



Tiger's Last Roar



Gert Kromhout visits the French Air Force's Escadron de Chasse 1/12, due to disband after this year's Tiger Meet

ALTHOUGH DISBANDMENT rapidly approaches, Escadron de Chasse 1/12 *Cambresis* is as busy as ever. It maintains a Mirage 2000C detachment in Chad, a two-aircraft Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) detachment in Creil, France and continuously detaches pilots to EC 3/11 Corse in Djibouti – all while it's organising the 50th Anniversary NATO Tiger Meet in May 2011 at Cambrai-Epinoy in northern France, which promises to be the biggest such event to date.



Dying species

The single-seat Mirage 2000 air superiority fighter of the French Air Force (FAF) is gradually disappearing from the skies. With the disbandment

of EC 1/12's sister squadron, EC 2/12 *Picardie* in July 2009, only three Mirage 2000C squadrons remain in the country. EC 1/12 *Cambresis*, based at Cambrai, is one of them; the other two being EC 1/5 *Île de France* at Orange and EC 1/2 *Cicognes* at Dijon.

On the day of the author's visit to Cambrai, one of the squadron's Mirage 2000Cs was being prepared to fly to Chad the next day for the combined EC 1/12 and EC 1/5 detachment in the North African country. The detachment comprises three aircraft, two from *Cambresis* and one from *Île de France* squadrons. EC 1/12 also sends pilots to EC 3/11 *Corse*, the permanent ten-jet Mirage 2000C/D squadron in Djibouti.

The Chad detachment at N'Djamena International Airport is very new – the two Mirage 2000C squadrons took over from a Mirage F1 unit, ER 2/33 *Savoie*, in June 2010. As the very last F1 unit, *Savoie* on its own could not maintain the Chad deployment (which it had done since 1984) concurrently with a three-plane detachment in Kandahar, Afghanistan. It was still a surprising move as the Mirage F1CR is primarily a reconnaissance aircraft with strike capabilities, whereas the Mirage 2000C is an air defence fighter although the air-to-air threat in Chad is almost non-existent.

Don't forget the camera!

Lieutenant Colonel Sebastien 'Dodi' Vallette, commanding officer of EC 1/12, explained that the M2000C's limited air-to-ground capability is not



Above: Although EC 1/12 has 23 aircraft, there are no Mirage 2000B two-seaters in its inventory. The 2000Bs are all based with EC 2/5 at Orange and are used for type training for all Mirage 2000 variants including the Mirage 2000D and N. ALL PHOTOS GUY KERNAN/OUT

Left: Unlike most French fighter squadrons, EC 1/12's official squadron patch does not include the emblems of the three escadrilles, but refers to the town of Cambrai.

new. "The air force added it to the 2000C in the mid-1990s with free-fall bombs. Now we also use GBU-12 laser-guided bombs, but we don't have our own laser designator. We are dependent on other aircraft such as the Mirage 2000D to guide these bombs. We started planning for Chad operations about three to four years ago." He says the air-to-ground capabilities of the Mirage 2000C force are adequate for Africa, but not up to the more difficult Afghanistan missions.

The agreement between France and Chad does not cover air-to-ground missions in Chad itself; the country has its own assets for that, although French fighters do regularly train with Chad army units. Lt Col Vallette added: "We are there to be able to use force in support of UN or EU operations outside of Chad – for instance, in Darfur."

The Mirage 2000C cannot carry any dedicated reconnaissance equipment, unlike the FICR – a serious shortcoming when aerial recce is an important mission, as in Chad. Lt Col Vallette: "We don't call it reconnaissance because we don't have the equipment. We call it surveillance, using our 'Mark 1 eyeball' and digital handheld-compact cameras. That sounds funny, but we do point recce with better than expected results. You know, moving people or cars with guns sticking out of the windows are easily recognisable. We cannot take a big DSLR camera because the cockpit is too small. Because of its outstanding fly-by-wire system, the 2000C is a very stable platform. At low altitudes the turbulence can get heavy, but the autopilot enables us to fly comfortably with, for instance, a 30 degrees 'bank and keep' altitude. The results are not comparable to

the output of the Mirage FICR, but are acceptable."

Although the Mirage 2000C is less suited for Chad than the F1, the security situation in this region has relaxed since the FAF established the detachment in the mid-1980s, making it easier to bring in the non-recce delta jet. Lieutenant de Vaisseau Raphael Brun, a French Navy Super Étendard pilot on a two-year exchange with EC 1/12, explained: "The relationship with the neighbouring countries is improving. Our main tasks are surveillance and protection of French citizens, and the base is an excellent springboard to other African countries."

