British Commonwealth Carrier Operations in the Korean War

By Cdr David Hobbs MBE Royal Navy

In 1950 the Royal Navy was still recovering from a shortage of manpower following the run-down after World War 2. Few ships had their war complement embarked although those deployed to the Far East were more capable than those on the Home Station. Naval Air Squadrons were short of aircrew and maintainers and were still using up stocks of obsolete wartime aircraft as production of new types moved only slowly. Fortunately, a number of people with war experience had been retained. The Far East Station covered a vast area with significant responsibilities.

The Royal Australian Navy had only formed its Fleet Air Arm in 1948 with a great deal of British help and had only recently taken delivery of its first carrier and embarked air group. Many of its aircrew had wartime experience with the Royal navy or Royal Australian Air Force.

The Royal Canadian Navy had also recently formed a Fleet Air Arm with a light fleet carrier on loan from Britain, but did not deploy it to Korea. A potential plan to embark a Canadian Sea Fury squadron in a British carrier was not acted on.

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The outbreak of war

The North Korean People's Army (NKPA) advanced, almost at will, through the South Korean defences after its surprise attack on 25 June 1950. On 27 June, President Syngman Rhee and his Government left Seoul and it must have seemed to the Communist commanders that the war was already won. However, in their plans they had left one factor out of their calculations that was to prove their ruin — sea power. The reaction of the United Nations to this aggression was swift and unambiguous, allowing Allied navies to exert relentless pressure on North Korea.

In the summer of 1950, the British Far East Station was commanded by Admiral Sir Patrick Brind who flew his flag at a shore headquarters in Singapore. Fortuitously, much of the operational fleet was in Japanese waters under the operational control of Rear Admiral Andrewes, Flag Officer Second-in-Command Far East Fleet (FO2 FEF), in the cruiser Belfast. They had recently carried out a number of exercises with USN warships under the command of Vice Admiral C T Joy USN, Commander US Naval Forces Far East (COMNAVFE). The British Task Force included the light fleet carrier Triumph, the cruiser Jamaica and a number of destroyers, frigates and logistic ships including a hospital ship.

On hearing of the invasion, Admiral Andrewes sailed on his own initiative at 0130 on 26 June, giving orders to his force to concentrate in southern Japanese ports. On 27 June the UN Security Council had described the NKPA attack as "a breach of world peace" and authorised member nations to assist the Republic of Korea. The British Government's decision to support the Security Resolution was announced by the Prime Minister, Mr Attlee, in the House of Commons on 27 June. On the next day he announced that British naval forces in Japanese waters were placed at the disposal of US authorities to act on behalf of the UN Security Council. The Canadian Government immediately offered naval support followed on 29 June, by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand. Orders from the Admiralty were sent directing the C-in-C Far East "to place the Royal Navy at present in Japanese waters at the disposal of the US Naval Command". Admiral Brind had already offered the use of his fleet to Vice Admiral Joy for 'any humanitarian mission' and warned Rear Admiral Andrewes that he might soon be called on for action under the UN Charter.

Commonwealth naval units were rapidly assimilated into the US command structure. COMNAVFE, Vice Admiral Joy placed Rear Admiral Andrewes in command of Task Group 96.8, the West Korean Support Group which comprised mainly Commonwealth and Allied ships. Rear Admiral Higgins USN was placed in command of the mainly USN East Korean Support Group. Triumph joined Task Force 77 of the US Pacific Fleet off Okinawa where Rear Admiral Hoskins USN, Commander carrier Division 3 in USS Valley Forge took tactical command of the force. Planning for a combined strike against targets in North Korea started at once and the Task Force moved to the operating area. American signal procedures were adopted at once and no difficulty was found in working with the USN. Rear Admiral Andrewes later wrote that "it all seemed so familiar as it was just what we had done so often before during the exercises in March with very similar forces". Also, it was only five years since the US and British pacific Fleets had worked together so successfully in the final phase of the war against Japan.

