

Fleet Carrier in Name or Fact?: The Post-War Misinterpretation of USS *Ranger* as Unsuitable for Combat in the Pacific

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Since World War Two, the USS Ranger (CV-4) has become perceived as incapable of combat in the Pacific Theater. Digitization has provided a new opportunity to examine its perception by commanders responsible for the carrier's employment. These records reveal that the common perception of the carrier stemmed from diplomatic necessity, from an overworked bureau uneager for additional projects, and from commands eager to acquire Ranger for non-combat duty. Ranger was considered by the US Navy as fit for combat in the Pacific Theater during WWII, but other requirements overrode the need for one additional combatant carrier in the Pacific.

À la suite de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l'USS Ranger (CV-4) était considéré comme un porte-avions incapable de combattre dans le théâtre du Pacifique. La numérisation a permis aux commandants responsables de l'emploi du porte-avions d'examiner cette perception sous un nouvel angle. Ces documents révèlent que la perception commune du porte-avions provenait de la nécessité diplomatique, d'un bureau surchargé de travail qui voulait éviter des projets supplémentaires et de commandements désireux d'acquérir le Ranger pour des tâches non combattantes. La marine américaine considérait le Ranger comme étant apte au combat dans le théâtre du Pacifique pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais d'autres exigences l'ont emporté sur la nécessité d'avoir un porte-avions de combat supplémentaire dans le Pacifique.

Introduction

On 4 June 1934, USS *Ranger* (CV-4), the only ship of its class, was commissioned into the United States Navy as its first vessel designed and built from the keel up to be an aircraft carrier. The Navy operated *Ranger* extensively until it was stricken from the Naval Register in 1946 and scrapped. Immediate post-war publications of *Ranger* regarded it as a fleet carrier in good standing, completely suitable for combat assignments. After World War II, however, naval historians concluded that the Navy Department regarded *Ranger* as unsuited for combat in the Pacific.

This conclusion would have been news to the head of the navy, Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King. Navy commanders regarded *Ranger* as a ship of great value for combat in all theaters of World War II, including the Pacific. This is not easily evident from its employment which included aircraft ferrying and pilot training. Yet, in every circumstance, the navy made clear decisions based on balancing its limited resources between combat and noncombat needs at home and in every theater across the globe.

The activities of *Ranger* have been well identified, but the factors determining the carrier's activities have not been as deeply explored. The why is critical because an important distinction exists between the denial of combat roles due to *Ranger* being considered unsuitable versus the assignment of non-combat roles which could not be accomplished without a combat-worthy vessel. Which came first: the duty or the carrier?

The question needs an answer, not just for establishing the record for posterity, but because *Ranger* has been the cautionary tale of building a carrier "too small" or of producing the first of a revolutionary ship class prior to a complete understanding of the required characteristics.¹ *Ranger* is still cited in debates on the size and types of carriers the United States builds. For *Ranger* to be used as an example, a complete understanding of the ship and its context is necessary. Otherwise, these arguments may be built on shifting sand.

A Problematic Historiography

The current scholarship evaluating *Ranger* is easily summed up with the following assessment: "Of the seven prewar carriers, only *Ranger* saw no action in the Pacific. This alone speaks volumes on how she was viewed within

¹ See for example David H. Lewis, "Innovation, Interrupted—Next-Generation Surface-Combatant Design," *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 1 (2022); Sam J. Tangredi, "Sizing the Carriers—A Brief History of Alternatives," *Naval War College Review* 74, no. 4 (2021); Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "Military Experimentation, Time to Get Serious" *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 1 (2001); John Lillard, "Austerity is Not Affordable," *Proceedings* 125, no. 8 (1999).

the US Navy.”² Restated: if *Ranger* did not fight in the Pacific, the Navy must not have wished it to fight. The statement is not rigorously supported but raises a compelling point. How could an American fleet carrier spend two-and-a-half years of declared war in the Atlantic before transferring to the Pacific and then spend the remaining year of the war without a combat deployment? Did the Navy willfully withhold *Ranger* from combat operations in the Pacific? Or did there exist requirements for fleet carriers equal to or greater than the Pacific’s need for combat-deployed fleet carriers? Neither question has ever been examined in depth and no exploration has been made of the navy’s decision-making around the carrier.

The current historiography on the subject reveals the lack of original research into *Ranger* and the reliance on minimal sources shorn of context. Sam Tangredi packs a respectable eight sources into a two-page review of *Ranger* in his *Naval War College Review* article, “Sizing the Aircraft Carrier – A Brief History of Alternatives.” The multitude of secondary sources echoing the same negative assessment might seem to indicate the strength of his assessment of *Ranger*, but an analysis of the sources cited by Tangredi reveals that these secondary sources rely too much on each other and use distressingly few primary sources concerning *Ranger*. For example, his use of Emily Goldman’s political history *Sunken Treaties* best exemplifies this issue because Goldman relied on Charles Melhorn’s *Two Block Fox* for her naval history assessments – a source Tangredi already used for many of his points. Melhorn, himself, relies upon a single 1931 letter shorn of context to prove naval leadership’s dissatisfaction with *Ranger*. Tangredi then uses the exact same letter as it is cited by William Trimble in *Admiral William A. Moffett* for the same point, also without providing the required context.³

Thus, the dominant narrative presents *Ranger* as poorly received by the navy even upon the laying of the keel in 1931 and insists that this dissatisfaction directly influenced the employment of the ship in World War II. In the seventeen years between construction and scrapping, the navy’s conception of *Ranger* is presented as unchanging. Opinions of size, speed, arrangement, protection, and seaworthiness are given without dates or contextual analysis.⁴

² Mark Stille, *US Navy Aircraft Carriers 1922–45, Prewar classes* (London, Osprey Publishing, 2014), 60.

³ Tangredi, “Sizing the Carriers”; Emily O. Goldman, *Sunken Treaties: Naval Arms Control Between the Wars* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1993); Charles M. Melhorn, *Two-Block Fox: The Rise of the Aircraft Carrier, 1911-1929* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1974); William F. Trimble, *Admiral William A. Moffett, Architect of Naval Aviation* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007).

⁴ Norman Polmar and Minoru Genda, *Aircraft Carriers: A Graphic History of Carrier Aviation and Its Influence on World Events* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969),

Three sources are usually used to paint this narrative of *Ranger*: the design history,⁵ the employment of *Ranger*,⁶ and the opinions and recollections of servicemen not involved with decisions regarding *Ranger*'s employment.⁷ Crucially missing here is a thorough exploration of the decisions and reasons for *Ranger*'s employment by its commanders. Here is where the primary focus on design history has limited understanding. *Ranger*, the only ship of its class, was not entirely unique. *Ranger* had flaws, but no single flaw that was not shared by other frontline vessels.

Ranger had three characteristics – speed, stability, and protection – that are usually given as the reason why it was never deployed for combat operations in the Pacific. All three were less than desired and less than that achieved with the Essex-class fleet carriers. However, nothing about these flaws was unique to *Ranger*. For example, *Wasp* was no faster and no better protected than *Ranger*,⁸ *Independence* was less stable in Pacific swells and more vulnerable,⁹ and both *North Carolina* and *South Dakota* operated continuously with the Fast Carrier Task Force despite their twenty-eight-knot design speed. None of these flaws militated against inclusion in Pacific carrier task forces. The US Navy strived for homogeneity, but the variety in frontline ship classes makes it fallacious to claim any single characteristic withheld *Ranger* from combat duty in the Pacific.

Against the current evaluation of *Ranger* as considered incapable of combat in the Pacific are numerous dispatches by Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. “Fast carriers in training squadron such as SHANGRI-LA and RANGER are to be ready for emergency combat employment,” he ordered in 1945. “This necessitates there being a continuously revised and up to date plan for equipping them with an air group on short notice.”¹⁰ Such dispatches refute the outdated notion that *Ranger* was considered unsuitable for combat in the Pacific, but cherry-picked sources are how a persistent mistaken evaluation of *Ranger* has been reached. A complete contextual reanalysis of *Ranger*'s

71-72.

⁵ For example, Norman Friedman, *US Aircraft Carriers: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 79-77.

⁶ For example, Polmar and Genda, *Aircraft Carriers*, 287.

⁷ For example, James S. Russell, “The *Ranger*: Atavistic Anomaly,” *Proceedings* 112, no. 4: Supplement “A Salute: The Diamond Jubilee of Naval Aviation,” (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute, 1986), 52–53.

⁸ Friedman, *US Aircraft Carriers*, 105.

⁹ Friedman, *US Aircraft Carriers*, 188 and 191.

¹⁰ 1945 March 201340 CINCPAC ADV HQ to COMAIRPAC, Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, USN Nimitz “Graybook” 7 December 1941 – 31 August 1945, 3078, U.S. Naval War College Archives, https://www.usnwcarchives.org/repositories/2/digital_objects/22.



This 1934 photo shows many of *Ranger's* defining features and many that would be changed over time. For example, note the two 5"/25 guns on the forecastle. Similarly, two of the guns are on the stern. This original arrangement was intended to give greater fore or aft concentration of the 5"/25 battery. However, soon the guns on the forecastle and stern would be moved to the four corners of the flight deck – where the guns would remain until fully removed by July 1944. (Flickr)

wartime employment is necessary to supplant the persistent misinterpretation of *Ranger* lest it continue to corrupt ongoing discussions of carrier design.

Prequel: A Brief History of *Ranger* Through 1941

Although commissioned on 4 June 1934, *Ranger*, carrier hull number 4, was born out of the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty tonnage limitations and 1920s budgetary limitations. It was built with less displacement and less money than the US Navy wished. Protection, speed, and even basic features like aircraft catapults and torpedo stowage were reduced or omitted to meet the qualitative and quantitative limiters under which the carrier was designed and built. The initial design was a direct response to the preceding *Lexington* class of battlecruisers converted to carriers.¹¹

The two preceding carriers, USS *Lexington* (CV-2) and USS *Saratoga* (CV-3), used 66,000 tons combined of the 135,000 standard tons available to

¹¹ John T. Kuehn, "The U.S. Navy General Board and Naval Arms Limitation: 1922-1937," *The Journal of Military History* 74, no. 4 (2010): 1145.

the United States for aircraft carriers per the arms limitation treaty, and both ultimately cost more than twice their initial authorized limit of cost.¹² With nearly half the tonnage used on only two hulls and those hulls costing over \$40 million each, the US Navy proposed a carrier design of 13,800 standard tons for its building program. At less than half the tonnage and less than half the cost of the Lexington-class design, the 13,800-ton carrier design would allow construction of five further hulls within the remaining treaty tonnage at reasonable cost.¹³ Congress authorized construction for one 13,800-ton carrier on 13 February 1929.¹⁴

Ultimately, *Ranger* was not built exactly to the 13,800-ton carrier design but rather grew from that design in a series of revisions made prior to and during construction. Where the 13,800-ton carrier design had torpedo stowage and catapults, *Ranger* was constructed with neither, and, instead of a flush-deck flight deck, *Ranger* was constructed with an island. Many of the omitted features were added at later dates.¹⁵ Like all major vessels, *Ranger* was not a static design, but rather it evolved over its construction and throughout its service history.

