

USS Gerald R. Ford Completes Flight Deck, Air Traffic Control Certifications



F/A-18E and F/A-18F Super Hornets assigned to CVW-8 launch from the flight deck of the USS Gerald R. Ford during flight operations in the Atlantic Ocean on March 21 for the ship's certifications. U.S. Navy/Chief Mass Communication Specialist RJ Stratchko

ATLANTIC OCEAN – “Man all flight quarters stations!” These words were heard across every space on the USS Gerald R. Ford as the carrier prepared to launch and recover aircraft from Carrier Air Wing Eight (CVW-8) to complete flight deck certification (FDC) and carrier air traffic control center (CATCC) certification on March 20.

Conducting flight operations is the key role of every carrier. To certify Ford's flight deck and air traffic control center, the ship was required to complete a precision approach landing systems (PALS) certification and finish two straight days of flight operations with 50 day traps on the first day followed by 70 day traps and 40 night traps on the second. The crews of Ford and CVW-8 exceeded those minimums.

Over a two-day period, F/A-18E and F/A-18F Super Hornets from four squadrons assigned to CVW-8 conducted 123 daytime and 42 night cats and traps aboard the Ford to reach this milestone in the ship's operational readiness.

“Our Sailors performed at a level that was on par with a forward-deployed aircraft carrier, and this was a direct result of the hard-core training and deployment ready mentality we have pushed every day for the past year,” said

Capt. J. J. Cummings, the Ford's commanding officer. "Our team put their game faces on, stepped into the batter's box and smashed line drives out of the park. It was fun to watch."

Prior to FDC and CATCC certification, Ford received its PALS Mode IA and Mode II certification from Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division. PALS, through the assistance of air traffic controllers in CATCC, aids pilots as they execute night or bad-weather landings, guiding pilots to a good starting position for approaches, and is a requirement for ships to conduct flight operations.

"PALS cert was a critical step to achieving our flight deck certification," said Cmdr. Phil Brown, the Ford's air operations officer. "Our system performed really well during our approaches and provided a solid level of confidence to NAWCAD in our ability to recover jets."

The Ford CATCC team was not only essential to FDC but was also required to complete a certification in concert with the flight deck certification.

Ford's CATCC certification was the culmination of a three-phase process that began in October 2019 at the Naval Air Technical Training Center (NATTC) in Pensacola, Florida. Since then, NATTC instructors have been alongside Ford Sailors for every phase, testing their practical knowledge, reviewing their checklists and observing their recovery operations.