The first carrier strike

The first naval air strikes of the war were flown off between 0545 and 0615 on 3 July from USS Valley Forge and HMS Triumph: 8 Corsairs, 16 Skyraiders and 12 jets from Valley Forge attacked Pyongyang and other airfield sites, destroying 15 to 20 aircraft on the ground and 2 in the air; 12 Fireflies and 9 Seafires from Triumph armed with rockets attacked Haeju airfield, damaging hangars and buildings but no aircraft were sighted. All the aircraft returned safely, flak had been negligible but slight damage had been inflicted on some aircraft by small arms fire.

Both navies had been at pains after 1945 to work out common operating procedures and these, enhanced by cross deck operations in the recent exercises, worked well. On 4 July aircraft from Valley Forge attacked two gunboats in the Taedong estuary, destroyed one small railway bridge, damaged another and destroyed 15 railway

locomotives and a significant amount of rolling stock. Aircraft from Triumph attacked the railway between Yonan and Haeju, scoring two hits on a bridge. Targets of opportunity, including a column of marching troops, were attacked. Two American and one British aircraft were damaged by flak.

The choice of targets for the British aircraft was severely limited by the poor radius of action of the early mark of Firefly operated by Triumph's 14th Carrier Air Group (CAG) and the limited strike capability of the Seafire 47 which was primarily an air defence fighter. An unfortunate incident occurred on 28 July 1950 when the Fleet Air Arm suffered its first casualty of the war. Commissioned Pilot White of 800 Naval Air Squadron was shot down in his Seafire by a USAF B29 "for no very apparent reason". Mr White was picked up, suffering from burns, from his dinghy by a USN destroyer and transferred to Triumph later in the day. Commenting on the incident, COMNAVFE later said that "the calculated risk of damage to friendly forces must be accepted".

Carrier operations

Like all wars in the modern era, this was a maritime war with the United Nations utterly dependent on the sea for the transport of troops, supplies and, to

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HMS Triumph

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Firefly landing on HMS Theseus

a very large extent, air support. Control of the sea allowed a firm beachhead around Pusan to be established and maintained. Triumph suffered a leaking stern gland and was replaced in Task Force 77 by USS Philippine Sea, a more potent strike carrier. After repairs, she joined the West Coast Task Force where British and Australian carriers were to operate for much of the remainder of the war. Although less capable than her USN counterparts, Triumph played a key role in the war by being in the right place at the right time and her contribution was, thus, more significant than forces who were too far away.

In September, Triumph played a small part in the covering force during the landings at Inchon that transformed the war. By then her elderly air group had become increasingly difficult to maintain and she was due for replacement.

HMS Theseus relieved her — a sister ship that carried the 17th CAG equipped with squadrons of very capable Sea Fury and Firefly FR5 aircraft. Her squadrons were kept busy flying combat air patrols over inshore forces, strafing mine-laying junks and supporting troops ashore. By November, it seemed that the war was nearly over and

Theseus was allowed to leave the combat zone when UN forces moved close to the Yalu River. She was hastily recalled when Chinese troops infiltrated into Korea and struck hard at UN ground forces.

A pattern of operations emerged in which the British carrier off the west coast alternated with a USN light carrier and friendly rivalry led to a constant improvement in both navies' war fighting capability. When not on patrol, the British ship would return to the Commonwealth base port at Sasebo to take on replacement aircraft and ammunition and give leave for the rest and recreation of the ship's company. A patrol typically comprised ten days at sea with a day refuelling and re-arming at sea in the middle.

