

STRIKE FORCE Souda

report:
Gert Kromhout



In a surprise move, the French AF deployed its Mirage 2000D force from Solenzara on the French island of Corsica to the Greek air base at Souda on the island of Crete on April 18. The Mirage 2000Ds were accompanied by four Mirage 2000N-K2s from early May.



The Mirage 2000Ds had been flying from Solenzara almost since the beginning of Operation 'Harmattan', the codename for the French effort in support of NATO's Operation 'United Protector'. The main reason behind the move to Crete was the shortened distance to the theater of operations. 'We save up to 1.5 to 2 hours of flight, but we can stay up to seven hours when we do ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] flights', says Capt Pouillard (all real names of French AF pilots are withheld for security reasons), a veteran Mirage 2000D pilot serving with Escadron de Chasse 2/3 'Champagne'. 'It saves us at least one drink at the tanker.'

The Mirage 2000N-K2s of EC 2/4 'Lafayette' entered the fray on May 6. This detachment is also manned by personnel from EC 3/4 'Limousin'. The 2000N-K2 was initially deployed to Souda to counter the temporary force reduction when the carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was in the Souda Bay naval facility for rest and recuperation and a crew swap.

However, after the *Charles de Gaulle* set sail again, the 2000Ns remained at Souda, and two more jets were added after *Combat Aircraft's* visit, taking the total to six.

The two-seat Mirage 2000N-K2 is an adaptation of the 2000N nuclear strike variant, but also has conventional bombing capabilities. According to Lt Col Christophe, detachment commander and commanding officer of 'Lafayette', it has more or less the same capabilities as the conventional 2000D, but its main difference is that it lacks a precision targeting system. 'Therefore, we always fly with the Mirage 2000D because they have to guide our bombs. We use laser-guided bombs such as the GBU-12, 22 and 24, but we are not capable of employing GPS-guided munitions. Only the Mirage 2000D variant is capable of employing the GBU-24 dual-mode bomb (laser and GPS guidance) and the SCALP cruise missile.'

SCAR challenges

The Mirage 2000D/K2 force performs air interdiction and strike co-ordination armed reconnaissance (SCAR) missions. Air interdiction, nowadays also known as



This photograph: A Mirage 2000N-K2 takes off with 500lb GBU-12s and Magic 2s. By early May, the French AF and Navy had dropped 25 per cent of all ammunition and flown 25-30 per cent of all flight hours in the Libyan operation. Gert Kromhout

Above: Manning the spare. The Mirage mission completion rate stands at 100 per cent. Spares such as this aircraft are not often required. Note that the back-up crew in 133-XN does not wear any equipment other than helmets and flight suits. In the event of the primary jet going unserviceable, the back-up crew begins the start-up procedure for the primary crew in order to save precious time. Gert Kromhout

deliberate targeting, involves attacking pre-planned targets, whereas SCAR refers to attacks against targets of opportunity. Close air support (CAS) is not conducted, since this mission requires friendly soldiers on the ground.

The SCAR missions put a lot of stress on the aircrew. 'When doing SCAR missions, we work with our own systems, with Joint STARS when it is airborne, or with recce assets that discovered targets for us', says Capt Pouillard. 'With precise information about the target we can direct our SCAR towards it. Nevertheless, positive identification remains a problem because we don't have people on the ground.'

Thorough mission preparation is therefore of utmost importance, but so is common sense. The fact that there are few if any forward air controllers on the ground to provide targeting information makes it

difficult to attack, since discrimination between friendly/unfriendly forces is difficult. This is the

major difference compared to operations in Afghanistan, where forward air controllers are relatively abundant. Intelligence, as always, plays a crucial role. Capt Pouillard continues: 'The CAOC [Combined Air Operations Center] in Izmir [Turkey] tells us that east of a particular line you can engage tanks otherwise you have to ask. Furthermore, when tanks or artillery are firing towards Misurata or Benghazi, they could be the bad guys. If we see a large concentration of tanks we also know they are not the rebels'. It might be expected that the lines of communication are rather long, but Pouillard confirms that's not the case. 'The other day, we had a mission based on a photo made by a recce flight only six hours prior. That's not a long period at all.'

