

Introduction

Presence, influence, and options. In these three words are the basic rationale for why politicians want carrier battle groups, and have been willing to spend over a trillion U.S. taxpayer dollars building a dozen for American use. That was hardly the original reason, though. Back in the years after the Great War, naval powers were trying to find loopholes in the first series of arms-control treaties (which had to do with naval forces). With the numbers and size of battleships and other vessels limited by the agreements, various nations began to consider what ships carrying aircraft might be able to contribute to navies. At first, the duties of these first carrier-borne aircraft were limited to spotting the fall of naval shells and providing a primitive fighter cover for the fleet. Within a few years, though, aircraft technologies began to undergo a revolutionary series of improvements. Metal aircraft structures, improved power plants and fuels, as well as the first of what we would call avionics began to find their way onto airplanes. By the outbreak of World War II, some naval analysts and leaders even suspected that carriers and their embarked aircraft might be capable of sinking the same battleships and other surface ships that they had originally been designed to cover.

The Second World War will be remembered by naval historians as a conflict dominated by two new classes of ships: fast carriers and submarines. The diesel-electric submarines were a highly efficient force able to deny navies and nations the use of the sea-lanes for commerce and warfare. Unfortunately, as the German *Kriegsmarine* and Grand Admiral Karl Donitz found, you do not win wars through simple denial of a battlespace like the Atlantic Ocean. Victory through seapower requires the ability to take the offensive on terms and at times of your choosing. This means being able to dominate vast volumes of air, ocean, and even near-earth space. Without a balanced force to project its power over the entire range of possibilities and situations, one-dimensional forces like the U-boat-dominated *Kriegsmarine* wound up being crushed in the crucible of war.

By contrast, the carriers and their escorts of World War II were able to project offensive power over the entire globe. From the North Cape to the

islands of the Central Pacific, carrier-based aircraft dominated the greatest naval war in history. Along the way, they helped nullify the threat from Germany's U-boats and other enemy submarines, as well as sweeping the seas of enemy ships and aircraft. While the eventual Japanese surrender may have been signed aboard the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, it occurred in the shadow of a sky blackened by hundreds of carrier aircraft flying overhead in review. Called "Halsey's Folly," the flyover was the final proof of the real force that had ended the second global war of this century. Despite the claims of Air Force leaders who pronounced navies worthless in an era of nuclear-armed bombers, when the next shooting conflict erupted in Korea, it was carrier aircraft that covered the withdrawal to the Pusan Perimeter and the amphibious landings at Inchon. They then dropped into a role that would become common in the next half-century, acting as mobile air bases to project combat power ashore.

Despite the best efforts of the former Soviet Union to develop a credible "blue-water" fleet during the Cold War, the U.S. Navy never lost control of any ocean that it cared about. One of the big reasons for this was the regular presence of carrier battle groups, which took any sort of "home-court advantage" away from a potential enemy. Armed with aircraft that were the match of anything flying from a land base, and flown by the best-trained aviators in the world, the American carriers and their escorts were the "eight-hundred-pound guerrillas" of the Cold War naval world. This is a position that they still hold to this day. However, their contributions have taken on a deadly new relevance in the post-Cold War world.

One of the tragic truths about America's winning of the Cold War was that we did it with anyone who would help us. This meant that the U.S. frequently backed any local dictator with a well-placed air or naval base and a willingness to say that Communism was bad. The need to contain the ambitions of the Soviet Union and their allies took a front seat to common sense and human rights. The result was a series of alliances with despots ranging from Ferdinand Marcos to Manuel Noriega. However, there was a war to win and we did win it. The price, however, is what we are paying today. Around the world, Americans are being asked to please pack up their aircraft, ships, and bases and please take them home. We should not be offended; we did it to ourselves. The continuing legacy of squalor in places like Olongapo City in the Philippines and other "outside the gate" towns was more than the emerging democracies of the post-Cold War era could stand. When you add in our continued interference in the internal politics of the countries that hosted our bases, it is a wonder that we have any friends left in the world as the 20th century ends.