Upon its commissioning on 4 June 1934, *Ranger* was an active participant in fleet work, material development, and foreign policy. From 1934 to 1938, *Ranger* was the only addition to the US Navy's carrier strength which had been composed of just two fleet carriers, *Lexington* and *Saratoga*, and the second-line but operational *Langley* (CV-1).¹⁶ During Fleet Problems, *Ranger* played significant roles such as a striking force in Fleet Problem XVI during 1935 or as the sole carrier opposition to the rest of the Navy's carrier might in Fleet Problem XX during 1939.¹⁷ Through the years, *Ranger* was used to test material innovations such as a cold weather test cruise in 1936 and anti-aircraft test firings at maneuvering drone targets in 1938. Beyond the purely

¹² House Report, "To authorize an increase in the limit of cost of certain naval vessels," 24 January 1927, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2022695342/>.

¹³ Norman Friedman, *Winning a Future War: Wargaming and Victory in the Pacific War*, (Washington, DC: Naval History & Heritage Command, 2017), 90-91.

¹⁴ Public Law 70-726, "An act to authorize the construction of certain naval vessels and for other purposes," 13 February 1929, Library of Congress, 1216, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v45/>

¹⁵ Friedman, *U.S. Aircraft Carriers*, 57-77.

¹⁶ "Schedule of the Naval Aeronautic Organization, Including Marine Corps, Monthly Revision 31 March 1944," Naval History & Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/naval-aviation-history/naval-aeronautical-organization/naval-aeronautical-organization-1923-1952/march-1944.html>.

¹⁷ Albert Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923-1940* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2010), 225-232 and 269-277, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/usnwc-historical-monographs/18/>.

naval, *Ranger* was used to great diplomatic effect twice in visits to the South American countries of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay (1934), and Peru (1937).¹⁸

The Good Neighbor visits of *Ranger* to South America were far from *Ranger*'s last brush with greater political policy. Upon the completion of Fleet Problem XX, *Ranger* was specifically kept in the Atlantic along with a division of heavy cruisers. Whereas the rest of the fleet hurried back to the Pacific to underwrite US policy in Asia, *Ranger* and the cruisers provided the modern vessels to transition the Training Detachment into the operational Atlantic Squadron to support US policy in the deteriorating European situation of summer 1939.¹⁹ Upon the outbreak of war, the Atlantic Squadron was given the mission to patrol the western Atlantic to find and monitor belligerent vessels in the hope of preventing the operation of German vessels in the western Atlantic. Over time this Neutrality Patrol area and the patrol squadron grew until, by the



USS *Wasp* (CV-7) at Scapa Flow in April 1942. HMS *Victorious*, USS *Washington* (BB-56), and USS *Wichita* (CA-45) are also present. (NHHC)

end of 1941, the Atlantic Squadron had become the Atlantic Fleet and operated as far as Iceland. When the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor occurred on 7 December 1941, half of the US Navy's active carriers were in the Atlantic supporting the Neutrality Patrol.²⁰

¹⁸ Joel C. Christenson, "From Gunboats to Good Neighbors: U.S. Naval Diplomacy in Peru, 1919-1942," *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University, 2013), 201-210 and 227-237.

¹⁹ Robert Stern, *The US Navy and the War in Europe* (Yorkshire: Seaforth Publishing, 2012), 73-74.

²⁰ The primary history focused upon the Neutrality Patrol is still Patrick Abbazia, *Mr. Roosevelt's Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975).

1942: Three Nos and a Yes

Throughout the year 1942, the British made four requests for reinforcement by an American fleet carrier. Only the first request in March was fulfilled. The intermediate two in April and June were hotly negotiated. The last request in December was refused flatly. The first request did not specify which of the Atlantic carriers the British desired as either was suitable, *Ranger* or *Wasp*. The subsequent three requests specified *Ranger* as no other carrier was available in the Atlantic.

The one agreement to major naval reinforcement was in response to a 14 March request from Prime Minister Winston Churchill to President Franklin D. Roosevelt for one carrier and two battleships to replace Force H at Gibraltar. The collapsing position in the Far East prompted the British to proceed with plans to invade Vichy Madagascar. Force H was needed to bolster the Eastern Fleet for Operation Ironclad.²¹ Admiral King, commander in chief, US Fleet, reviewed the request for American naval reinforcements and responded that two battleships and a carrier could reinforce the British Home Fleet at Scapa Flow, but not Force H

at Gibraltar.²² This compromise was initially rejected by Churchill as the needs of the Home Fleet could not be met by the two battleships he thought the Americans would offer, *New York* and *Texas*. He was quickly mollified when it was revealed that two battleships offered by King were *North Carolina* and



Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King was deeply familiar with *Ranger* since the carrier's beginning. In this photo then Rear Admiral King, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, talks with then Captain Arthur L. Bristol, commanding officer of *Ranger*, while on the flight deck of *Ranger* just weeks after *Ranger's* commissioning. (NHHC)

²¹ No. 44, Churchill to Roosevelt, 14 March 1942 in Message Files, Map Room Papers, 1942-1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, 55, National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/578278>.

²² Nos. 119 & 120, Roosevelt to Churchill, 16 March 1942 in Message Files, 34-35.

Washington.²³ As a result of discussions, the final compromise sent *Wasp* and *Washington* to Scapa Flow on 26 March.

If King felt any pride in the March compromise, *Wasp* and *Washington* sent to Scapa Flow and not Gibraltar, he was soon disappointed. On 31 March, Churchill requested Roosevelt to redirect *Wasp* before Task Force 39 had even arrived at Scapa. Malta needed a capacity load of Spitfires to defend itself against the Axis bombing offensive underway.²⁴ King's feelings regarding this change in assignment have not been uncovered, but his largesse was not yet expended. His official response queried if HMS *Furious* was sufficient, but made it clear he would acquiesce to the request if the British carrier was deemed insufficient.²⁵

In mere days King's cooperative spirit would be tested to the limit. The Japanese Navy was at sea in strength, sailing towards the Indian Ocean.

First Request for *Ranger*: Reinforcement in Response to the Indian Ocean Raid

The coming Japanese raid into the Indian Ocean was anticipated by the British Eastern Fleet. Indeed, it was over-anticipated. The Japanese main force was spotted on 4 April with the Eastern Fleet refueling at Adu Atoll after an early patrol. Providentially, the two fleets failed to bring each other to action despite the efforts of both. Serious losses were still inflicted upon the Eastern Fleet by the Japanese carrier attack on installations at Ceylon and its units detached there. In a simultaneous Bay of Bengal operation, the carrier *Ryūjō*, six cruisers, and four destroyers demonstrated the efficiency by which a carrier-cruiser force can sweep a sea of shipping.²⁶

The Indian Ocean Raid brought the war directly to India's doorstep and exposed the insufficient preparations made by the British to defend the region. If Japan marshalled its forces to continue the offensive into Ceylon and India, it would be devastating to the British Empire and the whole war effort. To forestall this potentiality, the British Chiefs of Staff were desperate to find the air and naval forces necessary to oppose an invasion of Ceylon supported by the concentrated Japanese fleet. In reviewing the whole British position across the globe, first priority was made for building up formidable forces in the Indian Ocean with second priority to concentrate on a Libyan offensive. All

²³ Nos. 48, 50, & 52, Churchill to Roosevelt, 17 March 1942 in Message Files, 66-67, 70, 72.

²⁴ No. 61, Churchill to Roosevelt, 31 March 1942 in Message Files, 93-94.

²⁵ No. 130, Roosevelt to Churchill, 2 April 1942 in Message Files, 59.

²⁶ Stephen W. Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945, Volume II: The Period of Balance* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), 21-32.



USS *Ranger* displaying two key alterations made by April 1942. The CXAM search radar and battery of six quad-1.1" guns were added in September 1941. Then in April 1942, Fire-control radar was added to the Mk. 33 directors for the 5" battery, and thirty 20mm Oerlikon guns replaced the .50-caliber machine gun battery – just in time for the British to request *Ranger* for the Indian Ocean. The planes spotted on deck in this November 1942 photo also display a key reason *Ranger* was desired by the Royal Navy, its full squadron of modern F4F Wildcat fighters. (NHHC)

else was to be avoided or minimized in favor of the above.²⁷

Into this situation, George C. Marshall, the US Army's chief of staff, arrived in England to campaign for the purest version of the Germany First policy: a return to the European continent in 1943. Buy-in from the British chiefs of staff was paramount if both nations were to prepare for the invasion with unwavering priority. Without definite allocation to the invasion, forces were likely to be diverted to other theaters such as the Middle East, Indian Ocean, and Pacific to address immediate concerns with no long-term progress towards defeating Germany. Were that to occur, an invasion of the European continent would likely be delayed to 1944 or later. Marshall arrived in London to the exact situation that he was campaigning to prevent.²⁸

To Marshall, the British chiefs of staff expressed agreement in principle but emphasized that the Germany First policy involved holding Japan. In their opinion, Japan was neither being held nor were sufficient forces then arrayed to hold Japan. The formal commentary Marshall received on 14 April

²⁷ Joint Planning Staff, War Cabinet, "Relation of Strategy in Middle East and India, J.P. (42) 376," 8 April 1942 in Minutes of 9 April 1942, War Cabinet and Cabinet: Chiefs of Staff Committee: Minutes, CAB 79/20/13, The National Archives, Kent, UK, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9191133>.

²⁸ Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1941-1942* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990), 187-189.

blamed the size of the raid on inactivity of the US Pacific Fleet and laid out the reinforcements necessary from the United States to hold Japan in the Indian Ocean. Marshall promptly shot off a cable to his deputy, Major General Joseph McNarney, quoting the paragraphs requesting capital ships, aircraft carriers, and aircraft for the immediate attention of King, Arnold, and Eisenhower.²⁹

Although all concurred on the gravity of a threatened Japanese offensive into India, US Army and Navy staff did not agree with the British on the immediate likelihood of an invasion of Ceylon or anywhere else in the Indian Ocean. US Navy intelligence indicated that the next major Japanese operation would be towards Port Moresby.³⁰ Success achieved by the Lae/Salamaua raid compelled Japan to assign greater forces to South Pacific operations scheduled for May. Furthermore, a major spoiling raid for Japan was already at sea. *Hornet* and *Enterprise* were mere days away from launching the Doolittle Raid. The military goal of the raid was to demonstrate American capability to strike the Home Islands and force Japan to deploy critical units to its defense.

