

THE U.S. NAVY ON THE EVE OF THE KOREAN WAR

By Marc D. Bernstein

This is the first article in a commemorative series entitled, "Naval Aviation in the Korean War."

The post-WW II years marked a period of extraordinary change for the U.S. military, both technologically and administratively. Jet aircraft and helicopters were beginning to enter service in significant numbers, nuclear propulsion systems were under development and the first surface-to-air missiles were tested. Also at this time, the focus of strategic planning became the delivery of atomic bombs against the Soviet Union, which brought the mission of the Navy, and specifically Naval Aviation, into question. It was a time of political uncertainty that would persist until after the Korean War was in full swing.

Defense reorganization was the order of the day, and that meant unification of the services under a single Department of Defense. Accordingly, the National Security Act of 1947 created the National Military Establishment under the first Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal. In 1949, the secretary's power was significantly strengthened when he was granted specific "direction, authority and control" over the military departments and the individual service secretaries were stripped of cabinet rank. The unification debate had a long history, with 55 bills on unification introduced in Congress between 1924 and 1945, and numerous studies of the issue had been undertaken. The debate was greatly complicated by conflicting

assessments of the utility of strategic bombing as a result of the WW II experience.

Forrestal had been an innovative leader in the policy sphere as Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV). He was personally responsible for accelerating the advancement of career aviators within the Navy, for the first time making aviators as eligible as other line officers for fleet





Above, AD-1 *Skyraiders* fly in a V formation in 1948. The aircraft was conceived during WW II as a carrier-based dive- and torpedo-bomber. It became operational too late to see combat in WW II, but its versatile design enabled the Navy and Marine Corps to field large numbers of *Skyraiders* in different variants, including day attack, night attack and airborne early warning. When hostilities erupted in Korea, ADs aboard *Valley Forge* (CV 45) were among the first naval aircraft to strike targets in support of the United Nations resolution to defend the Republic of Korea. Left, the North American AJ-1 *Savage* first flew in 1948 as the Navy's first carrier aircraft designed specifically to carry nuclear weapons. An interesting feature of the AJ was that it was powered by both piston and turbojet engines.



commands. Forrestal had also wanted to move the Navy away from its insular prewar institutional culture, toward greater involvement with the other services and the American public. The uniformed naval hierarchy largely viewed Forrestal as an ally in its cause, but as defense secretary, Forrestal would move toward embracing the Air Force concept of strategic air power as the predominant military arm. This was mainly because the strict budget constraints for the armed forces in the late 1940s under President Harry S. Truman's administration left him with little other choice.

In 1948, Forrestal orchestrated a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to lay out the respective roles and missions for each service under the umbrella of the National Military Establishment. While the Navy's primary function remained undertaking combat operations at sea, it also was assigned a collateral function of using its air power as directed by the JCS. The debate over strategic purposes—namely, the ability to deliver atomic weapons—or the procurement of particular weapons systems was not resolved. By the end of the year Forrestal had come to believe that U.S. military unification should



While not the first U.S. jet to land on a carrier (the McDonnell XFD-1 *Phantom* made its first carrier landing on *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVB 42) in 1946), the North American FJ-1 *Fury* was the Navy's first jet aircraft to operate on a carrier in squadron use (VF-5A, which later became VF-51). Shown below on *Princeton* (CV 37) in 1948, the *Fury* helped pave the way for future jet ops. By their very nature, jets proved more hazardous for carrier operations due to higher approach speeds and slow engine response times. Before the angled flight deck was introduced on its attack carriers (first tested in 1953), the Navy used straight decks, as seen opposite with an F2H *Banshee* about to cross the ramp of *Oriskany* (CV 34).



