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The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy

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administration's thinking on defense matters: "A country can, or will, pay only so much for its war fleet. . . . Will you have a very few big ships, or more numerous medium ships? Where will you strike your mean between number and individual size? You can not have both, unless your purse is unlimited."

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Reynolds, Clark G. *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 503pp. (No price given)

The Fast Carriers by Clark G. Reynolds is a reprint, with minor changes, of a milestone book originally published in 1968. It provides a useful, provocative, and unique view of the development and employment of fast (or attack) aircraft carriers, with primary emphasis on the Second World War.

This is a book with a viewpoint; Clark Reynolds is often critical of both individuals and of the Navy in general and is given to broad, strong, and often unsupported statements. One may agree or disagree with the author's opinions but will never be in doubt about his position while reading this book; *The Fast Carriers* is clearly pro-carrier-aviation and pro-carrier-admiral.

The evolution of fast carriers and of their tactical and strategic employment is covered in an effective and interesting manner. This work is unusual in focusing on the interaction of flag officer and staff personalities, and on the unglamorous administrative and logistic

factors that are vital in successful campaign planning and execution. These factors, above all others, make this book "inust" reading for future flag and staff officers.

Although Reynolds (and, presumably, the aviator flag officers he interviewed) emphasizes the importance of the creation of an "Air" billet on the staff of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet (known as "COMINCH"), one could argue that the decision to require surface flag officers to have aviation chiefs of staff (and vice versa) had more immediate, and perhaps greater long-term, impact, especially inasmuch as this policy continues in force today.

One conclusion the U.S. Navy repeatedly drew from the Pacific operations, particularly the Okinawa campaign, was that the fast carriers (CVs) were vulnerable to land-based air, especially when they were "tied to a beachhead." This perception, and the Navy's command quarrels with the Army (in the person of General MacArthur), were apparently the genesis of the Navy's "in support of" policy, which avoided whenever possible giving operational or tactical command of large or "fast" aircraft carriers to non-navy commanders. This policy endured until carrier battle groups were "chopped" to the Central Command during Persian Gulf escort operations. To support this perception of carrier vulnerability, Reynolds quotes the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey as saying that "major carrier operations in World War II against land-based aircraft were conducted after the Japanese Air Forces had been reduced to a relatively impotent and ineffective force [excepting, of

course, the human guided missiles of the kamikaze corps].” One may well ask, however, reduced by whom? Without denigrating the significant and important role played by land-based U.S. Navy, Marine, and Army air forces, it is evident that the primary “reducer” of Japanese land-based aircraft was U.S. Navy carrier aircraft. While it is true that the carriers suffered significant losses in these operations, it is also true that Japanese land-based losses, in aircraft, personnel, and bases, were far greater.

British operations are given little space in this book. Although their fast carriers engaged in fewer major operations, these were both significant and different in character from U.S. fast carrier operations and would have merited the greater coverage the title of this book implies.

Reynolds makes in passing a number of tantalizing references that raise obvious questions, and then he leaves them unaddressed. For example: “The inability of air groups to finish the normal six months’ combat tour . . .” on page 326 provides no hint as to why the air groups could not do so. On page 334, Reynolds states that the Marines felt fast carrier pilots were “better-trained and more knowledgeable about close support tactics” than those of escort carriers (CVEs)—this despite the fact that the CVEs had been trained and dedicated to providing close air support for years. In his discussion of the Iwo Jima operations on page 336, Reynolds provides the following chronology: 11 March, the CVEs withdraw; 14 March, the P-51s fly the last support mission; and 26 March, major Japanese resistance

ends. Why were there no air support missions flown from 15 to 26 March, while “major” Japanese resistance continued? On the Okinawa campaign, one reads that Marine F4Us ashore were “needed to combat increasing kamikaze attacks, so that carriers had to be tied down at the beach to do most of the close support work.” Why weren’t the CVs used against the kamikazes? Finally, on page 345, the author states that the CVEs “had to launch occasional strikes against Kyushu. The fast carriers had become close support escort carriers, and the cost was great.” Why were the CVEs used against Kyushu and the CVs used for close air support? Undoubtedly, there were reasons for all of these actions, but this book provides no insight into those reasons.

Although the section on post-war wrap-up, “Action Reports,” is an excellent synopsis and is useful in placing the earlier chapters in perspective, it unfortunately lacks the depth of the earlier chapters. It was particularly surprising to see in the nuclear capability discussion no mention of the AJ-1 Savage carrier-borne nuclear bomber, which would have been nearer in time and more pertinent than the A3D Skywarrior.

The appendices, covering Allied Carrier Statistics, Carrier Aircraft 1943–1945, U. S. Navy 1943–1945 (operational and naval air administrative organizations), Royal Navy 1943–1945, and Imperial Japanese Navy 1943–1945, are clear, complete, and concise. The “Dramatis Personae,” which precedes the text, is both invaluable for full comprehension of the chronicle and well placed in the book.

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While the photographs are fewer than one might have hoped, they emphasize the personalities associated with fast carrier warfare in World War II and complement the book well. Furthermore, the 1968 bibliographic essay has been updated for this edition and is an invaluable first source for those researching aircraft carriers. It alone is worth the price of the book.

The Fast Carriers needs a thorough editing before its next reprinting. Terms like "makee-learn" are overused and distracting; extraneous comments and ideas make reading difficult while contributing little or nothing to the book. Even more annoying, however, are gratuitous slaps at individuals, such as on page 359, where the author describes an aviator admiral assuming the post of Superintendent of the Naval Academy, where he "relieved a rather inconspicuous battleship admiral who had been Superintendent during most of the war." The "inconspicuous" admiral is unnamed, and one wonders what he did to merit the author's disfavor.

Despite its imperfections, *The Fast Carriers* is an essentially outstanding book that is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in naval aviation and can provide particularly valuable insights for current and prospective staff officers.

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Edwyn Gray's previous contributions to the history of submarine warfare in both world wars are well known. His most recent work examines the other end of the naval spectrum, the operational careers of the *Kriegsmarine's* four battleships, its three *Panzerschiffe* or pocket battleships, and, when the occasion warrants, its two remaining pre-dreadnoughts. It is a story well worth telling. Hopelessly outnumbered at the outbreak of the Second World War, the *Kriegsmarine's* capital ships nevertheless fought with determination, if not always with great skill, from the first day of the war (the *Schleswig-Holstein's* opening salvo at the Polish fortress at Westerplatte) until five days after Hitler's death (a final volley from the wreck of the *Lützow*). In between, Hitler's battleships had their share of successes. The *Graf Spee* and *Scheer* were able to divert Allied warships away from the crucial North Atlantic theater and achieve considerable results waging *guerre de course* in the South Atlantic and Indian oceans. In 1940 the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* had the good luck to catch the British carrier *Glorious* at the conclusion of the Norwegian campaign and in short order send it and its paltry two-destroyer escort to the bottom. Later, in March 1941 the same two battleships would sink twenty-one merchant ships as part of Operation Berlin, the German surface fleet's most effective antishipping operation of the war. And of course the *Bismarck* was able to sink the *Hood* before meeting its own catastrophic end in May 1941.

These successes notwithstanding, the surface fleet so dramatically failed to achieve its mission that, as Gray notes, not

Gray, Edwyn. *Hitler's Battleships*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 195pp. (No price given)