

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

F111 AIRCRAFT

(Ministerial Statement)

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 23 September 1969]

Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—This House will know that the Government recently sent a high level mission to the United States of America to discuss matters concerning F111 aircraft. That mission has now submitted its report to the Government and the Government has considered it. However, before detailing the matters discussed and the conclusions reached there is one matter which I believe should be made clear.

Because of the great publicity which has been given to any accident in which any F111 aircraft has been involved there has grown up a feeling that the aircraft is itself unsafe. The record shows that this belief is simply not true. The United States Air Force fleet of F111 aircraft have now been flying for a total of more than 40,000 hours, including more than 25,000 hours in the operational command, and it now has an accident record better, for example, than the Super Sabre or the Phantom and better than any other F century series of aircraft. On the record the aircraft is not unsafe and this should be known.

The matters discussed by the mission related to the aircraft's range, its weapons load, the assurance of a continuing supply of spare parts during its service life and the fatigue performance of the wing carry through box. Our military advisers are completely satisfied that the range and

weapons load of the aircraft will meet the requirements of the Air Force, as set down when the decision to order the aircraft was made. It will do the job which the Air Force wanted an aircraft to do. Our military advisers are also completely satisfied that there will continue to be a full availability of spares, readily available, during the full period of service of this aircraft with the Royal Australian Air Force.

Furthermore, our advice is that the F111, both in practice and during operations, has demonstrated a capacity to deliver a bomb load in any weather conditions with unprecedented accuracy, whether the target can be seen or not. For this purpose it is the best aircraft in the world, and our military advisers after evaluating other possible aircraft types tell us that there is not in being or in prospect any aircraft that would approach the already demonstrated performance of the F111 as a strike aircraft of the kind the RAAF requires.

The Government believes that the RAAF must have an ultra modern bomber strike aircraft to replace the Canberras which are now the RAAF's only strike force. The Government knows that the Canberras are approaching the limit of their service life, and the considerations which I have set out above all point to the F111 as the best aircraft to be this replacement, without exception.

But there remains the problem of the fatigue performance of the wing carry through box. This has been a matter of concern to us because it indicates that we would not get the length of service from the aircraft which we require, or anything approaching it; and our concern has been shared by the United States Air Force, although the United States already has over 120 F111 aircraft operating with the present wing box.

As a result of this concern two matters are in progress. Firstly, the wing box which gave an insufficiently long life under test has been modified as a result of information gained and is to begin a new series of fatigue tests next month. Secondly, more far reaching activity has been undertaken to overcome the fatigue problems identified as limiting the service life of the aircraft. Action has been comprehensive and has included the participation of groups of technical experts from universities, industry and government, all participating in detailed reviews of the test results and the proposed actions to resolve those technical problems. These groups, Mr Speaker, have been assisted by Australian structural experts.

As a result of these investigations a new design of the wing carry through box is under way and it is intended that this new design will be fitted to F111 aircraft by 1972. But, of course, the new design box, which our mission has advised us it confidently expects to be successful, has not yet been proved in practice. The question posed now is whether we should accept our F111s with the modified wing box which is due to begin testing next month. If we do it is expected that this box will give our F111s a longer service life than the present wing box but not the length of service life we require. Modifications seen to be required would be made to the wing boxes already fitted to our aircraft without additional cost to the RAAF.

The Government has decided that, provided the modified wing box to be tested next month lives up to expectations, we should accept the aircraft. This, however, is conditional on an agreement which has already been reached that whatever is needed to finally overcome the wing box problem will be incorporated in our aircraft at the appropriate time and at no increase to the ceiling price under the

formula applicable to the purchase of our aircraft. That is to say that unless the modified wing box we now propose to accept meets the endurance requirements for which it is designed, the United States Air Force will replace it with the new design box to be available in 1972—again with no increase to the ceiling price under the formula applicable to the purchase of the aircraft.

A further safeguard is the agreement that should one or more of the wing boxes we now propose to accept become unserviceable due to a design deficiency before the new design wing box is ready for fitting then the United States will replace those boxes at no cost to us—and as often as may be necessary until the new wing box is available for fitting.

As a result of these agreements we have therefore decided to accept delivery of our F111s as soon as the fatigue tests to begin next month have proved successful. We believe that in so doing we will be greatly strengthening the defence capacity of Australia and that the remaining problems of the aircraft which is not one of safety but of service life will have been overcome by the arrangements to fit new boxes or to fit replacement boxes until the new boxes are ready.

I believe I should, in this statement, remind honourable members that the arrangements made with the United States Air Force for these aircraft were that the ceiling price was to be \$US5.95m plus escalation of labour costs and materials after 1965, plus modifications requested by the RAAF and improvement modifications proposed by the USAF and accepted by the RAAF. The combined effect of this item will approximate \$US1.5m per aircraft. I would also add that the USAF has decided to go to an RF111A version for the reconnaissance aircraft and that this decision now makes it possible for the RAAF to proceed to a reconnaissance version of the F111C, as originally contemplated, which will be common with the reconnaissance aircraft in the USAF inventory. Before, however, the Government makes a decision on this matter we would require far more information as to costs.

Sir, I hope the House and the country will agree that our Air Force needs a strike bomber most effective in operations. I hope

they will accept the advice of our military experts that the F111 is far and away the best such bomber available, and I believe they will agree that our acceptance of the bomber subject to the conditions I have set out will be a powerful addition to our capacity to defend ourselves in time of need. May I add, Mr Speaker, that should the Deputy Leader of the Opposition (Mr Barnard) wish time to study this statement and to reply to it tomorrow, then that time will be accorded to him.