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In My View

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IN MY VIEW

“NOT SO!” ON AMPHIBS

Sir:

I write to call attention to the misleading and inaccurate statements contained in the recent article “Aircraft Carriers,” by John F. Lehman, with Steven Wills, in the Autumn 2021 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. I refer specifically to the portions concerning the *Bonhomme Richard* fire.

I am a retired rear admiral. I commanded three amphibious ships and served as commander of Amphibious Group 2 from 1992 to 1995. In one of my ship-board tours I served as the commissioning commanding officer of USS *Wasp* (LHD 1); *Bonhomme Richard* (LHD 6) was a follow-on member of the same class. After retirement from the Navy, I led the design team for the LPD-17 program, of which class USS *San Antonio* (LPD 17) is the first ship. I also am a 1985 graduate of our Naval War College.

I took particular issue with the *Bonhomme Richard* section in the Lehman/Wills article, including statements such as the following:

The blaze demonstrates the vulnerability of large amphibious ships. . . . [T]hey are not built to the same survivability standard as are full-size carriers. They have little armor; . . . they incorporate . . . large, open spaces that include well decks . . . and large storage parks for vehicles . . . to transport and land Marines. These characteristics add to the overall vulnerability of amphibious ships compared with purpose-built aircraft carriers.

Ships are built to perform a mission, and design follows function. The LHD was built to support the amphibious mission. Yes, the ship has a well deck to handle landing craft; vehicle decks to handle Marine Corps equipment such as tanks, trucks, mobile artillery, and armored personnel carriers; and a large hangar deck to support aircraft maintenance. It was constructed to be able to support a Marine amphibious landing, and to do so the ship has to be able to embark the Marines, store their equipment, and move both quickly ashore by landing craft (from the well deck) or helicopter (from the flight deck). It must be capable of moving the

equipment from its place of storage to the point of launch. In contrast, the aircraft carrier is built to support aircraft operations. It cannot carry the volume of Marine equipment the LHD can, is ill equipped to move such equipment from hangar bay to flight deck, and cannot support the type of command and control the Marines require—because that is not the mission the ship was built for!

However, both the CVN and LHD classes are built to the same survivability standards mandated by BuShips and NavSea. The LHD class design incorporated all the firefighting-equipment, damage-control, and ship-survivability lessons learned from the disastrous fires in USS *Oriskany* (CV 34) and USS *Forrestal* (CV 59), both of which were purpose-built carriers. Furthermore, as the first of a class of new warships, USS *Wasp* (LHD 1) was required to undergo a full series of shock trials, as does the first ship of any class of ship design, including aircraft carriers such as the new USS *Gerald Ford* (CVN 78), which has yet to deploy five-plus years after commissioning. I was the commanding officer in *Wasp* for its trials, and I can attest that the ship came through with minimal damage and was mission capable within fifteen minutes of the final detonation.

Owing to our inherent knowledge of the ship class, I and my commissioning executive officer, Captain Keith Larson, and command master chief, Michael Lopez (a master chief damage controlman [DCCM]), were asked to serve in an unofficial capacity as consultants to the NavSea team that investigated the *Bonhomme Richard* fire. From what we observed, the shipboard design had very little, if anything at all, to do with that fire getting out of control. As the published public report of the fire established, the ship was lost because the basic fundamentals of shipboard training in damage control, firefighting, electrical isolation, tagging out, and flammable storage were not followed. No ship can survive a major fire if the firefighting equipment is tagged out, the critical space cannot be isolated because electrical cables and hoses are running through it without quick disconnects being installed, and flammable materials are stowed improperly throughout the ship.

Lehman and Wills are wrong in their assumptions that design contributed to the loss of *Bonhomme Richard*. The first line of defense on a ship is always a well-trained, properly manned, and properly equipped crew. The best firefighting equipment in the world will not help if the crew mishandles or erroneously disables the equipment. Members of the shipboard damage-control and firefighting team must be prepared to recognize what they are facing and know how to either correct it or establish a work-around at the scene of the fire, and to accomplish this quickly—*before* a fire gets out of control.

Given that Secretary Lehman is a former Navy officer himself, it is hard to believe he does not know this. Perhaps the article represents an attempt to discredit a class of ships that he long has viewed as a threat to the procurement program for the large CVN.

Additionally, I was a bit disappointed that your reviewers did not recognize the inaccuracies in the article. As an alumnus of the College as well as a member of the Naval War College Foundation, I would be more than willing to review any future articles on amphibious-related subjects, and Captain Larson and DCCM Lopez have agreed to assist as required as well.

LEONARD F. PICOTTE

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“NOT SO!” ON CARRIERS

Sir:

I was disappointed in the article “Sizing the Carriers: A Brief History of Alternatives,” by Sam Tangredi, in the Autumn 2021 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. The title intrigued me, as the subject touches on a topic very close to my own research. However, the article relies greatly on sources from the late 1960s to the early 1980s that reflect little to no original research into the ship classes discussed. Therefore Dr. Tangredi’s article provides scant new information on the subject. Being a survey, the article cannot be expected to contribute original research, but if his survey provides no critical analysis of the extant publications, what was its purpose? Rather than proving that “the U.S. Navy has sound reasons for preferring a large-deck aircraft carrier over any smaller variant,” the author’s survey instead demonstrates how inadequate the level of scholarship is concerning small fleet carriers and light carriers.

Tangredi’s lack of critical attention to the early small carriers is made all the more apparent by the article’s many factual errors. The simplest is his shorting of the nine light carriers of the *Independence* class, which ranged from CVL 22 to CVL 30 rather than the “twenty-fifth through the thirtieth,” as the author reports. Tangredi never explicitly names the ships of the *Independence* class nor those of the *Saipan* class, but he states that CVL displacements ranged from sixteen to nineteen thousand tons. This suggests that his numbering of hulls represents an even greater error; rather than the eleven hulls built between the two CVL classes, Tangredi numbers just six. Also forgotten is the poor *Princeton* (CVL 23),

which was lost to a single bomb during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. This omission is particularly odd in that the case could have reinforced the author's point about the vulnerability of smaller carriers. Indeed, he could have dwelt on *Independence* (CVL 22), which was lucky to be struck by only one air-launched torpedo, and that outside the most vulnerable portions of its hull. Instead, *Princeton* is passed over with the incorrect statement that "all these ships survived the war."

Regarding *Ranger* (CV 4), the author makes several additional mistakes. In assessing the opportunity costs of building *Ranger* at a smaller tonnage than ships of the *Lexington* class, he demonstrates the usual inconsistency of evaluating *Ranger*'s wartime capabilities using its 1934, as-commissioned characteristics. Tangredi's own statement—"which took on a greater significance during World War II than it bore at the ship's commissioning" (p. 41)—either impugns *Ranger* for defects that had been corrected by the time war broke out or it highlights the very opportunity costs that he identifies as having no ultimate merit. Poor word choice makes it hard to discern which he means, but the citation of the faulty assessment of *Ranger* contained in James H. and William M. Belote's *Titans of the Seas* as "not equipped to handle a balanced air group" that included torpedo planes implies that Tangredi does mean to state that the corrected flaws of *Ranger* still influence the assessment of its capabilities.

Further muddying the waters, Tangredi flips back and forth between references to the ship's standard displacement (13,800 tons) and its full-load displacement (18,000 tons) without explaining the disparity in those figures or his respective purposes in using them. *Ranger* had been designed for a 13,800-ton standard displacement, then had been redesigned on the building ways to a 14,500-ton standard displacement. The mismatch between the original 13,800-ton designed standard displacement and the 18,000-ton full-load displacement used in Tangredi's article gives the erroneous impression that the Navy massively up-sized *Ranger* when it redesigned it. Instead, the Navy increased the tonnage only modestly, so as to improve *Ranger*; allow the building of two larger carriers, of 20,000-ton standard displacement; and add a second 14,500-ton *Ranger*-class vessel, while still remaining within the collective treaty-limited tonnage. This error comes from a misreading of the passage Tangredi cites from Norman Friedman's *U.S. Aircraft Carriers* discussing the development of 23,000-ton and 27,000-ton standard displacement carrier-design studies.

These mistakes are rooted in a reliance on late 1960s to early 1980s battle and design histories for a measured analysis of these ships. Tangredi's use of Dr. Emily O. Goldman's political history *Sunken Treaties* best exemplifies this issue, because for her naval history assessments Goldman relies on Charles Melhorn's *Two-Block Fox*—a source Tangredi already uses for many of his own points. Melhorn himself relies on a single 1931 letter to prove naval leadership dissatisfaction

with *Ranger*. Tangredi then uses the exact same letter cited in William Trimble's *Admiral William A. Moffett* to support the same point. In both instances the letter is shorn from its context. The multitude of secondary sources echoing the same negative assessment might seem to indicate the strength of their argument, but an analysis of the sources Tangredi cites reveals that these secondary sources use distressingly few primary sources concerning *Ranger* and rely entirely too much on one another. A strong survey of the history of aircraft-carrier sizing would have identified this flaw and highlighted it for the attention of future researchers; instead, this survey echoes the unoriginal and uncritical assessment.

The publishing of Tangredi's article makes it plain that historical examples continue to have an impact on the carrier-sizing debate. Published in the same issue was the article "Aircraft Carriers: Missions, Survivability, Size, Cost, Numbers," by John F. Lehman, with Steven Wills. Their article argues for the design and construction of smaller, conventionally powered fleet carriers of approximately the size of the *Midway* class. It is a shame that my article reevaluating *Ranger* was turned down when these articles were going to print. The publication of my article in a future issue would have continued this important discussion by addressing issues of fact in Tangredi's article and providing compelling historical support to Lehman and Wills.

JAMES ALVEY