

The Utility of the Aircraft Carrier

After a decade of frequent combat air operations over Vietnam, on 17th March 1975, the aircraft carrier USS Hancock (CV-19) was ordered to Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, where she disembarked a large part of her air group and loaded 25 helicopters. She then proceeded to Subic Bay in the Philippines where the rest of her combat air group were put ashore and she loaded more helicopters. Then on 12th April, she took part in Operation Eagle Pull, where her helicopters evacuated refugees from Phnom Pen, Cambodia, as they ran from the advancing Khmer Rouge forces. On the 29th and 30th April she was one of the carriers taking part in Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of distressed personnel from Saigon, via the US Embassy and the Defence Attaché's Office. On this operation even her expansive flight deck was not large enough to handle all of the helicopters involved and some of them had to be wet stowed, i.e. thrown overboard.

The Hancock was one of 24 Essex class aircraft carriers built during the 2nd world war. Commissioned in 1944, she operated exclusively in the Pacific during that conflict, in both defensive and offensive roles. At different times there, she was struck by two kamikaze aircraft and the debris from another, two bombs, and one of her own aircraft exploded when abreast the island structure, killing 50 men and injuring another 75. In all of those cases her damage control organisation quickly recovered the situation and kept the vessel, with her air group, in operation. At the war's end she was quickly fitted out for and used in Operation Magic Carpet, the repatriation of personnel from the Far East to the United States, followed by a short period as an aircraft transport until decommissioned and put into the reserve fleet.

In 1951 the Hancock was brought out of reserve and modernised. She was the first American carrier fitted with steam catapults capable of launching jet aircraft and five years later she was fitted with an angled flight deck. In the first half of the fifties she was used as a test base for aircraft and missiles and then in the second half she was used on several occasions in show of force exercises, when the Communist Chinese threatened the Nationalist islands of Quemoy and Matsu. At the very end of that decade she was a part of the fleet stationed off Laos to ease the tension building up there at the time.

Early 1960 saw the Hancock working off the west coast of the US in Operation Communication Moon Relay, a demonstration of reflecting ultra high frequency radio waves off the surface of the Moon. That was followed by more patrols in South East Asia to try and ease some of the tensions building there and in June 1962 she again appeared off Quemoy and Matsu to stem a threatened Communist invasion. From the mid 60s until the mid 70s she was regularly involved in combat air operations over Vietnam. In July 1969, during an operational work up for one of her many deployments to the region, an F8 Crusader jet fighter bomber, coming in to land, struck the stern of the vessel, split in two and careered down the length of the flight deck, causing much damage. Repair work was carried out 24/7 and the vessel deployed on schedule. In January 1976 the USS Hancock was decommissioned, stricken from the Navy list and then sold for scrap.

I relate this short history of the USS Hancock's 32 year career, not because it is unique, it is not, and many of the incident and operation types mentioned above could be attributed to any number of aircraft carriers that have operated since their inception; both American and British. I tell her story to demonstrate just how useful these vessels are in different situations of stress and how they can be continuously and progressively updated in order to handle current situations. The Hancock story also demonstrates just how robust these vessels can be and how difficult they are to put out of action for any length of time. They are, as the situation

demands, instruments of defence, strike, threat, persuasion, rescue, support and succour. They are the left hook of diplomacy, when the right hand of friendship has been slapped away and they are a demonstration of a nation's footprint on the world stage, which helps to bond alliances. I tell her story to demonstrate the Utility of the Aircraft Carrier.

British carriers have been in regular use since the end of World War 2. To name just a few of those actions:

1950 Korea, 1956 Suez, 1961 Kuwait, 1964 East Africa, 1963-1966 Malaysia, 1967 Aden, 1972 Belize, 1982 Falklands, 1990's Bosnia, 1998 Honduras and Nicaragua, 2000 Sierra Leone, 2003 Iraq, 2006 Lebanon, 2011 Libya, 2017 British Virgin Islands

The actions were very varied, with some providing aid after natural disasters, while others were helicopter evacuations or acting as a safe haven and standing by to do so. Others put troops ashore and provided top cover in a timely manner to stop a situation from deteriorating and some did the same with a show of force by the overflying of combat aircraft and the very presence of the carrier herself. Others were the classic, strike, ground support and fleet defence. Time and again, having the ability to quickly place a sovereign airfield close to a distressed or hostile shore, without having to ask anybody's permission and without embarrassing friends has paid dividends.

Britain now has two new aircraft carriers, the Queen Elizabeth (QE) class, that have attracted criticism from many quarters. It has been claimed that they are too expensive, under armed, obsolete because of new carrier killing weapon systems and that without catapults they are of limited capability because of the aircraft types they cannot deploy. Possibly the most damaging is the one that claims that they are a symbol of Britain's unaffordable pretensions, because it cuts to the core of how we see ourselves. With the exception of being under armed (a critique that could be levelled at many British warships), I reject them all.

