

Aviation Week Rides in Lockheed's T-50A Pilot Trainer

Aviation Week

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fz1MWFUAcnY>



As the U.S. Air Force's \$16 billion competition for an advanced pilot trainer reaches its final stage, Lockheed Martin is upping the ante. The company took five reporters on the ride of their lives in the T-50A, showing off the capabilities of the production-ready aircraft just weeks before proposals are due to the Air Force.

For Lockheed, the media flights were not only a chance to prove the T-50A would be ready to go on day one, but that it can meet and even exceed the T-X capability requirements. The T-50A, a block upgrade of Korea Aerospace Industries' T-50, can achieve 25-degree angle of attack, pull up to 8Gs (Aviation Week pulled 7.9), and fly supersonic. During Aviation Week's flight Feb. 23, Lockheed chief T-50A test pilot Mark Ward also demonstrated a Ground Based Training System that enables a pilot in a simulator to sync up with a pilot actually flying the aircraft. Working in a three-ship team made up of two real-life and one virtual T-50A, Ward tracked and shot down two simulated MiG fighters as well as ground threats.

The system was not flawless – after both air-to-ground kills, one of the GBTS screens glitched and the pilot needed to recycle it. Ward was not sure what caused the problem, but reported it to the maintainers after the flight.

With the sudden exit of two major players – Northrop Grumman and Raytheon-Leonardo – the 350-aircraft T-X contract will come down to a price shootout between the T-50A and Boeing-Saab's clean-sheet design. As Lockheed tells it, the T-50A's main advantage is that it is

a “low-risk, low-cost” solution, a proven trainer that has been operating with the South Korean Air Force since 2005. As an off-the-shelf aircraft, the T-50 won't suffer any risk-related cost growth. There is no doubt the T-50A can meet the capability requirements; the rest hinges on sticker price.

Boeing is hungry for the T-X contract and will likely bid aggressively, but much depends on how much of the non-recurring development cost the companies can absorb. Boeing says its two T-X aircraft are production ready, not prototypes; the first just took flight Dec. 20. As with any new aircraft, the design will have to go through a rigorous flight-test and certification process.

Technically, Leonardo and DRS, now teamed to offer the T-100 and Sierra Nevada are still in the race. But as Richard Aboulafia of the Teal Group wrote for Aviation Week & Space Technology recently, it's looking more and more like T-X is Lockheed's to lose, and Boeing's to win.