The FAF trains with the Chadian army, but not with the Chadian Air Force, which has a small fleet of Sukhoi Su-25 *Frogfoots* flown by non-English speaking pilots hired from Ukraine. "They don't like us to know what they are doing," said ▶

Tiger's Last Roar



Lieutenant Mark Arnould, a young pilot who has previous experience in Chad. They usually fly one mission per day, lasting about two hours. "We always fly in pairs and always use the tanker," said Lt Arnould. "Sometimes the missions can last four hours when we fly to the other side of the country. We also regularly train with the FAF CN235 and C-160 that are also based at N'Djamena International Airport." Jets normally stay there for about six months before coming back to France for maintenance. Pilots stay there for a maximum of two months.

Large squadron

Although the 2000C can perform air-to-air or air-to-ground missions, either function has to be prepared for while the jet is on the ground as it cannot be changed in the air. The aircraft's gun, however, can be used in both roles. All French fighter squadrons deploy to Corsica for two weeks every year to train primarily for air-to-air



Above: Centreline fuel tank-only is the preferred dogfight configuration, rather than two wing-tanks.
Left: Lt Col Sebastien 'Dodi' Vallette, commanding officer of EC 1/12 Cambresis.

operations, but also for strafing training at the air-to-ground range. They also deploy annually for three weeks to Cazaux Air Base in the south-west of the country to train with other squadrons at the Cap Sur range, the only one in the country where live ordnance may be dropped.

EC 1/12 sends its young pilots to the FAF air base in Djibouti immediately after they have qualified in the air defence role so that they can

carry out QRA duties. Also, Djibouti is considered as a perfect learning area for advanced training in the air-to-ground role as it has few restrictions and generally good weather. The pilots get to closely work with detached Mirage 2000D crews who are experts in air-to-ground operations. At all times, one to two pilots from Cambrai are detached to Djibouti. According to Lt Col Valette, this arrangement will come to an end when the



"The relationship with the neighbouring countries is improving. Our main tasks are surveillance and protection of French citizens, and the base is an excellent springboard to other African countries."



Mirage 2000C over the English Channel awaiting refuelling from a C-160R of ET 2/64 Savoie.

Right: Pilot on a pre-flight walk around with the crew chief.

Below: Two Mirage 2000Cs sporting the emblem of Spa89 with the red lightning flash that all escadrilles of this squadron have in common.



Mirage 2000C is replaced by Mirage 2000-5Fs from Dijon. This will happen this summer when the three Mirage 2000-5Fs of EC 3/30 Lorraine at Al Dhafra, UAE, are replaced by three Rafale Cs.

In France, the FAF maintains four QRA detachments spread strategically over the country. EC 1/12 is responsible for the QRA duty in Creil, just north of Paris and dedicated to the protection of the city. It has two jets and two pilots, rotating every week. They scramble three to four times a week and make about 50 'hot' scrambles per year. The other QRA locations are Mont-de-Marsan, Orange and Lann-Bihoué. In the past, EC 1/12 has also maintained QRA detachments in Iceland and the Baltic States.

Because of its commitments in Africa, and to QRA, EC 1/12 has more jets than most other frontline squadrons, totalling 23 Mirage 2000Cs but no Mirage 2000B trainers. It also has more pilots than usual, with 30, plus two non-flying officers and 18 NCOs.

As with all fighter squadrons, Cambresis has

three escadrilles (flights). Escadrilles were the smallest flying units in the First World War. When the unit of choice became the much larger escadron (squadron) after the Second World War, the French Air Force assigned the vintage escadrilles to the escadrons to maintain traditions and heritage. Unlike squadrons elsewhere in the world, the heritage and traditions of a French squadron are primarily derived from the much older escadrilles: this is the reason the fighters wear so many different emblems on their tails.

EC 1/12 is different from almost all other fighter squadrons in that its official unit badge, which is not present on any of its jets, does not include any of the three escadrille emblems. EC 1/12 was activated in 1952 when the Cold War was really heating up. The two escadrilles assigned to it are still with the squadron today. One of them, Spa162, was established towards the end of the First World War in January 1918. Most escadrille designations refer to the type of fighter

it was equipped with at the end of that war – for Spa162 it was the SPAD VII/XII biplane. The unit disbanded in 1927 but saw action in the Second World War as the 6th escadrille of Group de Chasse III/6, but without the tiger emblem it wore in the Great War. It became a tiger unit again in 1952 as the first escadrille of EC 1/12 – at that time based at Mont-de-Marsan reporting to Escadre de Chasse 12 (Fighter Wing 12). Subsequently, the red lightning flash common to all three emblems of EC 1/12 was added to the tiger. The second escadrille was Spa98 'Guepes' (Wasps), activated in 1917 at Villacoublay. It was short-lived, disbanding in 1919, but reformed in 1939 and was assigned to EC 1/12 in May 1952. The third escadrille was only added in 1996 when the French Air Force abandoned its wing structure. At the time, the total number of squadrons was reduced, thereby increasing the number of fighters in each that remained. This allowed for a third escadrille to be added to fighter squadrons: for EC 1/12, it was ▶



The third escadrille, Spa166 'Aigle de sable et d'argent', was added in 1996 when the squadron was enlarged to 20 jets from 15.



