

RCAF leads 104 safety tally

Those ill-starred Starfighters (the Lockheed F-104 in its different variants) were in the news again recently. The 65th German F-104G crashed, killing the 37th Luftwaffe pilot, on December 6th, last year. On the same day, the 37th Canadian CF-104 and the 12th pilot were lost on a training flight out of Cold Lake, Alta.

The comparative rates of attrition in the Canadian, U.S., and German Starfighter operations reflect considerable credit upon the RCAF pilots. In the first 100,000 hours of operation, the RCAF lost 29 aircraft. Comparative losses for the USAF and the Luftwaffe were 34 and 40 aircraft respectively.

In fact, the situation is even more favorable to the Canadians than would appear from these figures. The RCAF CF-104s were operated strictly as bombers, involving a high proportion of low-level operations, while the German 104G force is split about 50/50 between bombing and interceptor operations, and the USAF machines, which are of a less complex nature anyway, are strictly interceptors. But even the more favorable Canadian rate of attrition is about seven times the normal average rate of four losses per 100,000 hours of flying.

The RCAF's procedures have been refined and some important modifications have been made on the aircraft, including the installation of an improved, rocket-propelled ejection seat. This, incidentally, is the main reason the Germans have lost one pilot for every 1.75 accidents, while we lost only one pilot for every three accidents.

The Germans still seem rather far away from the RCAF's proficiency level in the operation of the Starfighter. Their rate of utilization has reportedly been only 13 hours a month per aircraft, about half the Canadian, which means the Luftwaffe pilots have not been getting enough flying time. The trouble has been that the Germans have found their aircraft more difficult to maintain.

The RCAF has spent about 75 man/hours of work on the ground for every hour in the air for the CF-104, compared to a ratio of upward of 100 to one for the Luftwaffe's F-104Gs. This is probably explained by better organization in the Air Division and by the fact that the Canadian ground crew are all long-service professionals, while

about 40% of the German mechanics are short-service draftees.

The Germans will have to improve the handling of their Starfighters if they do not wish to throw away their investment in them which reportedly by now stands at approximately \$2.25 billion. (Ours is estimated at about \$1 billion.) Even so, the question remains of whether the investment was a wise one in the first place. This question can be answered with an unequivocal, "No", and this for us as much as for the Germans.

Without going into too much detail in the discussion of the operation value, if any, of the Starfighters stationed in Europe, the situation is briefly this: Ours are tactical bombers, and pre- and post-nuclear-strike reconnaissance aircraft. At present, we have six squadrons of the former, and two of the latter. By April 1st, the respective figures will be four and two. It is most unlikely that they would ever get into the air if hostilities broke out in Central Europe.

A few of the several hundred Soviet short- and medium-range atomic missiles based within reach are no doubt zeroed-in on the huge, unprotected airfields on which the Air Division's aircraft are bunched together, 30 or 48 in one place now, 54 in one place after April 1st. The Soviet general would be criminally negligent if they did not knock out such accumulations of awesome nuclear power in the first surprise attack.

Conversely, the CF-104s could only do their job if NATO struck at the Warsaw Pact powers first, and with nuclear weapons. Surely, nobody believes that this will happen. It follows that, highly vulnerable as they are, the CF-104s in Europe have no real operational value, and at best a minimal deterrent value.

Recently, the Canadian Starfighters have also been adapted to carry conventional weapons. Using them as non-nuclear light bombers has been likened to delivering milk from house to house in a dragster. In any case, giving the CF-104s a non-nuclear capability does not increase their military usefulness by one iota: the enemy would still have to knock them out in the first minutes of a conflict because he could not be sure whether they would be used with nuclear or conventional weapons.

END