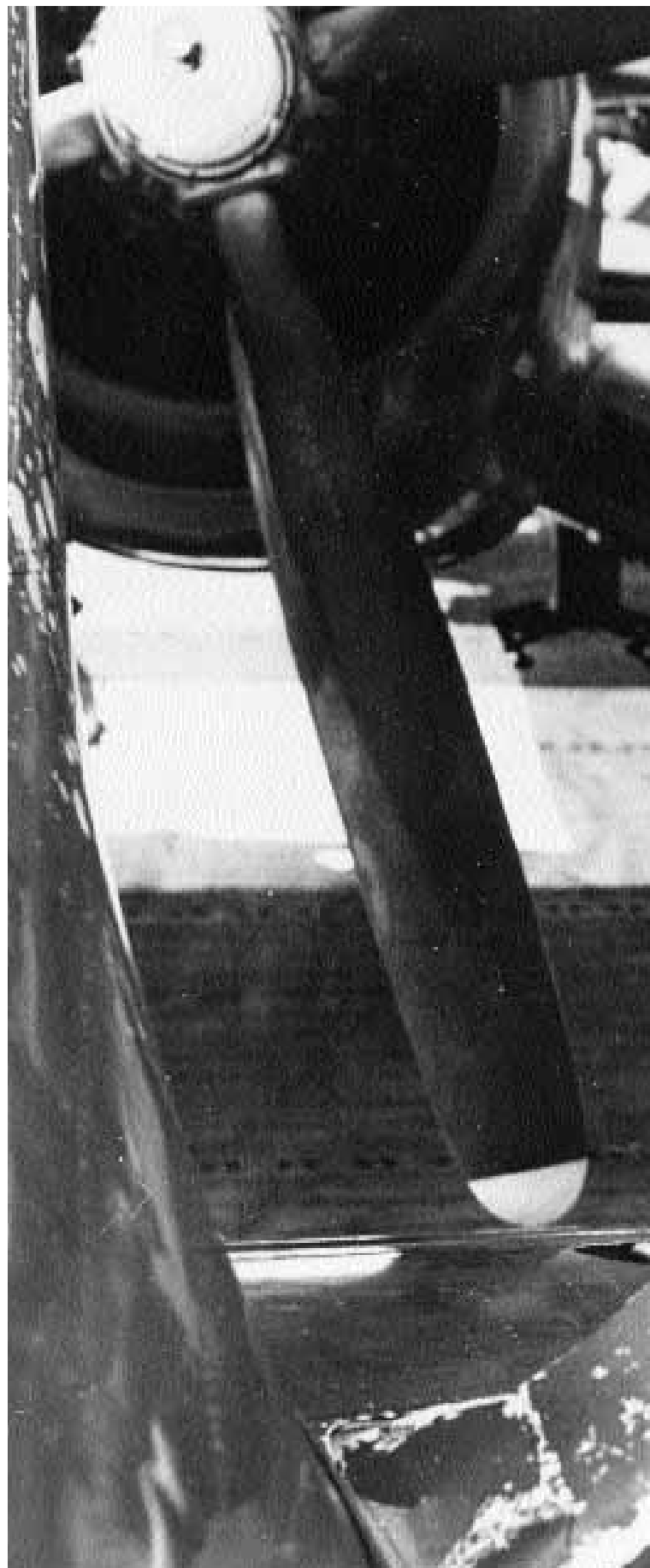
become a functional reality. Together with his advocacy of “balanced” budgeting across service lines, in which each of the three military departments would have approximately the same size budget, the short-term future of Navy and Marine Corps aviation was uncertain.

At the same time, Forrestal’s health was declining, and Truman had forced him out of office by March 1949. His replacement was strongly anti-Navy and wished to see Naval Aviation’s role limited strictly to tactical missions. Louis Johnson had been Assistant Secretary of War (1937–1940), and his antipathy toward the fleet had only deepened in the years since. Johnson favored the Air Force’s B-36 bomber program, and shortly after taking office he canceled the Navy’s supercarrier project. Five days after the keel was laid for the new *United States*, construction was terminated—without consultation with either the Secretary of the Navy or the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). SECNAV John L. Sullivan abruptly resigned, stating that Johnson’s action “represents the first attempt ever made in this country to prevent the development of a powerful weapon.” Though Johnson authorized the modernization of two additional *Essex*-class carriers to accommodate the fleet’s newer aircraft, by FY 1951 the number of carrier air groups was reduced from 14 to 9.

Budgetary considerations now dictated strategic military considerations. The position of the uniformed Navy remained that the United States needed balanced military forces that retained a high degree of flexibility for dealing with unforeseen contingencies. But in the late 1940s, the atomic weapon, because of its cost considerations and proven effectiveness in a big war, remained the centerpiece of U.S. strategic thinking.

In August 1949, the office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air produced a key study pointing out that the threat posed by Soviet air forces, especially to U.S. naval forces in the Mediterranean, was the greatest strategic issue facing the Navy. The study was important to the cause of Naval Aviation because it indicated a need for large aircraft carriers that could operate high-performance aircraft against land-based aerial opposition, independent of any argument regarding the viability of

Many pilots with WW II experience flew in Korea. Right, a direct hit by a Communist anti-aircraft weapon caused a three-foot hole in the tail section of an AD *Skyraider* attack bomber flown by LCdr. Wilfred O. McDowell. The plane from *Princeton* (CV 37) was part of a Navy strike group supporting UN troops at Heartbreak Ridge, between North and South Korea, when it was hit. White spots in other sections of the tail assembly were part of more than 400 holes blown into the tail surfaces when the shell exploded. After the strike, McDowell received his fifth Air Medal, adding to the others awarded for duty in the Pacific during WW II.





In the short span of 10 years, Naval Aviation's capabilities grew exponentially. For example, the gross weight of attack aircraft increased from 12,500 pounds for the AD *Skyraider* (below) of 1946 to 70,000 pounds for the A3D *Skywarrior* (opposite) of 1956. First flown in 1952, the turbojet-powered A3D was fast and sleek with great range and payload capabilities.

Navy-delivered nuclear strikes against the Soviets. But Johnson had, in addition to scrapping the supercarrier, greatly reduced the Navy's aircraft research and development budget, thereby strictly limiting the scope of foreseeable technological improvements.

