

## International Journal of Naval History

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April 2008

Volume 7 Number 1

Norman Polmar, **Aircraft Carriers: A History of Carrier Aviation and its Influence on World Events, Vol. II 1946-2006**, Potomac Books Inc, 2008. 560 pp. 350 B&W photographs, maps, glossary, appendixes, notes, index.

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The first volume of this book rightly received a very favourable report across the naval community. The second sets off on the same lines, switching the focus from operations to innovation and policy, from the dominant American theme to smaller carrier navies. These currently include Great Britain, France, Russia, India, Italy, Brazil, Spain and Thailand, while Argentina, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands were carrier powers between 1945 and 1992, and others harbour ambitions to acquire a carrier capability, notably China. An appendix restores the missing German and Italian carriers of World War Two to the story. The upbeat tone of the volume reflects the current carrier resurgence, in stark contrast to the first edition of 1969. In that year no large deck carriers were under construction: it seemed the type was going to fade away.

Where the first volume concentrated on carrier versus carrier combat, this volume has no such actions, and little serious planning for classic carrier warfare. In the 1982 Falklands War the British and Argentinians came very close to a carrier battle, only to find that *Veinticino de Mayo* could not launch her A4 Skyhawks when the wind fell! Instead the keys themes are carrier strike against the shore, in Korea, Suez, Vietnam, the Falklands, two Gulf Wars, Afghanistan, and Former Yugoslavia, and inter-service battles over the future of naval aviation. The American 'Revolt of the Admirals' of 1947 and the British decision to cancel the carrier programme in 1966 followed by political defeats were inflicted by skilfully handled Air Force polemic. Both have been reversed by the hard lessons of real war.

Carriers emerged as the undisputed capital ships in the post-war demobilisation. In the absence of hostile battleships the greater flexibility of the carrier made it the preferred large platform for both America and Britain, while surplus British *Colossus* class 'Light Fleet' carriers enabled France, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina and India to become low cost carrier powers. The United States ended the war with almost thirty fleet carriers, including three massive *Midway* class ships. Britain had only six, with ten capable light carriers and a large order book. This last was soon cut and the British have not begun a fleet carrier since 1945.

After a brief post-war rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the West the Cold War dragged naval aviation back into action. The Korean War saw American, British and Australian carriers in action, the former operating early jets. Their success prompted a renaissance in American construction, beginning with the super-carrier *Forrestal*. The new ships were completed with angled decks, steam catapults and mirror landing devices that enabled fast jets to be operated safely. While most navies adopted these British technologies American fiscal power turned them into a winning system, and took carrier air power out of everyone else's league. The success of the super-carriers off Vietnam, and elsewhere has sustained the astonishing production run of nuclear powered *Nimitz* class ships since 1972, without anything similar being considered elsewhere. The super-carrier is the most potent statement yet devised of why America is the world's only super-power.

The pre-1969 operational sections have been updated by close study of the latest evidence from inside the Communist bloc, notably on the participation of Soviet and Chinese pilots in Korea and Vietnam. The ill-starred Suez campaign of 1956 highlights another enduring theme, in limited wars military success does not always produce political results. The point was missed when Washington had to deal with other Arab nationalist dictators. Little wonder naval men hark back to the straight-forward total war in the Pacific.

Polmar guides his readers through the budgetary battles on Capitol Hill, and the British equivalent, without letting his sympathies become too obvious. Yet, as one might expect from a carrier aviation evangelist the text provides smart staffers with a lexicon of suitable examples, and plenty of killer quotes about the limits of Air Force action, insight and honesty. Sad to say such evidence is still necessary. In the same month this volume appeared the Royal Air Force was lobbying the British Government to cancel to current carrier project. It seems old habits never die, despite the RAF signing up to the project less than a decade ago, having half the deck spots on the new ships and no other strategic role! The two 65,000 ton *Queen Elizabeth* class ships to carry F-35 Joint Strike Fighters will be the biggest ships ever built for the Royal Navy, similar in size to the *Forrestal*. France may acquire a ship of the same class. Other navies are looking to the STOVL variant F-35 to follow on the stunning success of the British Harrier and Sea Harrier in generating fixed wing naval aviation from escort carrier sized platforms, and giving the Marines Corps a close support aircraft that can operate from landing ships. The new 25,000 ton Italian *Conte de Cavour* is one such platform. Air Defence Sea Harriers were critical to the British success in the Falklands War of 1982, winning the air battle over the invasion beachhead and Polmar pays tribute to this startling little aircraft by listing the production figures of the various British and American Harrier types.

The development of assault helicopter carriers is traced back to the pioneering days of 1944, through their first use at Suez in 1956 to the current trend for most world navies to build large power projection platforms, many of which will be STOVL capable. These big platforms are flexible, and with careful design may be useful carriers.

For an author so well versed in Cold War submarines the treatment of the anti-submarine warfare (ASW) effort appears thin – perhaps reflecting the fact that carrier aircraft have not sunk any submarines since 1945. However the USN devoted considerable resources, notably *Essex* class carriers to this role for much of the 1960s, the British built three *Invincible* ASW carriers and other navies focused their carriers on this role. ASW might not be a hot topic at the moment, but it would be wise to recover this knowledge before too many years pass.

When looking to the future Polmar parts company with some in American carrier community over nuclear power. He finds no clear rationale for such a costly solution to a non-existent problem. He is optimistic that new technology will enable smaller carriers to be fully effective with high performance aircraft. Russian experience using short take off conventional landing carriers to operate fast, heavy aircraft like the Su33 from a 50,000 ton ship with a ski jump is thought provoking. The Russian *Admiral Kuznetsov* is the biggest carrier built outside the United States since 1944. Her incomplete sister the Chinese *Shi Lang*, ex *Varyag* remains a well painted hulk, serving no better purpose than upsetting the Taiwanese and stimulating the dreams of American carrier admirals. China has far more important items in the defence budget than carriers. There is no prospect of carrier versus carrier combat in the foreseeable future. One can only agree with Polmar's conclusions (p.411).

Although fleets no longer fight against fleets in major surface actions, navies still play a vital role in the political-military policies of many nations. For those nations that can afford the ships and their embarked aircraft, carriers are important naval components and will continue to be for the foreseeable future.



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