The Carriers Hold the Line

By John Reilly

The Seventh Fleet maintained its heavy attack schedules to the very end, because unrelenting pressure was the only language the Communists understood.

— Adm. Joseph J. Clark, Commander Seventh Fleet

A flight of F9F *Panthers*, with their dive brakes and tail hooks down, prepare to return to *Boxer* (CV 21) after a mission in North Korea.

When the North Koreans rolled across the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, only one aircraft carrier, *Valley Forge* (CV 45), was operational with the Seventh Fleet. Postwar policy had called for two carriers to be assigned to the western Pacific, but tight budgeting had made even that "modest proposal" a dead letter. The Chief of Naval Operations had directed that in case of emergency the Seventh Fleet would come under the operational control of Commander Naval Forces, Far East (COMNAVFE), under the theater command of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur. The Seventh Fleet reported to COMNAVFE two days after the North Korean invasion, and *Valley Forge* was assigned to the Striking Force, Seventh Fleet (Task Force 77).

On 3–4 July 1950, TF 77 entered action when planes from *Valley Forge* and the British carrier HMS *Triumph* attacked military targets at Pyongyang, North Korea. By early October *Valley Forge* had been joined by *Philippine Sea* (CV 47), *Boxer* (CV 21) and *Leyte* (CV 32), and TF 77 had been renamed the Fast Carrier Force. Two smaller escort aircraft carriers of the late-WW II *Commencement Bay* class, *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) and *Sicily* (CVE 118), were formed into an escort carrier group and operated under COMNAVFE. Besides providing close air support, the "jeep carriers" were to conduct antisubmarine hunter-killer missions as needed. In December 1950 the light carrier *Bataan* (CVL 29) arrived with a Marine fighting squadron embarked, supported the evacuation of Hungnam and operated with TF 77 and the escort carrier group as the situation required. During the first quarter of 1951, *Bataan* operated off Korea's west coast on blockade and troop support duty in rotation with the British small carriers *Theseus* and *Glory.* This became the basic pattern of carrier employment.

Throughout the war, the carriers were charged with close air support to front-line troops; interdiction of enemy movement and logistics by hitting supply routes, storage areas, railroads and other strategic targets; destruction of enemy ground forces; and spotting for naval gunfire. Carriers rotated in and out of the Korean theater. By the time the war ended in 1953, eleven carriers, one light carrier and five escort carriers had served there.

The fast carriers operated as a single tactical organization, though specific missions could vary from ship to ship according to need. The tasks assigned to TF 77 were generally tailored to the war on the ground. From the beginning the carriers hit targets in North Korea and provided close air support to South Korean and U.S. troops. The escort carriers were the basis of air

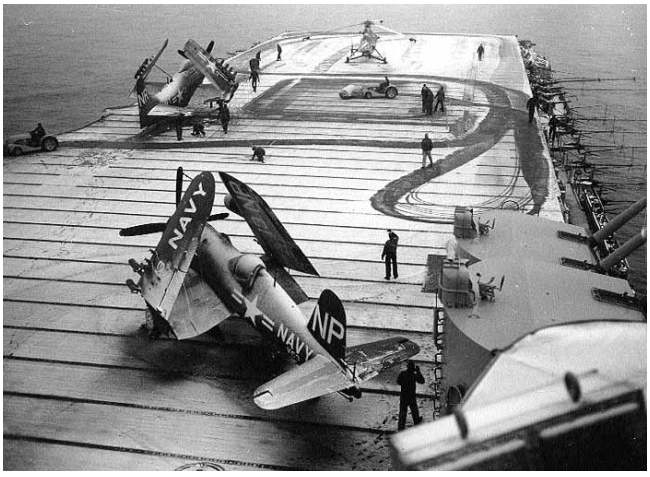
support and antisubmarine patrol missions, though they could be diverted to other tasks as needed.

