

2008

## Aircraft Carriers at War: A Personal Retrospective of Korea, Vietnam, and the Soviet Confrontation

John B. Hattendorf

James L. Holloway III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hattendorf, John B. and Holloway, James L. III (2008) "Aircraft Carriers at War: A Personal Retrospective of Korea, Vietnam, and the Soviet Confrontation," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 2 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss2/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

was fielded in September 1974, when the author, having retired from active duty, was on the faculty of the University of Vermont. Kinnard's guarantees of anonymity and his rapport with his peers elicited a response rate of nearly 70 percent. Many of those surveyed also added written commentaries. Questions dealt with a range of issues, including strategy, tactics, personnel management, the role of the media, rules of engagement, and recommended changes "if we had to do it over." The findings are disturbing, not only for people who lived through the Vietnam era but for those of us who are witnesses to history repeating itself in Iraq. Nearly 70 percent of the generals who responded stated that they were uncertain of the Vietnam War's objectives. Many conceded that they had overestimated the capability of South Vietnamese forces and had underestimated the extent of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's corruption and ineptitude. Over 50 percent of respondents thought that U.S. forces should not have engaged in combat in Vietnam. These views were recorded some seven months before the fall of Saigon.

Among the richest data in the book are the marginal notations by the respondents. It was widely acknowledged that the system for measurement of progress, based on body counts and kill ratios, fell victim to the natural optimistic bias of military men. The system was denounced by one respondent as "a fake—totally worthless." Another general replied, "The immensity of the false reporting is a blot on the honor of the Army."

Kinnard devotes a good deal of attention to the fact that despite such perceptions, dissent had been uncommon

among the generals. This is not surprising, given the risks such dissent would have posed to their careers. Writing in 1976, in the immediate postwar and Watergate years, Kinnard was cautiously optimistic that the officer corps could henceforth stand up and be counted. Unfortunately, thirty years later, dissent still remains hazardous to one's career.

Without wishing to strain comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, one cannot read Kinnard's book without developing a sad sense of history repeating itself. He reminds us that "in the Vietnam War there was too much tricky optimism from LBJ on down." Misplaced faith in the integrity and capacity of the local forces has a familiar ring. So too do cover-ups of egregious human rights abuses and insensitivity to indigenous culture.

One hopes that among the generals who have served or who will serve in Iraq, there is one who might be tempted to follow in Kinnard's footsteps and seek the candid views of his or her peers about the conflict. The same lessons remain to be learned.

PETER GRABOSKY  
*The Australian National University*



Holloway, James L., III. *Aircraft Carriers at War: A Personal Retrospective of Korea, Vietnam, and the Soviet Confrontation*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2007. 479pp. \$34.95

For three decades, Admiral James L. Holloway III has been one of the great supporters and promoters of the work of the U.S. Navy's historians, through his role as president and then chairman

of the Naval Historical Foundation, a position he has actively held since retiring from active duty as Chief of Naval Operations in 1978. With the Naval Historical Foundation, Holloway has played an essential role in developing the “Cold War Gallery,” now in progress at the National Museum of the U.S. Navy in the Washington Navy Yard. His connection to that ongoing project led him to think about the broader aspects of the Cold War, as well as his own personal reminiscences of it. With the publication of this book Admiral Holloway now makes his own direct contribution to the writing of naval history, as well as providing a fascinating memoir of that period.

The genre of the naval officer’s memoir is a specialized and important one in naval literature. Unfortunately for historians, few American contributions have been published in recent decades, although those of us working in this field have benefited from the growing body of transcribed oral history interviews, for use as sources.

Holloway is at his best in his well-crafted and evocative descriptions of personal experiences at sea and in the air. The book opens with one of his most compelling—a dramatic description of the view from the Mark 37 fire-control director in USS *Bennion* (DD 662) as he watched a formation of Japanese battleships moving at twenty-five knots with all guns firing as they emerged from the Surigao Strait off Leyte on 25 October 1944.

