



PHANTOMS OF THE PAST

After 15 years of service, the Canberra bombers of 82 Wing's 1 and 6 Squadrons at Amberley, Queensland, were retired in late 1970. However, the plan to replace the Canberra with the F-111C encountered an obstacle when serious technical problems in the USA delayed the timely introduction of the new type. As a stopgap, two dozen F-4E Phantoms were ferried to Amberley. To date, it was the RAAF's only use of an 'interim' strike aircraft.

In addition, the F-111C was a 'hybrid' version specifically tailored to RAAF requirements, and needed a long gestation period. In fact, the US had foreseen delays and earlier suggested the six-engined B-47 Stratojet as an interim RAAF bomber—an offer which was declined.

At the time the F-4s arrived, it was by no means certain how long they would be needed. No one could be sure how soon the F-111C's problems would be solved, nor whether new ones might arise. The F-4 lease arrangement included an option to purchase, should the F-111C program be cancelled. As events transpired, 82 Wing flew the Phantom for two and a half years.



The RAAF still had half its Phantoms when the first F-111s arrived in June 1973.

As early as 1963, the F-4C had featured among five aircraft types being considered by the RAAF as Canberra replacements. Interest switched to the emerging F-111, but it was not long before the problems with its cutting-edge technology began to appear. A series of crashes and in-flight failure of its world-first 'swing wing' grounded the US Air Force's F-111 fleet. The cause turned out to

be weaknesses in the wing-box structure. The problem was eventually solved (although more wing problems were to emerge in later years), in part by Australians working with the Americans, but that is another story.

The then Minister for Defence, Malcolm Fraser, met with US Defence Secretary Melvin Laird in early 1970 to plan the way ahead for a solution. The Fraser-Laird agreement outlined a 'recovery program' for the F-111Cs, which had already been signed over to Australia and were held in USAF storage; now they had to go back to the factory for modifications. The agreement also provided for the loan of 24 Phantoms in the interim.

An F-4 training program for RAAF air and ground personnel commenced at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. Deliveries of the brand-new Phantoms came just three months after the deal was announced by Fraser and Senator Tom Drake-Brockman, Minister for Air, in June 1970, and they were operational almost immediately. The arrangements, and the subsequent air-refuelled flights from the USA, were hailed by the senator as an example of the RAAF's efficiency and flexibility. While in some respects not meeting RAAF needs as fully as the F-111C would, he said, the F-4 'will make a most significant contribution to air defence capability'.

The F-4 was arguably the premier multi-role fighter of its time. In US service it flew in many guises: high-altitude interceptor, attack platform for conventional (and, potentially, nuclear) weapons, and reconnaissance. In the close air support role it carried a wide variety of bombs and missiles, and as 'wild weasel' carried out suppression of enemy air defence systems. After operational experience had shown the folly of not fitting a gun to the Phantom, the USAF installed a 20mm cannon—firstly on the F-4C in an underslung pod, and then as a fixture in the F-4E beneath its nose radar unit. Surprisingly, US units were still flying the Phantom in Iraq in 1996—38 years after the type's first flight.

In the RAAF, though, the Phantom's role was that which was intended for the F-111C: ground strike. Crew skills were honed at Evans Head bombing range, New South Wales, and on day and night exercises with Mirages and

Navy Skyhawks. With RAF Vulcans they formed an integral component of the strike force which ‘attacked’ Darwin in 1972’s Exercise *Top Limit*.

The F-4E’s level of technology, between that of the Canberra and F-111, also made for a useful transition between the two. It was not overly complex, but did introduce a modern radar system. It also suffered its share of accidents and technical problems, some minor and some more worrying, such as fatigue cracks in control surfaces.



F-4E on display in RAAF Museum

The Phantom was a real crowd pleaser during its brief RAAF career. In seven public air shows packed into a month during the Air Force’s golden jubilee year, 1971, formation fly-pasts of Phantoms and Mirages heightened public awareness of the RAAF’s potency in the strike and air superiority roles.

Despite an Australian assessment of the F-4 as superior to both the Mirage and Skyhawk, a US offer to sell the loaned aircraft to the RAAF was turned down. Late in 1972, when the arrival of the F-111Cs seemed imminent, half of the F-4 force returned to the USA. The following June, before a crowd of 3000, the first six F-111Cs finally touched down at Amberley, and the last of the Phantoms were soon gone. (In fact only 23 of the 24 delivered were returned, one unfortunately having been lost with its crew off Evans Head in 1971. The problem of how to pay for a leased aircraft was solved when the US government agreed to write it off against a P3 Orion.)

Today, the RAAF Museum displays an F-4E in kangaroo roundel markings, though not one of the original RAAF examples, as a reminder of our ‘interim’ strike aircraft. The Phantom could well have seen much longer RAAF service than it did, as the F-111C program came close to cancellation during its decade-long incubation. In a speech at Amberley commemorating the 25th anniversary of the first F-111C delivery, the former RAAF project manager Group Captain Milt Cottee (retired) said, ‘I suppose if that had happened, you may still be operating F-4s.’

The Vietnam experience

1970 did not mark the start of RAAF experience with the F-4, as several Australians had already flown the aircraft with the USAF in Vietnam. Wing Commander Lyall Klaffer commanded a RF-4C reconnaissance squadron there in 1965. Squadron Leader Alan Reed made 100 reconnaissance missions, including some into North Vietnam—a strict ‘no-go’ zone for the other four Australian F-4 pilots who later flew in the offensive air support role with US 12th Tactical Fighter Wing.

The Australian government policy of allowing only in-country (ie. South Vietnam) operations was ‘at best inhibiting, and at worst unworkable’, recalled Group Captain Lindsay Naylor at the 1998 RAAF History Conference. However on occasions, he continues, ‘only after plotting the positions in mission debriefs did [the pilots] realise they had been on the “wrong side” of the border’.

“...the Phantom was a fabulous aeroplane. Equally effective in a number of roles, it was perhaps unfortunate that the RAAF did not exploit its capabilities as a fighter, but for a pilot who flew the Mirage and F-111 as well, the Phantom was the best workhorse of the lot...”

Author Stewart Wilson,
*Phantom, Hornet and Skyhawk in
Australian service* (1993)



Air Power Development Centre
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: www.aaaf.gov.au/airpower

