

# THE AVIATION MAGAZINE

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Nº 65 September-October 2019  
Volume 10, Issue 5



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# FRENCH AIRCRAFT CARRIER CHARLES DE GAULLE

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The carrier strike group (CSG), formed around the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle (R91), sailed from the Naval Base Toulon in France on Tuesday, March 5th 2019 for a deployment of several months under the name 'Mission Clemenceau'. High level training has been held around Sicily in Italy and in the Strait of Messina on March 8th and 9th with the Italian air carrier group which was structured around the Italian aircraft carrier Giuseppe Garibaldi. These two days were used to conduct high level exercises during which the two navies conducted operational maneuvers in many areas of engagement. With the Danish frigate Niels Juel and Portuguese Corte Real which were integrated into the French CSG, this meeting highlights the ability of European partners to work together at sea.

After the warming up training, French, European and international means from Australia, Denmark, United States, Portugal and the United Kingdom, are deployed around the French aircraft carrier under the name of 'Task Force 473'. The units offer France and its allies multiple capabilities such as power projection, control of airspace, and gathering maritime intelligence. The Task Force 473 is commanded by Rear-Admiral Olivier Lebas and is a real politic and military tool. The task force will deploy in areas of strategic interest in the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and finally in the Pacific area. The airborne group (Groupe Aérien Embarqué, GAé) on board of the Charles de Gaulle consists of twenty Dassault Rafales M, two air surveillance aircraft of the type Grumman E-2C *Hawkeye*, two Eurocopter Dauphin rescue helicopters and one NH-Industries NH90 NFH *Caiman* helicopter. The naval aviation group on board of the Charles de Gaulle operates under the name 'Task Force 473'.

On March 13, 2019, the Charles de Gaulle arrived off the coast of Syria, and the carrier battle group which was formed around the aircraft carrier conducted its first air missions during 'Operation Chammal', the long standing French operation against IS/ISIS/DAESH. Marine *Rafales* and *Hawkeyes* were launched to support the ground troops in the vicinity of Syria and Iraq and to acquire intelligence. Other aircraft from the carrier and the surface ships provided control of the air-sea space. The arrival of the French naval air group reinforces the French military capabilities involved in 'Operation Chammal' and



consolidates the coalition acting within the 'Operation Inherent Resolve' to fight against IS/ISIS/DAESH. The French air carrier group is familiar with this theater of operations in the Levant since it has already led three 'Arromanches' missions since January 2015. The French aircraft carrier played a significant role in the military campaign which was contributed to the dismantling of IS/ISIS/DAESH. This capacity building illustrates the determination of France and its European and American allies to complete the military defeat of DAESH. While the current fighting

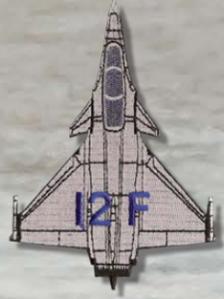
is now concentrated in a small territory, this naval force provides naval air surveillance, situational awareness and intervention to observe any possible reconfiguration and counter a potential resurgence of the terrorist group.

To contribute to the defeat of IS/ISIS/DAESH, the Charles de Gaulle is launching fully armed *Rafales* on a daily basis to operate over the operational theatre. Thus prepositioned, this naval force will be able to intervene according to the operational needs and to fight against the threats weighing on the interests of France and the French but also of Europe and the Europeans. This means that the *Rafales* of the Charles de Gaulle are always available for intervention, but sometimes they will return to the carrier without having dropped their bombs. The integration of the naval aviation group into 'Operation Chammal' during its presence in the eastern Mediterranean comes within this framework.