Theseus operated throughout the bitterly cold winter of 1950-51 despite gales, hail, snow and poor visibility. In December the air group was only able to fly on 17 days but managed 630 sorties without accident. By February the sortie tally had risen to 1,500, testimony to the ruggedness of the aircraft and the skill of the pilots. 17 CAG was awarded the Boyd Trophy for 1950. This was instituted by Rear Admiral Sir Denis Boyd, the wartime Captain of HMS Illustrious of Taranto

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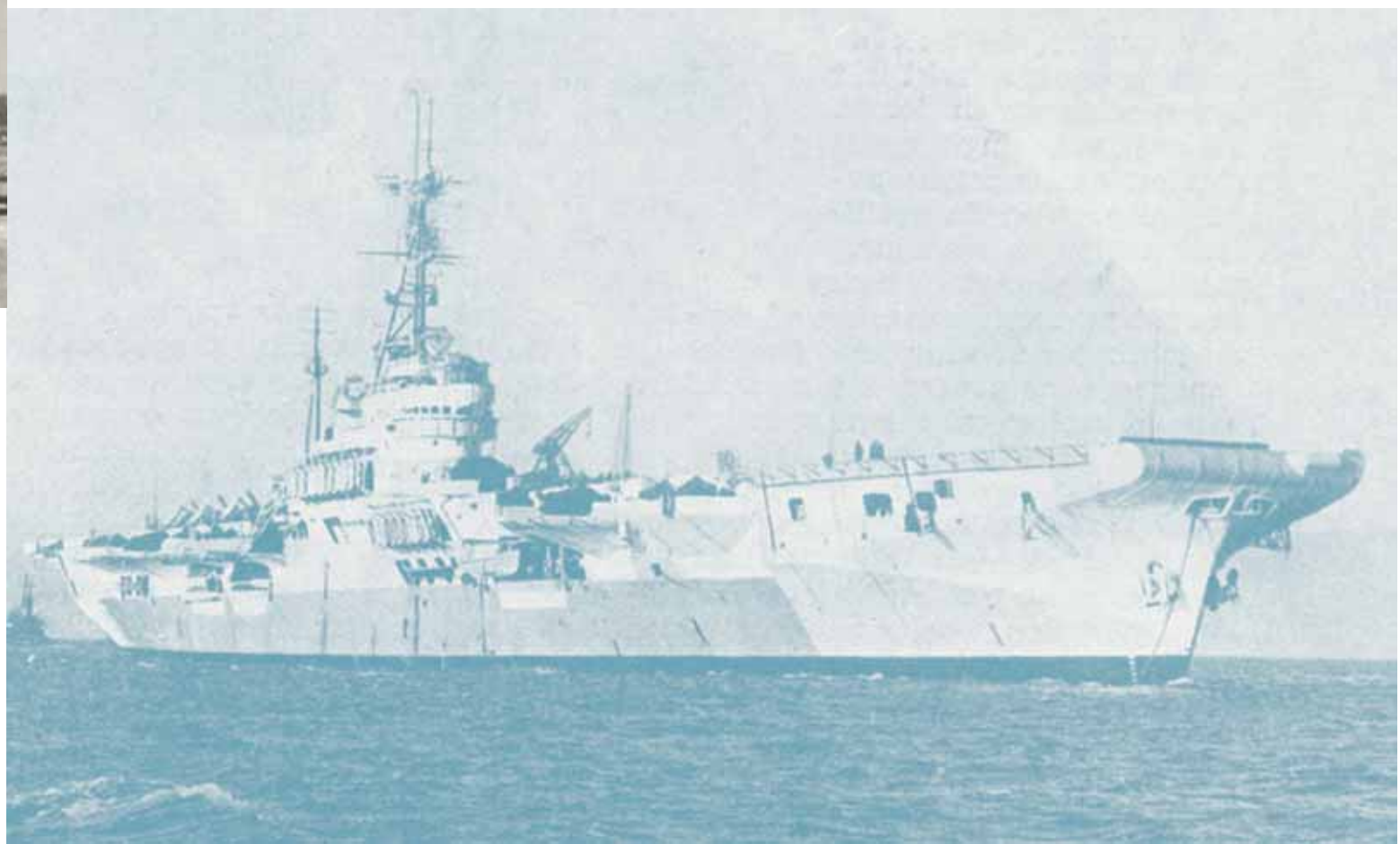
HMS Glory



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Sea Fury aircraft pass over HMAS Sydney

fame, and is awarded for the most outstanding feat of naval aviation in a given year. Until his death in 1965, Admiral Boyd usually presented the trophy in person.

