

Writing Naval Aviation History

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The history of naval aviation is largely the history of United States Naval Aviation. The U.S. naval air arm is the only one that has continuously evolved over more than half a century without serious setbacks or defeats in war, although it has seen some delays in that evolution as a result of politics. Japan's naval air force was, after all, destroyed in battle, after a career of subordination to the Japanese Army and the battleship. The only other major naval aviation force, Great Britain's Fleet Air Arm, had always operated on a shoestring, with erratic ups and downs; it now appears to be destined for the scrap heap within the next decade.

Naval aviation has been called upon to perform many diverse missions and has therefore been divided into several types of activities. One of its first combat uses was to seek out enemy submarines, a mission that evolved into the anti-submarine aircraft carrier and multi-engine patrol bomber of today. Concurrent with early anti-submarine air warfare was the mounting of small catapult airplanes aboard battleships and cruisers for reconnaissance and the spotting of the ship's gunfire. Before the coming of radar, the scout airplane was a major part of the Navy's aircraft inventory, hence the term, "eyes of the fleet".

The third function of naval aviation has been attack, embodied in the fast aircraft carrier that became the nucleus of the United States Fleet in the 1940's. Finally, Naval Aviation supported landing forces at the very beaches, a vital mission perfected by the Navy's own subordinate air force, the United States Marine Corps aviation.

The task facing the historian of naval aviation is therefore manifold, involving a working knowledge not only of aircraft but also of naval operations in general. Furthermore, before the historian can draw comparisons with the other services, he should have an appreciation of the missions of both Army and Air Force. The Navy, and Naval Air, must be viewed only as segments of America's military posture and then in the proper perspective of time and space. Only when the historian of naval aviation - or of any aviation - accepts this truth is he ready to ask the right questions.

Since naval aviation is but one segment of the United States Navy, the historical archives are identical. The early days of air history may be researched at the National Archives and the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress also contains the special manuscript collections of the Naval Historical Foundation. For the official documents of the last thirty years the researcher must go to the Classified Operational Archives of the Division of Naval History. Access to these archives, located at the Washington Navy Yard, require a somewhat routine security clearance from the Director of Naval History.

In addition, three other specialized offices in the Navy are worth consulting. One is the Air History Unit under the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air, which in 1946 produced the survey history, *The Navy's Air War: A Mission Completed*, edited by A. Russell Buchanan. Part of this office broke away in the Defense Department reorganization of 1958 to form the historical section of the Bureau of Weapons and, now under still another reorganization, of the Naval Air Systems Command. Finally, Marine Corps aviation has been thoroughly recorded and its records preserved by the Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Marine Corps.

Relying on official documents, however, does not tell any story completely. Memoirs, diaries, and private correspondence are needed for solid military history, and here is where the naval historian runs into serious difficulty. The Navy's reputation as the silent service quickly becomes apparent to the student of naval operations and administration. This silence was reinforced during the war years and afterward by security regulations forbidding personal diaries and limiting uncensored mail.

Unfortunately also, naval officers and airmen are not nearly as articulate as some of their Army and Air Force counterparts. Fleet Admiral William F. Halsey's book, ghostwritten by Journalist J. Bryan in 1947 is enlightening but Halsey was a second-generation aviator; he won his wings in 1934 at the age of 52.

Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King's autobiography, ghostwritten by maritime historian Walter Muir Whitehall in 1952, is very broad and deals only partly with naval air. King had earned his wings in 1927 at the age of 48. Admiral J.J. "Jocko" Clark is the first of the first-generation naval aviators to record his memoirs.⁽¹⁾

The historian must, therefore, seek out the surviving participants among the colonies of retired "black shoes", the naval aviators living at Pensacola, Virginia Beach, Washington-Alexandria, Carmel-by-the-Sea, and the San Diego-Coronado-La Jolla complex. Much information can be gleaned from these retired warriors, but only if they are willing to talk, and if their memories are generally reliable. These are formidable "ifs" for any historian. Happily, a few collections of the private papers of the World War II air admirals are beginning to appear, but these are still held within the families and await release to the public archives.

Writing of naval aviation history is compounded by a massive and difficult historiographical problem - namely the fact that America's Naval Air arm has been embroiled in bitter controversies and resulting emotionalism. Firstly, in the early days, naval airmen had to fight the battleship admirals for recognition and control over air operations. This dispute began with the first airplane carrier in the Fleet in 1922 and ended only with the sinking

of Japan's super battleships by U. S. carrier aircraft in 1944 and 1945.

The second struggle of naval aviation was against absorption by an independent air force. This struggle began during the Billy Mitchell hysteria of the 1920's. It ended finally in 1950 when naval aviation, under naval air command, proved its value in waging limited war in Korea. These two struggles have greatly influenced every historian of aviation. They are worthy of consideration here.

In retrospect, naval aviators took over the reins of leadership in the Navy from the non-airmen so quickly that the historians of the Navy had little time to adjust, an influence that is felt even now. The changeover began during the Fall of 1943, when new, fast carriers joined the Fleet. It was completed shortly after Japan's surrender in August of 1945, when the Navy Department was reorganized administratively to conform to operational changes resulting from the takeover by the air admirals. These two short years, from battleship Navy to carrier Navy, hardly allowed time for the historians to catch up.