Formal response to the British was returned within a few hours by two routes: a message from Roosevelt to Harry Hopkins – his chief liaison to Allied leaders – for Churchill and a detailed plan from Deputy Chief of Staff Joseph T. McNarney to Marshall. The offer was less than what the British chiefs of staff were hoping. The president's message to Hopkins for conveyance to Churchill stressed Roosevelt's belief that Royal Navy units should remain under land-based air cover, that cover to be provided by the American air reinforcements. The cable as sent did not discuss naval reinforcement at all, but Roosevelt's first draft expressed exasperation at the request for additional aircraft carriers: "It is of course impossible to send to the Indian Ocean. What would help a great deal, that is carriers, as we have already made available the only one we can possibly spare is the WASP."³¹ The plan as sent by McNarney to Marshall led with a sharp statement on the lack of reinforcements available:

At this moment no (repeat no) planes allocated to the Army Air Force are available for transfer to India or the Middle East. Units now engaged in such critical tasks as the combatting of the submarine menace on our East Coast are pitifully small and are all badly understrength. Admiral King states the tasks assigned the US Navy are so numerous and of such importance that no diversions can be made at this time.³²

²⁹ No. 2398, Marshall to McNarney, 14 April 1942 in Churchill to Roosevelt, March-April 1942, Message Files, 122-124.

³⁰ John B. Lundstrom, *The First South Pacific Campaign: Pacific Fleet strategy, December 1941-June 1942* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 136-141.

³¹ Handwritten draft, President to Hopkins to be conveyed to Churchill, 14 April 1942 in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April 1942, Message Files, 70.

³² McNarney to Marshall No. 320, 14 April 1942 in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April

Air reinforcement alone was then proposed in two mutually-exclusive plans to reinforce India from British stocks of planes allocated from US production but awaiting ferrying or shipping. The difference between the two plans involved which units the planes would reinforce in India: either the U.S 10th Air Force or British units. Both plans relied upon *Ranger* to ferry the pursuit plane reinforcements to Africa as no air ferry route existed across the Atlantic for such short-range planes. The only other method was by shipping crated pursuit planes. Shipping was both slower in transit than ferrying and required additional time to erect the planes at their destination. A shipment of P-40s was already enroute, but it was destined for the American Volunteer Group (AVG) in China. The 10th Air Force in India could only be allocated whatever was remaining over-and-above the AVG's requirements. Without *Ranger*, a balanced and full reinforcement could occur no sooner than 15 May.³³

The availability of *Ranger* to speed up the air reinforcement plans opened the carrier to possible specific request from Churchill or the British chiefs of staff. King attempted to quell the possibility early. King is quoted by McNarney as having definitely stated, "the *Ranger* cannot (repeat not) be made available for combat use in the Indian Ocean. The only way the Navy can assist is by the use of *Ranger* for ferrying across the Atlantic as above described."³⁴ This was not sufficient to dissuade Churchill from cabling Roosevelt to request *Ranger* and *North Carolina* for the Eastern Fleet on 15 April.³⁵ As revealed in a later cable, the British were not interested in releasing stocks of their P-40s for India because they deemed the type critical to their forces in the Middle East. With British interest lacking for the use of *Ranger* as a ferry and Marshall, perhaps, inadequately communicating King's absolute refusal to relinquish *Ranger*, it is natural Churchill continued to negotiate the carrier's employment with Roosevelt.

The chilly reception Churchill's cable received in the Oval Office was witnessed by Canada's Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, who was staying at the White House. In front of Mackenzie King, Roosevelt read to Admiral King and General McNarney the telegram from Churchill and discussed the situation. With greater desperation, Churchill retread the same points as conveyed by Marshall the day prior. Churchill requested *Ranger*

1942, Message Files, 65.

³³ McNarney to Marshall No. 320, 14 April 1942 in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April 1942, Message Files, 65-66.

³⁴ McNarney to Marshall No. 320, 14 April 1942 in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April 1942, Message Files, 66.

³⁵ Churchill to Roosevelt No. 69, 15 April 1942, Message Files, 132.

and *North Carolina*, failed to acknowledge even receipt of the American plan sent the day prior, and, most astounding of all, asked for American bomber reinforcement in India without reference to the proposed American air reinforcement. Roosevelt referred to it as “the most depressing of anything I have read.” The absence of any reference to the American air reinforcement proposal vexed Roosevelt. Churchill’s focus on naval reinforcement played upon Roosevelt’s concern that Britain intended to operate and engage the Japanese fleet beyond the support of its land-based planes.

The connection and weight Roosevelt placed upon the loss of *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire* and the loss of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* prompted McNarney to assert his support for reinforcing the Eastern Fleet with *Ranger*. Coast defense and air defense of fleet bases fit with Army responsibilities but the air defense of a fleet at sea was most regularly assumed by naval air. As an airman he could appreciate the ascendancy of air power but not the allocation of Army resources over Navy resources. Roosevelt flatly stated to McNarney that “any loan of ships meant no return in the end.”³⁶

King drafted Roosevelt’s response, as he did for cables related to naval matters. It was blunt and led with evident frustration about the lack of response to the American air reinforcement proposal. Leaning on secrecy, he then made a cryptic claim towards activity by the US Pacific Fleet without revealing so much as the general timing or objective. To finish, he revealed his willingness to consider releasing *Ranger*, *North Carolina*, or both, but only to the Home Fleet.

Scribbled in the margin of King’s draft were two names of Royal Navy aircraft carriers, “*Victorious*” and “*Furious*.”³⁷ King would see all available British carriers reinforce the Eastern Fleet before he would meet British needs for carrier reinforcement from the US Navy. *Wasp* had already been loaned to the Home Fleet to allow a redistribution of forces to the Eastern Fleet. With *Wasp* at Scapa Flow and *Ranger* in the Western Atlantic, the US Navy was disposed to allow the Royal Navy to concentrate its full force of fleet carriers in the Indian Ocean if the Royal Navy could accept the risks of bare minimum deployment in the Atlantic. Undermining the British requirement for *Ranger* was the modification made to *Wasp*’s employment as an aircraft ferry to Malta. If the Eastern Fleet needed carrier reinforcement, the Royal Navy was not demonstrating its commitment to filling it with any of the now three fleet

³⁶ Entry for 16 April 1942 in Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=24033&>.

³⁷ Draft Reply to Churchill’s No. 69 by E.J.K. in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April 1942, Message Files, 79.

carriers it had under operational control in the Atlantic. Instead, Britain aimed to meet its needs from the last American carrier in the Atlantic under US Navy operational control, and, as Roosevelt had said, the date of return for loaned US fleet units was unknown.

In an unusual turn, the cable sent to Churchill was not King's draft but Roosevelt's own. Roosevelt did not make a habit of editing King's drafts. Later, when Britain and America's roles in requesting and offering reinforcement switched, King's draft reply was used verbatim. Roosevelt replaced King's draft with his own because this was the United States' third cable on the subject. It was unclear to Roosevelt if his previous cables were either not received or not understood. The President's frustration was apparent to Mackenzie King.³⁸ The conversation had to be brought to a close and a decision made if action was to be achieved swiftly.

To achieve an end with this next cable, it was imperative to drive Churchill to a definite response on the American plan for aircraft reinforcement to India. Preferably that response would be approval. Roosevelt's draft lays out clearly in six sentences the benefits of the American plan. *Ranger's* part in the plan was emphasized to highlight the carrier's integral role to the air reinforcement plan in quickly ferrying short-ranged fighter aircraft across the Atlantic. Without *Ranger*, the reinforcement of India with a complete, balanced air force would not be possible until late May.

Had the cable ended there, Roosevelt would not have felt compelled to add a clause about *Ranger's* light construction, but again it was important that a decision be made. Therefore, Roosevelt's cable continued with a second paragraph to make plain the only naval reinforcement that the United States would possibly agree to. In US appreciation it was neither wise nor fully necessary to reinforce the Eastern Fleet with US naval units. If reinforcement was agreed to, *Ranger* and *North Carolina* would replace Royal Navy units in the Home Fleet to allow the British to further concentrate in the Indian Ocean.

At the end of the draft, Roosevelt realized that he had still provided two options to Churchill, the air reinforcement plan or a modified British naval reinforcement plan. Churchill's cables had been fixated upon acquiring America's last carrier in the Atlantic for the Eastern Fleet. Something had to be added about *Ranger* to shake the bulldog off the carrier. If Churchill rejected

³⁸ Memorandum of conversation Mr. King had with President Roosevelt, White House, Washington, 16 April 1942 in Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=24039>. Editing the draft may have been political theater by Roosevelt in front of the Canadian Prime Minister to display knowledge of his navy down to the individual characteristics of its ships and to display a hand in managing military matters.

Ranger's use in the air reinforcement plan, he might yet continue to argue with Roosevelt over where *Ranger* reinforced the Royal Navy. As a postscript Roosevelt chose to play up *Ranger*'s light construction as a measure to induce greater interest in *Ranger*'s role in the American air reinforcement plan rather than to continue to negotiate *Ranger*'s reinforcement of the Eastern Fleet.³⁹

In diplomacy it is important never to lie, but truths can be framed in exaggerated or misleading ways. Absolutely, the underwater protection of *Ranger* and *Wasp* was considered by the navy to be vulnerable. The navy's preference for carrier class when operating in submarine infested waters was foremost the Lexington class, by a significant magnitude, and then the Yorktown or Hornet class were considered somewhat more acceptable than the *Ranger* or *Wasp* class.⁴⁰ Only with the coming Essex class was the Navy finally to receive carriers with the level of underwater protection desired.⁴¹ Despite an acknowledged vulnerability of *Ranger* and *Wasp*, the Navy was appreciative of them as carrier platforms, records of which were in the president's files. In a request for information on the prospective appointment to rear admiral of John S. McCain, the central quote on McCain's fitness came from King's evaluation, "His leadership and enthusiastic devotion to his command has been reflected in the excellent performance of *Ranger* (decidedly a smart ship) and her squadrons during the present cruise. Under Captain McCain's command for the past two years *Ranger* has rendered outstandingly efficient service in the fleet."⁴²

If *Ranger* was considered a useful combatant, why then did Roosevelt refer to it as a ferry boat? Roosevelt was not unbiased in the proposed employments of *Ranger*. He was invested in the use of *Ranger* for the ferry operation as the best manner to prevent the reallocation of P-40s from the American Volunteer Group in China to the 10th Air Force in India. The proper supply of aircraft to the AVG was a sore point with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek who on 13 April

³⁹ Second draft reply to Churchill's No. 69 in Roosevelt to Churchill, March-April 1942, Message Files, 77-78. A hand-drawn circle and arrow moved the postscript into the body of the final version sent to Churchill.

