

1980

The American Flying Boat

W.A. Platte

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

Recommended Citation

Platte, W.A. (1980) "The American Flying Boat," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 3 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss3/19>

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.

measures to improve their own balance of payments, including preferential duties to favor their own merchant vessels. According to McCusker, Britain's mercantilistic policies were highly beneficial to the colonies, yet he tells us that the British authorities tolerated many colonial violations of the spirit of mercantilism in order not to hurt the thriving colonial economy. But, the chapter is so devoted to economic analysis (the word "promotive" appears three times!) that the slave trade is never mentioned, and captains and sailors are ignored, as are ports. All vessels are "ships," including those trading between the mainland and the West Indies.

In contrast, Bauer's chapter on the Golden Age deals with that period in a thorough and well-balanced manner. We have the growth of ports, the emergence of packets, clippers, steamboats and steamships, canals and railroads; government policies, wars, fishing, whaling, and the gold rush are lucidly explained. Above all, there are human actors on the stage.

Lawrence Allin analyzes the decline of American shipping and shipbuilding from the Civil War to 1913, tracing technological change, and leading us through the maze of legislative proposals that were publicly debated for decades, but accomplished little. The Navy's interest in a strong merchant marine is discussed at length. Unfortunately, this chapter is silent on the question of maritime labor, and the early efforts to organize seamen in the late 19th century. Indeed, one could read the entire book and not learn that brutality was common aboard American ships for almost a century. Allin only says that owners were unhappy with the crimping system which "produced less than able men."

This neglect of the labor picture continues into Jeffrey Safford's otherwise fine chapter on World War I.

The LaFollette Seaman's Act of 1915 is

only mentioned parenthetically as driving up wages on American ships and making them less competitive. In the remaining chapters the unions, which by then were powerful, are paid proper attention.

Two very readable chapters deal skillfully with the period from 1919 to 1945, when the government committed itself to supporting a strong merchant marine and shipbuilding industry. Clark Reynolds then shows that the United States has played a leading role in world maritime affairs in spite of its declining fleet in the years since World War II. The editors conclude with an appeal for wiser—but unspecified—maritime policies to overcome the many contemporary problems that they enumerate.

America's Maritime Legacy has little original material and is of limited scope, but it is an excellent concise history of the relationship between government and the American maritime industry. Anyone involved in maritime affairs who is not already familiar with their history will find this book valuable.

ALLAN A. ARNOLD
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

Knott, Richard C. *The American Flying Boat. An Illustrated History.*

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979. 262pp.

There are very few naval aviators remaining on active duty who know the challenge, thrill, and sheer enjoyment of flying a seaplane. Most aviators, familiar with the great power, simplicity, and agility of high flying jets, tend to look with disdain and amusement at the struggling, complicated old flying boats. Let's face it, the flying boats did have many aggravating deficiencies. But flying them, while physically demanding, was often truly rewarding and sometimes even romantic.

The seaplane pilot first had to be a real sailor! Water operation was where

122 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

he could easily get into trouble, for his machine was light, of shallow draft, with a lot of windage. In the big boats his thrust was off-center and, in later years, he often had too much power available for water work requiring finesse. He had to know about anchors, sea anchors, fenders, bridles, and beaching gear. He had to keep his airplane docile when mooring in tight, stormy situations so that his crewmembers, puny when measured with the great forces opposing them, would not be hurt. He often had to extend himself, and his engines, to the limit to get a heavily loaded seaplane "on the step"—planing—in order to take off. Those "max gross" takeoffs were something! Even with the latest, improved hull designs.

Once on the step, it could be a different world. How would you like to conn the world's fastest speedboat? Leap over small islands? Chase ducks and geese? And then fly past them, on and up into the other domain of your versatile machine. With what other aircraft could you make 20 consecutive touch-and-go landings—on the same pass, straight ahead? With what other aircraft could you land, light as a feather, so softly that the crew and passengers did not know your flight was over.

With the day's work done, you could moor, go fishing, and then cook your catch. You could swim, diving off the wing. And after relaxing, doze off in a comfortable bunk to the sound of gently lapping waves. You could do this in some of the beautiful far corners of the earth, in places ordinary aircraft could only fly over, if they could reach that point at all.

