

Last of the Flying Drumsticks

Today one of the first post-Cold War battles over roles and missions of the military branches will be settled when the last two historic carrier squadrons flying the A-6 Intruders haul down their flags. The Clinton administration has ordered the retirement of all Navy medium-attack aircraft, leaving the deep-strike mission to the Air Force long-range bombers. This has been one of the longest-running struggles in Pentagon history. It figured in the death of the first secretary of defense and the famous "revolt of the admirals" in the late 1940s.

In its successful postwar campaign to get out from under the Army, the U.S. Air Force based its case on the need for long-range bombers. Unwisely, the Navy took the Air Force on, arguing that carrier-based attack aircraft could do the job better. The titanic political battle that followed was resolved when the first secretary of defense, James Forrestal, was replaced by Louis Johnson. Johnson approved the B-36 bomber, slashed the number of Navy carriers to six from 106 and canceled the first super carrier, then under construction.

The outbreak of the Korean War resurrected the Navy. Its reactivated carriers provided the bulk of allied air power after all land bases were captured or destroyed in the initial communist attack. New super carriers were authorized, and the Navy got its new attack aircraft. Although history has proved that we need both land and sea-based manned attack aircraft, there has since been a dedicated faction in the Pentagon opposed to the Navy sharing the deep-strike mission. For the past 30 years, the A-6 Intruder has been their target.

Since the Douglas Dauntless and Grumman Avenger of Pacific War fame, the main offensive power of aircraft carriers has been delivered by their attack aircraft, while fighters cleared the skies of enemy combatants. For the past 33 years the carriers' main battery was the A-6 Intruder. Looking like a flying drumstick with its ungainly priapic refueling probe, it could have come only from the old Grumman "iron works." While it is not a thing of beauty, its capabilities are huge. With pilot and bombardier, massive terrain-following radar and twin engines, it could, as the bumper stickers said "go-deeper, stay longer, and deliver a bigger load." It was able to carry twice the payload of a B-17, day or night, in zero visibility, and then deliver laser bombs, cluster and antitank weapons, mines, antiship missiles or antiradar missiles, and return without refueling to land on a pitching deck. Supporting land forces, it could loiter for four or five hours over marines or soldiers in need of precision close

air support. It was the precision bombing and mining workhorse in Vietnam, in Beirut contingencies, in Libya, in the Gulf tanker wars and in Desert Storm.

After examining alternatives in the early 1980's the Navy decided to keep the Intruder in production with a modernized A-6F model with all new electronics and engines. But Pentagon bureaucrats killed the program during the Bush administration, arguing that a new stealth airplane, the A-12, would be better. A year later, the same whiz kids persuaded the secretary of defense to kill the A-12 on the grounds that it was too costly and the smaller F/A-18 would have to do. The agenda all along was to get the Navy out of the deep-strike business. Well, as that old bomber pilot Lloyd Bentsen might say, I know the A-6, and the F/A-18 is no A-6. The F/A-18 is a fine, versatile, reliable airplane, but when the latest "E" model reaches the fleet it will still have only about half of the attack capability of the Intruder. The ghost of Louis Johnson is applauding.

There will be scant applause at the decommissionings at Oceana and Whidbey Island, however. The gathered aviators will represent the greatest concentration of combat wisdom in the art of strike warfare ever assembled, an irreplaceable national resource. But most have left the Navy, many during the endless Tailhook witch hunt, and those remaining on active duty will disperse to new and different occupations. It is a bittersweet reunion. As the movie "Flight of the Intruder" illustrated, the bonds of its pilots, bombardiers and maintenance wizards, forged on long deployments and short bursts of adrenaline over the target area, are very close. Legends like Lyle Bull, Red McDaniel and others, who earned more Navy Crosses and other decorations than any other aviation community, will be there with admirals, authors, and astronauts whose lives were affected by that great flying dump truck.

Predictably, some of the same critics who were instrumental in killing the Intruder, are now arguing that because the carriers have no more deep-strike capability-historically their most useful mission-we can no longer justify their high costs. But nuclear carriers are simply four acres of movable American real estate from which every manner of military and naval power can be projected. Army divisions into Haiti. Marine teams into Bosnia. Fighters enforcing no-fly zones or intercepting Achille Lauro pirates-the options are unlimited. But now when the president asks during a crisis "Where are the carriers?" he will have to hope that they are close to the scene and that the weather is good-favorable conditions that were unnecessary when the Intruders sat on the alert catapults ready, night or day, fair weather or foul, to reach out and touch someone.

--- Mr. Lehman was the Secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration.

