

Raptor Turbulence

“IS THE F-22 a plane that is badly designed—or just badly produced?” asked reporter Brian Ross on ABC’s “Nightline,” May 2.

Pierre Sprey, a relentless critic of defense procurement programs identified by Nightline only as a former war-plane designer, paused to admire this softball. There were only two possible responses coming: yes or both. Sprey went with, “Both.”

That exchange may not have been quality journalism, but it was a fitting beginning for what was, at the time of this writing, two weeks of nonstop, mostly negative press for the F-22 Raptor. The Air Force took delivery of the 187th and final F-22 from Lockheed Martin on May 2, but this was completely overshadowed by other Raptor news.

On May 6, CBS’ “60 Minutes” featured two Virginia Air Guard F-22 pilots who stopped flying the Raptor because they felt an unresolved oxygen system problem made the fighter unsafe. They sought whistleblower protection and went public. 60 Minutes presented an evenhanded report on their concerns.

And so, a year after grounding the fleet while it attempted to determine what was giving F-22 pilots hypoxia, and eight months after determining the aircraft is safe enough to fly even if the cause was still undetermined, the Air Force again found the aircraft’s oxygen system dominating the news.

Until this problem is solved, the F-22—and the Air Force—will be under a harsh light. USAF is in a tough situation. One pilot, Capt. Jeff Haney, died in a 2010 crash. USAF’s accident investigators controversially found Haney responsible for the crash after his F-22 experienced an air system malfunction unrelated to the hypoxia issue in other jets. The leadership believes the F-22 is safe enough to fly, but sending Raptor pilots up without solving the riddle invites charges it is callously disregarding its airmen’s safety.

ABC’s report was, in its own biased and misleading way, an absolute masterpiece—the Raptor’s professional critics couldn’t have written a better script. Nightline managed, in a single five-and-a-half-minute segment, to trot out every tired argument F-22 critics keep in their arsenals. This deserves

some discussion, because these claims will surely come up again.

The F-22 has no purpose. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said the F-22 has “no purpose, no mission in Afghanistan or Iraq, unless you believe that al Qaeda is going to have a fleet of aircraft.” For some reason, McCain chose to ignore all possible future threats. China and Russia have advanced fighters and defensive systems—and sell them on the open market.

The F-22 has never been used in combat. DOD could use the Raptor to attack targets in Afghanistan tomorrow

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if it chose to, but an advanced air dominance fighter is not needed against a low-tech enemy. USAF should not kowtow to critics just to put the aircraft in combat—military commanders know what capabilities are needed where.

The F-22 was designed to fight an enemy that no longer exists. Almost everything in the US arsenal designed before 1991 was intended to fight the Soviet Union, which no longer exists. The F-22 offers capabilities needed against any major power—the ability to go just about anywhere and attack with huge advantages.

The F-22 is too complicated to maintain. So-called defense reformers have for decades made variations of this argument about aircraft such as the F-15, AWACS, and now the F-22. In reality, the Raptor’s 80 percent readiness rate compares well with older, less-capable fighters.

F-22 pilots still experience hypoxia-like symptoms. There have been 11 more cases since the Raptor returned to flight. This is a serious concern, but F-22s have flown 12,000 sorties in that time. The 11 incidents represent one in every 1,091 sorties. Military flying is inherently risky, and Air Combat Command finds this a tolerable rate while it continues to work the problem.

The Raptors are flying because they have unmatched capabilities. F-22s perform homeland air defense missions and deploy overseas. An adversary

knows if F-22s are nearby, its military facilities are vulnerable to attack. This helps keep renegade nations on their best behavior.

F-22s have staged within range of China, North Korea, Syria, and Iran—places that have much tougher defenses than al Qaeda. When the aircraft deploy, people notice. This spring, Raptors were sent to an undisclosed Middle Eastern base to fly with friendly air forces—and perhaps send a message to nearby hostile nations.

Unfortunately, millions of Americans who know very little about the fighter or airpower viewed the Nightline report. The segment ended with an implication that the Raptor is best suited for air shows. USAF must solve the F-22’s oxygen problem to change this narrative.

Lawmakers are looking for places to save money and reduce the deficit by going after unpopular programs. The first financial hits could be delivered to F-22 upgrades, but an unrelenting drumbeat of bad press could lead to much wider cuts. Ultimately, security suffers.

Pilots now fly with additional instrumentation, improved emergency oxygen pull-handles, pulse oximeters (to check their own blood-oxygen level), and orders to abort missions the moment something seems wrong.

On May 15, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta ordered additional steps to improve safety. A backup F-22 oxygen system is being expedited, and Air Force officials will limit the distance pilots fly from base so they can quickly return if a problem develops. Gen. G. Michael Hostage, head of ACC, pledged to begin flying the F-22 himself and not stop until the Air Force solves the problem.

“Our adversaries are all abuzz and all aflame” about the most recent Middle East deployment, Hostage said.

“People pay attention to where this airplane goes and what it does because, regardless of the furor in the press and public about the suitability or the safety of the airplane, [enemies are] very worried about its capability.”

This is what the F-22 offers, even under current limitations: a powerful deterrent, without ever seeing combat. ■