



The Harrier ready for retirement: the sunset of an aviation icon

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The countdown for the Harrier has entered the final phase: **June 2026** will mark the exit of the US Marines, **2028** that of the **Italian Navy**.

While the **United Kingdom and India** have already retired the Harrier from service, in **2010** and **2016** respectively, **Spain** plans to keep it operational beyond 2030, effectively becoming the last major user of the line.

It is the closure of a cycle lasting over half a century, ending one of the most unique capabilities of modern naval aviation: the **STOVL** jet, capable of operating from amphibious ships and forward bases with reduced infrastructure.

A concept that changes doctrine (since 1971)

The impact of the Harrier is measured not only in performance but in the change of doctrine it enabled. With its initial adoption in service in **1971**, the Harrier made operational on a large scale a principle that was until then almost “niche”: a combat jet that can take off short and

land vertically can bring air support close to the maneuver, reducing dependence on conventional runways and classic aircraft carriers.

Thus was born a form of **amphibious naval aviation**: not the power projection of a large aircraft carrier, but a more flexible capability, designed to accompany landing forces and expeditionary operations, ensuring rapid reaction, **close air support (CAS)**, and tactical interdiction.

In its various versions, the Harrier has spanned decades of real-world use in different contexts and doctrines: from the **Falklands/Malvinas War (1982)**, where the British component decisively demonstrated the value of the STOVL concept in a maritime environment, to post-Cold War campaigns and operations in **Afghanistan and Iraq**, up to more recent missions related to regional crises and countering hostile networks.

It has been a “workhorse”: robust, immediate, designed to stay close to the troops and operate from ships and forward bases with lighter logistical constraints compared to platforms dependent on large infrastructures.

Retirement is not an event: it is a process

The retirement of the Harrier has been gradual and marked by clear milestones:

- **United Kingdom**: complete retirement in **2010**
- **India**: complete retirement in **2016**
- **USMC**: official retirement in the first week of June 2026 (last flight expected at Cherry Point)
- **Italian Navy**: retirement brought forward to **2028** (two years earlier than planned)

In parallel, the replacement with the natural heir of the STOVL concept advances: the **F-35B**, which brings the same operational logic to a completely different technological generation, but the transition is never just technical: it involves costs, training, infrastructure, onboard integrations, and political choices.

For those who have yet to complete the generational leap, the Harrier remains a bridge: “old,” yes, but still capable of ensuring a strategic function — STOVL air projection from the sea — that is not replaced “with an announcement.”

The industrial knot: end of “central” support in 2026

An often underestimated point is that of industrial and logistical support. The **NAVAIR (Naval Air Systems Command)**, a reference for decades for the AV-8B fleets of USMC, Armada, and Italian Navy, **will close the program office in 2026**, effectively ending the official “control room” for **MRO** (Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul) activities.

This transition weighs as much as the operational retirement: without an active program structure, keeping a complex system in line becomes more burdensome, as logistical dependence increases, spare parts procurement becomes more difficult, and the need to support a contracting industrial supply chain grows.

The last European phase: Spain and Italy, numbers and deadlines

In the European framework, the situation is defined by numbers and dates:

- **Spain:** the Armada Española employs the AV-8B Harrier II Plus with the **Ninth Squadron** of the **FLOAN**, as the main combat carrier on the amphibious assault ship **Juan Carlos I (L-61)**. The fleet consists of **11 AV-8B+** and the intention is to keep them in service **beyond 2030**.
- **Italy:** the Italian Navy maintains **11 AV-8B+** in line, but has **brought forward the retirement to 2028** and will replace them with **F-35B**, aligning with the same transition initiated by the Marines.

For Madrid, the prospect of becoming **the last operator also means inheriting the burden of sustainability**: continuing to fly the Harrier when others exit the program requires very concrete operational and industrial choices.

Spare parts and “second life”: the most realistic solution

In a declining supply chain context, the most practical option to extend the operational life of the Harrier lies in the availability of airframes and components from decommissioned aircraft. The logic is simple: **acquire decommissioned aircraft** (or parts) from major operators who are retiring them, primarily USMC and, shortly, Italy, to feed the spare parts chain and maximize residual operability.

It is a typical solution for end-of-cycle weapon systems: less “program,” more resilience, controlled cannibalizations, targeted stocks, and increasingly selective maintenance.

Conclusion

The Harrier exits the scene not because it was marginal, but because it has completed its historical mission. Since **1971**, it has defined a different way of doing naval aviation: closer to the maneuver, more flexible, more amphibious. Between **2026** and **2028**, the line of major historical operators closes, while the last operational window extends **beyond 2030**.

It is not just the retirement of an aircraft: **it is the end of an era, and the definitive transition to a new STOVL generation.**