

International Journal of Naval History

December 2007

Volume 6 Number 3

Robert J. Cressman, **USS Ranger 1934-1946: The Navy's First Flattop from Keel to Mast**, Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2003. 451 pp., heavily illustrated.

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The USS *Ranger* was a curious ship. Designed to meet the arbitrary tonnage limits of the Washington Treaty limiting naval armaments at a time when the United States Navy had no operational experience of large carriers, she proved to be a very good aviation platform for biplanes and the first generation of monoplane carrier aircraft, but these qualities came at a price. The ship was lightly built, underpowered and lacked worthwhile protection against underwater damage. That said *Ranger* served her country well, because her crews sustained very high standards, and the Navy had the good sense to keep her out of the Pacific fighting. By concentrating on the human side of the *Ranger's* career Robert Cressman provides a remarkable insight into the making of the Air Navy. This is a book about training; hard, dangerous, sustained training. While he follows the ship on her pre-war and wartime deployments the focus is always on the air group. An endless parade of fresh faced young men that stare out from posed shots, all too many of them mark the fact that they died in training accidents. While the stream of deck accidents and landing milestones can occasionally dull the senses they are the key to the story of this ship, and of the Navy's air arm. Never was this more obvious than when British Rear Admiral Lyster, who had lead the carrier attack on Taranto in 1940, visited the ship in October 1941 with a Royal Navy team to observe American carrier operations. Lyster was highly impressed with the skill and speed of American deck operations, the ability to launch and recover large formations, far larger than the Royal Navy either possessed or planned to operate. However, he doubted the American system would work

as well when the ship had to operate round the clock, and that they might have to reduce the air group in the interests of flexibility. In this Lyster reflected British practice, and British experience. Only the Pacific navies had thought through carrier on carrier battle, Lyster's attack on Taranto involved 20 aircraft, *Ranger* was planning to put four times as many in the air. By 1945 the British were working hard to catch up on American practice.

In the interval *Ranger* went to war, in the Atlantic . The British hoped she would be used to support operations in the European theatre, and take over the ferry run delivering Spitfires to Malta . By early 1942 the British were short of capital ships, many had been lost, and others seriously damaged, including three of the four available fleet carriers. With Japan in the war Britain needed carrier forces at the Northern tip of Scotland , at Gibraltar, Alexandria and in the Indian Ocean . There were not enough ships and planes to go round. *Ranger* did not join the British, and Ernie King was the reason why. His objection to joint operations combined with *Ranger's* fragility ensured she was restricted to ferrying P40s to West Africa , and more training. The more the Americans looked at British operations the more they could see that the real problem was the independent Royal Air Force, a burden the United States did not have to bear, was hoarding air strength in the British Isles, leaving the other theatres short of shore based air power, and sacrificing ships to sustain this folly. King's staff properly saw no reason to throw American warships into the mix.

Instead *Ranger* went to war against the French, providing a key element of Operation Torch, the invasion of Vichy French North Africa in November 1942. Her air group provided fighter cover, ground support and strike mission against French warships and submarines. Together with a handful of CVEs *Ranger* was the air element of attack on Casablanca . All that training paid off, her planes took out most of the French air and naval strength, maintaining very high sortie rates between 8 and 12 November. The ship was able to hand over her role to shore based air just before the U-boats turned up.

Returning stateside for further training the high cost of air operations was all too clear. As fighters and torpedo planes made simulated attacks on the ship two of them

collided, with fatal consequences. The accident investigators recommended that such dangerous practice should not be allowed, but the Commander Air Force Atlantic Fleet snapped back that the prosecution of intense training for war was to be maintained.

The well-trained *Ranger* would have one more crack at the enemy, this time the Germans. In August 1943 she joined the British Home Fleet, operating out of Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, and took part in operations against German occupied Norway . The highlight was Operation Leader on 4 October, a large scale shipping strike against coastal traffic off Bodø, the only time an American carrier has fought above the Arctic Circle . Despite intense, well directed German flak the results were spectacular. Several ships were sunk, and two scout planes shot down, not only had the Americans outstripped anything the Royal Navy had achieved, they also shook up the German High Command. This was pretty good for a ship the U-boat arm claimed to have sunk! The only damage she suffered was from heavy seas that strained her hull. Returning home *Ranger's* future came under scrutiny. She needed a refit, and the options were either to give her a major reconstruction to improve protection and equip her to operate the latest planes, or simply keep her running. Wisely the decision was to turn her over to training. Whatever was done the ship would never be fast enough, or strong enough for pacific combat, and resources were better used to complete new *Essex* class units, leaving *Ranger* to train their air groups.

Intensive works ups for combat air groups helped to keep the standard of American naval aviation at a high level to the end of the war, while experimental aircraft like the Project Cadillac Airborne Early Warning Avenger and the combined jet and piston engine Ryan Fireball added a little novelty to the routine.

Once the war was over *Ranger's* days were numbered. Worn out and unsuited to modern conditions she carried on for a year as a training carrier before going for scrap in late 1946. In her short life the *Ranger* had steamed half a million miles, conducted 92,000 deck landings and given full value. Her people had done far more: at the cost of many young pilots and air crew, and a few from the deck party, the ship had provided a steady

supply of combat ready squadrons for service on the Pacific front line, a front line that the *Ranger*, alone of all the American fleet carriers never saw. By compiling a thorough record of activity Robert Cressman has opened a new window on the development and operations of the Air Navy. Far more than a mere ship history this is a book that will repay the reflective reader.



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