Responding to Crises in the New World Order

By Capt. Mark T. Vanderberg

No sooner had hostilities with Iraq come to an end in 1991 when the United States was faced with Iraqi government aggressions against its own people. Consequently, aircraft from U.S. carriers in the eastern Mediterranean flew missions in support of the U.S. and allied ground forces that entered northern Iraq to set up protection zones for Iraqi Kurds (Operation Provide Comfort).

In January 1992, attacks by Iraqi government forces against the Shia population in southern Iraq led the U.S. and several of our allies to declare a "no-fly" zone over the southern half of that country. Carrier aircraft participated in Operation

Southern Watch from its first day, and continue to play a key role today.

In April 1992, the United Nations authorized the establishment of another no-fly zone, this time over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Aircraft flying from *Saratoga* (CV 60) began participating in Operation Deny Flight that July, marking the first time a U.S. carrier had conducted sustained flight operations in the Adriatic Sea. And *Saratoga* was just the first of many East Coast carriers that supported the United Nations effort in the Balkans. Between 1992 and 1995, carrier air wings also supported food airdrops to the Bosnian population (Operation Provide Promise) and supported maritime intercept

operations (Operation Sharp Guard). They also stood by to support United Nations troops on the ground.

Even as Adriatic operations continued, the carrier force was supporting operations in the war-ravaged Horn of Africa. December 1992 witnessed the carrier *Ranger* (CV 61) and her air wing supporting the initial entry of U.S. and allied troops into Somalia during Operation Restore Hope. As U.S. troops secured key areas in the country, *Ranger's* aircraft provided show-of-force, reconnaissance and command-and-control support to the operation. *Ranger's* duties were eventually assumed by *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63).

Kitty Hawk's support for Restore

A VF-84 *Jolly Rogers* F-14A *Tomcat* blasts into the sky from the deck of *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) during Operation Deny Flight over Bosnia-Herzegovina in April 1993.

Hope was cut short in January 1993 when Iraq began challenging U.S. forces patrolling its skies in Operation Southern Watch. After Iraqi jets violated the no-fly zone, the carrier transited north into the Persian Gulf, dispatching F-14 *Tomcats* and F/A-18 *Hornets* to Saudi Arabian bases to support Air Force aircraft already there. When Iraq refused to back down, *Kitty Hawk* launched 35 aircraft to participate in joint and combined strikes against Iraqi air defense and command sites.

The United States struck again in June 1993, in retaliation for an Iraqi attempt on the life of former President George Bush. The *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) battle group left the Adriatic and moved to the Red Sea to reinforce U.S. forces in the area after Navy surface combatants launched cruise missile strikes against Baghdad.

The situation in the Persian Gulf cooled somewhat after that, but conditions in Somalia began to heat up in October. That month, *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) responded to the deteriorating United Nations position in Mogadishu, where American troops were suffering increasing casualties. *Lincoln* was later relieved by *America* (CV 66), which had left station off Bosnia to take up her new duties covering American forces in Somalia.

The summer of 1994 saw tensions rising on the Korean peninsula. The Navy put several carriers on a short "tether," keeping them prepared to move toward Korean waters on short notice. From this stance, the Navy could have deployed 248 combat-ready strike aircraft on board four different carriers to the Sea of Japan within 14 days.

In September 1994, *America* and *Eisenhower* (CVN 69) demonstrated their flexibility and value as joint assets. The two carriers transported aircraft, personnel and equipment belonging to the Army's 10th Mountain Division as well as various special operations forces to the Caribbean for Operation Restore Democracy, the U.S. intervention in Haiti. Without an air threat with which to contend, the ships—which were pulled from their normal work-up cycles—could be employed as joint task force support platforms.

More traditional carrier operations were required when Iraqi forces again made menacing moves toward Kuwait in October 1994. Once again a carrier—this time *George Washington* (CVN 73)—rushed to the Red Sea to reinforce U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Vigilant Warrior. *Washington's* air wing represented a critical addition to U.S. air power in the theater, particularly in the early days of the crisis.

After two high-ranking Iraqi military officers defected to Jordan in August 1995, Saddam Hussein's government again made threatening noises against that country and Kuwait. This time, the U.S. response included the *Lincoln* and *Independence* (CV 62) battle groups, which stood guard in southwest Asian waters as part of Operation Vigilant Sentinel. Meanwhile, *Theodore Roosevelt* took up station in the eastern Mediterranean.

Roosevelt was called back to the Adriatic later that month when the events in Bosnia came to a head. Aircraft from *Roosevelt* and later *America* participated in the air campaign launched against the Bosnian Serbs. Operation Deliberate Force began on 30 August and lasted slightly longer than three weeks, ending after the Bosnian Serbs agreed to a cease-fire in their war against other ethnic groups in the country.

In late 1995 the warring parties in Bosnia signed the Dayton Accord, which ostensibly ended hostilities. In December 1995, the first U.S. and allied troops entered Bosnia to begin enforcing the accord as part of Operation Joint Endeavor. To protect them, *America*—making her last cruise before she was decommissioned—left her station in the Persian Gulf to return to the Adriatic.

Events in the eastern Pacific initiated a series of carrier movements in March 1996. Mainland China began high-profile and potentially dangerous military exercises designed to intimidate the Taiwanese population, who were voting in elections that month. Concerned for the stability of the region, the United States dispatched *Independence* to take up station in the area. She was joined shortly afterwards by *Nimitz* (CVN 68), which had been conducting Southern Watch operations in the Persian Gulf. *George Washington* then moved from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf to compensate for the absence of *Nimitz* in southwest Asian waters.

Iraq's pattern of disruptive behavior continued in September 1996, when Iraqi troops moved into the exclusion zone in northern Iraq established after the 1991 Gulf War. F-14 *Tomcats* from *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) in the Persian Gulf escorted Air Force B-52s as they launched cruise missiles against Iraqi command-and-control and air defense targets during Operation Desert Strike. *Vinson's* aircraft also began enforcing a newly expanded no-fly zone, another punitive measure instituted by the United States and its allies.

The tracks of U.S. carriers during their post-cold war deployments could almost serve as a roadmap to American foreign policy in the new world order. The rapid carrier transits between the Persian Gulf and the Adriatic, the massing of carriers in the western Pacific and the *ad hoc* use of carriers in the Caribbean all highlight the challenges of upholding U.S. interests—and doing so with a smaller force. Carriers also maintain a peacetime forward presence in key areas of the world, and it is probably safe to assume that some potential crises never erupted because of this regular display of American concern and military power.

As the record shows, the demand for carriers has not declined with the end of the cold war. Today, aircraft carriers play a crucial "enabling" role in U.S. foreign and military policy. If history is any guide, they will continue to do so well into the 21st century. ∎

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