Australia's F-111 update debate

As the RAAF looks at updating its F-111 fleet, Mike Gaines visits RAAF Amberley to examine
the needs behind the programme. Australia's location, perceived threats, Z_\ and the limited amount of hardware A. \. available to counter them, dictate that the Royal Australian Air Force's operat-ing philosophy be different to that of, say, the European air forces. The latter have the luxury of larger fleets of more varied types and their allies to help them, but Australia has none of these. Her allies are distant and any reinforcements would take a consider-able time to arrive, given the politicking involved before the long-range reinforce-ment could even start.

In Europe a strike package could be set up with tankers, airborne early warning (AEW) jammers, air-defence suppression aircraft, and a fighter sweep to help the strike force aircraft penetrate to the target, hit it, and make good their escape. The RAAF does not have any tankers or AEW aircraft at present, although these force multipliers are at the top of the shopping list.
There are no dedicated combat-capable

electronic warfare aircraft, no dedicated Sam killers, and the F-18 Hornets would be needed for air defence and so in short supply for escort missions. So the strike force, the F-llls, will have to handle their mission requirements alone, demanding true multi-role flexibility.
The Royal Australian Air Force's strike element consists of 22 General Dynamics F-llls, including four reconnaissance variants, based at RAAF Amberley, near Brisbane on the eastern seaboard. The F-llls are operated by 1 Sqn and 6 Sqn, which together comprise 82 Wing, the RAAF's strike element. 1 Sqn is the operational strike squadron, while 6 Sqn is operational but also handles F-111 type conversion, reconnaissance training, and operates the four RF-lllAs.
The RAAF F-111 is a hybrid combining

Above A n RAAF F-111C shows its Pave Tack laser bombing module

the F-111A fuselage with an extended-span wing equal to that of the F-111F, but with the beefed-up gear, tyres, and brakes of th F-111K which was developed for the UK but eventually dropped. The four RF-lllAs are converted F-l 11 As, again with the beefed up main gear and extended wingtips. Instead o the Pave Tack installation a reconnaissanc pallet fits in the internal weapons bay, but the RF-llls can still deliver dumb weapons or toss laser-guided weapons for Pave Tac laser designator F-lllCs.
The F-111 force is at present awaiting the deliberations of a Defence Ministry sorely stretched by a tight budget. A decision in principle has been taken to update the F-l 11 's avionics, but the actual details have yet to be worked out. It makes sense to fit the
RAAF F-l 1 Is to the same standard and with
the same equipment as the US Air Force's
F-llls, but the RAAF is realistic enough to
realise that this might not be affordable.
However, the Service wants the F-llls to

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