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Robert J. Cressman, *USS Ranger; The Navy's First Flattop from Keel to Mast, 1934-46*

Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 2003, 451 pp, notes, bibliography and index.

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This is a detailed recounting of the history of the U.S. Navy's first "keel-up" aircraft carrier. Completed in 1934, *Ranger* (CV-4) was decommissioned in 1946. Her service was relatively brief, and her only exposures to combat were the landings in North Africa and an attack on German shipping at Bodo, Norway. Her story, however, proves to be eventful, and the author gives a lively account of the varied events that make up the life of a Navy ship. A warship's career is more than merely a tally of campaigns and bloody battles, and this book gives *Ranger's* peacetime service the attention that the reader will find it merits.

*Ranger* took part in the annual Fleet Problems in which, among other things, concepts of carrier warfare were tested and refined, visited Latin America in pursuit of President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy, conducted early cold-weather experiments, and lent scout-bombers to *Lexington* to help in the search for Amelia Earhart. In 1939 she began operations with the Neutrality Patrol. By 1941 she was operating the new Grumman F4F-3 fighter, and trying to cope with its aggravated "teething troubles" as Navy and Marine squadrons would later have to do in the Pacific until the F6F Hellcat came of age. In 1942 she made two voyages to Africa's Gold Coast carrying Army P-40 fighters, then began training for North Africa in company with four *Sangamon*-class escort carriers.

The French garrison in Morocco was an unknown quantity; would they welcome American liberators, or fight at the orders of Vichy commanders? *Ranger's* airmen found out as they took antiaircraft fire, dueled with French fighters, and bombed and strafed warships, troops, vehicles, and fortifications. After a Norfolk overhaul, *Ranger* ferried more Army P-40s to Casablanca and trained pilots off New England. In August 1943 she joined the British Home Fleet for duty in North Atlantic waters, broken by her strike on Bodo where her planes sank or damaged a number of German logistic ships. At the beginning of 1944 she began training carrier pilots out of Quonset Point, later carrying more Army fighters to Casablanca. In mid-1944 *Ranger* was refitted to train fighter pilots in night interception. In the fall she headed for San Diego and spent the last months of the war training air units for combat, taking part in tests of the first airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft, and conducting carrier trials of the Ryan FR-1 Fireball, the Navy's first attempt to take jet propulsion to sea. After V-J Day *Ranger* continued to train pilots but time and carrier design had passed her by, and she was sold for scrapping early in 1947.

Cressman's *That Gallant Ship* has told the story of *Yorktown* (CV-5), while Stafford's *The Big E* has amply recited the heroic tale of *Enterprise* (CV-6). Hone's *American and British Aircraft Carrier Development, 1919-1941* (1999) puts the rationale behind *Ranger's* design into historical context. Clark Reynolds' *The Fast Carriers* summarizes and evaluates the organization and accomplishments of the Pacific Fleet's World War II carrier striking force. *U.S.S. Ranger* tells its story in detail, though an overall analytical account of carrier operations in the Atlantic and Mediterranean are still waiting for their Clark Reynolds. The Mediterranean theater, scene of *Ranger's* principal combat action, has received comparatively little attention, though Volume II of Morison's WW II history (1954) gives the naval basics and, recently, Barbara Brooks Tomblin's *With Utmost Spirit; Allied Naval Operations in the Mediterranean, 1942-1945* (2004) and Rick Atkinson's *An Army at Dawn; The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* (2002) provide considerable detail.

Many individual ship histories are, basically, recitations of arrivals and departures, occasionally punctuated by gunfire. The reader of this book will be able to

reconstruct all of *Ranger*'s comings and goings from commissioning through decommissioning, but Cressman properly pays careful attention to *Ranger*'s historical context and to the air operations that were her reason for existing. This is a very human story of aviator accomplishment—and error—including the inevitable "...litany of deck landing accidents, part and parcel of a dangerous and demanding profession..." (p.300). It reminds us that carrier aviation is based on a foundation of peril bravely and thoughtfully faced, without the gadgetry that our generation takes for granted. *Ranger*'s two exposures to combat are recorded in detail, much of it from the individual experiences of the aircrews.

Based on an extensive combination of primary documentary sources and quality publications that flesh out *Ranger*'s story, the end notes themselves are interesting and informative and the text includes remarks on the background and later careers of the numerous key players who served in *Ranger*. Sources are carefully, and properly, cited. Considering the scope of this work, criticisms are few and minor. For the non-aviation reader, definitions of such terms as "flipper turn" (p. 5); "condition 13 readiness" (p. 30); "cutting the gun" (p. 252); and "ADB" (p. 283) would be helpful. Illustrations are plentiful and well chosen, but one can wish that the publisher had done a better job of reproducing many of them.

All in all, Cressman's book demonstrates that the story of a seemingly unimportant ship, with what many would dismiss as a humdrum career, can prove to be anything else but. This reviewer, for one, will never again look at *Ranger*'s share in the forging of the air Navy as inconsequential. She did, in fact, "do the State some service."



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