One good case in point is Samuel Eliot Morison, author of the monumental 15-volume *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*. Though the air battles were reported in the typically lucid Morison style, he gave scant attention to the equally important tactical and administrative struggles that reshaped the Fleet during the second half of the Japanese war. For example, Morison mentioned the most important and highest ranking naval aviator only three times in seven volumes of text. This was Vice Admiral John Henry Towers, Commander (Naval) Air Force, Pacific Fleet, and later Deputy Fleet Commander.

Towers, more than any other individual, integrated naval aviation into the Pacific strategy. Despite being given *carte blanche* in choosing combat ships from which he could observe the Navy's global war, Morison did not choose any of the hundred or more aircraft carriers. Rather, he served aboard two battleships, four cruisers, one destroyer and one Coast Guard cutter. (2)

However, Morison is not entirely to blame for his relatively superficial treatment of naval aviation in the war. He belongs to the generation of the battleship admirals who regarded aviation as a necessary evil and who only reluctantly accepted its assumption of leadership. Morison graduated from Harvard in 1908, one year before any American naval officer even rode as an airplane passenger. He received his doctorate in the same month that Lt. "Spuds" Ellyson, flying the Navy's first airplane, set a record by climbing to 900 feet altitude over Annapolis in three and a half minutes. The Navy then had four pilots and six airplanes. (3) Morison formed his basic assumptions of history and naval operations when naval aviation was little more than an experiment. As he finished his formal education the great battleship engagement at Jutland was four years in the future and the *LANGLEY* would not be commissioned for another decade. When he was commissioned a lieutenant commander in 1942 to begin his on-the-spot research of the Navy at war, it was still under the non-aviator admirals, and despite the battleship losses from aerial destruction at Pearl Harbor, it is small wonder that this eminent scholar did not embrace the new-fangled carrier warfare and that he recorded it from the viewpoint of a battle-ship oriented historian.

The possibility that historians might have taken a critical look at naval aviation after the close of WW II was spoiled almost immediately. The reason can be traced directly to the Bomb. So devastating was the Bomb, and so quick was Japan to surrender immediately thereafter that virtually every American military officer and statesman embraced what this author calls the Myth of the 1940's, namely that the Bomb was the answer to all future military situations. With Japan's navy eliminated no real enemy nation existed to challenge American supremacy at sea. The only possible threat to American security was Soviet Russia, a continental nation that could most assuredly be effectively defeated by strategic bombing. And strategic bombing was to be the privileged sanctuary of the new and independent United States Air Force. Unless the Navy could develop a nuclear capability it faced obsolescence - or so its air admirals reasoned. In 1946 Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, then Chief of Naval Operations, cautioned that there was "... a faulty tendency ... to give no major offensive role to the Navy - only a supporting role and the prosecution of anti-submarine warfare." (4)

The period 1946-1950 was therefore an unhappy one for the Navy and for its new backbone, naval aviation, and in particular, the aircraft carrier. Much bitterness arose between the Navy and the other Services over the unification act of 1947. Air Force and Navy pilots vied with each other for attention at air shows. And the air admirals "revolted" against their civilian bosses in 1949 because of the de-emphasis in the Department of Defense spending for naval aviation. This unfortunate period, reopening as it did the old wounds from the Billy Mitchell days, had a very damaging effect on the writing of naval aviation history then and since.

What writing did take place during the years immediately after Hiroshima was mostly propaganda. And since 1950, the beginning of America's first limited war (Korea), historical writing has not improved significantly. It continued to reflect the old Hollywood touch, dogfights and Kamikazes, when the flattop was queen, the enemy was the "Jap", and when naval air had a mission - to sink the enemy fleet.

The major difficulty for the admirals, and the historians of naval air, has been this problem of a mission. The coming of *Polaris* and the ballistic missile submarine has relegated the big aircraft carrier to a secondary role in the area of deterrence, and in participation in a total war. Also, anti-submarine warfare is important, but best practiced by long-range land-based patrol airplanes and by smaller carriers with slow aircraft, fixed wing and helicopter.

The confusion over a mission reflects the same confusion felt by American leaders and the American people ever since 1945 - namely, that they continue to view the world and warfare in the same light as they viewed it prior to 1945. We simply must face the fact that limited warfare is the only kind of armed conflict that any nation, large or small, may dare to wage in the nuclear era. Total war is no longer a viable political tool, and therefore the weapons for waging a total war must be held in check, as deterrence.

But what of the weapons of limited war? How effective is the aircraft carrier in this type of conflict? Are its planes and ordnance useful against jungle targets? Can Navy and Marine Corps aircraft

support the ground forces adequately in situations like Korea and Vietnam? What kind of experience has naval aviation had in supporting amphibious and ground operations in the Pacific? These are the questions that too few of the historians of naval aviation have asked, but they are very likely the crucial ones for our subject here.