At £3 billion for the two vessels (about the cost of 4 type 45 destroyers, or 3 of the new type 26 frigates) they are a bargain. The other £3 billion attributed to them is actually the cost of governmental indecision, delay and a procurement system that increasingly seems unfit for purpose. However, even including that cost, the average annual purchase price over the two vessel's proposed 50 year life span is £120,000 (£60K per vessel); which is about the same as the cost of one Member of Parliament, some of whom might claim that the QE class carriers are too expensive and poor value for money!

When it comes to vulnerability because of the new hypersonic missiles being deployed by potential enemies, we are considering peer states with a full spectrum of intelligence assets that provide the targeting data required to effectively use those weapons. Thus when we are talking about the sinking of aircraft carriers, we are considering a major war, where many other assets and systems will be involved. As far as the claims that the carrier and fleet's defensive systems will not have the time to acquire and intercept those rapidly approaching missiles, one should consider the problem from the other end. When that missile pops over the horizon and eventually breaks through the electronic and possibly atmospheric haze, it will not have much time to decide which among the many decoys and other vessels it sees is the right target. In the Falklands, Admiral Woodward did not cluster merchant vessels and a screen of other warships around his carriers for warmth! If one of our carriers does get hit, history and a study of the redundancy features built into the QE class carriers, indicates that they will be hard vessels to sink.

Without catapults and arrestor gear, the new carriers will not be able to deploy the latest most capable fighter aircraft. The F35B which they will deploy is, it is claimed, a poor alternative to the others and because of that these vessels will be reduced in their combat effectiveness. That view ignores the benefits that those aircraft bestow upon these vessels. If you want to operate an aircraft carrier in the North Atlantic, during winter and in all weather conditions, opt for a STOVL type (short take off and vertical landing). When the seas are alternatively throwing that vessel's bow and stern into the heavens and then dropping them to almost sea level, being flipped into the air by the bow ramp and then being able to stop and land in the middle of the ship, where the motion is the least, will ensure that those aircraft can be deployed when their conventional sisters are struck below for safe keeping. The same of course applies to helicopter born airborne warning, which doesn't even have to operate from the carrier, as opposed to more capable fixed wing assets. If, as suggested in the previous paragraph, the carrier does get hit and is possibly dead in the water or operating on very reduced power, provided she remains upright, her aircraft will still be able to take off and land, which again, those from a conventional carrier will not and if the worst comes to the worst, being able to land vertically, they will be able to deploy to other assets in order to fight another day. Their comparative lack of range is only a problem if aerial refuelling is not available. Which of course is also a problem that applies to conventional aircraft, operating from fixed bases some distance from the action. When the, Storm Shadow armed, RAF Tornados flew from their Norfolk base to Libya, they were refuelled four times on the way out and twice on the way back and we had to ask the Americans to help with tanker aircraft for the Euro Fighters operating out of Italy! In several ways Britain's two new aircraft carriers are more operationally flexible than their American sisters, with which they are often unfavourably compared. Several years ago an ex US Navy seaman told me that when he had served aboard a US Nimitz class carrier, "one of those little Brit carriers" (an Invincible class deploying Harriers) "beat the hell out of us in exercises because they could get their aircraft into the air so quickly". Having the fastest and longest legged aircraft is not always the deciding factor!

The claim that we are being pretentious suggests that we are harking back to our imperial past. Are we? Or by deploying two aircraft carriers are we just holding up our end of the alliance plank? NATO forms the bedrock of our defence and the United States provides the roof of that alliance but the UK is one of the pillars that holds it up, possibly the main pillar on this side of the Atlantic. The eminent historian Andrew Roberts pointed out, in his Daily Telegraph article of February 1st. 2020, that Britain had always made her way in the world and succeeded by forming, joining and supporting alliances. She is continuing to do that and the QE class carriers are an overt symbol of that effort. When HMS Queen Elizabeth deploys next year on a world cruise, she will carry with her a squadron of US F35B fighter jets, and may also, for short periods during that voyage, host similar aircraft from Italy, Singapore and Japan. She will be escorted by frigates and destroyers of other nations and will pass through areas of the globe where that solidarity of purpose among allies will be noticed and taken account of.

It is unfortunate that the term Strike Carrier is now being used to describe vessels that were previously called Fleet Carriers. As a part of a balanced fleet they are so much more than a strike machine. They are a convenient airfield that, when required, can be used to support Britain's new Strike Brigades when they are deployed to foreign parts while at the same time providing a safe haven to which those forces can be evacuated, should the need arise. They are also an important step in the ladder of deterrence, which climbs from the man with a rifle, through the various military capabilities to the Trident submarine hiding somewhere in the ocean depths. They are an item that says, yes, you might be able to hurt us but we can also reach out, in various ways, and touch you, so beware. On the other hand, if you have a problem, with these two mobile airfields, we may be able to help. They are extremely useful vessels. By deploying these vessels, that most other countries cannot or will not, we may be

seen as being pretentious, but if this nation cannot commission and operate just two aircraft carriers and a few dozen jet aircraft, what is her real worth as an ally? Is she worth anything?

Fred Dupuy

Non Executive Director, Defence UK