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MISSION CLEMENCEAU

The French Navy aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was back at sea in March with its air wing embarked for Operation 'Chammal', involving Rafale Ms in action against the so-called Islamic State.

REPORT AND PHOTOS **Joris van Boven and Alex van Noye**



A pair of Rafale Ms is readied for launch from the *Charles de Gaulle* in early April. Note that they carry live Armement Air-Sol Modulaire (AASM) bombs.

THE FRENCH NAVY (Marine Nationale) aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* (R91) was back at sea in March following an 18-month, \$1.5-billion, overhaul that began in 2016.

Having completed sea trials and a work-up period, the refurbished carrier was pressed straight into action. It embarked its air assets and deployed for 'Mission Clemenceau', initially joining the French Operation 'Chammal' effort against so-called Islamic State (IS).

Cruising in the eastern Mediterranean, the commander of the Groupe Aérien Embarqué (GAE, Carrier Air Wing), CDR Charpentier, told *Combat Aircraft* that the embarked air assets are divided into several groups, including 20 Dassault Rafale Ms drawn from the three squadrons based at Landivisiau, and a pair of E-2C Hawkeyes from Flottille 4F at Lann-Bihoué for airborne early warning and air surveillance, plus search and rescue/plane guard provided by two SA365F1 Dauphin II helicopters as well as

an anti-submarine warfare detachment with two NH90 NFH (NATO Frigate Helicopter) Caimans. As part of the task force, the *Languedoc* (Aquitaine class D653) has the Caimans embarked.

Part of the *Charles de Gaulle's* refurbishment work was to improve the carrier's suitability for an all-Rafale fighter complement, the retrofit having started shortly after the retirement of the last Super Étendard Modernisés (SEMs) in the summer of 2016.

As part of a comprehensive work-up for 'Mission Clemenceau', the Groupe Aérien Embarqué was active as a cohesive fighting unit at the back end of 2018. Charpentier said, 'This year I will spend more than six months at sea. We hope to be able to sustain a long and especially exhausting campaign against [IS]. [We are] starting with an operational phase with Operation 'Inherent Resolve' followed by countless interactions all the way to Singapore.'

According to Charpentier, the Rafales have been engaged in close air support

(CAS), defensive counter Air (DCA) and reconnaissance flights with the Thales AREOS (Airborne Recce Observation System, or RECO-NG) pod.

Wider mission

'Mission Clemenceau' is billed as a five-to-seven-month cruise under Task Force 473 (TF473), led by the *Charles de Gaulle*. TF473 takes in the Mediterranean Sea before navigating the Suez Canal and heading towards India and Singapore. A number of exercises have been completed and are planned, in addition to the combat operations. These involve the Egyptian Air Force, the Indian Navy and the Republic of Singapore Air Force.

The return to operations for the French carrier was a welcome opportunity for the Rafale Ms to resume a full embarked capability. French pilots had maintained a level of readiness thanks to joint operations and embarkations with the US Navy. However, the return of the *Charles de Gaulle* is an important landmark in getting back to complete capacity. 🇫🇷

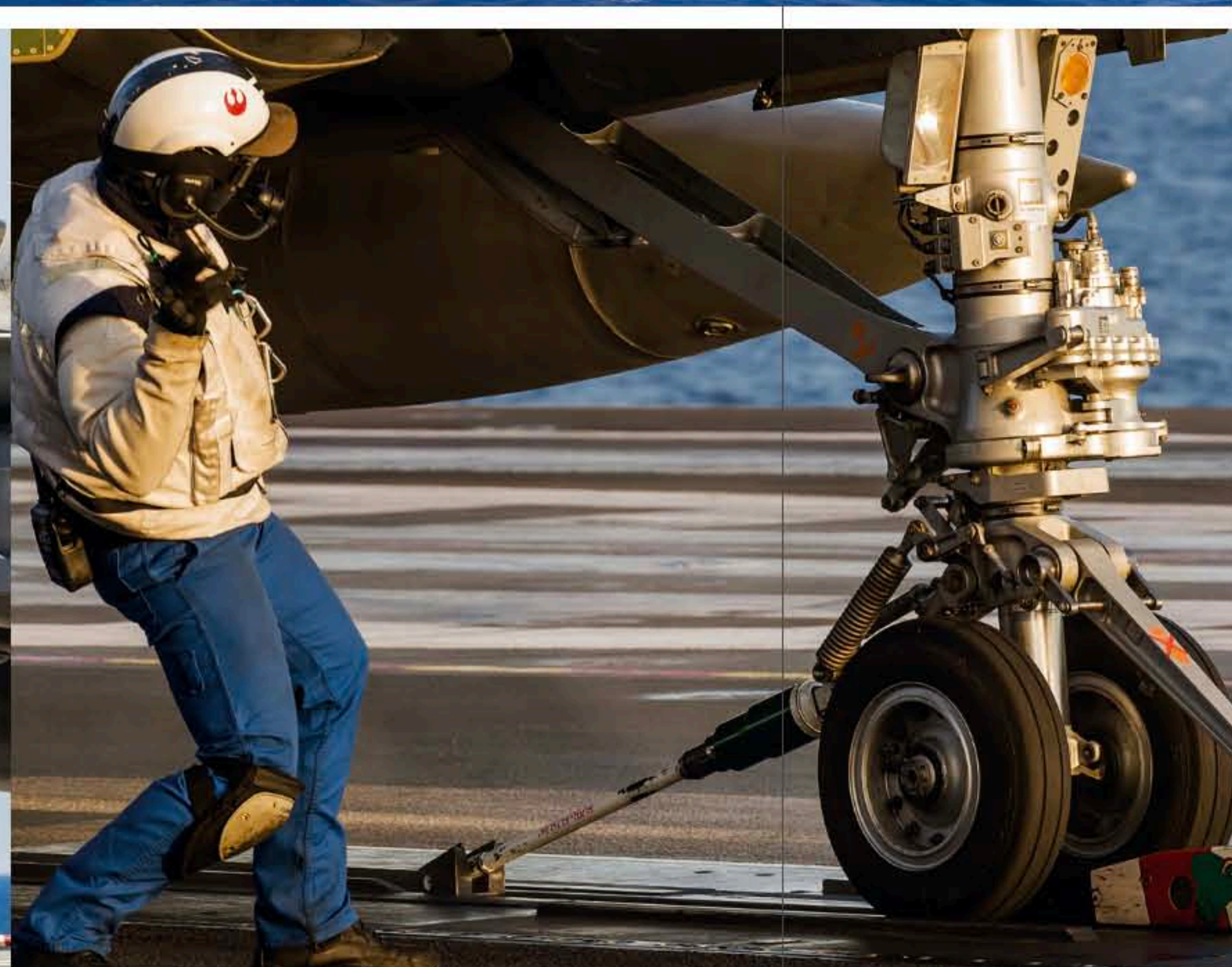
Right: The *Charles de Gaulle* is equipped with two catapults that are shortened versions of the steam-powered systems used aboard US Navy Nimitz-class carriers.

Below right: A Rafale M comes in for landing, carrying a RECO-NG pod on the centerline and live Mica infra-red missiles on the wingtips.

Below: The *Charles de Gaulle* steams in the eastern Mediterranean during late March as its Rafales began 'Inherent Resolve' missions.

Bottom left to right: Deck handlers wait to move a Rafale M into position to launch.

A Rafale is carefully marshaled into the 'shuttle' for launch from one of the two catapults.



One of the pair of E-2Cs returns in the early evening having overseen an entire mission cycle.