World’s Largest Aircraft Carrier, Strike Group Return from Historic 11-Month Deployment



NORFOLK, Va. (May 16, 2026) – Aircrew Survival Equipmentman 2nd Class Ireland Lowe, assigned to the world’s largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), hugs her family on the pier at Naval Station Norfolk, May 16, 2026, following a historic 11-month deployment to U.S. 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Fleets as part of the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group. Before returning to Norfolk after 326 days, the Gerald R. Ford crew conducted 23 replenishments-at-sea and sailed over 57,713 nautical miles. Embarked Carrier Air Wing 8 logged more than 5,760 flight hours and 12,200 flight launches. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Clay M. Whaley)

From Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, May 16, 2026

NORFOLK, Va. - Nearly 4,500 Sailors of the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group aboard USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) returned to Naval Station Norfolk the morning of May 16, following a historic and successful 11-month deployment to the U.S. 4th, 5th and 6th Fleets.

The aircraft carrier returned with its accompanying destroyers, USS Bainbridge (DDG 96), and USS Mahan (DDG 72). USS Winston Churchill (DDG 81) also returned to its homeport of Naval Station Mayport.

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Secretary of War Pete Hegseth greeted the Norfolk-based ships upon their return home.

Hegseth spoke to the Gerald R. Ford crew over the ship’s announcement system (1MC) recognizing the Sailors for their resilience and toughness throughout the deployment.

“For nearly a year, you have held the line for our nation,” he said. “Your voyage took you to places you never expected, from the Mediterranean Sea and 6th Fleet, where you thought you would be, to 4th Fleet, down in Southern Command for Operation Southern Spear and Absolute Resolve. Then, you fought through all the way to finish the latter part of your mission, which was to 5th Fleet in Operation Epic Fury, from Europe to Southern Command to Central Command. There, you had an unmistakable message to the world: no one can match the USS Ford. No one can match the United States military.”

At the homecoming, Hegseth presented Carrier Strike Group 12 with the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC). The PUC is the highest honor a military unit can receive, awarded for

extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.

“Individual valor is something we talk about a lot in our military, but what we honor today is something rarer: the collective soul of a unit that encountered the challenges of modern warfare and maintained an unbreakable resolve,” he said. “To wear this ribbon is to tell the world that everyone in this formation fought with an indomitable spirit. You operated with a grit and defiance that sets you apart. By your conduct, you have secured a permanent place in the hallowed lineage of our naval history.”

Carrier Strike Group 12, commanded by Rear Adm. Gavin Duff, deployed June 24, 2025, and includes flagship USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), commanded by Capt. Dave Skarosi; the nine squadrons of Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 8, commanded by Capt. Jacob Rose; Arleigh Burke-class destroyers within Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 2, commanded by Capt. Mark Lawrence; and Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81), commanded by Capt. Judson Mallory. The guided-missile destroyers of DESRON 2 include USS Mahan (DDG 72) and USS Bainbridge (DDG 96).

Squadrons of CVW 8 embarked aboard Gerald R. Ford include Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 37, “Ragin’ Bulls”; Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 213, “Blacklions”; Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 31, “Tomcatters”; Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 87, “Golden Warriors”; Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 142, “Gray Wolves”; Airborne Command and Control Squadron (VAW) 124, “Bear Aces”; Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) 9, “Tridents”; Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron (HSM) 70, “Spartans”; and a detachment from Fleet Logistics Support Squadron (VRC) 40 “Rawhides.”

U.S. 2nd Fleet, reestablished in 2018 in response to the changing global security environment, develops and employs maritime ready forces to fight across multiple domains in the Atlantic and Arctic in order to ensure access, deter

aggression and defend U.S., allied, and partner interests.