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## New Horizons

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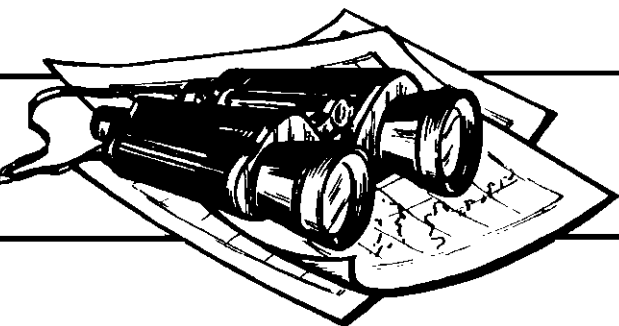
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# NEW HORIZONS

## A CONCEPT FOR CARRIER AIR CAPABILITY IN THE STANDING NAVAL FORCE ATLANTIC

(This article was extracted from a study conducted by a committee at the Naval War College. It will receive further consideration as a part of a group research project by a committee from the current class. Readers who desire to comment or add to this concept are encouraged to do so and can address their remarks to the Editor, *Naval War College Review*.)

The phasing out of British naval forces east of the Suez has been the topic of untold articles, while the prospect of eliminating its attack carrier capability in the Eastern Atlantic in the early 1970's is going virtually unnoticed. This is difficult to understand when one considers that the British carriers are the only forces that could provide organic naval air support to EASTLANT maritime contingencies on short notice. Granted, the United States has attack carriers that are in a high state of readiness in its 2d Fleet, but these carriers would normally be stationed so distant as to forfeit NATO's required "quick reaction" capability.

It is the purpose of this article to discuss this problem and to offer a concept that will provide relief for the prospective loss of the British carriers in EASTLANT.

To be credible and in keeping with our concept of naval task group make-up, a NATO naval force structure in EASTLANT must possess organic naval

air—the equivalent to that being provided by carriers of the United Kingdom. The retirement of these British carriers in the early 1970's will leave a void in the NATO EASTLANT forces that surely is of major concern to the planner who is responsible for contingency planning in the area.

The planner will be faced with the task of developing fast reaction plans around forces that have as their only offensive armament, naval gunfire. The problems of managing realistic planning under such limitations are readily apparent. For example, could we realistically expect NATO naval forces to be able to cope with a Soviet surface-to-surface missile fleet on the northern flank without carrier air? The answer to the question is obvious—obvious from a comparison of the capabilities of the surface ships involved, and from the composition of U.S. Navy task forces. No U.S. naval commander would think of engaging a Soviet naval force containing surface-to-surface missile ships and/or aircraft with air-to-surface missiles without having air supremacy over in his force. On a day in, day out basis this could only be provided by integral attack carriers. Some sources might argue that naval task forces in the EASTLANT area could operate under a cover of land-based air, a capability which it is understood the RAF is trying to develop. However, to tying these forces to land-based air would both seriously restrict their operating radius, and virtually annul the elements of

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mobility and surprise—characteristics that are vital to naval strike force operations. Besides, the planner and operator would find themselves hampered by working with a mix of forces which have not been primarily trained to conduct naval warfare.

The question arises: Who could provide this vital capability after the British retire their CVA's? An obvious source would be the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. However, if the nagging problem of funding dictates British withdrawal, it certainly would also preclude a U.S. commitment of CVA's to EASTLANT on a rotational cycle similar to that of the U.S. 6th and 7th Fleets. U.S. attack carriers are already overcommitted.

Other alternatives would be to get the European countries to underwrite the cost of a U.S. commitment—hardly possible—or to seek a workable joint European effort. This article proposes the latter—that is, that the British carriers be assigned to the custody of NATO for maintenance and upkeep and that they be assigned permanently as an augmentation to the Standing Naval Force Atlantic (SNFL) to provide the additional needed muscle. The necessity for a SNFL has been well argued and fully accepted within the Councils of NATO and need not be repeated here. The present force, made up of destroyer-type ships from many countries, has operated most successfully now for the last 10 years.

A commitment of at least two British attack carriers to the SNFL would provide NATO with a meaningful, quick reaction standoff offensive capability. It would make the SNFL a creditable and readily responsible force that could deal with enemy surface-to-surface and air-to-surface missiles; it is the only type naval surface force capable of operating in a hostile environment; and it could support land operations of the Allied Command Europe on the northern flank and in the center. Under certain circumstances it could be deployed to the

Mediterranean to support the southern flank.

