

A COMEDY OF ERRORS

THE CURIOUS DEMISE OF A BRAZILIAN AIRCRAFT CARRIER

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Commemorative medallion issued by the French for the *Foch*.

About two decades ago, a great deal of news surrounded the sprawling country of Brazil and this mainly centered on how the nation was dragging itself out of Third World status and entering the First World — the first Latin American nation in history to do so. Since then, that great feat has pretty much collapsed as Brazil has been embroiled in political corruption, massive inflation, increasing crime, environmental disasters, and a general crumbling of the national infrastructure. All these problems came

to the forefront on 3 February 2023 with the intentional sinking of the Brazilian Navy's aircraft carrier *Sao Paulo*. The carrier, loaded with asbestos and toxins, had become an international pariah. During the last few months, numerous global environmental concerns called Brazil's planned sinking of the carrier an "environmental disaster." Along with asbestos, the carrier contained cadmium, lead, mercury, and PCBs (exact proportions are still being debated). With so much negative publicity coming down on Brazil, the country's politicians

thought the best way to eliminate the problem would be to sink the vessel — a case of "out of sight, out of mind." Let's delve into the unfortunate history of this most interesting warship.

During 1957/1960, the French government had commissioned the construction of a new aircraft carrier that would be in the *Clemenceau*-class. The concept for this carrier goes back to 1949 when France was still reeling from the effects of WWII. The French Naval General Staff wanted four carriers of 20,000 tons each to be built in two phases and, like any plan, this one would change. During August 1949, the concept grew to a six-carrier fleet. By 1953, requirements had again changed with a target of three new carriers — mainly due to budget concerns. However, the French Navy would not even get that number as the government dithered back and forth and the final



The *Foch* executing a tight turn with its air group aboard.

total came to just two new carriers of the *Clemenceau*-class.

During the early 1950s, the French Navy had four aircraft carriers in service (provided by the Allies), the most modern of which was the *Arromanches* (previously the light carrier HMS *Colossus*) that went into service with the Royal Navy in 1944 but did not see any action and was obtained by France in 1951. *Arromanches* participated in

the First Indochina War and in three campaigns from 1948 to 1954 along with the Suez Crisis of 1956. In 1968, she was converted to an anti-submarine warfare carrier and was decommissioned in 1974.

The post-war carriers operated by France were all relatively small and not capable of handling the new generation of naval warplanes, which not only had more performance but were also rapidly



An interesting view of *Sao Paulo* (lead) with the USS *Ronald Reagan* during a combined training exercise during June 2004. It is unclear if the carrier ever came up to full combat capability. (USN)