During and after WW II the services had embraced two different systems of handling close air support. In the amphibious campaigns in the Pacific the Navy and Marine Corps had evolved a scheme of air direction by front-line ground troops. In contrast, the Army Air Forces (now the Air Force) had concluded that tactical air power should be under a central airborne controller, with control of the air the primary mission and ground support a secondary one. The differences in approach between the services often made air support in Korea considerably less effective than it could have been, and remained a sticking point throughout the war.

When Gen. MacArthur sent the Marines ashore at Inchon, TF 77 and the escort carriers of Carrier Division 15 were on hand to maintain air supremacy over the assault area, to attack enemy reinforcement efforts, and to give air support to the landing force by direct attacks and spotting for naval gunfire. TF 77 commander Rear Admiral Edward C. Ewen reported that Navy/Marine-style close air support "left little to be desired." The same scheme was placed in effect for the subsequent landing at Wonsan, though discovery of extensive North Korean mining of the inshore waters so delayed the landing that the port finally fell to South Korean troops advancing overland. Minefields presented such an obstacle that TF 77 was asked to try countermining by bomb strike. Planes from *Leyte* and *Philippine Sea* dropped 1,000-pound bombs in two parallel five-mile rows. Due to control and navigational difficulties, the results were dubious at best and planners concluded that mine warfare ships provided the only meaningful approach to mine clearance.

During the evacuation from Hungnam in December 1950, TF 77's *Philippine Sea, Leyte, Valley Forge* and

Above, *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116) and *Sicily* (CVE 118) formed an escort carrier group to provide close air support and conduct antisubmarine hunter-killer missions. Right, crewmen aboard *Valley Forge* (CV 45) sweep snow from the flight deck during operations off Korea in 1951. Opposite, *Leyte* (CV 32) is shown at anchor in Japan, shortly after joining TF 77 in 1950.



Princeton (CV 37) were joined by *Bataan*, *Sicily* and *Badoeng Strait.* With the battleship *Missouri* (BB 63), two heavy cruisers, seven destroyers and three rocket-firing close support ships, the fleet drew a massive pattern of aircraft and gunfire around the perimeter to permit the withdrawal to proceed without meaningful enemy interference. Two more massive Communist offensives which followed were driven back after initial losses with the powerful help of naval air strikes and gunfire. By summer 1951 the war had become a matter of smaller fluctuations in the front-line as seemingly endless truce talks ground on at Panmunjom. Carrier aircraft continued to hit the enemy, though growing numbers of antiaircraft guns made this task increasingly dangerous.

At this time *Essex*-class carriers operated five-squadron air groups: two jet fighter squadrons flying Grumman F9F *Panthers;* two propeller fighter squadrons with Vought F4U *Corsairs;* and one propeller attack squadron with Douglas AD *Skyraiders.* To these complements were added small detachments of radar-equipped night-flying F4Us and ADs, photo-reconnaissance F4Us, and electronic countermeasures and airborne early warning ADs. Each carrier also had one or two Sikorsky HO3S helicopters for search-and-rescue duty. While these could also do plane-guard work, destroyers still carried out much of that task.

The number of squadrons and detachments needed to support the rapid pace of combat missions made shipboard life chaotic in many ways. The three ready rooms on board the *Essex*-class carriers were overcrowded, so some squadrons had to use part of the wardroom as a ready room. Pairs of squadrons flying identical airplanes also caused problems because pilots flew the first plane of their type that became available, which was operationally convenient but diluted responsibility for the condition of the planes. In addition, separate spotting of planes by squadron added to the already burdensome tasks of flight deck crews.

Flight schedules were studied and adjusted to keep small strike groups, usually twelve F4Us and eight ADs, in the air for day-long target coverage. As ships and

squadrons gained experience, launch and recovery times improved. Night operations were rotated between carriers to keep the burden on flight deck crews to a minimum. Admiral Joseph J. Clark, who commanded TF 77 and the Seventh Fleet during the Korean war, recalled the inadequacy of night air operations against the enemy. "Operation Insomnia involved small air raids . . . at night, but these tactics kept Air Department personnel on the carriers operating around the clock. I felt the effort did not justify the heavy burden on our crews, so I recommended that a special night carrier be equipped to handle the task [as had been done during WW II]. None was then available so night air operations were curtailed. This weakness gave the Communists almost a free hand at night; we were paying the price of the postwar demobilization that resulted in an understrength Navy."

