AIR FORCE SPENDING $90 MILLION TO CONVERT LUXURY CORPORATE JETS INTO SPY PLANES

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The Royal Australian Air Force is spending more than $90 million to convert luxury corporate jets into state-of-the-art spy planes.

PM can reveal the high-tech surveillance aircraft are due to come into service at the end of next year.

Here's defence reporter Andrew Greene.

ANDREW GREENE: The Gulfstream G550 is a luxury corporate jet boasting the ability to fly more than 12 hours nonstop and over 12,000 kilometres.

Powered by two Rolls Royce engines, it can carry up to 18 passengers and operate out of short-field, high-altitude airports, meaning it can reach remote and difficult locations, such as Afghanistan.

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Peter Jennings is with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

PETER JENNINGS: Turning this aircraft from a business jet into, you know, potentially something that can be used for surveillance and electronic information-gathering. And I suspect that's the major intent behind this.

ANDREW GREENE: The project was quietly confirmed just after Christmas by the US Defence Department in a statement on its website.

US DEFENCE DEPT. STATEMENT (voiceover): L3 communications mission integration, Greenville, Texas, has been awarded a $93 million undefinitised contract action task order for Australian Government G550 aircraft procurement and maintenance.

ANDREW GREENE: Few other details are known, but it's understood two corporate jets will be modified in Texas. Australia's current P-3 maritime surveillance aircraft are due to retire in 2018 and will eventually be replaced by the P-8 Poseidon and Triton.

PETER JENNINGS: The Gulfstream is smaller, faster, takes fewer crew, so it's cheaper to operate.

It may well be that we're plugging a gap that the P-3, in a variety of roles, performed in Afghanistan. And so I think that's probably it's number one function, and then secondly we'll see that VIP transport role, which of course is important for a middle power like Australia.

ANDREW GREENE: Already, several militaries across the globe are using G550s for intelligence gathering, but full details of Australia's contract aren't expected to be known until the release of this year's long-awaited Defence white paper.

PETER JENNINGS: Sadly, it's not unusual that we often get the information first from American systems.

It's simply because America is more open in how it manages this type of information, whereas in Australia it seems that there is always a long wait between the actual American announcement and the ability of the Australian system to confirm it.

ANDREW GREENE: Australia's Defence Department is yet to respond to questions from PM about the military contract.

07 JANUARY 2016

SOURCE: ABC
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/events-festivals/air-force-spending-90-million-to-convert-luxury-corporate-jets-into-spy-planes

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