⁴⁰ Memo from Director, War Plans Division, to Chief of Naval Operations, Subject: Recommends transfer of one aircraft carrier from Pacific to Atlantic, 31 March 1941, Records Relating to Naval Activity During World War II, 1916-1948, Strategic Plans Division, Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6875400>.

⁴¹ Admiral Harold R. Stark to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 13 December 1941, Op-10-MD, "Navy, 1941 November through December" in Departmental Correspondence, President's Secretary's Files, 1933-1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/579094>.

⁴² Undated memo, Subject: Brief resume of service record of certain officers of the Navy in Navy, 1941 January through June, Departmental Correspondence, 8.

1942 had sent a telegram to Roosevelt about the very issue.⁴³ Politically, it was important that the 10th Air Force be supplied with planes that had positively no relation to consignments of aircraft for China. No P-40s were yet in transit for the 10th Air Force and thus P-40s needed to be dispatched from the United States swiftly. Roosevelt stressed this importance to Churchill in his cable of April 14th endorsing the American air reinforcement plans as well as internally when he stressed the necessity of accepting the risks associated with the air reinforcement plan.⁴⁴

Roosevelt's choice of words broke the impasse. On 17 April, Marshall and Portal met to straighten out the one major issue the British had with *Ranger* ferrying P-40s to India. The Air Ministry felt the use of *Ranger* to speed up deliveries was of great value to quickly building up the requisite air strength in India. Their remaining concern was the allocation of P-40s from British stocks to reinforce India would impact the timely delivery of P-40s to the Middle East. The Desert Air Force had come to depend on the P-40 and to forgo deliveries was considered a grave risk. Marshall gained acquiescence to the American air reinforcement plan by directing the supply of American P-40s for delivery by *Ranger*.⁴⁵ On 18 April, both Marshall and Churchill cabled Washington to inform Roosevelt, King, and staff of the decision and to have the plan implemented.⁴⁶ Action was swift. *Ranger* departed Quonset Point Naval Air Station on 22 April bound for Accra, Africa, with 68 P-40s.

By bending the truth, Roosevelt retained *Ranger* and prevented its dispatch to a British theater in which events would prove it unneeded. Such diplomatic words did not shield *Ranger* from further Royal Navy schemes. Just two months later, the Royal Navy was again asking for *Ranger* to participate in one of the most dangerous naval operations of 1942 involving aircraft carriers, Operation Pedestal.

Second Request for Ranger: Convoy to Malta

The failure of both Operation Harpoon and Operation Vigorous in June 1942 due to the active employment of the Italian Navy left Malta critically short of supplies. Effective continuation of the siege might even force the island's capitulation that fall. The June operations made it plain that an unprecedented

⁴³ Telegram from Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to the President dated Chungking, 13 April 1942, FDR and Chiang Kai-shek, 1941-1942 in Message Files, 96.

⁴⁴ Memorandum for Maj. Gen. Jos. T. McNarney, 17 April 1942 in War Department, 1942, Departmental Correspondence, 36.

⁴⁵ London to G-2, No. 2419, April 17th, 1942 in Marshall, 15 April 1942 to 1944, Safe Files, President's Secretary's, 1933 - 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, 10, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/16608811>.

⁴⁶ No. 71 and No. 72, Churchill to Roosevelt, March-April 1942, Message Files, 142-145.



The three Royal Navy carriers participating in Operation Pedestal, HMS *Indomitable* and HMS *Eagle* as seen from HMS *Victorious*. Only *Victorious* emerged from the operation largely unscathed. *Indomitable* was damaged by two bombs and *Eagle* was sunk by submarine torpedoes. (Wikimedia Commons)

concentration of two battleships and three carriers would be required to fight a convoy through to Malta. The primary role of the carriers would be to provide air defense for the convoy from the hundreds of German and Italian dive- and torpedo-bombers deployed along the convoy route. Success primarily depended on the number of embarked modern fighters.⁴⁷

The most desirable carrier in the Atlantic for such a role was *Ranger*, with its large capacity of modern fighters. On 17 June, First Sea Lord Admiral Pound, signaled Admiral Little, head of the British Admiralty Delegation in Washington, to ask King for *Ranger*. The request did not go over well. From the outset, the US Navy wanted no part in providing the carrier required to provide air protection for the Malta convoy operation. To the US Navy

⁴⁷ First Sea Lord to Admiral Little (British Admiralty Delegation, Washington), "M/42/16," 17 June 1942, FO 954/14B/667 in Private Office papers of Sir Anthony Eden, Volume 14 (part B): Malta, The National Archives, Kent, UK, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C6561367>

planners, the military necessity of maintaining Malta did not resonate. Recent victory at Midway had materially improved the situation in the Pacific, but the release of pressure did not open the US Navy to being profligate with its few carriers. In reply, King went straight for the language that Roosevelt had used to shake the British off in April. In response, he declared the light construction of *Ranger* made it “entirely unsuited for this character of operation.”⁴⁸

The suitability of *Ranger* for a Malta convoy is not an indictment of *Ranger* alone. At this point, no American carrier was suitable for an operation of this character. Operations in the Western Mediterranean involved a considerable lack of tactical surprise along a definite route through submarine-infested waters and near numerous enemy airbases. Much more dangerous to American carriers than dive-bombing was the threat of submarine and aircraft torpedoes. Of the prewar American aircraft classes, only the Lexington class had noteworthy underwater protection. The danger of submarine attack had been proven when *Ark Royal* was torpedoed by *U-81* on 13 November 1941.⁴⁹ *Eagle* would be lost to *U-73* on this operation contemplated for *Ranger*.⁵⁰

In his analysis of the request, King’s assistant chief of staff (plans), Rear Admiral Charles M. Cooke, expressed a concern that approval of this request would result in further requests for *Ranger*. “Inevitably, if the *Ranger* is used in this operation and survives, additional requests for her use – in spite of the fact that the British now have seven carriers, will arise.”⁵¹ Cooke was right to be concerned. In June, the US Navy was aware of no prospect for the relief of Malta’s predicament. Without change to the Mediterranean situation, a repeat convoy and large escort would be required to sustain Malta. The request for *Ranger* was not predicated on short-term shortage of Royal Navy carriers soon to be rectified by new construction or repair. The request was necessitated by the scale of escort evaluated as necessary to fight a convoy to Malta through opposing air, surface, and submarine forces.

Cooke specifically used the word “survive” in his phrasing to indicate that success or failure of the convoy would not shield *Ranger* from further British requests of it for additional convoys. The proposed convoy plan which included *Ranger* was born out of the failure of Operation Vigorous. Failure was likely to result in an even larger operation to deliver a convoy to Malta, and success was likely to breed repetition. To justify the operation to Stalin, Churchill described Operation Pedestal as a prototype for stronger direct escort

⁴⁸ Robert J. Cressman, *USS Ranger: The Navy’s First Flattop from Keel to Mast, 1934–1946* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2003), 189.

⁴⁹ Vincent P. O’Hara, *In Passage Perilous: Malta and the Convoy Battles of June 1942* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 70.

⁵⁰ Vincent P. O’Hara, *In Passage Perilous*, 280.

⁵¹ Cressman, *USS Ranger*, 189.

of the Arctic convoys.⁵²

A loan of *Ranger* for a Malta convoy would be a loan of *Ranger* for the foreseeable future. To release *Ranger* indefinitely would deprive the US Atlantic Fleet of its last carrier and restrict the fleet in meeting US needs in the Atlantic: supporting the US Army and defending the Atlantic shipping from hostile capital ships. With US Navy interests minimized in the loan of *Ranger*, Cooke suggested the removal of *Ranger* to the Pacific where *Ranger* “could be given very useful and active employment.” Rear Admiral Richard S. Edwards, King’s deputy chief of staff, emphasized *Ranger*’s role in countering the German fleet but concurred in Cooke’s conclusion to transfer *Ranger* to the Pacific.⁵³

King did not act on the recommendation to transfer *Ranger* to the Pacific, not because *Ranger* was unsuitable for the Pacific, but because he had good reason to believe he could retain *Ranger* in the Atlantic without the carrier participating in the Malta convoy operation. The need for immediate action had forced the Admiralty to present alternatives to King. Admiralty preference, Plan A, was for the use of *Ranger* in the convoy escort because *Ranger*’s large aircraft capacity and modern fighters would provide the greatest air strength to the convoy. If *Ranger* was not available for the convoy but could be loaned to the Home Fleet, Plan B would have HMS *Victorious* participate in the Malta convoy using fighter squadrons provided by *Ranger* to replace *Victorious*’ obsolete Fulmar fighters.⁵⁴ The assignment of *Victorious* instead of *Ranger* was much more palatable to King, who repeatedly displayed a preference and willingness to supplant Home Fleet units to allow the Royal Navy to concentrate in the Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean.

On 23 June, the British Admiralty Delegation signaled Pound that King had refused to make *Ranger* available for Plan A but agreed to make the carrier and planes available for Plan B. The message included two pieces of information that limited the practicality of King’s acceptance. First, there was only one fully-trained fighter squadron on the East Coast. There were not enough trained pilots available to equip *Victorious* with twenty-four American Wildcats. Second, King would not guarantee the loan of *Ranger* to August. With two key requirements of Plan B lacking, Pound proclaimed the plan dead and the July convoy to Malta with it. With insufficient American support, Admiralty planning shifted to an all-British August convoy using a carrier from the Eastern Fleet.⁵⁵

⁵² Churchill to Roosevelt No. 107, 16 July 1942, Message Files, 73.

⁵³ Cressman, *USS Ranger*, 190.

⁵⁴ Cressman, *USS Ranger*, 188.

⁵⁵ Admiralty to British Admiralty Delegation, Washington. “Convoys, W(g)/42/73,” FO

The sincerity of King's offer is matched by the telephone conversation his chief of staff had with Admiral Royal E. Ingersoll, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet. The same day the British Admiralty Delegation signaled Pound, Ingersoll was informed by telephone that TF 22, composed of *Ranger*, *Augusta*, *Juneau*, and seven destroyers, would go to Scapa Flow around 5 July. Less probable employment quoted to Ingersoll would be a repetition of the P-40 ferry trip to Accra, Africa.⁵⁶ The role deemed less probable bore out as another British crisis was developing.

