

Enterprise Ends 51 Year Career at Sea

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The aircraft carrier USS Enterprise (CVN 65) returned to homeport at Naval Station Norfolk, Va., for the last time Sunday under its own power, ending a storied era of service at sea in all the nation's wars and conflicts since the Cuban Missile Crisis 50 years ago.



Thousands of family members and spectators were on hand as tugboats nudged the Navy's first nuclear carrier dockside and the ship's crew began the delicate work of shutting down her eight reactors.

"Homecoming will no doubt be a bittersweet day," said Capt. William C. Hamilton, the ship's commander, before the Enterprise arrived from her 25th and last deployment. "To know that it is the last time Enterprise will be underway through her

own power makes our return very sentimental."

On her last journey, the Enterprise cruised nearly 81,000 miles in a 238-day deployment to the Persian Gulf and her aircraft flew more than 2,000 sorties in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

"This has not been a victory lap for Enterprise, by any means," said Rear Adm. Ted Carter, commander of the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group. "This has been a full combat operation. It's been a business as usual kind of deployment."

The decommissioning of the Enterprise will leave the Navy with 10 carriers and likely make deployments longer and turnarounds quicker for the carrier fleet, as the Navy has committed to a two-carrier deployment to the Persian Gulf region indefinitely to counter the threat from Iran.

The aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford, now under construction, is slated to replace the Enterprise in 2015.

The official inactivation ceremony for Enterprise will take place on Dec. 1. The carrier will remain at Norfolk for about six months to have equipment off-loaded and then will be towed to the Huntington Ingalls docks in Newport News, Va., to defuel its nuclear reactors.

The ship will later be towed again to the Puget Sound Nava Shipyard in Washington state to be dismantled and have its metal sold for scrap. The entire process will take about four years, the Navy has said.

Enterprise has achieved a number of firsts since putting to sea in 1961. She was the first nuclear-powered carrier and was key to America's initial response to 9/11. The Enterprise was returning from a Persian Gulf deployment in September 2001 when the carrier was ordered to reverse course and launch the first strike sorties against al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

As she returned to Norfolk this time, Enterprise was the second oldest commissioned ship in the Navy after the three-masted wood frigate Constitution (Old Ironsides), which was launched in 1797.