

QUEENSLAND AIR MUSEUM



**Founded 1974.
Located at Caloundra Airport on
Queensland's Sunshine Coast**

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UNFOLDING SCANDAL IN DEFENCE DISPOSALS

In December last year, the Royal Australian Air Force finally retired its F-111 strike aircraft after 37 years service to the nation. The event was surrounded by a blaze of publicity and rightly so. The select group of aircrew who flew the F-111 were fiercely proud of their aircraft right to the end. Similarly, specialists from many disciplines who had kept the aeroplane in service for all of these 37 years with many challenges along the way maintained their pride in the aircraft right to the end. It wasn't just the RAAF that had a genuine affection for the F-111. The aeroplane was well known to the average citizen who otherwise had no interest in aviation. This was largely due to a quirk of the F-111s design. When it was discovered that dumping fuel while using afterburner produced a spectacular torching effect, a star was born in the eyes of the public. It was because of this "dump and burn" capability that the Australian public took the F-111 to their hearts as it became a showpiece at many public ceremonies and sporting events. An aeroplane which was designed as a killing machine and which was born amidst political controversy was now the darling of the people. The F-111 was recognised and adored by everyone. Probably no military aircraft in history has attracted such affection while it was still in service. Most aeroplanes had to wait for years after their retirement for such adoration, if it came at all. By the time the adoration finally came it was usually too late as most of them had gone. But this time it's going to be different isn't it? We have 35 surviving F-111s and a public ready and willing to provide them with an honourable retirement.

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Australia has a number of museums which might be expected to be obvious homes for an F-111. Foremost is the RAAF Museum at the historic Point Cook RAAF Base in Melbourne. There is also the famous Australian War Memorial in Canberra. In addition to these government owned museums, there are also a number of not-for-profit aviation museums run by community groups.

The Queensland Air Museum (QAM) at Caloundra on Queensland's Sunshine Coast is one such group. QAM was inaugurated in 1974 with the unveiling of a Canberra bomber (predecessor of the F-111) which it had purchased from the Australian government with funds donated by its members. QAM's second aeroplane was a Meteor jet fighter which arrived the following year as an outright gift from the British government. Nearly 40 years later, QAM is still waiting to receive an aeroplane from its own government!

As early as 2005, QAM began planning for the retirement of the F-111 by approaching the Australian government with a request that an F-111 be gifted to the museum, not only as a means of preserving an F-111 but also as a means of recognising QAM's thirty-five years service to the educational needs of the community. During the ensuing years, three different Ministers for Defence assured QAM that its interests would be taken into account at the appropriate time.

As the F-111's December 2010 retirement approached, it was announced that four F-111Cs would be preserved on RAAF Bases at Point Cook, Amberley (2 aircraft) and Edinburgh (SA). Earlier it had been announced that one of the remaining F-111G models would be preserved at the RAAF Museum at Point Cook. However, the rest of the G models would be scrapped in accordance with international treaties as they were technically deemed nuclear capable. Although preservationists generally don't like to see aeroplanes scrapped, this was accepted as inevitable, despite the apparent anomaly of allowing one F-111G to escape destruction.

Subsequently it was announced that three F-111Cs would be retained for "RAAF Heritage use" but four aircraft would be scrapped as they were determined to be unsuitable for display. The clear implication of this is that the estimated eleven remaining F-111Cs **are** suitable for display. Indeed it was announced in *Air Force News* that:

The remaining aircraft are then to be offered for general sale by tender for other groups or organisations to use as static displays. Any such group will be required to agree to pay the costs to make the aircraft inoperable (estimated to be in excess of \$1 million) so as to meet US Government approvals to transfer them from Defence, as well as the costs to remove asbestos from the aircraft and to restore them to displayable condition (estimated at up to \$1.5 million) before approval is given.

What this means is that any group wishing to display an F-111 would be required to find an estimated \$2.5M just to buy the right to submit a tender! The only way a museum such as QAM could find such a fortune would be to approach a sponsor and what sponsor in his right mind is going to hand over \$2.5M knowing that it will go to the government for nothing in return? Indeed, no museum would insult a potential sponsor with such a request. When QAM advised the Minister that no community group in Australia could afford that sort of money it was probably seen as confirmation that the government's inflated estimates had served their intended purpose.

