

All set for the seventies

PART TWO



General Dynamics F-111: Over 200 delivered, but still experiencing operational difficulties

The first part of the assessment of the industrial situation which faces American industry was published in "Flight" for December 18. The second and concluding part, also by aircraft-market analyst Hugh Cowin, deals with the industry situation in the military aviation field. The concluding remarks deal with business and general aviation.

The Current US Fighter Situation

Whilst the current in-service strength of the US Air Force, Navy and Marines must be about 5,000 aircraft, the great majority of these are more than twelve years old in design philosophy. The story of the General Dynamics F-111 is too well known to repeat here, but its ramifications are manifestly apparent in the intensive struggle between the Navy and the Air Force for each to obtain a suitable air-superiority fighter follow-on to the ubiquitous McDonnell F-4. At the present time, the US possesses only one fighter, the Convair F-106, which is capable of out-fighting the MiG-21. The gravity of these circumstances are brought home when it is remembered that less than 270 F-106s are currently in service, with possibly another 50 of these 13-year-old aircraft in cocooned reserve. Against these, the Soviet and its satellite air forces can muster a minimum of 1,800 MiG-21s. The US has yet to devise a credible counter against the threat of the later and now widely deployed MiG-23 Foxbat. Clearly, the US cannot afford to rely on its main fighter strength of some 2,800 McDonnell F-4 Phantoms for very much longer, although export versions of an "austere" F-4, plus production against attrition could account for a further 800 sales over the next two or three years. Unit price with spares is about \$2.8 million but a stripped-down version would probably cost between \$2.3 million and \$2.4 million.

Fleet Defence Fighter (VFX 1, 2 and VFAX)

Following the cancellation of the Navy's F-111B in April 1968, an added spur was given to the development of a F-4 replacement and eight months later Grumman were awarded a formal contract for the development and production of the F-14, at a unit price which will probably not exceed \$3.2 million.

The first batches of F-14s to be bought will be the F-14A air-superiority fighter, with which (it is hoped) parity with the

modern Soviet fighters will be restored. Based on the retention of 15 attack carriers, plus three Marine fighter wings over the next decade, a total Navy and Marine requirement exists for about 780 aircraft.

Subsequent versions of the F-14, of which B, C and D models have been proposed, will meet the fleet strike-fighter requirement. Later variants of the F-14 will employ the same basic airframe, but will have an increased load-carrying ability at some small cost to performance. While no official indication has been made of the total requirement, the author estimates that some 950 later model F-14 will be needed by 1980. Unit price, including spares, could well show a significant reduction over the cost of the F-14A, say, \$2.7 million-\$3.1 million. If these target costs can be achieved, then the later versions of the F-14 could well appear as a serious rival to the European multi-role combat aircraft.

USAF Air Superiority Fighter (FX/F-15)

Fairchild Hiller, McDonnell Douglas, and North American Rockwell has been competing for this very important contract, which was awarded to McDonnell on December 23. Immediate USAF requirements would be for 600 aircraft by the mid-1970s. To date, the fortunes of this requirement have been somewhat mixed and some voluble lobbying is still being made to abandon the whole F-15 programme in favour of additional F-14 purchases. The value of the F-15 contract may be as high as \$10,000 million, at which level it could become the largest aircraft programme in the Western world.

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Boeing B-52s, fifteen-year-old technology