In the midst of naval discussions concerning Malta, calamity occurred in North Africa. While meeting Roosevelt and Marshall in the Oval Office on 21 June, Churchill and Alan Brooke were informed that Tobruk had fallen. Neither had considered such an immediate possibility. The city had been reached and isolated by the Axis on 17 June, but the British expected the city to hold out under siege as it had for many months in 1941. Responding to the severity of the blow, Roosevelt and Marshall immediately offered reinforcements of troops, equipment, and planes. The next day, the British officials discussed the offers and delivery methods.⁵⁷ With Royal Navy interest in *Ranger* eliminated due to the cancellation of the July convoy plan, the carrier was available to assist the US Army Air Corps in its proffered air reinforcement of the Middle East in the wake of Tobruk's fall. Churchill accepted the air reinforcement plan and signaled the War Cabinet Offices on 24 June to inform General Claude Auchinleck, commander in chief, Middle East, that *Ranger* would depart within days with one pursuit group (the 57th) of eighty P-40s for Takoradi.⁵⁸

King had refused to guarantee the loan of *Ranger* for the Home Fleet through August, to retain control of the carrier for any eventualities of his planned South Pacific offensive. Just a few months later, he would state, "I am particularly anxious that RANGER be kept under my control, in order that it may be used in the Atlantic or the Pacific as the situation may require."⁵⁹ In July, the situation in the Atlantic dictated events sooner than the Pacific.

954/31B/385 in Private Office papers of Sir Anthony Eden, Volume 31 (part B): War (General), The National Archives, Kent, UK, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C6568370>.

⁵⁶ "Notes on Admiral's Telephone conversation with Chief of Staff, US Fleet dtd 23 Jun. 1942 re: Employment of AUGUSTA, RANGER & JUNEAU," Royal E. Ingersoll Papers, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington Navy Yard, DC.

⁵⁷ A.F.B. Alanbrooke, Alex Danchev, & Daniel Todman, *War diaries, 1939-1945* (London: Phoenix Press, 2003), 270.

⁵⁸ Prime Minister to Deputy Prime Minister, Subject: "Prospective movement of planes to Middle East," FO 954/15A/146, in Private Office papers of Sir Anthony Eden, Volume 15 (part A): Middle East, The National Archives, Kent, UK, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C6561482>.

⁵⁹ King to Leahy, Memorandum dated 4 December 1942 in Roosevelt to Churchill in Message Files, 96.

By the time *Ranger* returned from its second ferry trip, Marshall and King had relented to the pressure of Roosevelt to undertake Operation Torch, the invasion of French North Africa. From the beginning, the operation's planning included *Ranger's* participation.⁶⁰

As the one American first-line fleet carrier in the Atlantic, *Ranger* had an important role in the planning of Operation Torch. A sharp difference of opinion existed between the American and British Chiefs of Staff as to the locations of the initial landings to be made. The British Chiefs of Staff pushed for the furthest east practicable landings to facilitate the earliest capture of Tunis. In contrast, the American Chiefs of Staff maintained that the early capture of Casablanca was necessary to secure a port for communication and supply of the beachhead. The British chiefs consented if the US Navy supplied the entire naval covering force for the Casablanca operation.⁶¹ Without *Ranger*, the American planning staff would not have had the requisite forces to support the unilateral landings on Morocco's Atlantic coast.

Important as *Ranger* was to Operation Torch, King rankled the planning staff by refusing to commit to a definite force for the operation. The issue was in doubt on the island of Guadalcanal, but even after the stinging defeat of the Battle of Savo Island the response from Japan was slow to develop. The outline plan for Operation Torch was submitted on 21 August, three days before the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. The outcome of this battle was the last opportunity to transfer *Ranger* to rescue Guadalcanal, had a naval disaster occurred. Instead, the US Navy beat back the Japanese Navy without undue losses. Although *Enterprise* was damaged, *Saratoga* and *Wasp* were yet available in the South Pacific, and *Hornet* was at Pearl Harbor. The carrier situation in the Pacific was not yet critical, but the battle served to impress upon Marshall that nothing would be spared from the Pacific.⁶²

On 3 September, the lack of definite American naval commitments to Operation Torch was elevated to the highest level when Churchill cabled Roosevelt.⁶³ From this point forward, the operation picked up more steam while the South Pacific carrier strength was chipped away one-by-one. When

⁶⁰ Chart illustrating "Secret Plan I, Plan as Originally Suggested July 30, 1942 by CG ETO (Eisenhower)," in "MR310 Sec. 1 TORCH (1) Army and Navy Planning Messages – August 10 - November 8, 1942," Military Files, Map Room, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/578525>, 256.

⁶¹ Chiefs of Staff to Joint Staff Mission, C.O.S. W 265, 27 August 1942 in "MR310 Sec. 1 TORCH," Military Files, 220.

⁶² Marshall to Eisenhower No. R-100, 25 August 1942 in "MR310 Sec. 1 TORCH," Military Files, 230.

⁶³ Churchill to Roosevelt No. 144, 3 September 1942, 57, and No. 184, Roosevelt to Churchill, 4 September 1942 in Message Files, 59.

Hornet was scuttled on 26 October leaving only a damaged *Enterprise* to support Guadalcanal, *Ranger* was already steaming from Bermuda to join the invasion force enroute to French Morocco. When the First and Second Naval Battles of Guadalcanal succeeded in blocking Japanese bombardments and reinforcements, *Ranger* was still steaming back to Norfolk from French Morocco. By the time *Ranger* returned to Norfolk on 24 November, *Saratoga* had relieved the damaged *Enterprise* in the South Pacific.⁶⁴ The Pacific Fleet needed more than two carriers, but the greatest dangers to Guadalcanal had come and gone.

King's June gamble had succeeded. In the second half of 1942, US forces



Composite track chart created in Google Earth from the daily locations reported in the *Ranger's* war diaries. This view shows all of *Ranger's* activity in the Atlantic from 1942 to 1944. The track chart continues into the Pacific for 1944 and 1945. (Author's own)

in the Pacific undertook a key offensive operation that wrested the strategic initiative from the Japanese and US forces in the Atlantic engaged Germany in North Africa. Both could only be achieved at the same time because he maintained carrier forces in both oceans and did not relinquish *Ranger* to British operations.

Third Request for *Ranger*: Exchange for Two British Carriers to the Pacific

⁶⁴ War diaries of *Saratoga*, *Ranger*, and *Enterprise* for the months of September, October, and November 1942 in World War II War Diaries, Other Operational Records and Histories, ca. 1/1/1942 - ca. 6/1/1946, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4697018>.

The loss of *Hornet* led directly to the last British request of *Ranger* for 1942. Following the sinking of *Hornet*, Britain received a request to reinforce the US Pacific Fleet with a British carrier. Churchill and the Royal Navy responded generously. In a cable to Roosevelt on 2 December, Churchill offered two British fleet carriers, HMS *Illustrious* and HMS *Victorious*. The offer was contingent upon *Ranger* replacing *Victorious* in the Home Fleet.⁶⁵

The counter proposal from Roosevelt, drafted by King, turned down *Victorious* in favor of accepting just *Illustrious* and retaining *Ranger*. King declared that if a second carrier was necessary for the Pacific, “Ranger would be chosen as she does not require special preparations for operations with other American forces.”⁶⁶ In defending his choice, King focused primarily on the disadvantages of creating mixed-carrier task forces in both the Pacific and the Atlantic. He was willing to reduce the British proposal to limit the number of mixed-carrier task forces to just one. In closing, King stated, “I am particularly anxious that RANGER be kept under my control, in order that it may be used in the Atlantic or the Pacific as the situation may require.”

King’s ability to respond with agility to the fluid worldwide situation required that he keep his three remaining first-line carriers under his control. The damaged *Enterprise* was alone in the South Pacific and in need of relief. By the time *Ranger* returned to Norfolk from Operation Torch, *Saratoga* was already on its way south to relieve *Enterprise*. The solitary *Saratoga* was then in need of reinforcement, but the lone *Ranger* was already the only fleet carrier in the Atlantic, as it had been since June without any radical improvement to



USS *South Dakota* (BB-57) firing at a Japanese carrier attack plane that had dropped its torpedo. The presence of the battleship was greatly appreciated at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. However, the fast battleship’s moderate design speed meant it struggled to keep station with the rest of the task force when maneuvering defensively at 27kts. To benefit from the battleship’s protection, carrier task forces learned to maneuver at the fast battleship’s slower speed. (NHHC)

⁶⁵ Churchill to Roosevelt No. 217, 2 December 1942, in Message Files, 69-71.

⁶⁶ Roosevelt to Churchill No. 226, 5 December 1942, in Message Files, 95-97.

the Atlantic situation. The role of the Atlantic Fleet, the calls upon it, and the threats faced in the European Theater had changed but little. At the close of 1942 the danger of the Vichy fleet was finally settled for good, but the status of the German and Italian fleets was no less threatening. Indeed, the new Allied supply lines to a tenuous beachhead could have been inducement to greater activity by Germany or Italy.

Churchill's request for *Ranger* revealed a new concern for the possible resurgence of German naval forays into the Atlantic. Intelligence had assessed the German aircraft carrier *Graf Zeppelin* as nearly ready.⁶⁷ The implications of a balanced German squadron operating against either the Atlantic or Arctic convoys were manifest. German capital ships with integral air support would be harder to track, harder to catch, and harder to overpower. Half a year prior during the Indian Ocean Raid, Japan had demonstrated in the Bay of Bengal how effectively a carrier teamed with cruisers could sweep a sea of shipping. The quick dispatch of all shadowing Catalinas by Zeroes indicated how difficult it would be for aircraft to shadow a force protected by Messerschmitts. The German fleet in Norway was a menace in itself but development of the *Graf Zeppelin* played upon the worst fears of the Allies.

Above all was the necessity to maintain close cooperation with the US Army. To continue the campaign in the South Pacific, the Navy was dependent on the largesse of the Army for supplies, aircraft, and troops. Now that American infantry were engaged in the European Theater the Army depended all the more upon the Navy for defense of its supply lines. One month to the day from landing in Algiers, Eisenhower began requesting carrier loads of fighters to replace the losses occurring in the fierce air battles with the Luftwaffe over Algeria and Tunisia.⁶⁸ *Ranger* met this call with two trips in January and February 1943.

Retention of *Ranger* in the Atlantic for Operation Torch, both the invasion and the ongoing operation, was publicly praised by Marshall at a Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting during the Casablanca Conference. In front of the British Chiefs of Staff, Marshall expressed appreciation for King's courageous decision to meet naval commitments to Operation Torch despite the desperate situation in the South Pacific during the end of 1942.⁶⁹ Marshall's comment

⁶⁷ Marcus Faulkner, "A Most Disagreeable Problem, British Perceptions of the Kriegsmarine's Aircraft Carrier Capability," *Decision in the Atlantic: The Allies and the Longest Campaign of the Second World War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 190-192.

