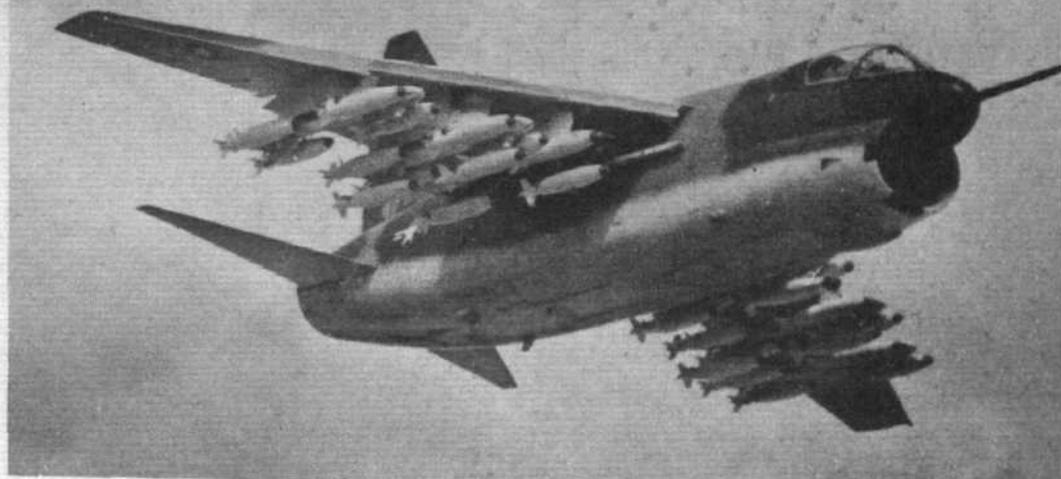




**DEFENCE**



LTV A-7D Corsair 2 tactical fighter, armed with 28 low-drag bombs. Some 600 of these aircraft powered by the Allison TF-41 (Rolls-Royce Spey), rated at 14,250lb thrust, have been ordered for the USAF. Flight testing and production are now under way at LTV's Dallas, Texas, plant

## MRCA—ITALIAN IMPLICATIONS

THOUGH LITTLE HAS BEEN SAID of Italian attitudes towards participation in the MRCA project (*Flight*, Sensor, September 19), it seems clear that, subject to greater technical definition, the Italian Air Force is favourably disposed towards the aircraft as a fulfilment of its post-1975 needs. But from the political and industrial point of view a number of difficulties need solution before Italian participation can become firm.

MRCA—multi-role combat aircraft—is the new designation for the combat aircraft being studied by Britain, Germany, Holland, Italy, Belgium and Canada; it was previously known variously as ACA (advanced combat aircraft) and MRA-75 (multi-role aircraft for 1975).

The Italian Air Force has two roles for the aircraft to fill in this context—as a tactical support for the Navy and Army, and as an interceptor. There is still a certain amount of scepticism in defence circles in Rome as to whether the MRCA will be able to meet both these roles, especially as others have tried and failed to combine them in one aircraft. At any rate, it is thought, a successful compromise of the two would be certain to bring the unit cost above the £1.1 million envisaged at present. The fact that the German Government, in particular, has placed emphasis on

low unit cost (insisting as it did on a figure of DM9 million, or about £1.1 million) only increases Italian doubts that a true multi-role aircraft will emerge.

This does not by any means damn the project in Italian eyes; the MRCA would be welcomed as an interceptor alone, since the possibility would still present itself of building an all-Italian tactical support aircraft, a less costly task than the development of an interceptor. Conversely, the MRCA would perhaps be slightly less welcome if it emerged primarily as a tactical-support aircraft, but efforts would still be made to initiate development in Italy of an interceptor.

The Italian Air Force appears not to have any very controversial feelings on the desirable performance of MRCA, and would probably be content to go along with the other participant countries. It does, however, attach importance to V/STOL capability, having in mind Italy's rugged terrain, and it will support a twin-engine configuration as a matter of policy.

On the political front the situation is more cloudy, tied as it is to the question of the whole future of the Italian aircraft industry. The Government has been trying to induce the rather frag-

mented industry to carry out a voluntary rationalisation, but it is finding, as the British Government found, that however desirable this may be it is difficult to achieve. A big question mark hangs over the industry in the 1970s, and firms are anxious that the supply of work will not dry up. The MRCA is thus becoming one of the Government's reorganisation carrots.

Implicit in the Government's wishes is the relocation of some aviation manufacturing activity in the depressed areas of the South—at present it is mainly concentrated in the more prosperous North. The official line is that future Government investment in the industry will not be forthcoming without such rationalisation and relocation; the industry's line is the reverse—no move without first having an assurance of work well into the 1970s.

The extreme reluctance of the industry to comply with Government wishes shows no sign of disappearing. Meanwhile the Government will find great difficulty in bringing about a compulsory rationalisation—the links between politicians and industrialists are so delicately balanced that a disastrous reverse for the Government would be on the cards.

The dilemma is having its effect on other facets of Italian military aviation. The Air Force's ageing C-119 transports need urgently to be replaced. The C-130 has been considered, but rejected on the

North Vietnamese MiGs of two different types appear in this line-up. The aircraft on the right is probably an early MiG-21F, while the three others are of the later -21PF type