'Normally it is CAOC which tasks us with the weapons to be deployed, but if we think another weapon would be more appropriate we call them and discuss it with them'. Usually, pilots of all participating aircraft types are represented in the CAOC. 'If the environment is not very appropriate for the weapon assigned by CAOC, or the weather means LGBs are not our weapon of choice, we sometimes also ask if the co-ordinates they gave us are precise enough to use the dual-mode GBU-24', says Capt Pouillard.

Afghanistan comparison

Many of the pilots are combat veterans who have completed numerous tours in Afghanistan. Capt Pouillard, for instance, went to Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007 and will return later this year.

Maj Marc 'Claudia' S. is operations officer for the Souda detachment (and with EC 2/3 'Champagne'). In this capacity, he is also the second in command of the

This photograph: The fighter-bombers do not drop bombs on every SCAR mission, though this Mirage 2000D expended two bombs against Libyan tanks. Note the empty centerline station. Gert Kromhout

Left inset: High-scoring bombing 'ace' Mirage 2000D 660/133-JF. Gert Kromhout



air detachment. He was in Afghanistan in 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2011 before he arrived in Souda. He also flew missions over the Congo from N'Djamena in Chad in 2003. In total, he has logged 2,000 flying hours on the Mirage 2000D. For him, the difference between Afghanistan and Libya is obvious. 'In Afghanistan we do a lot of CAS, and that is always urgent because there are troops in contact (TIC). When doing CAS, dropping bombs is very difficult because our troops are always in close proximity to the enemy, and we have to avoid blue-on-blue. In Libya, we don't have troops on the ground, so there is less stress for that. However, we do have other stresses — the surface-to-air threat, for instance. This threat is virtually non-present in Afghanistan, hence we can — and do —



'The surface-to-air threat in Libya means we stay at or above medium altitudes at all times. Actually, there are a lot of surface-to-air threat indications on our ECM gear over Libya, and we have to manage that'

Maj Marc 'Claudia' S., EC 2/3

Top right: Groundcrew closely observe the start-up of a Mirage 2000-5F. The Mirage 2000N-K2 and 2000-5F forces share a hardstand, while 2000Ds operate from the nearby shelter area.
Gert Kromhout

Right: Detachment commander Lt Col Emmanuel Caboche.
Gert Kromhout

Below: A Mirage 2000D weapons system officer.
Gert Kromhout



go very low occasionally, but in Libya we stay at or above medium altitudes at all times. Actually, there are a lot of surface-to-air threat indications on our ECM gear over Libya, and we have to manage that. Another stress-increasing factor for the last four weeks was the turbulence over the sea during refueling.'

As 'Claudia' underlines, Libya is a different war. 'The war in Afghanistan started 10 years ago. By now, it is well organized and our flight schedule is better and predictive. Here,

everybody is very tired. We fly long missions day and night, and fly more missions than in Afghanistan. I returned from a seven-hour mission last night, and I am already on the schedule for the next mission.'

The SCAR missions don't make for relaxing flights, either. 'You have to be very flexible. We also have more pressure from the media point of view because the rules of engagement are much stricter. The responsibility is much more with the aircrew. The targets are also different. When you see something on the ground, you report it to the airborne command. He says you are free to attack. However, it remains your decision. There is nobody on the ground who says you are cleared hot, whereas in Afghanistan it is the man on the ground who gives you delivery clearance.'

At Souda

According to detachment commander Lt Col Emmanuel Caboche, the French Mirages at Souda have an astonishing 100 per cent mission completion rate. When an aircraft is not able to take off, the spare always can, but in practice the spares are rarely used. Caboche says that the Rafale is performing even better. 'We have excellent technicians and aircraft. Take the K2, for instance. It has been in the fleet since 1987, but it doesn't look old, and it doesn't behave like an old aircraft. Our technicians work 24 hours a day in three shifts. They work hard, but the aircraft are helping them a lot. The failures we have are not critical; they are normal for operating aircraft and are not related to age.'

Of key importance for mission success is the support factor, both from the host nation and headquarters. 'The support from the Hellenic AF is outstanding,' says Caboche. 'It is beyond expectation, they never say no, and we are really asking for many and difficult things. It is obviously their pride to help us as best they can.'

