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# COVID-19 pandemic on *Charles de Gaulle*

In April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reached the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and the Aeronaval Group of the Naval Action Force, its carrier battle group.

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### COVID-19 pandemic on board *Charles de Gaulle*



*Charles de Gaulle* in April 2019

<b>Disease</b>	COVID-19
<b>Virus strain</b>	SARS-CoV-2
<b>Location</b>	North Sea
<b>Index case</b>	<i>Charles de Gaulle</i>
<b>Arrival date</b>	10 April 2020 (4 weeks and 1 day)
<b>Confirmed cases</b>	1,046 <sup>[1][2]</sup>
<b>Recovered</b>	Unknown
<b>Deaths</b>	0

## Background

*Charles de Gaulle* was constructed for the French Navy in Brest from 1980 to 2001.<sup>[3]</sup> The ship's completion was severely delayed by budget cuts and mechanical problems, which included a snapped propeller.<sup>[4][5]</sup> A mid-sized carrier, *Charles de Gaulle* is smaller than American supercarriers but larger than similar ships operated or retired by Russia, India, and Brazil.<sup>[6]</sup>

After *Charles de Gaulle* was commissioned, the French government quickly deployed it to support the War in Afghanistan. The ship also saw active service in supporting NATO's military intervention in Libya (2011) and the International military intervention against ISIL (2015). In 2017, the aircraft carrier underwent a nearly two-year refit which modernized it for an intended additional twenty years of service.<sup>[3]</sup> In January 2020, the French government ordered *Charles de Gaulle* and its associated carrier battle group to deploy to the Eastern Mediterranean for further operations against ISIL, after which it would transit through the Strait of Gibraltar and engage in multinational training exercises in the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

## Causes and event

After several weeks on station in the eastern Mediterranean, *Charles de Gaulle* proceeded to the Atlantic and North Sea for naval exercises with a carrier battle group composed of the air-defense frigate *Chevalier Paul*, the anti-submarine frigate *La Motte-Picquet*, the command and replenishment ship French tanker *Somme*, and a nuclear-powered submarine.<sup>[9]</sup> From 13–15 March, *Charles de Gaulle* was docked in Brest for a brief port visit. The enactment of a strict

lockdown to combat the ongoing coronavirus pandemic came two days after the ship left Brest, and the sailors were allowed shore leave that included seeing family members and visiting local commercial establishments.<sup>[7][10]</sup> *Charles de Gaulle*'s crew did not have contact with the outside world for the next three weeks.<sup>[11]</sup> Belgium's frigate *Leopold I*, part of the carrier battle group, was ordered to prepare to leave the force on 24 March after detecting a single coronavirus case.<sup>[8][12]</sup> The nature of warships, which includes working with others in small enclosed areas and a lack of private quarters for the vast majority of crew, lent themselves to the rapid spread of the disease to a degree even greater than that seen on cruise ships.<sup>[13]</sup> Indeed, on *Charles de Gaulle* there were places where 20 people would sleep together on three or four floors of berths.<sup>[14]</sup>

During this time, several common colds were registered on board, but the level of sick sailors was not above the ordinary for the frigid  $-5\text{ °C}$  temperature and strong winds of the region *Charles de Gaulle* was operating in.<sup>[7][15]</sup> Starting on 5 April, however, the number of crew members reporting to the infirmary began growing exponentially to alarming levels. Two sailors were medically scanned and found to be infected by the coronavirus, after which the French defense minister Florence Parly ordered the carrier to return to its home port of Toulon.<sup>[7][16][17]</sup> On 10 April, French news outlets reported that out of 66 tests conducted on board the aircraft carrier, 50 had returned positive.<sup>[18]</sup> Three sailors were evacuated by air to Saint Anne Army Teaching Hospital.<sup>[18][19]</sup> There were 1,760 personnel on board.<sup>[17]</sup>

The carrier arrived in Toulon on the afternoon of 12 April, where the personnel began a 14-day quarantine.<sup>[11][20]</sup> The ship was to be decontaminated over the course of several weeks.<sup>[21]</sup>

At first, the origin of the outbreak was unknown; there had been no contact with the outside world after the ship's stopover in Brest.<sup>[11][20][a]</sup> The captain had given the crew orders to avoid an infection and a family day had been cancelled. However, the girlfriend of a sailor said in an interview on Easter Sunday that some sailors had eaten in the same restaurants as their wives or families. She also said that sailors of other nationalities had been there, too.<sup>[20]</sup> As of 18 April, Brest is considered the point of infection.<sup>[14]</sup>

On 15 April 2020, the Ministry of Armed Forces reported that, out of the 1,767 tests conducted on the members of the carrier battle group, 668 returned positive, with the vast majority of cases being aboard *Charles de Gaulle*.<sup>[22][b]</sup> The 1,700 sailors of *Charles de Gaulle* were subsequently quarantined for two weeks.<sup>[22][23]</sup>

On 17 April, the numbers reported went up to more than 1,000 infected, from 2,000 tested, with 500 showing symptoms, 24 admitted to hospital and one of them to an intensive care unit (ICU).<sup>[24]</sup>

On 18 April, it was reported that 1,081 out of 2,300 people on both *Charles de Gaulle* and its escort, frigate *Chevalier Paul*, tested positive. Two investigations have been launched. One on the situation in Brest and one lead by admiral Christophe Prazuck on the epidemic on board of the carrier strike group.<sup>[15]</sup>

Reports for Thursday 23 April state that about 15 people were still in hospital with three in intensive care.<sup>[25]</sup> It was said that only about half of the positively tested persons were presenting symptoms. This correlates with a similar case on an US aircraft carrier. During the previous voyage coughing went an everywhere item on board. It's further said that the average age of this military ship is below the average age in the overall population (of France).



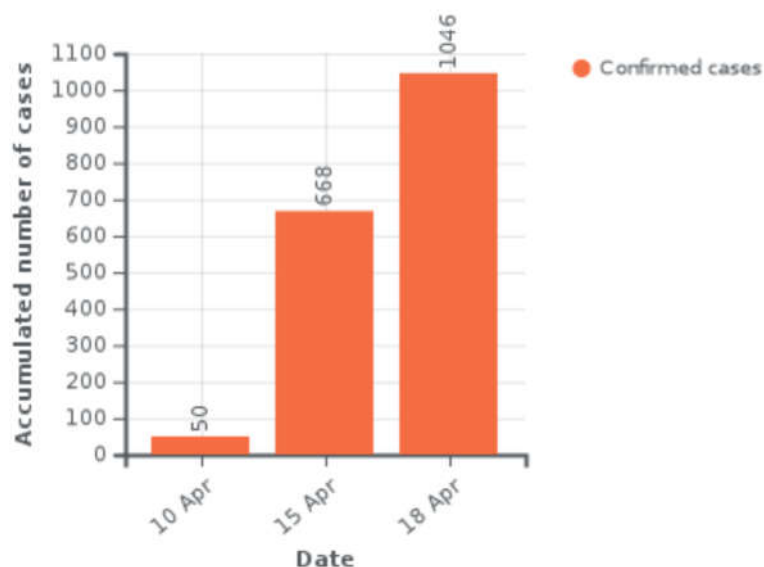
Admiral Samuel J. Locklear inside *Charles de Gaulle* (2011)

## Aftermath

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### Number of confirmed cases over time

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### See also

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- [COVID-19 pandemic on naval ships](#)
- [COVID-19 pandemic in France](#)

### Notes

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- Between 13 and 16 March.
- 30% of the tests were still inconclusive.<sup>[22]</sup>

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