



ARGENTINA'S BIG CATS

THE GRUMMAN F9F-2B PANTHER & F9F-8T COUGAR IN ARGENTINIAN NAVY SERVICE

When Argentina's *Comando de la Aviación Naval* entered the jet age by buying ex-US Navy Grumman Panthers in 1958, later acquiring a pair of two-seat Cougars, it became the sole export customer ever to operate either type. **SANTIAGO RIVAS** relates how these feline fighter-bombers gave the Service an unparalleled capability in the region

BY THE MID-1950s the *Comando de la Aviación Naval* (COAN — Naval Aviation Command) of the *Armada de la República Argentina* (ARA — Argentinian Navy) had begun negotiations to equip its fighter force with jet aircraft and, having analysed various proposals from all over the world, selected the USA's Grumman F9F-2B Panther. The latter was deemed the best jet fighter-bomber available secondhand, offering a good cost-to-benefit ratio. Although the COAN had no aircraft carriers on which to base the aircraft at this point, it was exploring acquiring one, thus it was considered crucial that the selected aircraft was carrier-capable. By this time, the *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* (FAéA — Argentinian Air Force) had been operating jet fighters since 1947, when it acquired 100 Gloster Meteors from the UK, but other countries in Latin America were just starting to operate jets including Meteors, de Havilland Vampires (also from the UK) or Lockheed F-80 Shooting Stars from the USA.

ENTER THE PANTHER

By the end of 1957 the ARA had signed a contract for the purchase of 28 F9F-2Bs (four of which were to be used as spares sources), the first ten of which arrived at *Base Naval* (BN) Puerto Belgrano, in the south of Buenos Aires province, aboard the transport ship *ARA Bahía Buen Suceso* (B-6) in August 1958. Once disembarked, the Panthers were transported by road to the nearby *Base Aeronaval* (BA) Comandante Espora to be assembled and painted in ARA colours, having arrived in US Navy markings.

On November 27, 1958, the first Panther was officially enlisted into the ARA and was assigned to the *1° Escuadrilla Aeronaval de Ataque* (1st Naval Aviation Attack Escadrille) of the *Flotilla de Combate* (Combat Fleet), receiving serial 0416 and unit code 2-A-20. A week later it made its first flight in its new home country. The remaining examples of this first batch were enlisted on January 29, 1959, and received serials from 0417 onwards, with unit codes according to a revised structure — the Escadrille was now subordinate to *Escuadra*



A pair of COAN pilots pose beside Grumman F9F-8T Cougar serial 0517/unit code 3-A-152 shortly after its arrival in Argentina in May 1962. This example had originally served with the US Navy as BuNo 142498 before being refurbished and offered for sale to the Argentinian Navy, which could subsequently claim to operate the only supersonic aircraft in the region (although admittedly only in a dive).

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS VIA AUTHOR



BELOW In their orange flight suits — highly visible in case of ditching — COAN pilots walk towards the flight line of F9F-2B Panthers for another sortie from Base Aeronaval Punto Indio circa the first half of 1960, by which time the Panthers were marked with the “3-A” codes of *Escuadra Aeronaval* No 3. The Panthers were painted in a Sea Grey overall with a large Argentinian flag displayed prominently on the fuselage beneath the cockpit.