Since 1942 much of the Naval Air Arm's history, and largely the unsung part, has been the history of close air support for American ground forces. In the Pacific, in late 1943 and early 1944, the Navy's air and amphibious flag officers battled over the usage of the new carriers. While deployed close to the beaches and acting as offshore artillery, the big carriers were vulnerable to enemy air and submarine attack. But they provided invaluable service to the landing forces and infantrymen ashore. The compromise was to be the small carrier which gave exclusive attention to close air support while the big carriers went after the enemy's planes and ships. Naval air support of the Army and the Marines led to highly successful landings at Bougainville, Kwajalein, Saipan, Leyte, Lingayen Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. So effective had these close support tactics become, and so limited had naval targets become by the summer of 1945 that the naval aviation commander in the Pacific suggested that carriers might be given over exclusively to close air support operations.©

In addition, the Marine Corps was specifically requested by Allied commanders to lend its air support skills to the Philippines Campaign. Corps aviation responded by developing a ground-to-air communications system that enabled the Army to liberate Manila with lightning speed early in 1945, thus winning the praises of the Army commanders. This new doctrine of close support of large armies was so successful that the Army Air Forces quickly adopted it for the liberation of Luzon and subsequent Pacific operations.(6)

When the atomic bomb was dropped, however, the concept of amphibious operations in the Western Pacific simply vanished. The new Air Force, engrossed in strategic bombing, promptly forgot the tactical lessons it had learned.(7) So did the Navy and Marine Corps as they struggled for survival in the postwar infighting. Korea changed this temporarily for the Navy and Marines, but soon afterwards, again, close air support tactics languished. Then came Vietnam and renewed necessity for air-ground coordination.

None of the armed forces cared to wage a limited, counter-insurgency type of war, but as the Vietnam fighting built up, they had no choice. The Air Force, still preoccupied with the massive nuclear retaliation concept, and the new field of aerospace, could not then afford to develop an adequate close support capability. The Army, needing mobility and close support more than ever, built its own air force of helicopters, which were at first hardly adequate for the task. The Navy and Marines were, however, more prepared, and filled the gap with close support air strikes. Said Captain James L. Holloway, skipper of the nuclear powered ENTERPRISE, in early 1966, "Tactical air support is required to do the job in Vietnam. The Navy's contribution is required. It is not an ideal situation, but nobody else could make these strikes if the Navy pulled out.(8)

The basis of the Navy's reluctance to fight under the unprecedented conditions in Vietnam, like that of the Army and Air Force, is historical. Its

pilots, like those of the Air Force, are schooled in the traditions of an earlier age, enamored by the excitement of the jet-propelled airplane and an air supremacy mission. Nevertheless, try as the admirals and the Dept. of Defense planners do to deny it, the best suited attack airplane for close air support work has been proven over and over to be the propeller-driven Douglas A-1H Skyraider. Ironically, it was designed in 1944-45 for just the kind of work that naval aviation is doing today in Vietnam.

To conclude, I would say that the troubles of the naval air historian arise from the turbulent history of his subject. Battleship historians dominated the Golden Age of the aircraft carrier. Embittered post-Hiroshima naval airmen, rather than putting out to pasture to write their memoirs, chose instead to fight the battle of unification. Lately, the changing political and military requirements have caused another reassessment of roles and missions. Analyzing and recording these events, as history, is a supremely difficult undertaking.

But buried somewhere in the depths of the documents and the confusion are a few gems of truth. One of these was when Admiral Marc Mitscher, commanding carrier Task Force 58 in 1944, sent up his non-aviator chief of staff, Arleigh Burke, to observe the effects of American air power from a dive bomber, at Hollandia, New Guinea. Mitscher sent a message throughout the fleet - "Thirty-one Knot Burke is now in a plane over the target." Non-airman Burke returned to the flagship, plainly impressed by what he had seen. Mitscher then relayed another message to his forces which will live long in the annals of aviation history. It read:

"Thirty-one Knot Burke has returned and has authorized this statement, quote: the airplane is here to stay."(9)

NOTES:

(1) Adm. "Jocko" Clark's memoirs were ghost-written by Prof. Reynolds and are due for publication this year.

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(4) Nimitz, Fleet Admiral Chester W., *The Future Employment of Naval Forces*, Washington: Press Release, 1946. p.2.

(5) Commander Air Force Pacific Fleet (Rear Admiral A. E. Montgomery) Analysis, Okinawa Carrier Operations. March-June 1945, Serial 002144, 28 September 1945. In Classified Operational Archives, Washington, D. C.

(6) Boggs, Jr., Major Charles W., USMC, *Marine Aviation in the Philippines*. Washington, 1951. pp 59-85; Futrell, Frank. "Luzon", *The Army Air Forces in WW II*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953. Vol. IV, p 421; Hough, Major Frank, USMC. *The Island War*. New York, 1947. p 322.

(7) McClendon, R. Earl, *Army Aviation, 1947-1953*. Maxwell AFB: Air University, 1954. Air University Documentary Research Study; see also Hough, Major, pp 8-9 and De Seversky, Alexander, *Air Power: Key to Survival*, New York, 1950. pp xvii-xxi.

(8) As quoted in the *Washington Post*, 24 January, 1966.

(9) Jensen, Oliver, *Carrier War*, New York, 1945, p.19,