As spring succeeded winter, less wind and a heavy swell gave deck landing a lively interest but the accident rate remained commendably low. The loan of a USN helicopter for combat SAR duties in place of the obsolete Sea Otter biplane flying boat had an outstanding effect on aircrew morale. Five aircrew were rescued within minutes of ditching in its first few weeks of operation.

This is an appropriate point to mention the maintenance carrier HMS Unicorn, which served throughout the war in support of the operational carriers. She ferried hundreds of replacement airframes from the main British bases at Singapore and Hong Kong, used her extensive workshops to repair battle damaged aircraft and transported thousands of Commonwealth troops to and from Korea. She even carried out a bombardment of NKPA positions ashore with her four inch guns on one sortie. Despite her largely second line tasking, she had a fully functional flight deck and often gave deck-landing practice to replacement pilots and acted as 'spare deck' for the operational carriers. Replacement aircraft were ferried from the UK to the Far East in the light fleet carrier HMS Warrior.

In April 1951 Theseus was relieved by HMS Glory having carried out 3,500 operational sorties in 86 flying days over seven months. The light fleet carriers were built to an austere specification

By the summer of 1952 the first communist jet, the Mig 15 powered with a copy of the Rolls Royce Nene, appeared. They had a considerable edge in performance over the Sea Fury but, fortunately, their pilots did not

in World War 2 and had many disadvantages including lack of speed, liveliness in rough weather and recurrent trouble with the single catapult. Despite that, they succeeded in operating with an intensity and skill which Rear Admiral Scott-Moncrieff, who had relieved Rear Admiral Andrewes as FO2 FEF on his promotion to Vice Admiral, was able to report to his C-in-C as being praised highly by the USN.

Glory, another of the ubiquitous light fleet carriers, carried the re-formed 14th CAG equipped with Sea Furies and Firefly FR5 which were to be the standard Commonwealth carrier fighter-bombers for the rest of the war. Her first patrol coincided with the Chinese spring offensive in which the 1st Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment was almost annihilated defending a position of the Imjin River and the British 27th Brigade and the US 5th Cavalry Regiment fought memorable delaying actions near Kapyong. In the summer, talks about an armistice began and the land war became static, based on lines of trenches reminiscent of the First World War.

In September 1951 Glory was relieved by HMAS Sydney, the first Commonwealth carrier to go into action and a great credit to the Royal Australian Navy which had only established its own Fleet Air Arm in 1948. Her squadrons were equipped with the same type of aircraft as her British sister ships and, indeed, many replacement aircraft came from British Far East reserve stocks, lent to the RAN while Sydney was in the war zone. Aircraft maintained the coastal blockade and kept a watchful eye on the building up of Chinese troops by rail and road. During October, Sydney had to move away from the war zone to avoid Hurricane 'Ruth'. She still encountered storm force seas, which destroyed six aircraft in the deck park.

In four months of operations, while Glory was away refitting in Australia, Sydney's 21st CAG flew 2,366 sorties in 43 operational flying days. Casualties included three pilots killed and 15 aircraft lost. She was relieved, in turn, by Glory who "fell back into the routine as if she had never been away" in January 1952. Flying operations now included the defence of islands off the west coast occupied by Allied forces as well as interdiction, spotting for shore bombardment, blockade enforcement and close support of the Commonwealth Division. By the end of her second deployment in the war zone, Glory completed nearly 5,000 operational sorties for the loss of nine aircrew and 27 aircraft. Her Sea Furies, armed with two 500 lb bombs, had become deadly accurate dive-bombers using a 45 degree dive technique.