Captain Dick Knott, USN, of the seaplane brotherhood, has caught the trials and the triumphs, the risks and the romance of seaplanes in *The American Flying Boat. An Illustrated History*. It obviously is a labor of love, and the Naval Institute Press has assisted him in the same spirit. The

result is a rich and beautiful book. Captain Knott's readable text is supplemented with rare photographs and drawings. His historic account is fast paced, with a lot of data, and full of exciting vignettes that make American seaplane experience come alive. Needless to say, the most exciting stories are of Navy pilots and aircrews, for naval aviators led the way in developing and operating seaplanes during their heyday. The stories are of both peace and war, including the first transatlantic flight by the Navy Curtiss (NC)-4, and war patrols by the *Americas* (also built by Glenn H. Curtiss) in World War I, the *Catalinas* (*Black Cats*) and *Mariners* in World War II, and the *Marlins* in Vietnam.

Captain Knott says that "the exploits of the flying boats and the men who built them are an *everlasting* tribute to the searching, soaring spirit of man." Some may not agree, pointing to the poignant demise of Navy seaplanes in the 1950s, when the all-jet Martin *Seamaster* program was scrapped and dollars diverted to *Polaris*. If seaplane exploits were so laudable, should we not have kept them in inventory? Though many loved them, seaplanes had become dinosaurs, and it was wise to move on to high technology vehicles.

However, it is enlightening to consider the further activities of seaplane designers and manufacturers. Almost unanimously they became leaders in U.S. space programs. If we have traded off our *flying boats* for *space ships*, can we not point to activity that is a *continuing* tribute to our own searching, soaring spirit?

It is no accident that Captain Kirk *flies* to the reaches of space in *Starship Enterprise*.

The seaplane has given way to the spaceship. The exploration of space will be marvelously analogous to the pioneering of air routes on earth by the *China Clipper* and other famous seaplanes. If you want to understand the

PROFESSIONAL READING 123

early analog to better understand the future, read *The American Flying Boat*.

W.A. PLATTE*
Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

*Captain Platte may be in the picture on the last page of this book. He once brought a P5M back to Willoughby Bay from 450 miles offshore with the starboard engine feathered. But his magnifying glass could not verify his presence among those aviators shown atop a crippled "3-boat."

Marwah, Onkar, and Pollack, Jonathan D., eds. *Military Power and Policy in Asian States: China, India, Japan*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980. 180pp.

This collection of essays has an importance extending well beyond its modest scale. The editors and authors bring sound credentials, good judgment, and crisp style to their work. Onkar Marwah, formerly an Indian civil servant, works in the Program for Strategic and International Studies of the University of Geneva; Jonathan Pollack, formerly associated with Harvard University, now holds a position in the Social Science Department of the Rand Corporation; Stephen Cohen is associate professor of political science and Asian studies at the University of Illinois; Yasuhisa Nakada is a prominent Japanese journalist specializing in defense and foreign affairs.

The four essays presented here revolve around the premise that a number of the world's second-rank powers possess security concerns and strategic objectives increasingly independent from the preferences of the major powers. Further, within the next 10 years, some of these second-rank powers, especially China, India, and Japan, will develop military capabilities permitting them wider latitudes of aspiration and action than at any time since World War II. Thus, the authors suggest, "future prospects for stability and peace in Asia will be

increasingly determined by the states of the region themselves."

In an introductory chapter the editors emphasize a 30-year trend of erosion in European power, a trend represented in the anticolonial movement since World War II and, more poignantly for some Americans, in the emergence of global economic interdependence during the 1970s. In this context, they suggest, second-rank powers in the world's various regions have acquired the ability "to greatly raise the stakes of any external actor seeking to exercise military power with impunity against them; and second, to develop capabilities that address the real needs of national security for these states in the context of their own regional environments."

Each of the essays in this volume contains information and judgments of considerable interest. Cohen surveys the potential and the inclination of China, India, and Japan to become great powers, or at least *greater* powers, in the near future. Reminding his readers that for each of these countries "military power and technology became an obsession as a result of contact with the West," he endorses the view that these secondary powers will exert great influence in the international system. He also analyzes typical flaws in Western assessments of Asian politics. The three principal essays—Pollack's on Chinese military development, Marwah's on India's evolving defense policy and posture, and Nakada's on the influences for change in Japan's postwar political and security traditions—provide broad coverage of trends and prospects. Each blends fundamental information and cautious judgment.

This book should have a wide audience. The premise that powers such as China, India, and Japan hold increasing political and military importance is beyond dispute. Few Westerners know as much as they