The Navy was heading for a showdown with Johnson, and would get the chance to air its grievances during Representative Carl Vinson's House Armed Services Committee hearings that would convene in October 1949 to discuss defense unification and strategy. Before the Vinson committee, the uniformed Navy had an uphill battle to fight: not only were the admirals opposed on policy and funding issues to Secretary of Defense Johnson, but also to the new Secretary of the Navy, Francis P. Matthews, who was out of touch with Navy concerns.

During the hearings, Matthews claimed that the Navy's morale was good, except for "insubordinate, faithless and guilty" officers (mostly aviators). But CNO Admiral Louis E. Denfeld sided with his fellow admirals, stating that "the entire Navy . . . is gravely concerned whether it will have modern weapons, in quality and quantity, to do the job expected of the Navy at the outbreak of a future war. We have real misgivings over the reductions that are taking place in the Navy today." He explained, "It is not so much the reduction in congressional appropriations that worries us. . . . Our concern is with arbitrary reductions that impair, or even eliminate, essential naval functions." Denfeld's view reiterated much of what had already been presented at the hearings by other officers, particularly by Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet.

The underlying issue at the hearings involved the Navy's fundamental belief that Air Force advocates of strategic bombing—and the B-36 program—were overzealous. Naval Aviators did not accept the idea that the results of strategic bombing in WW II had "proven" the decisiveness of that element of warfare. The admirals succeeded in getting these points across to the committee, though without an immediate effect on the budget,

and at the cost of Adm. Denfeld's career (Denfeld was almost immediately forced out as CNO, and officially retired in 1950). The committee's report, issued in March 1950, sided with the admirals on most important matters. The report stated significantly that "intercontinental strategic bombing is not synonymous with air power. The Air Force is not synonymous with the Nation's military air power. Military air power consists of Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps air power, and of this, strategic bombing is but one phase."

Still, the experience of 1948–1949 exposed certain weaknesses in the Navy's ability to compete effectively with the other services in the quest for funding of vital



programs. Indeed, until the actual Vinson committee hearings the Navy had singularly failed to get its salient points across to the American public, and the Navy was losing the increasingly important public relations game. Eventually, a senior officer took matters into his own hands. Captain John G. Crommelin leaked word of the internal dispute to the press in a desperate attempt to get the word out that the U.S. military posture was being substantially eroded through a combination of short-sighted budgeting and misguided strategic conceptualization.



When Forrest P. Sherman replaced Denfeld as CNO, he immediately went to work repairing the damage that had been done prior to his arrival. Sherman was the youngest CNO appointed up to that time, and the first career aviator named to the position. His overriding objective was to “modernize and revitalize the concept of sea power in the atomic age.” Even with the current tight budget constraints, Sherman achieved some success early on by getting the Vinson committee to agree to a \$350 million increase in the Navy’s budget, which he directed toward ship modernization.

Between September 1949 and June 1950, a new impetus was found for exponential increases in the defense budget, though it took the actual outbreak of the Korean War to implement the big jump in spending. The Soviets succeeded in detonating their first atomic bomb, years ahead of U.S. anticipation of such an event, and that caused a basic reevaluation of U.S. defense policy, culminating in the presentation of the NSC-68 memorandum in April 1950. NSC-68 called for increasing annual defense spending from 6 percent of national income in 1949 to 20 percent by 1954, establishing a defense budget as high as \$50 billion for conventional “rearmament and rehabilitation of forces.” The founding of the North American Treaty Organization in April 1949 had also meant that, despite then-current budget austerity, U.S. defense spending was due for an eventual significant increase.

At the inception of the Korean War on 25 June 1950, the Navy was largely unprepared because most military planning focused on European developments. As a result, only 37 percent of the Navy’s major combatants were deployed in the Pacific Ocean on the first day of the war.

The combined strength of the Seventh Fleet and Naval Forces, Far East comprised only 1 U.S. fast carrier, 2 cruisers, 12 destroyers, 4 submarines, 2 divisions of minesweepers, a small amphibious squadron and a few support ships. The Korean War would be the impetus for improved circumstances for the Navy in the 1950s. For example, the Navy’s budget quadrupled from \$4 billion in FY 1950 to \$16 billion in FY 1952; by 1 July 1953, the Navy had doubled its active carrier strength from that in 1950. The gross weight of naval attack aircraft increased from 12,500 pounds for the AD *Skyraider* of 1946 to 70,000 pounds for the A3D *Skywarrior* of 1956, indicative of a vast increase in the capabilities of Naval Aviation.

The 1945–1950 period witnessed some of the most intense interservice bickering in history, instability in civilian leadership, severe budget limitations, increasing overseas commitments and a forced unification of the defense establishment. But the Korean War led to tremendous growth in the Navy’s budgets, size and capabilities in the very near term, and effectively pulled the U.S. Navy out of its doldrums of the 1940s and set it on course to becoming the truly dominant maritime force of the late 20th century. ✈

Mr. Bernstein is a freelance writer and independent scholar specializing in 20th century U.S. naval and military history. His book, *Hurricane at Biak: MacArthur Against the Japanese, May–August 1944*, is due for release in the summer of 2000.

For an in-depth look at this tumultuous era, see *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945–1950* by Jeffrey G. Barlow, available through <http://www.history.navy.mil>.