Each carrier's endurance on station was affected by its capacity for aviation fuel, bunker oil and ammunition. As soon as the second carrier joined TF 77, each carrier spent two days on line and one day replenishing, working at night if necessary. When three carriers were available, two were kept on line while the third retired for rest and upkeep. Major Communist offensives called for continuous operations, consuming fuel and munitions at a rate that necessitated daily replenishment from late afternoon until around midnight. As with flight operations, experience led to more efficient delivery of fuel and ammunition, and the Seventh Fleet's underway replenishment group stayed continuously at sea and replenished as often as weather permitted.

WW II carrier operations had typically involved temperate to tropical climates. As the Cold War took shape, the Navy conducted cold-weather carrier experiments with *Midway* (CVB 41) in 1946. This early experience was put to good use off Korea. *Valley Forge's* operations report in February and March 1951 noted that more time was needed to prepare for flight operations, and that maintenance could only be carried out on the hangar deck. Icing was not reported as having any serious effect on airplane performance, but cold weather made speedy recovery of downed pilots imperative. Exposure suits, though considered bulky and uncomfortable, nevertheless justified their existence by enabling several fliers to survive in the water. As the war went on, improved survival gear was introduced and tested.

Mission priorities shifted as the military situation on the ground developed. Carrier aviation showed itself to be particularly well suited to close air support of ground troops. At first it was also thought to be highly effective for interdiction of the combat zone, but it became apparent that the enemy was still able to keep forces adequately supplied despite the best efforts of Navy and Air Force fliers. Roads, bridges and rail lines were repeatedly pounded, but the enemy was adept at making rapid repairs to keep supplies coming. Soviet and Chinese MiG-15 fighters were judged able to penetrate existing fleet air defenses and outperform the F9F *Panthers*. In response, the carrier jet fighter complements were increased to 35 percent of air-group strength when air opposition was met, as had been done to combat kamikaze attacks during the last year of WW II.

Accumulating experience showed that a typical carrier could consistently expect to maintain 1,200 to 1,500 sorties per month, putting 1,200 to 1,500 tons of ammunition on target. When need was great, sorties could be considerably increased for short periods. The carriers

recommended that F4U fighter-bombers be replaced by AD *Skyraiders*, which could carry approximately three times an F4U's ordnance load. McDonnell F2H *Banshees* began to operate from *Essex* (CV 9) in August 1951. While the "Banjo" was considered superior in many respects to the F9F, like the *Panther* its lower speed put it at a disadvantage against the MiG-15. A 1952 photoreconnaissance version of the F2H was also considered better than the photorecon F9F because it could obtain detailed pictures at higher altitudes.

Fleet air defense gave cause for concern. WW II-vintage air-search radars were inadequate to cope with jets flying at high altitudes, and the then-standard identify friend or foe (IFF) system had been compromised during the war when it was given to the USSR. Priority was given to production of an improved IFF and a new air-search radar which, though it lacked height-finding capability, permitted ships to detect and track faster targets at longer ranges.