In this proposal the British carriers would be transferred to the custody of NATO in a fully ready condition. They would be under the command of a British officer and be manned by Royal Navy personnel exclusive of the embarked air group. The air group would be multinational in character, composed of nationally manned squadrons contributed by NATO Western European countries within their capabilities. The force commander would continue to be the SNFL commander. Costs for upkeep of the carriers would be cost shared under NATO infrastructure funding similar, in principle, to that of joint NATO airfields. Costs of the carrier air squadrons would be a national responsibility, and all personnel costs would be defrayed by the nation providing the same.

The SNFL force would operate in EASTLANT, ready for quick reaction to contingencies at sea and applicable adjacent land areas. One carrier, with escorts, would be at sea or while in port, on 12 hours notice at all times. The carriers would be home ported in the United Kingdom. The squadrons would be assigned on a rotational basis to the alert carrier for periods of 3 to 6 months. During these deployments the squadrons would remain physically aboard the carrier to reduce reaction time, to insure survivability if land bases were attacked, and to improve working coordination between the squadrons and the ships. When not deployed with the alert carrier, squadrons would be based at national land bases and would maintain their operational readiness. Dislocation of dependents, out of country, would be avoided. There would be no significant balance of payments problem.

Of the three United Kingdom carriers currently in operation, the H.M.S. *Ark Royal* and the H.M.S. *Eagle* are the most suitable to perform the projected

TABLE I—COMPARISON OF UNITED STATES  
UNITED KINGDOM CVA's

	U.S.S. <i>Intrepid</i>	H.M.S. <i>Ark Royal</i> *	H.M.S. <i>Eagle</i> *
Disp.	42,800	43,000	43,000
Length	900'	720'	720'
Beam	103'	112.8'	112.8'
Width	192'	164.5'	171'
Normal A/C load	60 +	40 + 8 helos	34 + 10 helos

\**Ark Royal* is currently undergoing refit primarily to accommodate F4K. *Ark Royal* has a 5.5° deck angle. *Eagle's* deck angle is 8.5°. Both carriers are equipped with latest in steam catapults but are unable presently to nose launch.

Source: *Jane's Fighting Ships*, 196B-69.

roles, considering size and equipment. Table I sets forth their characteristics and compares these two ships to a U.S.S. *Essex* class CVA.

Since the selection of aircraft must be limited to those configured for carrier operations, the choice would necessarily be limited to United States and British sources for the immediate future. However, it is noted that the United Kingdom, West Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have agreed in principle to the joint development of a multirole combat aircraft. If it were feasible to develop a carrier version of this aircraft, it would be a replacement for existing equipment and sources.

From the point of view of providing an operational capability to fulfill a strategic posture, the concept of a SNFL with organic tactical air is operationally and technically feasible and enjoys the prospect of retaining an existing capability in a critical geographic area. There is a meaningful history of U.S. carrier "cross-deck" operations with other nations. The program should be politically palatable as the arrangement would be an extension of the existing SNFL concept. The basic problem would be the motivation of the countries concerned as to the continued need of a sea-based tactical air capability in EASTLANT. From the eco-

nomie aspect, the proposal should appear relatively attractive. There is no requirement for ship construction. Ship upkeep and operations would be cost shared by NATO, and aircraft procurement and support would be the responsibility of the nation providing. Carrier aircraft provided would substitute for an appropriate share of planned land-based aircraft procurement.

The addition of carrier strike air to SNFL would provide NATO with a conventional weapon delivery capability that could play an important "quick response" role under the new NATO strategy for flexible response. Besides the substantial military capability, it has the prospect of being politically attractive to NATO. The force would provide a visible, powerful, day-to-day symbol of the unity of NATO. Economically, the cost of the force would not be excessive to the countries concerned, and it might well offer the most feasible prospect of maintaining a ready carrier force in EASTLANT.

One of the major problems presented by this concept would be the retention of adequately trained Royal Navy personnel to provide ship companies for the two carriers. It is understood that personnel planning, based on withdrawal of the CVA's in the early 1970's, has proceeded to the point that would

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make this most difficult. An alternative to "all British" ship manning might be to consider supplementing the crew with Norwegian, Danish, and Dutch naval personnel. This should be quite

feasible. It would only repeat the practice during World War II when naval personnel, refugees from these countries, joined the Royal Navy and served admirably under the British Ensign.

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Not alone is the strength of the Fleet measured by the number of its fighting units, but by its efficiency, by its ability to proceed promptly where it is needed and to engage and overcome an enemy.

*Admiral Richard Wainwright, USN: Letter, 1911*