

INS *Viraat* decommissioned



INS *Viraat* and *Vikramaditya* steaming side by side with decks full of aircraft
(photo: Indian Navy/ Cdr Navtej Singh)

Laid down as a *Centaur*-class carrier during WWII, launched in the year 1953, commissioned into the Royal Navy as HMS *Hermes* in 1959, sold to India in 1986 and re-commissioned as the Indian Navy flagship in 1987, INS *Viraat*'s long and storied career finally came to close on 6 March 2017, when she was decommissioned at sunset at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai. The ceremony not only marked the carrier's 30 years of service with the Indian Navy, but also the 27 years she spent with the Royal Navy – Admiral Sir Philip Jones, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff of the Royal Navy, and Vice Admiral Vinod Pasricha, commissioning CO of INS *Viraat* were guests of honour, while Admiral Sunil Lanba, Chief of the Naval Staff, was chief guest. Some 1,300 personnel who had served on board *Viraat* were also in attendance.

In her 27-year Royal Navy career, *Hermes* was converted from her original CATOBAR configuration to a helicopter and troop carrier, and then in 1980 to a STOVL carrier with a ski-jump. It was in this final configuration that the carrier saw action as flagship of the British forces during the 1982 Falklands War, with RAF Harriers and RN Sea Harriers and Sea King helicopters operating from her decks through the historic campaign.

Under the Indian ensign, *Viraat* was referred to as 'Mother' and was home to the Sea Harriers of INAS 300 'White Tigers,' Sea Kings of INAS 330 'Harpoons,' and SAR Chetaks of INAS 321 'Angels.' Her air wing amassed 22,622 flying hours across all aircraft types over three decades, and she spent

nearly 2,252 days at sea sailing a distance of 588,287 nautical miles (1,094,215 km), roughly equivalent to 27 circumnavigations of the globe! *Viraat* has had 22 Captains since she began Indian Navy service, and some 40 flag officers, including five Chiefs of Naval Staff, served aboard the vessel.

INS *Viraat* played a major role in *Operation Jupiter* during the 1989 Sri Lankan peacekeeping operation, after which she was affiliated with the Garhwal Rifles and Scouts of the Indian Army in 1990. She was also a key part of *Operation Parakram* in 2001-2002, after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. Above all, *Viraat* is credited with honing the art of carrier flying in the Navy, which enabled the seamless induction of INS *Vikramaditya* and its integration with the fleet, despite differences in carrier configuration and air wing. She participated in numerous international and domestic exercises, including the Indo-US *Malabar* series, the Indo-

French *Varuna* exercises, *Naseem Al Bahr* with Oman, and the annual Theatre-level Readiness and Operational Exercise (*TROPEX*) with the Indian Army and Air Force. *Viraat*'s last operational deployment was for the International Fleet Review off Vishakhapatnam in February 2016 (see *Vayu II/2016*).

With the decommissioning, the Indian Navy returns for the moment to being a single-carrier force, with INS *Vikramaditya* taking up aviation operations at sea as the completion and induction of INS *Vikrant* (IAC-1), currently under construction at Cochin, is awaited.



INS *Viraat* underway with Sea Harriers, Sea Kings and Chetaks visible on deck (photo: Indian Navy/ Cdr Navtej Singh)