



SÃO PAULO RULES THE WAVES

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In recent years the Brazilian navy's aviation program has undergone a significant evolution in both ship and aircraft capability. Since 1965 the navy's air assets had been limited to helicopters because the president decided that fixed-wing aircraft were the exclusive territory of the air force. However, in April 1998 the navy received governmental permission to buy fixed-wing aircraft, and three weeks later 23 (T)A-4KU Skyhawks were bought in Kuwait for \$70 million, including spare parts and Sidewinder missiles. These were

among the last Skyhawks built by McDonnell Douglas in 1978. In Brazilian service the designation changed to AF-1 (single seat) and AF-1A (two seat), and the jets were assigned to the Primeiro Esquadrão de Aviação de Interceptação e Ataque (First Intercept and Attack Squadron), or VF-1, at naval air base São Pedro da Aldeia near Rio de Janeiro. The new acquisition of jets brought with it the need for a newer, larger aircraft carrier.

The country was offered a U.S. Navy *Forrestal*-class carrier, but turned it down



because it was considered too expensive to operate and too big for the maximum of 25 aircraft it would carry. Later, France decommissioned the carrier *Foch* (R 99) and offered her for sale in 1999 when the nuclear-powered *Charles de Gaulle* came into service. Brazil bought the French ship in September 2000. Joining the Brazilian navy as *São Paulo* (A 12), the “new” carrier arrived in Rio de Janeiro on 17 February 2001 and moored at her new berth at the “Island

of the Cobras.” She replaced the vintage light aircraft carrier *Minas Gerais* (A 11), which was launched in England in WW II and retired in October 2001 after 41 years of active service in the Brazilian navy.

The first A-4 pilots were recruited from the helicopter squadrons and sent to Uruguay and Argentina for basic training in T-34 trainers. (Future A-4 pilots will start their training with the Brazilian air force.) They then traveled to NAS

Facing page, a Skyhawk prepares to land aboard *São Paulo*. Below, an Argentinean S-2T Tracker prepares for launch using the only bow catapult, while some of the Brazilian A-4 Skyhawks await their turn.





Above, Cdr. Curt Francis, USN (Ret.) of Kay & Associates Inc., right, instructs the Brazilians in the art of being a landing signal officer. To his left is Lt. Jose Vicente de Alvarenga, the first Brazilian A-4 Skyhawk pilot and the country's first LSO. Right and below, *São Paulo's* relatively small flight deck accommodates Brazil's helicopter fleet and its new Skyhawks.



Meridian, Miss., for carrier training with Training Squadron 7 in the T-45 Goshawk. Brazil's first Skyhawk pilot became the last pilot to earn his wings on the TA-4J at NAS Meridian, landing the first A-4 on *São Paulo* in July 2001. During a two-week training cruise in September 2002, the fifth since the ship entered service, the total of qualified jet pilots reached eight.

One and a half years after her first cruise in Brazilian waters, operations on board the new ship are still evolving. When the A-4s entered service, the *Marinha do Brasil* had no experience with jet operations on a carrier. To help bring the pilots, maintenance crew and deck-handling personnel up to speed, Kay & Associates Inc, based in Arlington Heights, Ill., was





Above, while the Skyhawk has seen its last days with the U.S. Navy, it has become Brazil's first fixed-wing carrier-based fighter aircraft. Left, the aircrew of an Argentinean S-2 Tracker return from a training flight as their aircraft is lowered on the elevator on board *São Paulo*.

hired in a consulting role. Commander Curt Francis, USN (Ret.), is one of the last remaining advisors on board the carrier and serves as landing signal officer. Under his tutelage the former helicopter pilots have shown great progress in learning to operate fixed-wing aircraft on board the smallest carrier for conventional

aircraft in the world, with the narrowest and shortest runway.

At least once a year *São Paulo* hosts a detachment of Argentinean navy Super Etendards and S-2T Turbo Trackers for joint exercises and training. The first combined navy exercise was held in 1993. *São Paulo's* captain, Capitão-de-Mar-e-Guerra Antonio Fernando Monteiro Dias, is enthusiastic about this cooperation. "There is a strong bond between our two countries since the late 1980s, and that goes for our navies. The Trackers are important to us, as they are good weapons and form a



worthy addition,” he said. The detachment of Argentine S-2Ts provided benefits for both parties. The Trackers flew many missions in order to keep the Argentinean pilots carrier qualified, and working with another aircraft type allowed the Brazilian deck crew to increase their skills.

Although the Brazilian economic situation is in flux, there are plans to purchase a fleet of modified S-2T Turbo Trackers for airborne early warning, aerial refueling and carrier onboard delivery. Another plan is to buy some TA-4J Skyhawks from U.S. Navy stocks for pilot training, since the heavier two-seat AF-1As are not

Above, Brazil operates one squadron of SH-3 Sea Kings, some of which have the capability to carry the AM-36 Exocet antisurface missile. Facing page bottom, the Argentinian navy relies upon the Brazilian carrier for training its S-2 Tracker pilots at sea.

suitable for carrier operations.

“Brazil is a peace-loving country,” Capt. Monteiro Dias said. “Our mission is to defend Brazil, its fishing and merchant fleets and its national waters.”

With her new complement of jet aircraft combined with Brazil’s existing helicopter assets, *São Paulo* is certain to rule the waves south of the equator. ✦

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Prior to its acquisition of Skyhawks, the Brazilian navy focused solely on helicopters. Among the models it operates are the UH-12 Esquilo (above) for light transport and support; the Bell Jet Ranger (right) for plane guard; and the UH-14 Super Puma (below) for medium transport, search and rescue, replenishment and assault.