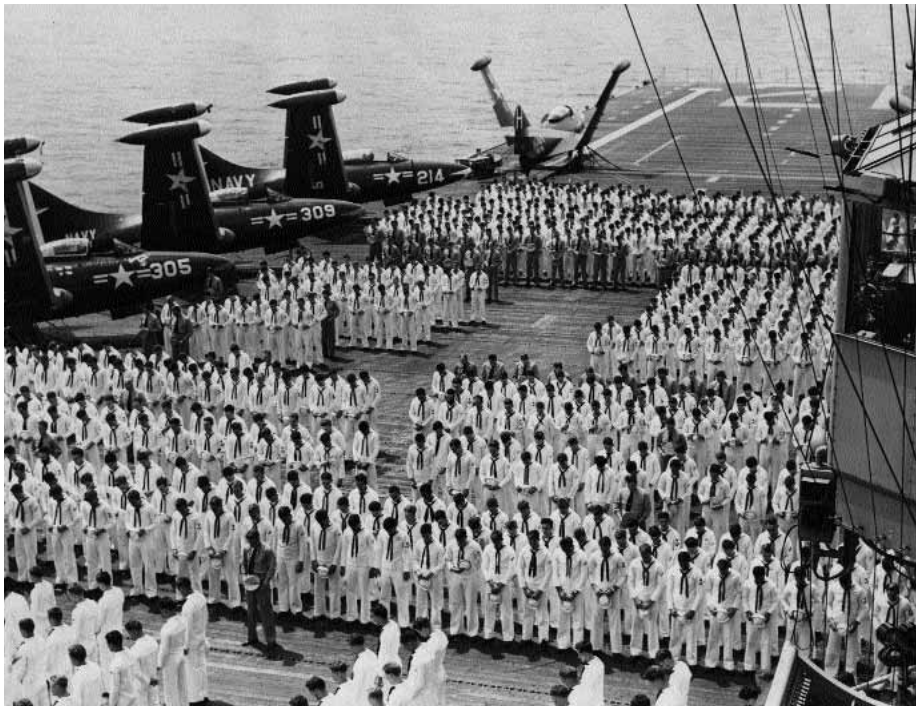
The air defense problem was complicated during the first year of war by a lack of trained Combat Information Center (CIC) personnel. Task force defense depended on combat air patrol and ships' antiaircraft gunfire, which had been stretched to the limit in 1945 to fight kamikazes and had now been left behind by modern aircraft. Existing proximity-fuzed ammunition, which had worked well against propeller planes, could not keep up with jets.

Air defense remained a deep concern to the war's end. In April 1953 Commander Carrier Division Five reported that "the inability of any radar in the Task Force to detect high-altitude jets is considered to be a most serious problem. . . . Generally speaking, radar performance leaves much to be desired. The vulnerability of the Task Force to jet aircraft has been demonstrated on numerous occasions." The new SPS-8 air-search radar helped, as did better training for CIC crews and a new Mark 10 IFF system. As in WW II, destroyers were called on to assist the carriers with radar detection and fighter direction. The process of change in the carrier Navy was beginning to pick up speed.

In 1947 the Chief of Naval Operations had approved a carrier improvement program called Ship

Left, an HO3S flies plane guard as an F4U *Corsair* prepares to launch on a strike mission from *Boxer* in 1951. Opposite top, an F2H-2P *Banshee* approaches *Oriskany* (CVA 34) off San Fransico, Calif., in 1953. The first post-WW II carrier, she joined TF 77 in Korea in late 1952. Opposite bottom, on 9 August 1953, crew members on board *Boxer* pay their respects to shipmates who lost their lives during the war.

Characteristics Board Project 27A. The unfinished *Oriskany* (CV 34), laid up after V-J Day, entered the yard that fall, followed by eight other *Essex*-class ships. The project was calculated to give carriers the ability to operate 40,000-pound planes, including jet aircraft. Flight decks were to be strengthened, and more powerful hydraulic catapults and bigger elevators, jet blast deflectors and provisions for jet fuel would enable the ships to handle a new generation of warplanes. Islands were to be streamlined, and five-inch gun mounts would be removed from flight decks to increase usable deck space. *Oriskany* left the yard in October 1950. As the first post-WW II aircraft carrier, she was also the first to put her improvements to the test of combat, joining TF 77 in November 1952. Other carrier enhancements such as angled decks, steam catapults and hurricane bows followed.



Two years after the Korean war ended, *Forrestal* (CVA 59) became the first of an entirely new generation of supercarriers to go into commission. *Oriskany,* though, had led the way in the waters off Korea. Her hard-earned experience, with that of her sisters, would pay dividends in the decades to come.

John Reilly is the former head of the Naval Historical Center's Ships History Branch, and is now a researcher for the Naval Historical Foundation.