The fact is that the French AF is amid a huge force reduction and reorganization process. Two of the participating squadrons are on the eve of relocating to a new home base. EC 2/4 will move from Luxeuil to Istres this summer, while EC 3/4 will simultaneously disband. As EC 2/4 assumes the role of EC 3/4 at Istres, the unit will also adopt the latest Mirage 2000N-K3 version. Lt Col Christophe Itcol, squadron commander of EC 3/4, confirms that the move is proceeding as planned, but refuses to commit himself as to how the ongoing operation may interfere. Group de Chasse 1/2 'Cigognes' also moves from Dijon to Luxeuil in August and terminates its commitment to EC 3/30 'Lorraine' in the United Arab Emirates. 'Lorraine' is currently a small squadron consisting of three Rafales and three Mirage 2000-5Fs but will become an all-Rafale unit. Almost all 'Lorraine' pilots



SOUDA SUPPORT

Right: Hellenic AF support for Operation 'Unified Protector' extends beyond providing air bases at Souda and Araxos. The air arm also operates the EMB-145H Erieye airborne early warning and control aircraft in support of Libyan operations. Normally based at Elefsis, the aircraft is stationed at Souda for the duration of the operation. Gert Kromhout

Below: Temporarily based at Souda are three E-3C Sentrys of the US Air Force. At the time of its visit, *Combat Aircraft* noted two E-3Cs, one E-8C, one C-2 and two RC-135s, plus two MC-130Ps and three HH-60s from RAF Lakenheath. Also present were two C-295s of the Portuguese AF.



No 13 Squadron on the Tornado GR1 and GR4 at RAF Marham. His 'day job' is deputy commander of the Préparation, Retour d'expérience, Évaluation (PRE, Preparation, Debriefing and Evaluation), a department of the Commandement la Défense Aérienne et les Opérations Aériennes (CDAOA, Air Defense and Air Operations Command). In this capacity, he is responsible for organizing almost all exercises in France. He was temporarily assigned to US AFRICOM at



Groundcrew prepare a Mirage for its next mission. In the background, on the other side of the base, are RC-135s, an E-3, an MC-130P and an E-8C Joint STARS.

are temporarily assigned from France-based squadrons for periods of a couple of months.

Lt Col Caboche does not foresee any problems as the operation continues into the summer. 'Everybody here is really motivated because this is what they are trained to do. The question is, how long can we sustain this? It is up to us to show the politicians that the force reductions should be reconsidered.'

The Souda detachment is largely dependent upon the aerial supply line from France, and it is no secret that the French transport fleet is ageing and

overworked. 'But they are doing a great job in Paris. We get what we ask for and the European Air Transport Command really works. We are resupplied by many nations'. The EATC was activated in February 2010 with the objective of providing more efficient employment and co-ordination of transport and tanker aircraft among the four participating nations (France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands).

Caboche is a veteran fighter pilot. He began his career in 1985 and flew the Mirage III, the 2000N-K2 and the 2000D, and had a tour with the Royal Air Force's

Ramstein Air Base, Germany, for six weeks during the initial phase of the operation against Libya. 'That was quite interesting and I wanted more, so I asked for Souda and got it.'

Caboche realizes the conflict is becoming more drawn-out than initially anticipated. 'We try to stop it as quickly as possible. Our job is to help the diplomats do their job. We see that our efforts have an effect and that things on the ground are improving. Not as quickly as everybody expected but I am pretty sure we are heading to a solution to the problem.'

THE QATARI CONNECTION

report: **Gert Kromhout**
and **Stephan de Bruijn**

Qatar's participation in Operation 'Unified Protector' is remarkable. The relatively tiny air force rarely deploys beyond its home borders and has never previously operated fighters in the Mediterranean. Even photos of its Mirages were once scarce, an indication of Qatar's self-sought isolation. Nevertheless, the deployment to Souda demonstrates that the country wants to play a new role on the political scene.



Qatar is a small but wealthy country with 1.7 million residents situated alongside one of the largest natural gas fields in the world. The country is a peninsula with a land border to Saudi Arabia in the south. Bahrain is situated about 20 miles to the north-east and the United Arab Emirates 20 miles south-west. Iran is some 200 miles across the Persian Gulf and shares the huge natural gas field with Qatar.