In addition, this deployment against IS/ISIS/DAESH, will enable France to strengthen its strategic partnerships by developing strong links, work habits and mutual knowledge essential to operational efficiency. Exchanges and exercises will be conducted throughout the cruise, especially with Australia, Egypt and India, to cooperate with the French allies and partners and to make France shine in the world. With Egypt the 'Ramses' exercises will be held before the Charles de Gaulle and its battle group will move along to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal. In the Indian Ocean an Australian vessel will join the carrier strike group during the second part of 'Mission Clemenceau'. When the formation reaches India, they will join the Indian forces for a few major interoperability exercises. India is a very important partner for France and its strategic partners. The final part of the mission will be conducted in the vicinity of Singapore.

Mission Clemenceau will end for the battle group in that area and the ships will return to Europe after this deployment. But until then the Task Force 473 is active during the missions over Syria.





Rafale M taxiing to the catapult (main image)  
Emblems of Flottille 12F (left insets) and Flottille 17F (right insets), based at BAN Landivisiau





Rafale Ms just about to "hit the deck"



Fully loaded Rafale M of the Flottille 12F on final approach



Flight operations are conducted 24 hours a day

THEIR PROFESSIONALISM AND DEDICATION ENSURES THAT THE CHARLES DE GAULLE IS ABLE TO CONDUCT ITS MISSION ANYTIME, 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK





E-2C Hawkeye of the Flottille 4F seconds from touchdown



The **SA365 Dauphin** is the primary SAR helicopter aboard the Charles de Gaulle. The crew of the Dauphin consists of four crew members during a typical SAR standby: a pilot in command, a co-pilot, a hoist operator and a rescue swimmer. During Mission Clemenceau, the detachment of the 35 Flottille on board the Charles de Gaulle consists of six pilots, three hoist operators, three rescue swimmers and 26 technicians. The detachment of the 35 Flottille has two SA365 Dauphin helicopters on board.

While flying the SAR standby during aircraft operations, there are specific patterns which the helicopter flies. The fixed-wing aircraft use a more spacious circuit around the ship, while the helicopter is hovering closer to the ship. The Dauphin also flies a lot lower than the aircraft to maintain the flight safety margins. According to Philippe, the capacity of the Dauphin is large enough to save the entire crew of five from a Hawkeye in the event of an emergency. Normally the Dauphin keeps moving during SAR standby, because at a low speed of 70 knots the helicopters can stay in the air for more than 2.5 hours.



In addition to the Dauphin operations, a **NH90 Caiman** from the 31 Flottille is also deployed aboard the Charles de Gaulle. During Mission Clemenceau, there is only one NH90 flight crew and twelve technicians aboard the carrier. Usually the crew consists of a pilot, an observer, a sensor operator, and a rescue swimmer. Benjamin specifically explains that only one pilot is deployed on board of the Caiman. The NH90 is mainly used to detect ships and, if necessary, to eliminate them with anti-ship missiles. The helicopter can be equipped with two anti-ship missiles which can be attached to the sides of the fuselage. The helicopter is also being used to search for submarines hidden deep under water. For attacking submarines, the NH90 can be equipped with two MU90 torpedoes. In addition to deployment at sea, the NH90 Caiman can also be used for Personnel Recovery (PR) missions. The Caiman can only be used for PR and not for CSAR tasks. PR missions are planned from the sea in the same way and with the same mindset as PR missions on the mainland. The Caiman is able to take more than fourteen people on board, excluding the crew.





At sea, the Danish Navy has an **EH101 Merlin** helicopter available during 'Mission Clemenceau'. The helicopter crew consists of two pilots, a flight engineer who is also the hoist operator during SAR missions, and a mission system administrator who has various tasks such as communication, acting as a radar operator, FLIR operator, and backup rescue swimmer. The fifth person on board is the rescue swimmer for SAR operations. During 'Mission Clemenceau', however, there will be a sixth crew member. This is an additional flight engineer, so the two flight engineers can support each other in the *Merlin*. The *Merlin* is from the 722 Squadron which is based at the Danish air base Karup.

The role for the Danish EH101 in Mission Clemenceau consists of Search And Rescue (SAR) missions, maritime reconnaissance flights, and logistical flights. For the latter, the helicopter is capable of carrying a sling load of up to 3,000 kg.

