

## **Last hurrah for the Harrier: Jump jets take to the skies for their final farewell**

**Flying in a spectacular diamond formation so tight it appears they are almost touching, 16 of Britain's legendary jump jets soar through the wintry skies.**

**The occasion was billed as a celebration but, for many, the mood was as sombre as the gloomy weather.**

**On a freezing day heavy with emotion, the Harrier — the revolutionary aircraft that helped Britain defeat Argentina in the Falklands War in 1982 — took to the air for the last time.**



**Final salute: The 16-strong fleet of distinctive Harrier jump jets keep close formation in the skies above RAF Cottesmore today**



**Cutting edge: A Harrier takes off from the aircraft carrier Ark Royal. Both have become victims of Government defence cuts**





Celebrations of Harrier 'VSTOL' (Vertical Short Take off and landing) Day at RAF Cottesmore

**The sense of loss — of both the iconic fighter planes, and of a cherished piece of British military and aviation history — was symbolised in a moving tradition called the ‘walk of honour’. After landing the jets following their last flight, the pilots walked away from their craft without a single backward glance. The Harrier jets have been axed after falling victim to a savage round of defence cuts. Their next stop, after being decommissioned next year, will be the scrapyard. To mark their retirement after 41 years’ service, 16 Harriers were**

**scheduled to take off from their base at RAF Cottesmore, Rutland, and perform a spectacular flypast of seven other RAF bases, the nearby towns of Stamford and Oakham, as well as Lincoln Cathedral.**

**Unfortunately, the weather spoiled the occasion. Conditions were so poor that the pilots, after forming a diamond formation, could not safely fly below the cloud cover.**

**Nevertheless, more than 2,000 people turned out at the airfield to bid farewell, while the Red Arrows performed a flypast in tribute.**

**Air Vice-Marshal Greg Bagwell, the Air Officer Commanding No. 1 Group, said: 'The Harrier is a true icon and stands testament to the innovation and excellence of British design and engineering and the skill and courage of our airmen.**



The last hurrah: Harriers take off from RAF Cottesmore for a series of nostalgic fly-pasts before being decommissioned





**An RAF Harrier puts on a display at RAF Cottesmore, after a flypast passing over seven military bases, the town centres of Stamford and Oakham and Lincoln Cathedral before landing back at RAF Cottesmore**

**'It has had a truly distinguished service with the RAF and the Royal Navy, from the South Atlantic to the skies over Afghanistan. It takes its place in history as one of aviation's greats.'**

**Group Captain Gary Waterfall, the Joint Harrier Force commander, said: 'This is an emotional day for all those who have been fortunate to be involved with one of the true icons of aviation, alongside Concorde and Spitfire.'**

**Considered one of the country's greatest technological achievements, the British-built military jets were the first in the world to be able to take off and land vertically.**

**Introduced by the RAF in 1969, they were famed for their ability to hover above the ground, a distinctive feature which enabled them to fly in and out of areas close to a battlefield that conventional aircraft could not reach.**





**End of an era: Flypast to mark the retirement of the Harrier aircraft above RAF Cottesmore, Oakham**



**What they do best: Two Harriers hover just 40 feet off the ground at RAF Cottesmore yesterday**

**The 700mph Harriers played a crucial role in defending Britain's interests, seeing action in every conflict from the Falklands — where they were known as the 'Black Death' by Argentine pilots, after shooting down 25 enemy aircraft without a single combat loss — to the two Gulf Wars and five years in Afghanistan.**

**The aircraft also flew combat missions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, providing close air support to troops on the ground.**

**But the 79-strong Harrier fleet was axed in the coalition Government's strategic defence and security review, saving less than £1 billion. The decision sparked controversy, because scrapping the 130 RAF Tornados — which were retained — would have saved £7.4 billion.**



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The last-ever sortie: Harrier pilots before last flight walk to their aircraft at RAF Cottesmore





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So proud: Wing Commander Simon Jessett waves from the Harrier cockpit after the last flight





**Don't look back: The pilots stride away from their aircraft as pipe band plays a stirring tune**



That's my daddy: Wing Commander Jessett with daughter Sophie after the emotional ceremony

**Critics are outraged at the decision, which means the Royal Navy will not have a sea-borne strike capacity until 2020 when a new aircraft carrier is kitted out with jets.**

**Commander Nigel 'Sharkey' Ward — dubbed Mr Sea Harrier after being decorated for flying the jets in the Falklands — said: 'The connived withdrawal of the Harrier from service is an appalling miscarriage of justice, and of operational wisdom. 'The reprehensible actions of those who contrived this as "a logical operational decision" must be condemned as disloyal and against the direct interests of our national defence capability.'**

**Meanwhile, the Government announced yesterday that it is to scrap HMS Illustrious, its final aircraft carrier. She will be decommissioned in 2014 — joining her sister ship, HMS Ark Royal, which will be scrapped next year.**

**The helicopter and troop carrier HMS Ocean will be retained following a review, revealed Defence Secretary Liam Fox.**





**At the controls: Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during a visit to British Aerospace's Sea Harrier production line at Kingston in December 1982**





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Royal Marines lined up for a weapons check in the hanger of HMS Hermes in the South Atlantic on their way to the Falklands in 1982, with Sea Harriers in the background



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**Long life: A Hawker Siddeley Harrier undergoing refuelling with a Royal Air Force Victor inflight re-fuelling tanker aircraft in 1967**

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