WHY WE MUST HAVE NEW AIR GUARD FIGHTERS SOON

Unlike the Army Guard, which has had only about 70 percent of its equipped strength reduced, the Air National Guard is fully equipped to the levels indicated in Air Force equipment documents. However, as the results of two recent aerial competitions indicate, this may not be good enough.

Further, while all the equipment issued is deployable and capable of wartime fighting, a look 10 years down the road indicates the potential exists for serious problems. Let me explain.

In 1980, the Air Force revived its air-to-air competition, William Tell, this competition, held at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, involved the hottest fighter units in the Total Air Force. The Air National Guard from California flying F-106s won.

About a year later, in late 1981, the Air Force revived its air-to-ground competition. This contest, Gunsmoke, held at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, involved the best of the air-to-ground units in the Total Air Force. Again, the Air National Guard, this time time from Colorado, won the competition, flying F-18 attack jets.

However, as two new generations of fighters have come into the Air Force inventory, the Air National Guard has not continued to prosper in these competitions. Two years later the Air Guard and the Air Force again went to Tyndall for William Tell, '82. That's not particularly surprising considering the differences in flying and fighting capability between the F-106, which is still flown by a few Air Force and Air Guard units, and the F-15, which is replacing the F-106 and F-4 as the air-to-air fighter of the future.

The results were similar in Gunsmoke '83, also held at Nellis (see article, February 1984 NATIONAL GUARD). The 1981 Gunsmoke winner, the 140th Tactical Fighter Wing from Colorado, returned to Nellis for the competition. The unit produced a higher score in 1983 in total quality of weapons delivery on target than any two years earlier. So one might conclude that it actually is better at its mission now than in 1981.

However, this time the 140th didn't even come close to winning. In fact, it finished fourth. Finishing above them were three active Air Force F-16 units. The F-16, a multi-role fighter that happens to be well-suited to the air-to-ground mission, captured first, second and third places. Again, no surprise. The A-7 is a Vietnam-era aircraft, as is the F-4, while the F-16 is the multi-role fighter of the future. The Air Guard has its first squad of F-16s in South Carolina, and another will be delivered to the Texas Air Guard later this year.

But this is hardly enough for several reasons. Having nothing to do with his pilots and their readiness and fighting capability, there simply is no comparison between the F-15 and F-16, the F-102 and F-106, the F-18 and F-16, the F-16 and F-4, the F-4 and the A-7, the fighters of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the Air Force is not asking to procure only a limited number of those fighters each year because of their cost.

In the fiscal year 1984 Defense Budget, the National Guard Assistance Program (NGAUS) was able to influence the submission to the money that was added to this for a 24-aircraft squadron of F-16s for the Air National Guard. This is progress, but more is needed.

The Air National Guard are to survive and prevail on the modern battlefield, they must be equipped with the latest in aircraft technology. We will always have a high-mix of aircraft, some equipped with obsolete super- oratory and some in the tactical support role to influence the ground forces through air power. What must be kept in mind is that this mix must be kept modern.

The A-10 is the most modern aircraft for the ground mission, better suited than the F-4, which fulfilled that role in Vietnam. The F-4 also is capable of the air-to-air mission, but it is not nearly as capable as the F-4. The F-16 is capable of both missions when properly configured. The F-105 the on the other hand, is an aging and non-replaceable air-to-air fighter, and neither the Air Guard nor the Air Force can maintain it for many more years.

Even though the F-4 will be with us for quite a few more years, we must begin to move progress towards its replacement. A large number of F-4s were procured during the 1960s. Many are still in Air Guard units today; more are coming. However, there is a limit to how long they are sustainable or maintainable. The danger is obsolescence in the 1960s if the speed of procurement of F-15s and F-16s is not increased significantly.

In order to achieve the goal of a 40-wing fighter force by 1988, it will require procurement of 276 fighters a year, compared with the 216 programmed for procurement for next year. That is where we in the National Guard can help the Air Force.

The goal should be a Total Air Force capable of gaining and maintaining air superiority while providing support to the Army troops on the ground. To do that, we have to keep the Total Air Force. Air Guard and Air Force Reserve, have adequate quantities of the modern types of fighters required to fight and win on the modern battlefield.

To do that, we must accelerate the procurement of modern fighter aircraft for the Total Air Force, wherever they go, so the Air Guard of the 1990s is fully capable and so the Total Air Force is fully equipped with the most modern aircraft possible.