The latest development is that the original tender for the destruction of the 13 remaining F-111Gs has been expanded in its scope. The 13 G models are now identified as the "Core Scope". To this has been added an "Optional Scope" which provides for the destruction of up to another 15 F-111s. What this means is that if the so-called "Optional Scope" is fully invoked, all remaining F-111s can be summarily destroyed without further reference or tenders being called. It would appear that this "Optional Scope" may include aircraft previously set aside for RAAF heritage purposes.

As previously announced, any organisation wishing to display an F-111 would be required to pay \$1M to have the aircraft demilitarised. Apart from confirming that the aircraft **can** be demilitarised to the satisfaction of the U.S. government to permit transfer to a non-government recipient, one has to wonder who will be paying to demilitarise the aircraft that are to be destroyed? If the scrap merchant has to pay the demilitarisation cost then obviously the scrap value of the aircraft would be negated, so it is no surprise that Request For Tender documents make no provision for these costs to be passed on to the successful tenderer. What this means is that the taxpayer will have to absorb the cost of preparing the aircraft for destruction while a private individual or company will make a significant profit from destroying taxpayers' property! Clearly it would make more sense to gift the aircraft to established museums which have indicated interest in displaying an F-111. At least then the taxpayer would have something to show for the

huge investment that has gone into acquiring and maintaining these aeroplanes to say nothing of the potentially huge cost of destroying them. The people who have flown and maintained these aeroplanes with pride for 37 years should be appalled that their years of effort are held in such low esteem by their own government.

Work that needs to be done to demilitarise the aircraft is defined in a “U.S. Government Demilitarisation Manual” which is freely available online. Currently the Defence Materiel Organisation is actively discouraging potential tenderers from referring to this manual because “reference to the Demilitarisation Manual on its own can be confusing and misleading.” The only thing confusing about the Demilitarisation Manual is that its requirements are significantly less stringent than those imposed by the Australian government!

Because of the deterrent factor of the F-111, it was never used in anger by the RAAF. This deterrent factor is now working against the aircraft in that it is deemed to be an ongoing threat. The well-equipped RAAF stopped using the F-111 because the aeroplane was proving difficult to keep in the air. How could a non-nuclear configured, demilitarised airframe, out of the maintenance schedule, and minus engines, pose the slightest threat to anyone, particularly when no other nation on earth operates F-111s?

The US government has already allocated F-111s to community museums in the United States. How would Australian museums differ? Perhaps the Australian government could show some initiative in preservation by working with the US government to identify equally acceptable organisations in Australia that would meet the standards of the National Museum of the United States Air Force (NMUSAF) for the placement of such equipment?

The project to destroy the remaining F-111s would appear to be moving with indecent haste. Why this is so is difficult to understand when even the U.S. government itself provides for the demilitarisation of defence assets to facilitate their placement in museums. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the Australian government believes that only their own museums are worthy enough to receive F-111s and that community group museums should remain unrecognised as they have been for decades.

In allocating four aircraft to RAAF Bases, the government doubtless feels that they have fulfilled their heritage obligations and that four is enough. Of these four aircraft, only one (Point Cook) will be accessible to the public in a currently operational aviation museum. The other three will be subject to the stringent security restrictions which are now unavoidable at military establishments. Indeed there have been recorded instances where people attempting to photograph aircraft on display at the front gates of an RAAF Base have been unceremoniously chased away by security staff on the premise that any photos taken will show defence establishments in the background. Only in Melbourne will Australian families be able to turn up unannounced with their cameras to view an F-111 (which they effectively paid for). An F-111 positioned at the front gate of a military establishment is not publicly accessible and does not meet the heritage expectations of the community. They want to see an F-111 displayed as part of a collection of aircraft and above all they want to be able to touch it. No, four aeroplanes is nowhere near enough.

To be using taxpayers' money to destroy taxpayers' property is a scandal.

(Written by Vice-President, Ron Cuskelly and issued on the authority of the President)