Clearly situated in a politically and militarily volatile area with major global interests, Qatar tries to remain on good terms with its neighbors and the international community. At the same time, the country seeks a prominent role in regional and global politics — in which it has been quite successful. In the past, Qatar has played an important part in solving problems in several Arab countries and participated in a number of humanitarian operations. It has strong ties with Western countries such as the US and France, but also with Iran and Syria. Located near the capital Doha, Al Udeid AB is an important base from which US Central Command controls operations over Afghanistan.

Qatar was one of the 22 nations of the Arab League that strongly supported UN Resolution 1973. It was also the first country that politically recognized the Libyan opposition. Qatar put its money where its mouth was and deployed six Mirage 2000-5EDA/DDA fighters and two AgustaWestland AW139 search and rescue helicopters to Souda. Moreover, it provided its new C-17A Globemaster IIIs for humanitarian

flights into Libya. Qatar recently acquired two C-17As with the intention of increasing its participation in humanitarian relief missions.

Significant participation

Though six fighters is a relatively small number, the Qatar Emiri AF fleet includes only 12 of these Mirages. Taking into account the number of aircraft in maintenance, then one comes to the conclusion that there are few, if any, Qatari Mirage 2000s left to defend their homeland.

Since Qatar did not have any experience of NATO taskings or in operations so far from home, France offered to form a joint detachment at Souda. Shortly before the arrival of the Qatari deployment, GC 1/2 'Cigognes' from Dijon arrived at the base with a number of Mirage 2000-5Fs. 'Cigognes' is the sole dedicated air superiority squadron within the French AF. The Mirage 2000-5F cannot employ air-to-ground weaponry other than its internal gun, as it lacks any offensive software. At the time, GC 1/2 had already

been active since the very beginning of Operation 'Harmattan'.

The Qatari Mirages arrived at Souda on March 22-23 and flew their first operational mission on March 25, together with the French. That day, Qatar also conducted its first C-17 flight into Libya. Initially, it was expected that the QEAF Mirages would be stationed at Solenzara, but Souda is a much more practical location, since in terms of flight time it is some 45 minutes closer to the Libyan no-fly zone (NFZ). As the QEAF Mirages lack equipment for in-flight refueling (IFR), operations from Souda allow 90 minutes' more playtime in the NFZ.

Escort missions

The lack of IFR capability is a decisive factor in the operations. *Combat Aircraft* interviewed Capt Blanc, a GC 1/2 pilot. He explained that the combat air patrols (CAPs) last a maximum of three hours. 'We don't go any further into Libya than 50 miles. We only fly CAPs — no escort or sweeps — although you might describe CAPs in the proximity of C-17 flights into Libya as escort missions. We place our CAPs such that we can react in a timely manner in the event that the Libyan Arab Air Force (LAAF) would decide to attack the big transport'. Qatari C-17s have made flights into Benghazi and Tobruk, both in the east of Libya.

The lack of IFR is only one of the challenges the French and Qatari pilots face. An important operational limitation is the fact that certain communications equipment is different (the other participating Arab nations, the UAE and Jordan, both flying their F-16s in support of the NFZ, have similar problems). The French and Qatari contingents have found a way to work around this, but the French AF does not want to reveal how it has been solved.

Furthermore, some start-up problems had to be overcome. According to Capt Blanc, the Qatari pilots' inexperience in NATO combat operations and the differences in tactics and procedures were quickly solved. 'In the air you need to use the same codewords and the definitions



for formation flying. For example, when we fly in line abreast formation we are used to having two-mile separation; they were used to one mile. By now, they have adopted our technical standards. As formation lead, when I order them to fly a certain formation they immediately comply perfectly.'

Another difficulty encountered in the early days was inexperience in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). Crete may be known for its beautiful weather, but the conditions in the first six weeks of the operation were much worse than usual for that time of year. 'At home they do fly in clouds every now and then but never at altitudes as close to the ground as a few hundred meters', Capt Blanc says. 'Naturally, we do have to fly the same flight paths, otherwise we run into trouble. They were unaccustomed to that, but they learned quickly.'