⁶⁸ Entry for 8 December 1942, Diary, Operations Division, 1 November 1942 to 31 December 1942, Combined Arms Research Library, 14, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll8/id/2311/rec/1>.

⁶⁹ 60th Meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, 18 January 1943 at 1030, Presidential Trips - Casablanca Conference, Papers and Minutes of Meetings - January 1943 in Message Files, 255.



USS *Ranger* after its partial modernization during May to June 1944. Visible is its new radar suite composed of an SM height-finder radar and an SC search radar. The 5"/25 battery was removed as weight compensation for the strengthened flight deck, deck catapult, new radars, and new combat information center (CIC). (NHHHC)

underpinned an argument over providing minimum commitments in the Pacific to retain the initiative and prevent crisis that would syphon away European Theater forces at inopportune moments. The support of Marshall was critical to King's primary goal of the conference, which was to guarantee the Pacific its share of the pie.

King achieved success at the conference. He obtained the acknowledgement that the fleet dispositions present in the Atlantic were sufficient and that all of America's new construction could be deployed to the Pacific.⁷⁰ For the price of one fast carrier and two fast battleships, King obtained the right to deploy all new battleships and fleet carriers to the Pacific. The troops, supplies, and shipping to undertake operations would still be a constant battle, but the needs of the Pacific Fleet with regards to force allocation were met from this point on without a struggle in the Atlantic.

⁷⁰ "Situation to Be Created in the Eastern Theater (Pacific and Burma) in 1943," C.C.S. 153 (Revised), 17 January 1943 in Presidential Trips - Casablanca Conference, Papers and Minutes of Meetings - January 1943 in Message Files, 16.

Policy Withheld *Ranger* Not Purported Deficiencies

In March and April, Churchill had made two requests for American carrier reinforcement. The key difference between providing *Wasp* and withholding *Ranger* was not ship characteristics but policy. Churchill requested *Wasp* to backfill Royal Navy units dispatched to the Indian Ocean whereas he requested *Ranger* to reinforce the Indian Ocean directly. American naval policy was to replace Royal Navy units in the Atlantic to permit them to concentrate in the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean rather than to directly reinforce those theaters. Undeterred by Churchill's persistence for *Ranger*, Roosevelt and King held firmly to policy and did not send *Ranger* to the Indian Ocean.

In June, the Royal Navy had requested *Ranger* for Operation Pedestal. Again, it was against American naval policy, at the time, to directly support Mediterranean operations with fleet units. In keeping with policy, King offered *Ranger* to replace *Victorious* in the Home Fleet to allow the necessary Royal Navy concentration for the operation. In spite of the offer, *Ranger* proceeded on another aircraft ferry mission because the Middle East needed aircraft reinforcement following the fall of Tobruk and because King refused to guarantee the loan of *Ranger* beyond the initiation of Operation Watchtower.

At the end of November, Churchill had requested *Ranger* for the Home Fleet in exchange for two British carriers for the South Pacific. Once again, the request was against American naval policy. This time the policy was avoidance of carrier task forces of mixed nationality. In withholding *Ranger* from the Home Fleet, King stated that if the situation became critical *Ranger* would go to the Pacific.

Thrice *Ranger* was requested and thrice it was withheld. All three requests were definitively against American naval policy. In all three cases, the necessity for breaking policy was not accepted by Roosevelt or King. To refuse British requests without debating policy and situation analysis, Roosevelt and King relied upon overplaying negative characteristics of *Ranger*. Yet it is clear from internal records that Roosevelt and King did not believe these characteristics barred *Ranger* from operations in the Pacific against Japan. Instead, internal documents regarding two of the requests plainly state that if circumstances required *Ranger* would have been sent to the Pacific.

1943: The Modernization That Almost Was

The war in the European Theater continued in a manner vastly different in 1943 than 1942, but in key themes the naval war was fundamentally unchanged. Great progress had been made in North Africa, but almost no progress had been made in reducing the German and Italian fleets. A powerful German squadron was ensconced in Norway and the full might of the Italian

battlefleet remained available to obstruct actions in the central basin of the Mediterranean. Although great strides had been accomplished in the Pacific with a perilously thin margin of forces, the strategic situation in the Atlantic called for no less naval support than it had required in 1942.⁷¹

For *Ranger*, its role was little different in 1943 versus 1942:

1. Anchor the Atlantic Fleet's striking force against German raiders.
2. Support active and potential Army operations.
3. Be available to reinforce the Home Fleet to allow the Royal Navy to concentrate in the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean as the situation dictates.

Over 1943 a desire grew to modernize *Ranger* and *Enterprise* to incorporate wartime lessons and innovations. The other remaining prewar carrier, *Saratoga*, had already benefited from a modernization in early 1942 while repairing the damage from its first torpedoing.⁷² For the most part, *Ranger* and *Enterprise* were both up-to-date on their sensors and armaments, but both could benefit from structural and system improvements. The airpower of both would benefit from faster elevators and strengthening of the flight decks for the heavy weight of new types of aircraft in production. Deck catapults for *Ranger* would expand the opportunities in which *Ranger* could perform various flight operations. Blistering both vessels would provide greater torpedo protection and relieve the extreme condition of overloading from sensor, armament, and other additions of 1942 and prior.⁷³ The benefits to each carrier were obvious to all but modernization would depend on resource allocation.

Modernizing *Enterprise* was successfully approved at the 4 June 1943 Pacific Conference between Chief of Naval Operations and Commander in Chief, US Fleet, Admiral King and Commander, Pacific Ocean Areas, and Commander, Pacific Fleet, Admiral Nimitz. The minutes capture Nimitz's opinion of *Enterprise* as "a good carrier with a weak elevator."⁷⁴ With King's blessing, Nimitz seized the opportunity and sent *Enterprise* to Puget Sound Navy Yard for modernization. *Enterprise* departed Pearl Harbor on 14 July and did not return until 6 November.⁷⁵ Both the availability of a yard and capacity to release a fleet carrier for a quarter of 1943 stand in stark contrast to the

⁷¹ "Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet", *Atlantic Fleet History* 1, 13 May 1946 in World War II War Diaries, 596-600.

⁷² Friedman, *US Aircraft Carriers*, 51.

⁷³ Friedman, *US Aircraft Carriers*, 76 and 99.

⁷⁴ Item #25, Conference Notes of 4 June 1943 in Agenda, Minutes, and Working Papers for Conferences held Between Admiral King (COMINCH-CNO) and Admiral Nimitz (CINCPAC), 1942-1945, Papers of FADM Ernest J. King, 1878-1956, Naval History and Heritage Center, Navy Yard, Washington, DC.

⁷⁵ War Diary, July to November 1943, USS *Enterprise* in World War II War Diaries.

resources in the Atlantic.

Upon the conclusion of extensive discussions into modernizing *Ranger*, formal recommendation for the comprehensive refit and modernization was submitted by the commanding officer on 13 October 1943.⁷⁶ Although the modernization was approved, it was infamously cancelled. Robert Cressman has done an excellent job illuminating the correspondence authorizing and subsequently canceling the modernization of *Ranger*, but it is important to examine two letters further: the commander in chief, Atlantic Fleet's (CinCLant) lukewarm recommendation to King to proceed and Vice Chief of Naval Operations Frederick J. Horne's heavy-handed recommendation to cancel.⁷⁷ Both had severe biases against modernizing *Ranger* for further combat duty. King's responses as commander in chief, US Fleet (Cominch) provide indication of his own thinking. The cancellation of *Ranger*'s modernization had less to do with the ultimate utility of *Ranger* as a fleet carrier and was instead rooted in non-combat issues.

When the subject of modernizing *Ranger* officially came to CinCLant on 15 November 1943, Admiral Royal E. Ingersoll had a little reason to wish *Ranger* to be modernized. *Ranger* was the Atlantic Fleet's only fast carrier. To date the unmodernized *Ranger* had met the needs of a combatant carrier in the Atlantic Fleet, but, by the end of September 1943, the Italian fleet had been surrendered and the German fleet was waning. A modernized *Ranger* was likely to transfer to the Pacific Fleet, as had all other carriers upon leaving the east coast yards. Although CinCLant no longer needed a carrier for combat, he still had need for as many flight decks as he could have.

"In view of the progress made in the CV program,"⁷⁸ the need for a fast carrier to commission new air groups had been growing across 1943. The fruits of the greatest ship building program in history were finally realized in 1943. Six Essex-class carriers and nine Independence-class carriers were commissioned that year with more on the building ways to commission in 1944 and 1945. The responsibility to form the air groups for each fast carrier commissioned was upon Atlantic Fleet. The weight of this program necessitated

⁷⁶ The recommendation was endorsed and routed to the Bureau of Ships for action via: 9 November 1943, Rear Admiral Gerald F. Bogan, Commander, Fleet Air, Norfolk; 14 November 1943, Vice Admiral Patrick N. L. Bellinger, Commander, Aircraft, Atlantic Fleet; 17 November 1943, Admiral Royal Ingersoll, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet; 13 December 1943, Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, US Fleet; 18 December 1943, Vice Admiral Frederick J. Horne, Vice Chief of Naval Operations.

⁷⁷ Cressman, *USS Ranger*, 352-353 and 358-360.

⁷⁸ Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet, to Chief of the Bureau of Ships, 17 November 1943, Subject: "USS RANGER (CV4) – Recommending a comprehensive refit and modernization," in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-313, NARA.

the use of six Atlantic Fleet escort carriers in carrier landing qualification and refresher duty for 1944.⁷⁹

To cope with the incredible responsibilities placed upon Atlantic Fleet, CinCLant needed a training carrier more than a fleet carrier. The endorsement of *Ranger*'s modernization was thus tempered to encourage Cominch to forgo the modernization and assign *Ranger* for training duties. Only the barest nod was given to the benefits of modernizing *Ranger* for combat. Despite CinCLant's hedged endorsement, Cominch directed the modernization to occur.⁸⁰ Evidently, King intended further combat action for *Ranger*.

Vice Admiral Horne, vice chief of naval operations, oversaw the Navy's bureaus administering the sinews of Navy logistics, design production, and commissioning.⁸¹ He was not involved in matters of strategy or unit assignments. Instead, he was the bureaus chief spokesperson in matters conflicting with Cominch, and the Bureau of Ships was desperate not to modernize *Ranger* per Cominch directive.

