

## International Journal of Naval History

---

April 2008

Volume 7 Number 1

Norman Polmar, **Aircraft Carriers: A History of Carrier Aviation and its Influence on World Events, Vol. I 1909-1945**, Potomac Books Inc, 2006. 576 pp. 389 B&W photographs, maps, glossary, appendixes, notes, index.

Review by Andrew Lambert  
King's College London.

---

This is a classic work renewed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Originally published in one massive volume in 1969 Norman Polmar's book had been thoroughly revised, not just to address the carrier aviation after 1970, but also to engage with the latest scholarly debates. In the process it moves seamlessly from a work largely influenced by the living pioneers of the subject, many of whom were still alive in the late 1960s, to one that lauds their achievements and argues the contemporary case for carrier aviation. Lest anyone is in any doubt where Polmar's loyalties lie his book is defiantly pro-carrier, criticising every strategic bombing proponent since 'Billy' Mitchell, and every independent air force to boot. The current resonance of the subject is not hard to spot, in addition to the United States, Britain, and France are about to build large deck carriers. India and Italy are building medium carriers, Russia, Brazil, Spain and Thailand all possess carriers of varying sizes. China owns two, but one is a casino, the other a well painted engineless hulk – but who knows what the future holds.

While the history of carrier aviation is reasonably well known, not least from the first edition of this book, the wealth of detail and sustained study that inform the second edition make it a critical text. There is a caveat: Polmar's engagement in current debates influences his view of the past. His judgements tend to be teleological. This volume effectively traces a direct line back from Tokyo Bay in 1945 to pioneering efforts just after Kitty Hawk. In reality the development of carrier aviation was filled with dead ends and disasters. The implication that 1945 was inevitable and anyone who questioned the fact was a stupid reactionary is not sustainable. Nor is the idea that only carrier aviators understood how to use carriers, an approach he shares with the late Clark Reynolds. John Lundstrom's majestic *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal*, published at the same time as this book, provides a decisive counter-argument. Carrier aviation was not a proven instrument until the Second World War, and was only decisive in one theatre of operations.

The *raison d'être* of the book is the Pacific War, 1941-1945. Polmar's comprehensive treatment serves the very useful function of reminding 21<sup>st</sup> century planners of the advantages to be gained by shifting the operating base toward the target and delivering precision attacks, in contrast to USAAF carpet bombing. Given the range

at which home based USAF strategic bombers are currently operating the lesson is obvious. However, it should be stressed that the Pacific was an ideal conflict for carrier aviation. Not only did the USN face a regular naval opponent willing to fight large scale battles, but that opponent was easily demonised, by virtue of distinctive race, religion and culture. In defeating Japan the United States found the carrier task force to be the ideal weapons system, and the USN ended the war with a mighty carrier fleet. One wonders what would have happened if the Pearl Harbor strike had sunk three or four American carriers, rather than the battleships – as the Japanese had planned.

The Pacific War occupies 340 of the 528 pages of text, a book in itself, and while the events covered are of the first importance in the history of carrier aviation they may have been over-represented in the final balance. Any judgment on the role of carrier aviation in securing allied victory in the Second World War requires a larger picture. In stark contrast to the ideal conditions offered up by the central Pacific the European theatre posed serious problems for carrier aviation. German shore based air power was, until late in the war, invariably superior to any thing the allies could operate from the sea. Here the baleful effect of the 1922 Washington Treaty process was most obvious. After 1922 navies were limited in the number and size of carriers they could operate, America's treaty tonnage would be exceeded by just two of the latest nuclear carriers. Consequently aircraft numbers were low. No such Treaty limits were ever applied to Air Forces. The legacy of this misguided zeal was that the Royal Navy, which had created the modern aircraft carrier, and exercised a decisive influence on post 1918 carriers designs in America, Japan, and France entered WWII in September 1939 a mere shadow of its former self, in size and relative power. It was air minded, but there were not enough carriers to warrant a big research and development effort for new aircraft, and this proved critical in the mid 1930s, when wood and canvas biplanes were replaced by heavier and faster landing all metal monoplanes. As Polmar shows the first naval monoplanes were significantly inferior to land based types, the first time such a state of affairs had occurred. Peter C. Smith's *Skua! The Royal Navy's Dive Bomber* records how one such design was crippled by Royal Air Force control of aircraft procurement. The RAF was so heavily committed to the dogma of strategic bombing that it would not adopt dive bombing (in case it worked!) and refused to develop a dive bombing sight, despite endless requests from the Royal Navy. Despite this, and a top speed lower than the older biplane fighters, the Skua held off Me 109s and sank a German cruiser in the Norway campaign of 1940.

Because the Royal Navy had to plan for war in European waters, where carrier aircraft would be outnumbered, and probably outperformed, it could not risk shifting more resources into carriers before 1939. That the British had the world's biggest carrier programme in 1939 is often forgotten – in truth the pre-1939 USN was no more air minded than the RN. We should not let 1945 dictate our judgement of 1939: the intervening six years changed the world. From 1939 to November 1941 British carriers, especially the iconic HMS *Ark Royal* acted as a high speed fire-brigade, rushing from one theatre to another, stemming the tide of Axis success, crippling the Italian battle fleet, stopping the *Bismarck*, and flying Spitfires to Malta. Equipped with American aircraft and escort carriers the RN continued to make a difference all round Europe, nowhere

more so than on the Arctic Convoy route to Soviet Russia, the most atrocious conditions in which carrier operations have ever been undertaken, but Germany could only be defeated on land.

Because every state has unique strategic and political concerns the role of any specific weapons system in their overall policy will be different. Carrier aviation is not a universal panacea just because it is fundamentally important to the United States . The Soviet Union operated as a superpower for fifty years without a real carrier. Stalin limited his ambition to areas where Soviet land based aviation would be effective, and saw no need for carriers. He was wiser than his successors who wasted billions on ships that never served the strategic ends of the state. Nor, one suspects, would China be any better off with carriers. Carrier aviation is a powerful tool in the American/Western arsenal, but it is not high on the shopping list of those who really hate the West. It will be very interesting to see how Polmar develops his case in the asymmetric warfare that has been the norm since 1945. Are carriers quite so useful when the enemy does not even have a navy or, like Afghanistan , a coast?

Curiously there are a few missing carriers, not least the German *Graf Zeppelin* and *Seydlitz*, which while never put into service were almost completed. The recent discovery of the wreck of the *Graf Zeppelin* off Gdansk reminds us that this big carrier, equipped with Me109 and Ju87 aircraft, would have been a serious opponent.

There can be no doubt that the new edition will neatly replace the old as the standard narrative of the carrier in history, or that it will last as long. Thirty-five years is a good shelf life for any history. This big, beautifully produced book is clear, comprehensive and convincing. It contains all the ammunition the pro-carrier lobby needs, and an endless supply of fresh insights to ensure the arguments never get stale.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

© Copyright 2008, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved