

# Answering the Call: Carriers in Crises Response Since World War II

By Jeffrey G. Barlow

**W**here are the carriers?" is a question that U.S. presidents have asked with increasing frequency in the years since the end of WW II. Indeed, the U.S. government has employed military force in responding to foreign crises more than 200 times since 1945, and in two-thirds of these instances the U.S. Navy task forces sent into harm's way have had aircraft carriers (CVs) as their major offensive component. It is easy to see why this has been the case. With their multipurpose air wings, forward-deployed

aircraft carriers possess a potent offensive strike capability which enables them to control the sea and air space within the radius of their aircraft and to project air power ashore. Unconstrained by the need to operate from foreign bases, carriers can provide an extended, low-profile presence by remaining over the horizon from possible trouble spots or can serve as active deterrent forces by operating close to the coasts of potential antagonists.

An examination of how U.S. aircraft carriers have been used in a number of interna-

tional crises during the past 50 years reveals just how the versatile carriers can influence the outcome in the United States' favor. On-scene carrier task forces can serve to deter aggressors from taking actions detrimental to U.S. or allied interests or to compel them to accept otherwise unpalatable consequences. If, however, the crises escalate into open warfare, forward-deployed carriers can transition almost immediately from peacetime operating tempos to active combat status.





The "Ageless Warrior," *Coral Sea* (CV 43), was the epitome of aircraft carrier responsiveness and flexibility. From her commissioning in 1947 until her final deployment in 1989 she was the purveyor of American naval air power on countless occasions. *Coral Sea* was a floating bastion of democracy during the Suez Crisis and many other conflicts, including the Vietnam War.

Courtesy ANA/Photo by Perry Thorsvik



Left, bombs are loaded on an F4U Corsair aboard *Phillippine Sea* (CVA 47) on 6 September 1950 in preparation for a strike on a North Korean target. Below, an AD *Skyraider* pulls out of a dive after dropping a 2,000-pound bomb on a bridge in enemy-held territory.



## Korea—June 1950

On Sunday, 25 June 1950 at approximately 0400, North Korean Army troops began attacking across the 38th parallel in Korea, catching many South Korean units totally unprepared. Beginning with a series of blows in the western part of the peninsula, the fighting spread rapidly eastward during the next hour. By the end of the first day, South Korean troops were in headlong retreat almost everywhere along the front.

President Harry Truman decided to give air and naval assistance to the Republic of Korea (ROK) on the evening of 26 June (Washington time). Within a few hours, Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, Commander Naval Forces, Far East, had issued an operation order directing the naval forces under his command to assist ROK forces south of the 38th parallel and instructing the Seventh Fleet to take station both to prevent Chinese Communist troops from invading Formosa and to preclude Nationalist Chinese forces from attacking the mainland.

The Seventh Fleet's Striking Force, Task Force (TF) 77—consisting of the *Essex*-class carrier *Valley*



*Forge* (CV 45), a heavy cruiser and eight destroyers—sorted from Subic Bay, Philippines, on the morning of 27 June and headed north toward Sasebo, Japan. While en route, it was redirected to Okinawa, Japan. On 29 June, pursuant to its instructions to keep the Formosan situation neutralized, 29 *Valley Forge* F4U Corsairs and AD *Skyraiders* flew up the Formosa Strait in a show of force. The following morning TF 77 reached Okinawa and dropped anchor in Buckner Bay. There, it was soon joined by a British force consisting of the light carrier *Triumph*, a light cruiser and two destroyers.

On 30 June, President Truman committed U.S. ground troops to the fighting in Korea and authorized General Douglas MacArthur, Far East Commander, to extend military operations into North Korea against military targets. The augmented TF 77 sortied on the evening of 1 July for the west coast of Korea. On 3 July, 21 aircraft from *Triumph* and 36 planes from *Valley Forge* struck

the military airfield at Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, destroying planes on the ground and in the air, cratering runways and demolishing the field's hangars and fuel storage facilities. Further air attacks that afternoon and all of the next day were directed against Pyongyang's railyard, along with its road and rail bridges and locomotives. The highly successful, two-day air strike was a valuable demonstration of the United States' determination to stand firm against aggression on the peninsula. The U.S. military commitment rapidly increased, and, only a month later, on 5 August 1950, *Valley Forge* and *Phillippine Sea* (CV 47) began what was to become almost three years of continuous fast carrier operations during the Korean War.

## Suez—1956

The Suez Crisis began on 26 July 1956, when, following the United States' decision to withdraw its offer of a grant to aid the construction of

Egypt's Aswan High Dam, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The governments of Britain and France secretly began planning for an invasion of Egypt. Not to be outdone, Israel soon was doing its own invasion planning, completing its final plan on 5 October. After several international mediation efforts had failed, Britain and France agreed in mid-October 1956 to undertake a joint intervention in Egypt. Aware of the upcoming Israeli plan to invade the Sinai, French officials suggested that a Franco-British force could enter Egypt ostensibly to separate the combatants, while actually seizing control of the entire Suez waterway. On 26 October, the United States learned of Israel's military mobilization, and President Dwight Eisenhower sent the first of two personal messages to Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion asking that Israel do nothing to endanger the peace. In the Mediterranean on the 28th, the U.S. Sixth Fleet was placed on alert. Undeterred by U.S. diplomatic maneuvering, Israeli forces began attacks in Egypt on 29 October.

The following day Britain and France began to make their move. The

British government issued an Anglo-French ultimatum calling on the Israelis and Egyptians to withdraw their forces to a distance of 10 miles from the Suez Canal and demanding that Egypt allow British and French forces to temporarily occupy key positions guarding the canal. That same day, Admiral Walter F. Boone, U.S. Commander Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, ordered the Sixth Fleet to assist in the evacuation of U.S. nationals from Israel and Egypt. *Coral Sea* (CVA 43) and *Randolph* (CVA 15), the fleet's two attack carriers that were already operating in the eastern Mediterranean, were directed to keep clear of British naval units operating there. In Norfolk, Va., the Navy ordered one attack carrier, a heavy cruiser and a destroyer squadron to get ready to sail to the Mediterranean to augment the Sixth Fleet and a second CVA and a division of destroyers to be on 72-hour notice.

The Anglo-French attack on Egypt began at dusk on 31 October with a series of large-scale air strikes. The following day Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Arleigh Burke signaled Vice Admiral Charles R. "Cat" Brown, Commander Sixth Fleet: "Situation tense; prepare for

imminent hostilities." Brown signaled back: "Am prepared for imminent hostilities, but whose side are we on?" In classic Burke style, the CNO's return response was, "Keep clear of foreign op areas but take no guff from anybody."

The Suez Crisis increased in intensity on the afternoon of 5 November when the Soviet Union sent diplomatic notes to Britain, France and Israel threatening to crush the aggressors and restore peace in the Middle East through the use of force. President Eisenhower's reaction to these threats was that "if those fellows start something, we may have to hit 'em—and, if necessary, with everything in the bucket."

*Coral Sea* and *Randolph* and their escorts shifted to an operating area southwest of Crete in order to improve their readiness posture for a general emergency. Agreeing to a cease-fire on 6 November, Britain and France ended their military operations that night at midnight. Soviet military moves continued during the next few days, however, and on the 7th, Burke ordered attack carriers *Forrestal* (CVA 59) and *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA 42) to sail from Norfolk toward the Azores, together with a heavy cruiser and three divisions of destroyers, to act as a standby augmentation to the Sixth Fleet. U.S. Navy forces were directed to maintain readiness to execute emergency war plans. Tensions remained high until 15 November, when United Nations forces were brought into Egypt to provide a buffer between the Egyptians and the invasion forces. From that point on, the Soviet intervention threat gradually dissipated.

## Cuban Missile Crisis—1962

The crisis over Cuba began on 15 October 1962, when Central Intelligence Agency photo interpreters reviewing the reconnaissance film taken the previous day by a U-2 aircraft flying over Cuba discovered the construction of a site for a Soviet



Personnel in the *Randolph* (CVA 15) Combat Information Center use a plotting board to track French, British and Israeli aircraft in the area during the Suez Crisis.



In addition to the dozens of ships involved in the Cuban Quarantine (as the blockade was renamed), two Second Fleet attack carriers served as the carrier striking force. *Independence* (CVA 62), with Commander Carrier Division 6 embarked, had deployed from Norfolk with four escorts on 11 October to operate in or south of the Mayport, Fla., area in order to reduce reaction time in the event of operations in the Caribbean. On 19 October, the nuclear-powered carrier *Enterprise* (CVA 65), with Commander Carrier Division 2 embarked, got under way and proceeded south as well.

As Task Force 135, the two carriers were directed to prepare for naval actions supporting Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet's air strike plan. Specifically, if ordered to do so, the carriers were to strike assigned targets in Cuba and to provide air defense and close air support for Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. By 21 October, TF 135 was operating in the waters north of Cuba—the optimum position for launching air strikes against the island. A few days later, it shifted its operating area to the waters south of Jamaica in response to possible submarine contacts. Although the

SS-4 medium-range ballistic missile. Further analysis of the film later that night revealed other possible missile sites. President John F. Kennedy was briefed on the unexpected threat just before noon on 16 October. The president quickly made it clear to his advisers that the Soviet missiles in Cuba would have to be eliminated, by force, if necessary.

Military preparations for getting the missiles out of Cuba began at once. By 19 October, the president and his crisis advisers decided upon enforcing a limited blockade of Cuba to prevent the further introduction of offensive arms onto that island. On 20 October, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara directed Chief of Naval Operations Admiral George Anderson to prepare the position papers, scenario and implementa-



**Carriers kept watch during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Top, a VA-65 AD Skyraider loaded with bombs sits at the ready aboard *Enterprise* (CVN 65). Above, an S-2 Tracker keeps a close eye on the Soviet freighter *Alajevsk*.**

tion instructions for this limited blockade. The unified commander for the Atlantic theater, Admiral Robert Dennison, was responsible for carrying out military operations related to the crisis.

task force was not called upon to conduct the anticipated air strikes on Cuba, it remained poised to respond rapidly to changes in the crisis situation throughout November and into December 1962.



A VF-103 F-14A *Tomcat* prepares to launch from the deck of *Saratoga* (CV 60). The *Sluggers*, along with sister squadron VF-74, intercepted the Egypt Air 737 aboard which the hijackers of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* were attempting to make their escape.

## Achille Lauro—1985

On 7 October 1985, *Achille Lauro*, an Italian luxury liner with some 100 mostly elderly passengers on board, was hijacked in Egyptian waters by terrorists representing the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). The ship's captain was ordered to sail for Tartus, Syria. That night, the hijackers informed Egyptian authorities of their action by radio and stated their demand for release of 50 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

The next day, after being denied docking rights at Tartus by Syrian authorities, the terrorists decided to kill one of their hostages to prove their determination. Pushing the elderly, wheelchair-bound, Jewish-American passenger Leon Klinghoffer to the side of the ship, the leader of the terrorists shot him in the head and chest and then threw his body overboard. The Syrians still continued to deny the ship docking rights, but before a second passenger could be killed, the terrorists received a radio message from PLF leaders directing them to leave the passengers unmolested and to head to Port Said, Egypt. Once there, the

Egyptian government, unaware that Klinghoffer had been murdered, provided the hijackers with safe passage in exchange for freeing the ship and its passengers.

Once the murder had been discovered, the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt demanded that the Egyptian government prosecute the terrorists. The Egyptians, however, reported that it was too late, since the hijackers had already left the country. Through clever intelligence work, the National Security Council staff determined that the terrorists were still in Egypt and were about to be flown to Tunisia on an Egypt Air 737 airliner. They reasoned that, with a lot of luck, the United States might be able to intercept the plane before it reached its destination.

*Saratoga* (CV 60), with Commander Task Force (CTF) 60 on board, was steaming northward through the Adriatic Sea toward a port call at Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, on the afternoon of 10 October, following completion of a major North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise in the central Mediterranean. Suddenly, the carrier received orders from Sixth Fleet headquarters to

reverse course and to launch the alert combat air patrol. Despite the ship's "Alert 60" status, two F-14A *Tomcats* and an E-2C *Hawkeye* were airborne within 22 minutes. Apprised of the emerging situation by Sixth Fleet, Rear Admiral David Jeremiah, CTF 60, immediately alerted his staff that *Saratoga* was going after the hijackers, even though the plane's exact takeoff time from Egypt, the route it was flying to Tunisia and its altitude were unknown.

The plan called for *Saratoga*'s planes to make night intercepts and identifications of air contacts on the airways crisscrossing the central Mediterranean as they flew eastward toward a common airway intersection point south of Crete. On the fourth interception of the night, following two hair-raising, lights-out intercepts of darkened transport planes, the F-14s hit pay dirt. At about 2230, 30 miles southeast of Crete, they closed on an Egyptian 737 airliner showing the tail number 2843—the aircraft they were looking for. After identifying themselves to the airliner's pilot, the American planes eventually were able to convince the 737 to land at the NATO base in Sigonella, Sicily. Upon landing, the airliner was quickly surrounded by American soldiers. The terrorists ultimately were taken into Italian custody. The operation provided a first-class demonstration of the versatility of carriers in a fast-moving crisis situation.

## Desert Shield—1990

In July 1990, Saddam Hussein of Iraq was desperate. His country's eight-year war with Iran had ended in 1988 in a virtual stalemate that had left it economically crippled. To keep his brutal regime in power, Saddam needed to spend billions of dollars for revitalization to placate an increasingly restive population. Yet, the national finances were in ruins, and Iraq's oil revenues were hostage to falling oil prices caused by excess production. Kuwait, Iraq's small neighbor to the south, was one of the major offenders flouting the OPEC



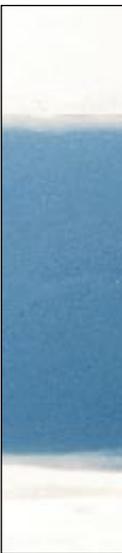
Above, "Fill 'er up!" *America* (CV 66)-based CVW-1 F-14 *Tomcats*, F/A-18 *Hornets* and an EA-6B *Prowler* belly up to the KC-135 and KA-6D "pumps" during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Left, the venerable A-7E *Corsair* made a definite impact on the enemy during the Gulf War. This VA-72 *Corsair* is all business on the way to its target in Iraq with a load of MK 82 500-pound bombs.

Capt. John Leenhouts

(Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil production quota designed to keep prices higher. Saddam decided to take action. In mid-July 1990, Iraq issued an ultimatum to Kuwait: comply with a number of harsh economic demands or face the consequences. Iraqi military forces began massing near the Kuwaiti border. Although American intelligence assets quickly picked up on Iraq's military preparations, the U.S. government largely believed that Saddam's actions were designed as a bluff to force Kuwait into concessions. Thus, the sudden thrust into Kuwait on 2 August by the first of some 140,000 Iraqi troops and 1,800 tanks came as a shock to the Bush administration. Recovering quickly, the administration began assembling national and international military forces to oppose Saddam's expansionist actions.

It was vital for the United States to get significant military forces into the Persian Gulf region as rapidly as possible. There was no way for the United States to tell if the move into Kuwait was merely the precursor for large-scale attacks into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. When President George Bush met with the Saudi ambassador on 3 August, though, it was evident that despite the Iraqi threat, Saudi Arabia was reluctant to allow U.S. forces early access to its bases. U.S. aircraft carriers operating in international waters, however, were not constrained by issues of national sovereignty, and they were already moving into position to deter further Iraqi moves. The Seventh Fleet carrier, *Independence* (CV 62), and Battle Group Delta had been passing through the Malacca Straits toward Diego Garcia when first alerted to

trouble in the Persian Gulf. Ordered to make best speed for the North Arabian Sea, they arrived at their operating area in the Gulf of Oman, designated Gonzo Station, on 7 August. If required, the planes of *Independence's* Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 14 could have launched long-range strikes as early as the 5th. The carrier's immediate mission was implicit: help deter Saddam Hussein from moving into Saudi Arabia while American follow-on forces were being assembled state-side. *Independence* immediately began flight operations. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) was operating in the central Mediterranean in the last month of her planned six-month deployment. Alerted to the situation, she quickly headed east toward Suez. The carrier transited the Suez Canal on 7 August





and entered the Red Sea the next day. The Navy now had carrier battle groups poised on both flanks of the area of conflict. The aircrews of *Eisenhower's* CVW-7 at once began familiarizing themselves with the local terrain and monitoring the entire Red Sea operating area, designated Camel Station.

Even while these carriers “held the line” against further Iraqi moves in the gulf, other carriers were being readied to augment them. *Saratoga* and her battle group cleared

PH2 Charles W. Moore



Mayport on 7 August 1990, headed for the Mediterranean Sea for a scheduled deployment as *Eisenhower's* relief. *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67) and her battle group, which had been alerted on 10 August and



Lt. Scott Ginder

Above, Lt. Gerry Parsons from VF-41 poses next to an AIM-54 Phoenix missile loaded on an F-14 Tomcat during Operation Desert Storm. Left, *John F. Kennedy* and *San Jacinto* (CG 56) join up with *Saratoga* and *Biddle* (CG 34) in the Red Sea in November 1990, just two months before the shooting started. Below, *Dwight D. Eisenhower* transits the Suez Canal for home on 22 August 1990, after “holding the line” at the beginning of Operation Desert Shield.

ordered to get under way for a “no-notice” deployment, left Norfolk and other East Coast ports for the Mediterranean on 15 August. By the beginning of the air campaign against Iraq on 17 January 1991, the U.S.

Navy had six carriers operating in the area of conflict—four in the Red Sea and two in the Persian Gulf.

## Conclusion

Because of their mobility, their wide-ranging offensive power and their ability to conduct sustained operations off the coasts of potential aggressors, forward-deployed aircraft carriers have constituted a major portion of the United States’ crisis-response capability during the past 50 years.

Indeed, their availability in times of international crises has often spelled the difference between a successful resolution of these crises and a foreign policy failure.

The carrier’s highly successful mixture of capabilities cannot be duplicated by other U.S. military forces. Over the years it has demonstrated an enduring value that is essential to our war-fighting prowess in the next century. n

Dr. Barlow is a historian in the Contemporary History Branch of the Naval Historical Center.



PH3 Frank A. Marquant