

# Haute couture air show

The Paris Air Show, held every two years, is the world's foremost arms bazaar. The sight of rows of warplanes, piles of bombs and rockets, missiles and other implements of destruction might well reduce the average housewife or "refuse the cruiser" to shudders of mute horror.

But for the 100,000 aerospace professionals, 900 exhibitors from 29 countries, and some 500,000 spectators, the 10-day show that began May 26 was an exciting opportunity to make deals, check out the competition, talk shop, party and bask in Paris' warm, sunny weather.

While civil aviation comprised an important portion of the exhibits at Le Bourget airport, the space and military displays commanded prime attention. The French, who have been competing fiercely to launch commercial satellites from their Ariane rocket, were gloriously upstaged by America's space shuttle.

## Space shuttle unscuttled

The French authorities, anxious to keep their Ariane in the limelight, refused permission for the space shuttle, piggybacked atop a 747, to fly over downtown Paris. Forced to fly around the city, the Americans suddenly encountered atmospheric conditions that compelled them "to make a sharper turn than planned" that took the shuttle right over the Eiffel Tower.

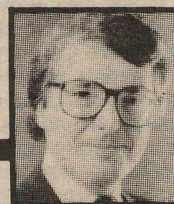
Competition between the military exhibitors was no less gentle: While the Panavia Tornado performed overhead, TV-guided anti-aircraft cannon from Switzerland's Orlikon swivelled and tracked the manoeuvring jet, much to the delight of the throng of spectators.

Israel's defence minister stared at that nation's extensive displays, certainly the most warlike and impressive at the show, featuring models of cluster bombs, missiles and films of hapless Arab aircraft being vaporized by Israeli-built missiles and cannon. Sitting in a mockup of the cockpit of Israel's Kfir fighter-bomber, one was treated to the sound of Wagner's *The Valkyrie*, a somewhat incongruous note.

American aerospace dominance was strongly evident even though some of her major manufacturers stayed away from the show, citing exhibition costs that can run as high as \$2 million. After the space shuttle, the most impressive U.S. displays were from Hughes Aircraft, whose superb, professional personnel were featuring the new lethal AMRAAM missile, and by Northrop, whose new F-20 low-cost, high-performance fighter impressed even the French.

The massive displays of European aircraft and electronic systems showed clearly that the continent is technologically in advance of the Russians and lacks only the political and economic commitment to defend herself by purchasing the excellent arms that her industries, such as British Aerospace, Selenia, Dassault and Thompson can produce. The welcome absence of the arriving Japanese

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aerospace companies also proved a relief to the European aerospace industry.

Amid all the warlike stores, Canada's exhibit hall seemed a pastoral island: Aside for a few ancient air-to-ground rockets, no lethal equipment was on display — for the very good reason that Canada does not export anything more dangerous than some small-arms ammunition and hockey pucks. de Havilland and Canadair were showing their small aircraft and Litton some electronic systems; but the Canadian exhibit seemed permeated by a sad air of resignation and commercial passivity.

The market for light commercial aircraft and transports is fast becoming saturated by more aggressive competitors from other countries. The enormous and growing worldwide demand for defence electronics and weapons is simply not being addressed by Canadian industry, which today produces only military small potatoes.

France, now the world's third-largest arms exporter, nurtures and encourages its highly profitable military industries that are the nation's prime earner of hard currency.

## Weak Canadian arms

Canada, in contrast, has rendered the production of high-technology arms almost impossible by her virtual military disarmament: The tiny Canadian armed forces simply cannot support the necessary level of purchasing required in order to create viable local arms industries. Without an adequate domestic sales base, it is extremely difficult to develop arms production for export.

So Canada is alone among the world's leading industrial powers in having nothing warlike to sell, a delicate moral position, but one that is difficult to justify at a time of 13% unemployment and a growing demand for weapons.

Anyone who thinks that disarmament is simply a political decision should have had a good look at the Paris Air Show. From the French workers who make weapons, to the American executives who sell them, to the wives of aerospace executives who spend their husband's commissions at Balmain and Courreges, to the hotels that overcharge the 100,000 visitors, all are wrapped up in a seemingly irreversible economic cycle that is today a vital portion of most nations' industrial life.

Somehow, the thought of the Paris Ploughshare Show just does not have the same excitement.

*(Eric Margolis, a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, writes frequently on international affairs)*