Joint operations

The Mirage 2000-SEDA/DDA is an export version of the 2000-5. The QEAF operates the jet in virtually the same configuration as the French, and their aircraft have even been seen with external fuel tanks borrowed from French AF Mirage 2000Ds. Both French and Qatari Mirage 2000-5s fly with a 1,300-liter centerline tank and two 1,700-liter drop tanks under their wings, and six air-to-air missiles. The difference is that while the French carry a mix of infra-red and radar-guided MICA missiles, the QEAF aircraft tote four radar-guided MICAs plus two of the earlier infra-red Magic 2s.

The QEAF usually flies alongside the French AF, but occasionally operates independently. 'When they go alone they need to co-operate closely with the CAOC because everybody must know that they don't transmit mode 4 in order not to scare other players', continues Capt Blanc. 'They don't have Link 16 datalink either.'

The culture shock for the Qatari pilots must have been tremendous. They had no previous combat experience, had never flown in combat with NATO, and had never operated so far from home. Apart from that, there was the below-average weather for the first six weeks. The QEAF is used to hot conditions and blue skies but found themselves in, according to one Qatari pilot, four-seasons-per-day conditions.

More autonomy

With the LAAF posing little to no threat, it might be expected that the CAPs are uneventful. Capt Blanc refutes this. 'If you only fly straight and take some

turns periodically, then yes, it is boring, but you never know how a mission will develop. We fly over Libya and anything can happen. The position of Libyan troops can alter each day and the surface-to-air threat such as the SA-8 missiles still exists. We were shot at in the early days of the operation by ground-to-air systems, but we have never seen any LAAF aircraft. LAAF helicopters do fly occasionally but never in our proximity. They often fly too slow, too low and too briefly for us to intercept them. Sometimes we do get a radar contact that eventually turns out to be false but we still have to investigate. If AWACS cannot explain a contact we go out to investigate, only to find that it is a fast car on the road, for instance. If we receive an enemy radar contact, we report the estimated location to the AWACS which in turn is able to

have much more freedom, and we must trust in following the mission as we have planned it'

Strategic importance

The overall commander of the French detachment is Lt Col Emmanuel Caboche, who arrived at Souda in early May. He is very positive about the Qatari participation. 'Here at Souda we are their facilitators. We are helping them to be a full part of the operation and how to operate up to our standards. They have adapted really well to NATO standards and are very professional. Their successful participation proves that NATO can evolve.'

At the time the first Qatari C-17 relief flight to Benghazi came into question, Caboche was at AFRICOM headquarters at Ramstein AB, Germany, which was responsible for Libyan operations until March 31. 'NATO was hesitant

'We were shot at in the early days of the operation by ground-to-air systems, but we have never seen any LAAF aircraft. LAAF helicopters do fly occasionally but never in our proximity'

Capt Blanc, GC 1/2

direct coalition aircraft capable of attacking radar or SAM installations to the estimated location, so they can take care of business.'

However, Capt Blanc admits that communications with AWACS aircraft (whether E-2, E-3 or Erieye) are frequently poor because of the considerable distances between the jets and the AWACS. 'The CAP stations are situated about 60nm from each other while the AWACS track is usually at about 100nm in the center of the Gulf of Sirte. The most westerly and easterly orbits suffer the most from the long distances to AWACS. The result is that we are more autonomous because we don't get the precise directions we are used to in our training. We

to allow Qatar to execute these flights, but the Qataris were very determined and convinced us. I must say they did a pretty amazing job', says Lt Col Caboche.

Although the Qatari input in the Libyan operation is small, the presence of the Mirages (together with the UAEAF and Jordanian AF F-16s) is of great strategic significance. It shows that the intervention is not a purely Western affair. It also proves that the Arab world is changing. According to Gen Jean-Paul Palomeros, the French AF chief of staff, 'This is truly an exceptional event, a turning point in history... It really shows the courage of Qatar to enlist at our sides.'

Above left inset: A Mirage 2000-SEDA takes off. Note the Magic 2 missiles on the outer wing pylons and the radar-guided MICAs on the inner wing stations.
Ken Smith

This photograph: A Mirage 2000-5F taxis out for a mission followed by a Qatari jet. Gert Kromhout

