
ANNIVERSARY

30 years of the 'Ícaro' detachment

Spanish Air Force took part for eight years in NATO's air task force during the Balkans conflict





STATIONED at Aviano air base (Italy) for the first time thirty years ago, the 'Ícaro' detachment was tasked with providing close air support for UN peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was the first time that combat aircraft were deployed outside national territory to take part in real operations, thus writing one of the most remarkable chapters in the Spanish Air Force's recent history.

EF-18s reached 28,000 flight hours in the 7,500 missions flown in support of operations in the former Yugoslavia. Below, one of the crews in a pre-flight briefing. The missions of the Spanish fighter jets required thorough planning.

The Aviano air base deployment was not the first one in international operations. However, due to its importance, length and the multidisciplinary composition of the force, it served to boost much of the doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures that have made the Air and Space Force of today one with a strong expeditionary character.



It all began in June 1994 when Spain, in response to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 816, 836 and 958, decided to participate, along with the other NATO nations, in the Allied effort to provide air support to the peacekeeping operations that were being conducted in the former Yugoslavia. The result of this decision was to set up the 'Ícaro' detachment at Aviano air base, an Italian city near the Slovenian border.

Eight EF-18 (Spanish F-18) fighter-bombers from the 15th Wing, two KC-130 Hercules from the 31st Wing

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Spanish Air Force personnel load a Sidewinder missile on an EF-18. The fighter jets were armed with these missiles for self-protection.

and about 240 people were sent to the new detachment, which became fully operational on 1 December 1994, when it joined operation Deny Flight. From then on, the EF-18s would take off daily at the foot of the Dolomites for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The Spanish fighter-bombers flew 7,500 missions, reaching 28,000 flight hours.

KC-130 Hercules were in charge of their air-to-air refuelling, which supplied fuel to the fighter jets over the Adriatic Sea in order to double their flight time. In total, the Dumbos from the 31st Wing transferred eight million litres of fuel, not only to the Spanish aircraft but also to the Canadian, American, British and German aircraft stationed at Aviano.

In order to guarantee its security and from its inception, members of the newly established Air Deployment Support Squadron (EADA) joined the 'Ícaro' detachment. It also had a Communications Centre managed by the Mobile Air Control Group (GRUMOCA). An Intelligence Branch was also stationed at Aviano air base and the first operation, Deny Flight, involved C-212 and CN-235 aircraft on transport and support missions.

Additionally, the contingent took control over the remaining assets that had for nearly a year been involved in NATO operation Deny Flight to enforce the international community's embargo on the former Yugoslavia and its airspace, and to provide direct air support to UNPRO-

FOR (UN Protection Force). These assets included a C-212 Aviocar belonging to the 37th Wing (Valladolid), which since June 1993 had been carrying out logistical support missions for NATO's Fifth Task Force in Vicenza; and three TACPs (Tactical Air Control Parties) whose mission was to lead the fighter jets to their surface targets. Subsequently, Spain reinforced its contribution to the Allied contingent with a Boeing 707 from the Air Intelligence Centre stationed at Torrejón air base.

NATO OPERATIONS

'Ícaro' joined operation Deny Flight with three main missions: CAP (Combat Air Patrol) to ensure compliance with the flight restrictions imposed by the United Nations; CAS (Close Air Support) for the blue helmets and humanitarian assistance missions; and Airstrikes on targets designated by the United Nations. For these tasks, the aircraft were loaded with HARM (high-speed anti-radiation) and Sidewinder missiles for self-protection, as well as laser-guided and conventional bombs. The detachment took part in successive



A KC-130 Hercules air-to-air refuelling aircraft returns to Aviano air base after supplying fuel to Allied fighter jets in the Adriatic.



An EF-18 fighter jet from the 15th Wing is refuelled in flight during one of the missions over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

operations in the former Yugoslavia. Special mention should be made of operation Deliberate Force in the summer of 1995, NATO's first offensive action in its 46-year history, as it allowed the siege of Sarajevo to be lifted and forced the warring parties to negotiate and reach the Dayton Accords in December 1995. The United Nations transferred authority to the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR), and thereby the UNPROFOR mission came to an end. Likewise, operation Deny Flight ended and Joint Endeavour began. On 20 December 1996, the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) replaced the Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, giving way successively to operations Joint Guard and Joint Forge.

On 15 June 1998, the Spanish Air Force took part in NATO air exercise Determined Falcon over Albanian and Macedonian airspace to demonstrate the Alliance's commitment to peace and stability in the region.

A year later, NATO air forces were compelled to step in once again due to the worsening situation in the Serbian region of Kosovo. Operation Allied Force, which involved the EF-18 and Hercules aircraft deployed at Aviano air base, lasted from 23 March to 10 June 1999, the date on which the Serbian regime was forced to call for a ceasefire. In 79 days of bombing over the former Yugoslavia, Spanish Air Force fighter jets

The collective Air Medal recognised the work of the members of the detachment

flew more than 200 sorties on patrol and attack missions, in some cases leading Composite Air Operations (COMAO).

The professionalism of the members of the 'Ícaro' detachment was recognised on 7 April 2000, when the Spanish Council of Ministers agreed to award them a collective Air Force Medal. This commendation, which is the Spanish Air Force's highest military award in peacetime, recognised, according to the Royal Decree, "the brilliant performance of the detachment since its creation and, in particular, in operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force, often assuming situations of extraordinary risk in which the distinguished courage, as well as the military and professional virtues of those who have formed this unit, have been demonstrated".

On 1 July 2002, the 'Ícaro' detachment came to an end with an emotional ceremony in which the Spanish flag was lowered for the last time at Aviano.

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