

1997

Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950

Jan van Tol

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

Recommended Citation

Tol, Jan van (1997) "Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 50 : No. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol50/iss1/26>

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.

including the "revolt of the admirals" incident.

Here are the operational, training, command, and leadership experiences of men like Rear Admiral Francis D. Foley, commanding officer of Helicopter Utility Squadron Two, one of the first two rotary-wing squadrons in the Navy; Captain Arthur Hawkins, World War II SC-1 pilot and later commanding officer of the Blue Angels; Admiral James Russell, involved with the development of the angled deck, mirror landing system, and other programs while on the CNO's staff (OP-05) and as Chief, Bureau of Aeronautics; and Vice Admiral Robert Pirie, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when naval aviation was testing and acquiring the jet aircraft that would take it through the coming Vietnam War. The last chapter presents an interview with Vice Admiral William Lawrence, who was commanding officer of Fighter Squadron 143 when he was shot down over Vietnam in June 1967. Admiral Lawrence came home in March 1973.

Though it looks back between twenty and fifty years, *Into the Jet Age* is still timely; its value is all the greater in view of the passing of many of these warriors over the last two decades. Captain Wooldridge's editing and presentation are excellent. For his part, Wooldridge lived the period, flew the aircraft, and made the fleet and staff tours. A proven naval aviator, historian, and author, Wooldridge's experiences have served him well. This is an excellent book.

MARK MORGAN
Tunkhannock, Penna.

Barlow, Jeffrey G. *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950*. Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1994. 420pp. \$30

Jeffrey Barlow has been a historian with the Contemporary History Branch of the Naval Historical Center since 1987. His publications include chapters in Gray and Barnett's *Seapower and Strategy* and Howarth's *Men of War: Great Naval Leaders of World War II*, as well as articles in various national security periodicals. His latest work, *Revolt of the Admirals*, is a compelling, thoroughly documented account of the bitter fight for key military roles and missions between the newly independent U.S. Air Force and the Navy during the latter half of the 1940s. This complex struggle was as vicious, and at times unseemly, as any in U.S. history, which helps to explain the high drama in which it culminated and from whence the title derives.

Barlow starts by tracing the interplay of various factors that led to the so-called revolt. These included the politics of military unification under a single defense department, the establishment of an independent air force, the U.S. Navy's struggle to establish its relevance in the absence of a significant naval competitor, disparate Navy and Air Force views on the role (and control) of atomic weapons and their implications for conventional forces, and the key programs each service pushed in pursuit of its vision. The struggle raged amidst a constant backdrop of decreasing budgets, fierce public-relations battles, and unremitting political infighting. Large figures, among them Arthur Radford, Omar Bradley, and Arleigh Burke, plus a big cast of lesser characters, played important roles in the unfolding drama.

By 1949, under that year's extraordinarily stringent budget constraints, it was

clear that the country could not (or would not) afford both the U.S. Air Force's B-36 strategic bomber and the Navy's proposed *United States* class of big, jet-capable carriers. That April, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, newly appointed by President Harry Truman after playing a crucial role in his surprising 1948 reelection, peremptorily cancelled the *United States* without meaningful consultation with Navy leaders. To many naval officers, the very future of the service was at stake. Moreover, Johnson's decision seemed to commit the nation to the highly questionable doctrine of massive strategic nuclear bombardment. The Navy faced the difficult question of how to raise crucial national security issues in the face of a civilian leadership that appeared unwilling even to listen.

Almost immediately, an "anonymous document" was received by various members of Congress charging that the Air Force's troubled B-36 program was "a billion dollar blunder . . . which remained uncorrected because the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Air Force had a personal financial interest in its continued production." It prompted hearings, which were expanded to examine not only the immediate venality charge and the B-36 program but also service roles and mission issues (including the soundness of the *United States* cancellation) and the proper role of strategic bombing in U.S. national military strategy. An open debate on fundamental issues seemed in store.