Our poor foreign policy record aside, the United States and our allies still have a number of responsibilities in the post-Cold War world. This means simply that to wield military force in a crisis, we now have just a few options. One is to ask nicely if a friendly host nation might allow us to base personnel, aircraft, and equipment on their soil so that we can threaten their

neighbors with military force. As might be imagined, this can be a tough thing to do in these muddled times. George Bush managed to do it in the Persian Gulf in 1991, but Bill Clinton failed in the same task in 1997 and 1998. Even with a dictator like Saddam Hussein, most regional neighbors would rather tolerate the bully than risk the death and destruction that occurred in Kuwait in 1990 and 1991. This leaves just two other credible options; to base military power at homeland bases or aboard sovereign flagged ships at sea. The first of these options means that fleets of transport ships and aircraft must be maintained just to move them to the place where a crisis is breaking out. It also takes time to move combat aircraft and ground units to the places where trouble may be brewing. This is why having units forward-based aboard ships is so incredibly important to us these days.

Time in a crisis is more precious than gold. As much as any other factor, the time delay in responding to a developing conflict determines whether it results in war, peace, or a distasteful standoff. While we may never know for sure, there is a good chance that Saddam Hussein stopped at the Saudi border in 1990 because of the rapid flood of U.S. and coalition forces into the Kingdom. However, it would be a tough act to duplicate today. One of the benefits of our military buildup in the late years of the Cold War was the ability to do both of these things well. Along with lots of continental-based forces with excellent transport capabilities, we usually had a number of carrier and amphibious groups forward-based to respond to crises. However, these rich circumstances are now just happy memories.

Today the U.S. Navy considers itself lucky to have retained an even dozen carrier battle groups, along with their matched amphibious ready groups. By being able to keep just two or three of these forward-deployed at any time, the United States has managed to maintain a toehold in places where it has few allies and no bases. The recent confrontation with Iraq over United Nations weapons inspectors, had it led to war, would have been prosecuted almost entirely from a pair of carrier groups based in the Persian Gulf. With the 1990/91 allied coalition splintered over each country's regional interests, almost nobody would allow U.S. warplanes and ground forces onto their soil. This is a 180° change from 1990/91, when the majority of Allied airpower was land-based.

This brings us back to the three words at the beginning of this introduction: presence, influence, and options. Naval forces generally provide presence. Carrier groups, though, dominate an area for hundreds of miles/kilometers in every direction, including near-earth space. While a frigate or destroyer impresses everyone who sees it, a carrier group can change the balance of military and political power of an entire region. A weak country backed by an American carrier group is going to be much tougher to overthrow or invade for a local or regional rogue state or warlord. That is the definition of international presence these days. Finally, there is the matter of options.

In the deepest heart of every politician, there is a love of options. Having

choices in a tough situation is every politician's greatest desire, and carrier groups give them that. It is one of the oddities of national politics that until they become President or Prime Minister, politicians frequently and publicly view large military units like carrier groups as a waste of taxpayer money. However, let the politicians hit the top of a nation's political food chain, and they sing another tune entirely. It is almost a matter of national folklore that every Chief Executive will, at some time in their Presidency, ask those four famous words: "Where are the carriers?" It certainly has been the case since Franklin Roosevelt haunted the halls of the White House. Today, in fact, the use of forward-deployed forces afloat may be the only option open to a national leader.

Understanding aircraft carriers and their associated aircraft and battle group escorts is not an easy task. Focusing only on the flattop is like tunnel vision, since the carrier's own weapons are purely defensive and quite short-ranged. To fully understand what effects a carrier group moving into your neighborhood is going to have, it is necessary to look beyond the carrier's bulk and dig deeper. You must look into the embarked air wing with its wide variety of aircraft and weapons, as well as the escorts. These range from Aegis-equipped missile cruisers and destroyers, to deadly nuclear-powered attack submarines. Armed with surface-to-air missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles, they not only protect the carrier from attack, but have their own mighty offensive punch as well. To see it all takes a wider, deeper look than you are likely to find on the nightly news or in your daily newspaper. To do that requires that you spend time with people. Lots of people. These include the Navy's leaders, who make the policy decisions and have the responsibility of keeping our Navy the best in the world. You also need to spend some time with the folks who build the ships, aircraft, and weapons that make the force credible and dangerous. Finally, you have to know the thousands of people who run the battle groups and sail them to the places where they are needed across the globe.

I hope as you read this book that you get some sense of the people, because it is they that are the real strength of the carrier groups, and our nation. While you and I stay home safe and warm in the company of our families and loved ones, they go out for months at a time to put teeth into our national policies and backbone into our words. It is they who make the sacrifices and perhaps pay the ultimate price. I hope you see that in these pages, and you think of them as you get to know the "heavy metal" of the U.S. Navy up close. If you do, I think that you will gain a real perspective on their difficult, but vital, profession.

—Tom Clancy
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