By 1944, the Bureau of Ships was stretched to the limit administering the greatest naval building program of history. The sourcing of material and building-ways for thousands of ships and the efficient orchestration to deliver those ships quickly was a monumental effort.⁸² Justifiably, the bureau was not eager for additional assignments, and, in the opinion of the bureau, *Ranger* modernization was a spurious request. Every available yard was completely consumed with building Essex-class carriers. *Ranger* could only be modernized on the east coast by delaying Essex class construction. In the bureau's opinion the Essex class was superior enough to *Ranger* to deem any diversion of effort a misappropriation of resources.

Expressing its opinion against the modernization of *Ranger*, the Bureau of Ships informed Horne that modernizing *Ranger* would delay both an Essex-class carrier and an Iowa-class battleship under construction at Norfolk Navy Yard. When this did not result in cancellation, another letter was sent escalating the impact to two Essex-class carriers delayed. The Bureau of Ships routing

⁷⁹ War Histories, Commander, Fleet Air, Norfolk, and Commander, Fleet Air, Quonset Point, in World War II War Diaries.

⁸⁰ Memorandum to Vice Chief of Naval Operations from Commander in Chief, US Fleet, Subject: "USS RANGER (CV4) – Refit and Modernization of," 13 December 1943 in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-19, NARA.

⁸¹ Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Seapower: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 366 and 382.

⁸² Thomas R Heinrich, "Superior to the Combined Strength of Our Enemies," in *Warship Builders: An Industrial History of US Naval Shipbuilding, 1922-1945*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020). Chapter 3 uses the design and construction of Essex-class carriers to examine the naval strategy, shipbuilding programs, and Navy Department reforms during 1940-1945.

sheet for that letter indicated that the Bureau of Ships would further escalate the estimated delays to all three Essex-class carriers under construction at the Norfolk Navy Yard if *Ranger*'s modernization was not cancelled. How many more delays the Bureau of Ships could attribute to *Ranger* modernization will never be known because, with the threat of two delayed carriers, Horne pressed King to cancel the modernization.⁸³

The Bureau of Ships opposition to the modernization of *Ranger* was so great that frustration was found even in the language of Horne's letter to King. A comment on the routing slip attached to Horne's letter to King in Bureau of Ships files stated bluntly, "Unfortunately written in terms which ask Cominch to affirm decision. I'm afraid that *Ranger* will be done."⁸⁴

Cominch response was not immediate. The response closely followed the devastating British carrier raid on the German battleship *Tirpitz* in Norway. Although *Tirpitz* did not sink, the raid crippled the battleship and indicated that Britain had shifted from passive to active large-scale naval operations against Germany's last fleet unit beyond the Baltic.⁸⁵ Possible fleet action in the Atlantic was finally at an end. Within days Task Force 22 was dissolved, and, for the first time in four-and-a-half years, the Atlantic Fleet was without a carrier striking force.⁸⁶ Even so, King was not willing to give up the planning for full modernization. He directed the Bureau of Ships to continue plans and prefabrication for the full modernization at a future date. The lack of specificity pleased the bureau as it could assign limited priority to the planning activities.

Horne, CinCLant, and the Bureau of Ships were not wrong to take the stances they did. The US Navy did not need one more first-line fleet carrier for combat as much as it needed a first-line fleet carrier for training. That their underlying motive was correct does not mean their claims were true that *Ranger*, modernized or unmodernized, was a second-line fleet carrier incapable of operating with the Fast Carrier Task Force. It is evident that King did not agree with these opinions as he had originally approved the modernization and resisted cancelling it outright. What brought him around to deferring the modernization was not disparaging remarks but evidence of training needs that could not be fulfilled with escort carriers (CVEs).

Percolating up through the command channels was justification for

⁸³ Memorandum to Commander in Chief, US Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations from Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Subject: "USS RANGER (CV4) – Refit and Modernization of," 27 March 1944, in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-19, NARA.

⁸⁴ Route slip attached to memo, Commander in Chief, US Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations from Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Subject: "USS RANGER (CV4) – Refit and Modernization of," 27 March 1944, in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence.

⁸⁵ G. H. Bennett, *Hunting Tirpitz* (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2017), 21-28.

⁸⁶ Entry for 15 April 1944, War Diary, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet (CinCLant) in World War II War Diaries.

Ranger's training duty in the Pacific. The squadron commander of VFN-101, the Navy's first night fighter squadron deployed on a frontline carrier, submitted a list of recommendations for the night fighter program on 4 February 1944. It highlighted the need for a large carrier (CV) for night fighter training. Light carriers (CVLs) and CVEs were not considered sufficiently large or stable enough to perform night fighter training safely. To fulfill this role, Cominch directed, "as a matter of urgency," the planning of *Ranger* for immediate use in Pacific Fleet for training of night fighters.⁸⁷

Cominch was homing in on the opportunities present in its three legacy carriers and the individuality of their characteristics. *Enterprise* was singled out to be the night carrier as its smaller aircraft capacity was more suited to a night air group than the enormous day air groups of the Essex class. *Saratoga* and *Ranger* were identified to be the night training carriers as their turning circle and speed, respectively, although not militating against inclusion in fast carrier task forces, were different enough to be the obvious choices for this necessary training duty instead of assigning Essex-class carriers.⁸⁸

The assignment of the surviving pre-war carriers to the night carrier program was settled at the May 1944 Pacific Conference between King and Nimitz. Shortly after on 20 May, *Ranger* entered Norfolk Navy Yard for a limited modernization. Upon completion, *Ranger* headed west, transited the Panama Canal, and reported to Pacific Fleet. Finally, after two-and-a-half years of active war, *Ranger* was headed to the Pacific, a place it had been and would again be considered a valuable combatant. The transfer of *Ranger* to the Pacific was poignantly recalled in CinCLant's war history:

"As the denouement in the Battle of the Atlantic became more pronounced, Admiral Ingersoll began to receive a growing number of orders for transferring some of his most famous units to the Pacific theatre of operations. The carrier RANGER had reported to Admiral Nimitz for duty on 16 July 1944, and thus began the long parade of traditional Atlantic Fleet units through the Panama Canal – even those crusty old ladies, NEW YORK, TEXAS, ARKANSAS."⁸⁹

1944: Awaiting Further Orders to Combat

Ranger transited the Panama Canal on 16 July and after stopping over at

⁸⁷ Item #31 of Section IV – Training, Minutes of Pacific Conference, 6 May 1944 in CNO Subject Files, 1942-1946, RG-313, NARA.

⁸⁸ *Saratoga* and *Ranger* were identified and tasked with night carrier training by the 6 May 1944 Pacific Conference, and *Enterprise* was identified as the night carrier by the 13 July 1944 Pacific Conference in CNO Subject Files, 1942-1946, RG-313, NARA, College Park, MD.

⁸⁹ "Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet," *Atlantic Fleet History* 1, 761.



Like Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, Vice Admiral John S. McCain was also deeply familiar with *Ranger*. This photo of then Captain McCain was taken in September 1937 when he was commanding officer of *Ranger* from June 1937 to June 1939. (NHHC)

with just those few nights of experimentation.

Ranger may have left Pearl Harbor in the opposite direction from combat, but its contribution was noted. *Ranger* received the following dispatch: “Commander Air Force Pacific Fleet commends the officers and men of the *Ranger* for a splendid performance of duty while operating in this area. These operations contributed markedly to the war effort as evidenced by the higher state of training of pilots attained during this period. Well done.”⁹²

Yet the appraised efficiency of

the carrier to the training program would do unjust harm to *Ranger*’s reputation as a first-line carrier.

During *Ranger*’s time at Pearl the subject of finishing the partially completed modernization came to a close. The final decision was prompted by the pertinent question raised by the Commandant of the Norfolk Navy Yard. On April 8th, the navy yard had been informed that the planned modernization was to be deferred but the yard was to continue acquiring materials for the modernization to be completed at a later date.⁹³ With the transfer of *Ranger* to the Pacific, the Commandant of the Norfolk Navy Yard asked for clarification on whether the modernization would be carried out at Puget Sound or Norfolk.⁹⁴

The shift of *Ranger* to the Pacific added a further complication to the fulfilment of the modernization. Only Puget Sound on the west coast was capable of modernizing *Ranger*, but it was also the only yard on the west coast capable of repairing and overhauling all the Pacific Fleet’s carriers and battleships. On the other hand, the transfer of *Ranger* back to Norfolk for the modernization would add two months travel time to the yard work. King’s

⁹² Entry for 15 October 1944, War Diary, October 1944, ComCarDiv 11 in World War II War Diaries.

⁹³ “USS RANGER (CV4) – Modification to,” 8 April 1944 Bureau of Ships to Commandant, Norfolk Navy Yard in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-19, NARA.

⁹⁴ “USS RANGER (CV4) – Change in Home Yard and Transfer of Material,” 30 August 1944 Commandant, Norfolk Navy Yard, to Commander Pffingstag, Bureau of Ships in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-19, NARA.

initial response was confirmation of Norfolk as the yard for modernization, but just days later he changed his mind and cancelled the modernization outright.⁹⁵

The drawn-out demise of *Ranger*'s modernization did not preclude it from combat. Indeed, Nimitz voiced his confidence in *Ranger* on 5 October, stating that "although CarDiv 11 is employed primarily for training the SARATOGA and RANGER are both ships of great value for combat and are to be kept potentially available for combat duty." The commander in chief, Pacific Ocean Areas directed the commander, Air Force, Pacific Fleet that "their employment and state of training of air groups in Hawaiian area be so adjusted that on short notice either or both ships (SARATOGA in particular) can be dispatched to participate in combat."⁹⁶ To comply with the directive, Gardner inspected *Ranger* on 8 October and declared *Ranger* to be in very good condition and effective as a carrier.⁹⁷ Irrespective of their combat value, neither *Saratoga* nor *Ranger* were deployed for operations in the Philippines, but their best chance for deployment resulted from combat experience gained during the operations in October and November.

On 7 December 1944, the US Navy's first night carrier, *Independence*, submitted a report on its operations. As a result of operations since 25 July, the commander of the *Independence* recommended against the assignment of CVLs as night carriers as the flight decks were too small and subject to too much pitch and yaw for efficient and safe night operations.⁹⁸ This threw quite the wrench into the plans to deploy the first night carrier division in the Fast Carrier Task Force by the end of December. The Night Carrier Task Group was to be composed of *Enterprise*, *Independence*, and *Bataan*. In response to the recommendation against CVLs, ComAirPac messaged Admiral William F. Halsey, commander of 3rd Fleet, and Vice Admiral John S. McCain, commander of Second Carrier Task Force, soliciting input on *Independence*'s recommendations.⁹⁹ Both Halsey and McCain proclaimed that the night carrier had proved its utility and sought the realization of the night carrier division with all large carriers in place of the light carriers.