But by late August 1949, the corruption charges had been shown to be totally unfounded. Worse, the scurrilous "anonymous document" was found to have been coauthored by a naval officer. When the hearings recessed for six weeks, it was

uncertain whether they would be resumed at all, thus putting at risk the thorough examination of deeper issues the Navy wanted. The Truman administration and the Air Force argued that since the secretaries of Defense and the Air Force had been vindicated and the Air Force had successfully made its case for the B-36, there was no need for further hearings.

Navy Secretary Francis Matthews, who was appointed following his predecessor's resignation in protest of the carrier cancellation, vigorously pushed efforts to end the hearings, in support of Secretary Johnson. Later, when they nonetheless resumed, he tried to limit severely Navy testimony, even unsuccessfully pressuring Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Louis Denfeld: "Admiral, I believe we should select a time at which you and I can get together and prepare your statement."

When the hearings resumed, Matthews's opening testimony was soundly rejected by the naval witnesses, who went on to present their professional views on the wider issues of roles and missions and the role of strategic bombing. Denfeld, the final Navy witness, sealed his own professional fate with the remark that "as the senior military spokesman for the Navy, I want to state forthwith that I fully support the broad conclusions presented to this committee by the naval and Marine officers who had [sic] preceded me." The Secretary of Defense, outraged by the CNO's testimony, believed it "an attack against the President and civilian control and economy." Secretary Matthews fired Admiral Denfeld less than two weeks later. The press judged at the time that the "Revolt of the Admirals" (a *Time* magazine headline) had failed.

Yet the opposite turned out to be the case. Barlow concludes that the Navy's tes-

timony "challenged much of the accepted strategic wisdom regarding the role of the strategic air offensive in warfare, the proper use of atomic weapons, the capabilities of the B-36 as an intercontinental bomber, and the usefulness of carrier aviation. Clearly, the nature of the Navy's 'revolt' served to establish doubt in the minds of some members of the [congressional] committee about the efficacy of the policies that . . . Johnson was pursuing in the name of economy and unification." The committee's report was released in March 1950, and "among the most important conclusions was the view that intercontinental strategic bombing was not synonymous with air power—that U.S. air power consisted of Air Force, Navy, and Marine air power, and, of these, strategic bombing constituted but one aspect." By late 1950, Johnson had been sacked and carriers had played a crucial role in stemming the initial North Korean invasion. The first of the big *Forrestal* carriers was authorized in March 1951.

The period addressed by this book offers some fascinating parallels with the present. The same potent brew exists today. The role of airpower (manned and unmanned) is once again a central focus during a time of decreasing budgets and potentially bitter roles-and-missions debates. Once again unproven technologies suggest new ways of doing business that could radically alter how the military is organized and how future combat operations are conducted. And once again there are those who claim that the military threatens to go beyond its proper bounds into areas rightfully the domain of civilian leaders. Recently, academics have suggested that current civilian-military relations are increasingly poor,

with more than a hint that the military no longer knows its place. This case study offers some timely thoughts on the inherent tensions between "revolt" and providing sound professional military advice to the civilian leadership on matters of profound national concern.

JAN VAN TOL
Commander, U.S. Navy

Blackwill, Robert D., and Sergei A. Karaganov, eds. *Damage Limitation or Crisis? Russia and the Outside World* (CSIA Studies in International Security #5) Washington, D.C.: Brassey's (US), 1994. 330pp. \$18.50

This volume constitutes another addition to the scholarly debate over the future direction of Russia's foreign policy and what, if anything, the United States and its allies can do to influence it in directions congenial to their interests.

Prominent academicians from Russia and several other countries, including the United States, China, Germany, and Japan, analyze these issues thematically, assessing the prospects for democracy in Russia and delineating Russia's national interests; and regionally, by examining Russia's policy toward the "near abroad" (i.e., the other successor states of the Soviet Union) and respectively Eastern Europe, Western Europe, China and Japan, and the United States. Given Russia's current diminished role in world affairs, one might justify the omission of Russian foreign policy toward Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. Less explicably, however, given the subject of its inquiry, the volume devotes no chapter to the overall status of Russia's armed forces or