



"I see no ships..."

Robin Powney went to Portsmouth and Trafalgar 200 in search of aircraft. Photographs by the author, **Damien Burke** and **Roger Cook**

The pride of the French fleet and the largest and most modern warship in Europe, the 40,000 ton nuclear-powered P.A. *Charles de Gaulle* dwarfed all other ships as she sailed into the Solent to form part of the massive fleet of over 130 ships attending the International

Fleet Review (IFR). Once the IFR fleet was amassed, the crew of the *Charles de Gaulle* were still justifiably proud of the fact that their ship was still the biggest - pretty much twice the weight of the Royal Navy's largest ship. Anchored next to the *USS Saipan* and *SNS Principe de Asturias*, the *de Gaulle* was by some margin the smartest looking ship and looked every inch a modern, extremely capable warship - she is capable of conducting flightdeck operations in Sea State 6 conditions (20ft waves with winds up to 33 knots).



Designed to go to sea with up to forty aircraft, the embarked airwing was somewhat reduced in size and was made up of four Rafale Ms, six Super Etendards, one E-2C Hawkeye, one Dauphin 2 and one Alouette III. Having disembarked an almost equal number of aircraft prior to arriving off Portsmouth, the air element left aboard would still be able to pack an admirable punch and, even in this reduced form, it's fair to say it is only 'outgunned' by a US Navy Carrier Air Wing. This heavyweight punch was used to useful effect in Operation HERACLÉS, the French operation against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban under the overall umbrella of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, where the *de Gaulle* formed the lead of Task Force 473 and operated alongside RN, USN, Italian Navy and Dutch Navy warships.

With operations in the Indian Ocean beginning on 19 December 2004 and coming to a conclusion in mid-June after 212 days (189 of which were at sea), the *de Gaulle* logged more than 770 missions over Afghanistan. The airwing was made up of sixteen Super Etendards, seven Rafale Ms, two E-2C Hawkeyes, two Dauphin 2s and one Alouette III. Of note, at least until early March when AdA Mirage 2000s were forward deployed to Manas, was that the Super Etendards, together with AdA Mirage IVPs, were the only non-US aircraft over Afghanistan. Whilst out in the Indian Ocean, the *de Gaulle* operated in close proximity with USN carriers and as such often hosted each others aircraft and ship's personnel (28 February 2005 saw a *USS John C Stennis* E-2C land aboard the *de Gaulle* with 14 March seeing a French E-2C land on the *Stennis*).



This deployment was the first time Rafale Ms had been at sea and they used the opportunity afforded to them to continue training and working up the Rafale on the *de Gaulle*; in doing so, the seven Rafales racked up some 1,600 cat shot cycles and 2,100 flight hours. On two occasions, aircraft flew direct from Istres to the carrier and in doing so covered 3,300 nautical miles in roughly seven hours. The Rafales also took part in joint exercises and mock dogfights with USN F-14 Tomcats and F/A-18 Hornets - the results are said to have been 'positive' with the slow-speed handling of the Rafale taking the USN

pilots by surprise.

In May, whilst taking part in MNME 05-1 off the east coast of the USA alongside *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, *USS Theodore Roosevelt* and numerous other Canadian, French, British, Spanish and US ships and personnel, *Ike* and *de Gaulle* occasionally swapped aircraft to conduct cross-deck tactical training as a step towards certification of the NATO Response Force. CVW-7 from the *Ike* trapped (and subsequently launched) a VAW-121 E-2C Hawkeye, a C-2A Greyhound and, for the first time ever, an F/A-18C Hornet of VFA-131 on the *de Gaulle*. Similarly, *Ike* trapped and launched an E-2C from 4 Flotille and witnessed numerous 'bolters' from a 12 Flotille Rafale M. Following bad weather eight Super Etendards, one Rafale M and one Hawkeye had to divert to a CONUS airbase yet were refused permission at McGuire AFB and ended up at the commercial airport in Atlantic City.



Current Rafale Ms are F1 standard and do not have an air-to-ground capability so cannot yet replace the ageing Super Etendards of 11 Flotille and 17 Flotille, a type that made its first flight in 1974

and will be replaced by the Rafale M in the 2010 timeframe; they do however have a vital role to play aboard the *Charles de Gaulle* in that they provide the carrier strike group with much needed air cover (although only with Mica radar guided AAMs), replacing the 1950s vintage F-8E Crusader. F2 Rafales began testing at Mont de Marsan in late 2004 and will



On board the CdG



Over the Asturias

eventually be able to deliver the full arsenal of French munitions including the Mica IR-guided AAM. Nuclear munition and Exocet anti-shiping missile delivery will come with the introduction of the F3s from 2007 onwards. In the mean time, the Super Etendards can fulfil almost any strike role called upon them, from anti-surface warfare to an ASMP-equipped nuclear strike. Furthermore, Super Etendards are also being continually upgraded to take advantage of new technologies and will continue to be upgraded until the Rafale M completely takes over.

Flypast file
Pictures by Damien Burke



Airborne surveillance, the Rafales own radar and sensor fit excepted, is provided by the E-2C Hawkeye - the three of which the Aeronavale have are operated by 4F at Lorient. All was not plain sailing as the Charles de Gaulle hit a major stumbling block when it was realised the Hawkeye couldn't actually operate from her flightdeck - a few design/manufacturing changes and 4.4m of extra length later and the de Gaulle strike group is now looked after by one of the finest AEW platforms in the world. Providing the important search and rescue cover during carrier operations (launching and recovery) as well as logistical support are the Dauphin 2 and Alouette III helicopters.



Following the French Navy's lead in sending their flagship to the IFR, the Spanish Navy sent their own flagship to the event - the seventeen-year old 17,000 ton SNS Principe de Asturias. The Asturias is based on the cancelled 1970s US Navy 'Sea Control Ship' but adopted for V/STOL operations and is only the Spaniard's second ever carrier after the SNS Dédalo.

Though roughly similar in size to an Invincible-class V/STOL carrier, the Asturias differs very visibly in that the entire full width of the deck is the ski-ramp rather than the 'runway' width of the Invincible class.

Capable of supporting operations of up to of twenty-nine aircraft and carrying up to thirty-seven, the usual airwing is made up of ten EAV-8B Harrier II + aircraft from 9 Esc with six SH-3H Sea Kings from 5 Esc (plus two SH-3H AEWs) and four Agusta-Bell AB.212ASW helicopters from 3 Esc embarked to provide airborne surveillance, SAR cover, anti-ship/submarine warfare and logistics. The Harrier brings a fearsome, combat proven ground attack capability to the Spanish Navy; furthermore, with their AN/APG-65 radar (as used in the F/A-18A/C Hornet) and AIM-120 AMRAAMs, the Harriers also bring a very capable air defence role to the Alpha group wherever it may be deployed.

In July 2004, the Principe de Asturias participated in MEDSHARK/Majestic Eagle '04 which was part of the Summer Pulse '04 exercise - the Asturias, together with the USS Enterprise and ITS Giuseppe Garibaldi (the Italian AV-8B equipped aircraft carrier), 'fought' against the USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group off the coast of Morocco in an exercise designed to test the US Navy's ability to operate multiple carrier strike groups alongside allied forces in the same region of operations.

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In the USS Saipan
Pictures by Roger Cook



IFR participants at Odiham

Pictures by Roger Cook

