for 37 years. His final assignment was at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's southern European headquarters in Naples, Italy, where he was the Chief of Media Operations. In addition to his service in Canada, he has deployed to the Middle East, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo. He has also established and managed NATO press information centres for major exercises in Romania, France and Bulgaria. He was awarded the Order of Loyal Service by the Republic of Bulgaria in 2002. He can be contacted by email at:*

***tdunne@duncom.ca***