Admiral Holloway insists, “This book has been about aircraft carriers.” That is true—aircraft carriers provide a central strand to Holloway’s career, as well as a central theme to his book—but the book is about much more. It is not just

an enthusiast’s view of his favorite ship type, although that comes through clearly enough; his views and experiences are so balanced that they make the book more than one written for naval aviators alone. This is a book for everyone interested in the U.S. Navy in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a carefully crafted personal view of the Cold War era from the changing perspectives of an exceptionally fine officer as he rises to the top. He keeps this sharp professional focus, judiciously avoiding personal and tenuous issues. Throughout, Admiral Holloway shows himself to be an excellent writer, one who has additionally benefited from very sound advice in preparing this memoir.

There are many incidents of broad interest to be found in this volume. For example, readers interested in the history of the Naval War College will take particular note of Holloway’s account of how the secretary of defense intervened in the Navy’s selection of the President of the Naval War College with a new requirement to interview the Navy’s candidate, Vice Admiral James Stockdale.

Most importantly, however, Holloway’s memoir puts into context his major career achievements, not only in developing the nuclear carrier program but equally in his concept for the operational organization of the carrier battle group and his personal involvement in improving the Navy program management through *Strategic Concepts for the U.S. Navy* (NWP-1A). Additionally, Holloway’s memoir provides interesting insight into the failed Iranian hostage rescue operation of 1980 from his experience as chairman of the Special Operations Review Group.

In “The Future: The Past as Prologue,” Holloway concludes with an overview of recent naval trends and with his carefully considered views on the present and future role for aircraft carriers. In short, Holloway’s combination of memoir and history with an explanation of his professional judgments makes this a book that deserves to be read widely, by people both inside and outside the U.S. Navy.

JOHN B. HATTENDORF  
*Naval War College*



Dickinson, H. W. *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 258pp. \$125

From time to time every reader experiences the peculiar delight of discovering a fascinating gem of a book lurking behind an unremarkable cover and prosaic title. While not for the casual reader, *Educating the Royal Navy* is just such a find for those with an interest in the profession of arms at sea. The author, Harry Dickinson of King’s College London, has done masterful work at charting the surprisingly convoluted and highly politicized course of educating the men who led what was at the time the world’s greatest navy. His book is well worth reading.

Dickinson dispels many casually held beliefs concerning Britain’s senior service and its officer corps. For example, the vaunted lieutenant’s exam, established by Samuel Pepys and later enshrined in C. S. Forester’s *Hornblower* series, was not a uniformly applied rigorous test of an officer’s professional skill and knowledge but a most uneven

event that at times entered the realm of the absurd. He also makes clear that patronage and classism were as rampant in the British naval officer corps as in its army equivalent. Correcting the historical record is just one of the book’s contributions to the field.

Dickinson focuses on a major theme in each chapter, while maintaining a more or less chronological approach. The first theme of note is the British attempt to determine if it was more beneficial to train officers ashore or afloat and, if afloat, whether on board dedicated training ships or on vessels sailing on active service.

Another theme concerns the men who did the actual educating. Dickinson fully describes how shortcomings in the naval education system led to professional “tutors” who used “cramming” as a means of getting officers to pass required exams, which did little or nothing to help those officers retain their temporarily gained knowledge or deepen the intellectual capital of the service.

Dickinson, who has taught at the Royal Navy colleges of Greenwich and Dartmouth and at the U.S. Naval Academy, does not shy away from comparing British educational efforts to those of Britain’s rivals. He concludes that the Royal Navy lagged badly behind those other naval powers, including Germany. Dickinson also admits that the Americans developed a “genuine naval war college” well in advance of their British cousins.

Dickinson’s book is so interesting that one wishes he had specifically examined the impact of the Royal Navy’s unquestionably successful seagoing performance and of the complacency that