Without explicit prompting, both zeroed in on *Saratoga* and *Ranger*

⁹⁵ "USS RANGER (CV4) – Change in Home Yard and Transfer of Material," 12 September 1944, Chief of Naval Operations to Chief, Bureau of Ships in Bureau of Ships Confidential Correspondence, RG-19, NARA.

⁹⁶ 1945 October 052014 CINCPAC to COMAIRPAC, "Graybook," 2257.

⁹⁷ War Diary, October 1944, ComCarDiv 11 in World War II War Diaries.

⁹⁸ "Night Carrier Operations," 7 December 1944, CO, USS *Independence* to Commander, Air Force, Pacific Fleet in ComAirPac Secret Correspondence, Box 2232, RG-313, NARA College Park, MD.

⁹⁹ Routing slip to "Night Carrier Operations," 7 December 1944, CO, USS *Independence* in ComAirPac Secret Correspondence.

currently operating as training carriers. In considering *Ranger*, both revealed that *Ranger*'s characteristics in Pacific swells were markedly superior to that of light carriers. Halsey, aware of limitations to the opportunity, kept his request to one CV, *Saratoga*. As a night carrier, *Saratoga*'s wide turning radius would not endanger the rest of the Fast Carrier Task Force during night maneuvers because night carriers maneuvered independently. He chose *Saratoga* over *Ranger* because the greater speed of *Saratoga* enabled it to separate more quickly for independent night operations and then hustle back to rejoin prior to dawn as per doctrine.¹⁰⁰ McCain saw no reason to limit the request and messaged ComAirPac asking for both *Saratoga* and *Ranger*.¹⁰¹

Although requested for combat duty, *Ranger* was not so easily released. To backfill the training program, *Independence* and *Bataan* were nominated. If both *Saratoga* and *Ranger* were released for combat duty, McCain nominated a Sangamon-class CVE as an additional training carrier. Complicating the release of *Saratoga* and *Ranger* was the recent submission of a report on the requirements of the carrier pilot training program. The report identified the immense number of carrier qualification landings required every month to adequately train new pilots and to refresh qualified pilots. Large CVs such as *Saratoga* and *Ranger* were identified as worth 1.5 escort carriers (CVEs) each for the number of landings they could perform per month, and large carriers were required to provide air groups with coordinated practice in group operations from a flight deck.¹⁰² Pilots attained a higher state of training with a large carrier, as had been noted by ComAirPac in his dispatch of 15 October to *Ranger*.

The importance given the finding that CVs were more efficient than CVEs was all the greater due to the contemporaneous report on the growing requirements of the carrier transport squadron for more CVEs. As the front moved further and further west the voyage became longer and longer for CVEs ferrying Army and Navy planes to the new conquests and to the battle-worn fleet. Losses to escort carriers during the Philippines operations further compounded the premium on CVEs.¹⁰³ Even if the training program could forgo group practice for embarked air groups, there simply was no fat in the CVE fleet to take up the slack in carrier landing qualification. This is why,

¹⁰⁰ 1944 December 160333 COM3rdFLT to CINCPAC in "MR310 Sec. 2 Plans and Operations-Future Operations, Plans, Etc. (Pacific) - 1944-1945," Military Files, 16.

¹⁰¹ 1944 December 161025 CTF 38 to CINCPAC in "MR300 Sec. 14 Warfare- Mid Pacific Area - December 16-31, 1944," Military Files, 211.

¹⁰² "Carriers for Training - request for assignment of" ComAirPac Secret ltr. to CinCPac Serial 001499 dated 8 November 1944, in ComAirPac Secret Correspondence, A4-1, RG-313, NARA.

¹⁰³ "Carriers for Training - request for assignment of" CinCPAC Secret ltr to Cominch Serial 0103933 dated 17 November 1944, in ComAirPac Secret Correspondence.

despite McCain's request for *Ranger*, only *Saratoga* was deployed.

Saratoga's deployment from the Carrier Training Squadron was destined to be temporary. Before *Saratoga* had departed Pearl Harbor, wheels were already in motion to plan its return. On 27 December, King evinced his displeasure at the assignment of *Independence* and *Bataan* to the training squadron in *Saratoga*'s place.¹⁰⁴ ComAirPac was forced to declare the move as temporary and the next month solicited comments from 5th Fleet on designation of *Saratoga*'s relief.¹⁰⁵ On 13 January 1945, *Ticonderoga* was proposed as replacement.¹⁰⁶ This substitution was scheduled for 5 March with *Saratoga* to return to Pearl Harbor for resumption of training duty.

By 20 February, it was apparent that no large carrier was available as relief for *Saratoga*. The needs of the Carrier Training Squadron still won out, despite the needs of the Fast Carrier Task Force for a night carrier. Nimitz decreed that upon completion of the occupation of Iwo Jima, *Saratoga* would return to Pearl Harbor without relief. Instead, the first practicable Essex-class carrier would become the second night carrier.¹⁰⁷ The specification of class emphasized that nothing else would be available. The use of CVLs was not to be revisited. *Enterprise* was already the other night carrier and *Saratoga* had proven that the training program could not do without two CVs.

The severe damage and near loss of *Saratoga* while supporting the seizure of Iwo Jima overshadowed the fact it would have been detached even without the terrible attack. Its delayed return to the training program for many months did further reveal that assignment to the training program was not subject to class of vessel. The damage and strain upon the Fast Carrier Task Force was such that the commander of 5th Fleet, Admiral Raymond Spruance, messaged Nimitz requesting *Shangri-La* be rushed forward from its training duty at Pearl Harbor.¹⁰⁸ In denying the request, the commander in chief, Pacific Fleet, ruled that the importance and requirements of the training program overrode 5th Fleet's need for additional reinforcement prior to the invasion of Okinawa. In the face of continued pressure by Spruance, Nimitz signed a pointed dispatch to make it clear the decision was made himself. Not even an Essex-class CV was capable of deploying from the training squadron without which "timely replacement of Air Groups suitably trained cannot be achieved and the efficiency and tempo of operations would be unacceptably reduced."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ 1944 December 272145 COMINCH to CINCPAC in ComAirPac Secret Correspondence.

¹⁰⁵ 1944 December 290331 CINCPAC to COMINCH and CNO, "Graybook," 2499.

¹⁰⁶ 1945 January 131938 COMAIRPAC to CINCPAC, "Graybook," 2763.

¹⁰⁷ 1945 February 202305 CINCPAC ADV HQ to COM5THFLT and COMAIRPAC, "Graybook," 2779.

¹⁰⁸ 1945 March 090229 COM5THFLT to CINCPAC ADV HQ, "Graybook," 2811.

¹⁰⁹ 1945 March 132234 CINCPAC ADV HQ to COM5THFLT, "Graybook," 2816.

Although the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, again endorsed the combat value of *Ranger* on 20 March,¹¹⁰ there was no possibility in 1945 that *Ranger* could be required at the front. After the disastrous failure of the Sho plan and near annihilation of the Japanese Navy in October 1944, Japan was incapable of inflicting a disaster upon the US Navy that would allow Japan to wrest control of the initiative again. As long as Japan was incapable of an offensive, no setback could be worth dislocating the training program preparing the pilots who would be needed to redress such a setback. To do so would obtain a limited objective at the cost of the US Navy's efficient recovery.

Ranger was an efficient, combat-capable carrier. However, an efficient training program needs first-line resources to produce fully-trained pilots and air groups who do not need a working-up period prior to combat deployment. Only with a constant supply of replacement air groups and pilots who had attained complete readiness could the 3rd and 5th Fleets achieve the continuous, hard-hitting operations for which they and the US Navy became famous. Even had *Ranger* possessed a larger flight deck, lower metacentric height, a full 32.5 knot speed, and better bomb and torpedo protection, the carrier still would have been assigned to the training squadron. By this measure the *Ranger* design was highly successful.

Conclusion

Ranger was fully capable of carrying out combat deployment in the Pacific, but it was required for other duties. During the war, King and Nimitz, the two admirals with the most authority over *Ranger*'s employment against Japan, gave every indication of being willing to deploy *Ranger* for combat in the Pacific. Combat duty in the Atlantic and later the need to sustain the Navy's war machine precluded *Ranger* from active participation in the Pacific war. Detractors of *Ranger* were the logisticians, such as Vice Admiral Horne and the Bureau of Ships, for whom the development of the navy's war machine was the primary focus. Overwork and scarcity prompted those authorities to play up *Ranger*'s faults to avoid additional work and to acquire the carrier for auxiliary duties supporting the navy's war machine.

Articles and books that evaluate *Ranger* as an unsuccessful design or unsuitable for combat in the Pacific portray the ship as a misstep, but they fail to identify what the US Navy lost in *Ranger*'s design and construction. Too often *Ranger* is lost amid discussions of the Lexington class and Yorktown class. The history of *Ranger* from concept to scrapping spans two decades, during which no two years were anything alike in the US Navy. Between 1927

¹¹⁰ 1945 March 201340 CINCPAC ADV HQ to COMAIRPAC, "Graybook," 3078.

and 1947 there were radical changes in the design, theory, and application of airplanes, carriers, and the fleet, all of which were influenced by diplomacy, economics, industry, and war. The tendency to link the 1931 General Board's revised characteristics for carriers to the decision to employ *Ranger* in the Atlantic fails to evaluate properly the US Navy's evolution across the decades.

Faulty metrics that assign value only upon combat performed in the Pacific need to be discarded. Evaluation only upon comparative design records is insufficient. Weighing *Ranger* must involve the context of all periods of its design, construction, peacetime operation, and wartime operation, and include the command records of those with direct authority over the employment of the carrier.

Evident in the decisions on *Ranger*'s employment is the ascendancy of military necessity over combat-worthiness. Refusal of British requests to provide *Ranger* for combat in no way establishes *Ranger* as useful for noncombat duties only. Cancellation of *Ranger*'s proposed modernization was not declaration of *Ranger* as incapable, modernized or not. Assignment to pilot training was not relegation of an obsolete vessel. In all these decisions, the combat value of *Ranger*, in any theater, was documented but superseded by other needs – political, industrial, and military.

Proponents of building large carriers need not fear revision to the historiography of *Ranger*. Reevaluating *Ranger* does not immediately invalidate all arguments against small carriers, light carriers, medium carriers, vertical take-off and landing carriers, and other explorations of America's carrier design and construction programs. *Ranger* has no bearing on contemporary statistics, tests, and requirements for sortie generation, combat power, cost, active defense systems, passive defense systems, and survivability. *Ranger* is not, however, a detracting example when placed in its context. America might not even have a historical example that is an argument in itself against any particular design or construction. If this is so, the lack of a completely unsuitable carrier in America's history is all the greater responsibility to properly evaluate new carrier designs with contemporary data and needs, not faulty corollaries.

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