

Canada dazzles at Paris Air Show

PARIS — Beautiful, sexy models and high fashion. But the hot designer names this week in Paris are not Dior or Chanel but Dassault, General Dynamics and Grumman. For a week, the world's leading aircraft, missile and electronics manufacturers are showing off their wares at the 36th annual Paris Air Show.

Competition, every bit as fierce as real warfare, rages between exhibitors. Swiss anti-aircraft guns swivel around to follow French aircraft; British missiles are displayed only feet away from Argentine missiles. Makers of anti-ship missiles explain why their weapons can't be stopped; makers of anti-ship missiles patiently tell you why their systems are "leak-proof."

A million visitors and 100,000 aerospace professionals will discuss technology, make deals and ferret out competitors' products. Billions in sales will be made. Generals from around the world are wined, dined and pampered by aerospace firms with the suave French outdoing everyone else in the Gallic art of high-style entertainment.

The sexy stars of this show are the American F-16, the French Mirage-2000 and the British Harrier fighters. Sleek, powerful and agile, they perform high-G turns over Le Bourget airfield. The Mirage, France's pride, roars over the field on full afterburners, deafening everyone below. Then the raptor-nosed F-16 steals the show by surging into full power and flying directly up. The Harrier, victor of the Falklands War, roars over the field, stops dead in midair and bows to the vastly impressed crowd.

Even the Russians are into the act with their mammoth new 40-ton AN-124 transport and the MI-26, the world's largest helicopter. I tried to get aboard the AN-124 and was quickly surrounded by a bunch of Russian "technician," squat, bullet-headed men wider than they were tall. "No English speak," I was told, "you go," I went.

"Canada means business." About time, too.

Even President Mitterand gave what I assume was a favorable nod to our Canadian display. He has just walked through, surrounded by a small army of security guards, admirals and generals, courtiers and factotums. There are more guards here today than soldiers in the Canadian army. Various terrorist groups have been threatening to attack the show — particularly American exhibitors.

I almost got riddled with gunfire for walking outside without the proper badge. It's a strange feeling walking alone with a hundred armed guards squinting menacingly at you. The French somehow seem to have more "flics" and security agents than any other country — including the first public appearance of France's new anti-terrorist commando units, a very tough-looking outfit.

And here's an observation about the people I met at this show from such aerospace companies as our own Litton or Hughes aircraft. Their executives are among the brightest and most thoughtful businessmen that I know. Of more importance, most of them truly believe that they are helping defend their countries, often in the face of indifference or even hostility.

Of course, business comes first. I listened with fascination as a company representative waxed lyrical about the effectiveness of his firm's new anti-tank missile. "Once it penetrates the tank's armor," he enthused, "there will be nothing left of the crew but eyeballs and teeth."

Nasty? Yes, certainly. But the world needs arms and can't seem to do without them. Canada is still only flirting with this \$100 billion market. This show demonstrated that if we get our act together and start making complete weapons systems instead of just components, Canada could become a major exporter of military products. That's how jobs are created.



ERIC MARGOLIS

But the really big surprise of the Air Show was Canada. That's right, our own dear Canada. I walked into our exhibit, expecting to see the same rather frumpy display that we had in 1983. Then, Ottawa was in the hands of a regime hostile to business and our displays mirrored official neglect. The exhibitors had a hangdog look and actually served corned beef sandwiches and beer here in the gastronomic capital of the world.

This year, by contrast, Canada put on one of the slickest and most impressive displays of the show. Forty Canadian aerospace firms presented their products in a dazzling display that made us look like the hi-tech nation we would like to be. And, unlike 1983, our aerospace salesmen were charged up and ready to sell.

No beer and sandwiches this time. The Canadian Embassy staff in Paris and the ministry of external affairs, the latter sometimes abused in my columns, made everything hum with efficiency. Good food, wines, entertaining potential customers comme il faut. You just can't serve sandwiches when everyone else is dining out caviar.

More important, our aerospace industry and government officials showed a professional style and teamwork that left me impressed. Canada needs more of this cooperation to help sell its products in a climate of savage competition. The feeling that came across was