Over Normandy.

Spa166 *Algle Noir* (Black Eagle), which had been dormant since 1919.

Tiger Meet

As the last active founding member of the NATO Tiger Meet in Europe, it is fitting that EC 1/12 organises the 50th anniversary of the famous NATO Tiger Meet in May 2011. And it will be a big one, perhaps the biggest Tiger Meet ever. As the operations officer and deputy commander of the squadron, Commandant Jean-Luc 'Doudou' Daroux is responsible for the flying part of the meet. "It will be a huge event," he says. "All member squadrons have said they will attend with their aircraft. Seventeen countries and 23 squadrons will be at Cambrai with 77 fixed-wing and ten rotary-wing aircraft. The air base will be loaded. At first we thought it would be impossible to accommodate all of them but we managed. I don't know of any other exercise that has such diversity and so many nationalities."

Following on from Volkel in the Netherlands in October 2010 and Kleine Brogel in Belgium the previous year, the meet will not be the social gathering with some flying that it once was – but a full exercise. "The first time we made it an integrated flying exercise was in 2009," said Daroux, adding: "We had to in order to survive, but the social aspect is still very strong and that makes it different from all other big exercises. You get to know other people very well."



Above: EC 1/12 has a proud tradition of painting one of its jets in tiger colours for the Tiger Meet. This one is landing at Volkel Air Base, in the Netherlands, for the 2010 event. The 2011 meet will see at least one Mirage 2000 in special colours.



Left: Crew room with its large tiger head. One of the squadron traditions is that all commanders donate one of their hats to the squadron to be displayed above the bar.



Above: A Mirage 2000C taking off from Cambrai in December 2010.

squadron. 'Hard to be Humble', the NATO Tiger Association motto, proudly welcomes visitors at the entry to the main squadron building. The entrance is guarded by a large stuffed tiger and the walls in the building are covered by pictures of aircraft in special tiger paint schemes. This squadron has yellow and black blood pumping through its veins.

Because of the huge organisation and spacing issues, the airshow during the Tiger Meet will not be held at Cambrai air base but at nearby Cambrai-Niergnies, a general aviation airport at the other side of the village of Cambrai. "The rotary aircraft will fly from Cambrai-Niergnies but the runway is too small for fixed-wing aircraft," says 'Doudou' Daroux. "We plan a formation flypast of all participating squadrons, each flying one of their aircraft from Cambrai air base."

He added that the Indian Air Force will send a delegation from its own tiger squadron to the meet, and that they may come with their Mirage 2000Hs. Another non-affiliated unit taking part is the 121st ARW, Ohio Air National Guard, which also participated in the 2010 event, with one KC-135R. It has not been decided where the tanker will fly from as Cambrai is too small: the airport of Lille is a possibility, as is Florennes air base in Belgium.

Lt Col Vallette added that the meet offers excellent training "not just for the flying, but also very good language training for all our people". Two COMAOs (combined air operations) are planned each day for the two-week event: COMAO 1 for fighters, and COMAO 2 for all aircraft.

Cambresis takes its 'tiger responsibilities' very seriously, and the tiger spirit is the soul of the

Future

For EC 1/12, this year's Tiger Meet will be its last before disbandment in mid-2012. However, it does not mean the end for Spa162 - French Air Force policy is to keep its most important escadrilles alive based on their history. Although more historically important escadrilles have not survived, the high command of the air force has decided to assign the Spa162 identity to a Rafale squadron in the future. According to Lt Col Vallette, the important contribution of the tiger spirit is the primary reason for this decision. Although several media reported Spa162 would go to EC 5/330 Cote d'Argent at Mont-de-Marsan, Lt Col Vallette says it won't, as that's already a tiger squadron with two tiger escadrilles. "It will be decided next summer," he added.

The last flying operations for Cambresis will take place in April 2012, shortly before disbandment and the closure of the air base. The QRA detachment at Creil will become the responsibility of another fighter squadron. With the demise of EC 1/12, the fighter presence in Chad may also come to an end as it will probably be too much for the single remaining Mirage 2000C squadron to maintain, given that EC 2/5 is also responsible for training crews of all Mirage 2000 types and maintaining QRA detachments in France.

Right: Although EC 1/12 is disbanded next year, the Mirage 2000C will linger on until 2015 with EC 2/5 Ile de France at Orange.



"We had to change in order to survive, but the social aspect is still very strong and that makes it different from all other big exercises. You get to know other people very well."