For the remainder of the war, Glory alternated in the operational area with yet another light fleet carrier, HMS Ocean. By the summer of 1952 the first communist jet, the Mig 15 powered with a copy of the Rolls Royce Nene, appeared. They had a considerable edge in performance over the Sea Fury but, fortunately, their pilots did not. Sea Fury sections stayed together, kept their eyes peeled, used the available cloud cover and survived. Some did more than that. A World War 2 veteran pilot, Lieutenant Peter Carmichael, always known as 'Hoagy' and his flight from 802 Naval Air Squadron embarked in Ocean shot down a Mig 15 on 9 August 1952. They 'inconvenienced' several others.

Looking back on the war, Carmichael recalled that ox-carts were one of the main road targets to go for. It was amazing how many of them blew up when you hit them with cannon fire! This was a manifestation of the Allied policy of interdiction in which both heavy bombers of the USAF and the bomb and rocket armed carrier fighter-bombers attempted to halt enemy troop and supply movement. It was not entirely successful and the communist armies were able to launch a large scale offensive in the spring of 1953, as the possibility of a truce became stronger in the hope of making it appear as if the UN was suing for peace in order to avoid defeat. During this final period, Sea Furies and Fireflies covered large areas of country; attacking anything that moved and much that did not. For a time three night-fighter Fireflies were put ashore at the request of the US 5th Air Force to counter night-nuisance raids by Communist propeller driven aircraft. They operated with success from an airstrip south of Seoul.

The downed aircrew helped to keep the encircling enemy troops at bay with their Owen sub machine guns

At last, on 27 July 1953, an armistice was signed at Panmunjon. For some months after the war, light fleet carriers continued to operate close to Korea in case there was a resumption of hostilities. They included a tour by HMS Warrior, returned to operational duties after her time as a ferry carrier and HMAS Sydney, which left Korea for the last time in June 1954.

The Commonwealth carrier that saw most action in the Korean War was HMS Glory. She had equalled a record of 123 sorties in a single day set by HMS Ocean, a feat which involved every pilot including Commander 'Air' flying four sorties and which resulted in the destruction of 7 bridges, 28 buildings and 5 ox-carts. After leaving the UK in May 1951, she steamed 157,000 miles and flew 13,700 sorties of which 9,500 were operational. Her aircraft destroyed 70 bridges, 392 vehicles and 49 railway trucks for the loss of 20 aircrew. Weapon expenditure for this ship alone totalled 278 x 1,000 lb bombs, 7,080 x 500 lb bombs, 24,328 x 3 inch rocket projectiles and 1,441,000 rounds of 20 mm cannon ammunition.

Sorties
These are examples of sorties flown from HMS Glory:

People
Individual accounts of war operations are beyond the scope of this paper but I have selected two as being illustrative of the Commonwealth carrier operations. Sub Lieutenant Neil MacMilland and CPO Hancox of the RAN were shot down in the Firefly near Sariwon north of Haeju. HMAS Sydney had Sea Furies in the air and they were sent to provide cover, as the downed aircraft was well inside enemy territory. The carrier captain found it difficult to make the decision to send the SAR helicopter,

June 1951	Sea Furies flew close air support over the Allied lines. Fireflies used 1,000 lb bombs against bridges and both types spotted for bombardments by frigates.
July 1951	Attacks concentrated on railway trucks, junks and barracks. Several 'moving haystacks' caught fire after being hit.
September 1951	Set a new record of 66 offensive and 18 defensive sorties in a day with 100% serviceability.
February 1952	Operated in defence of allied held island including Chodo and Pengyong do.
March 1952	Lieutenant Fraser's Sea Fury suffered an engine failure 'slotting' to starboard of the carrier and he ditched. He was immediately rescued by the USN planeguard helicopter, which had him on deck in one and half minutes; quicker than he would have been there in his own aircraft!
March 1953	Equalled the record of 123 sorties in a single day set by Ocean.

loaned by the USN with a USN crew, for them because it was doubtful if they could fly the 75 miles and clear enemy territory before nightfall. He approved the sortie and the helicopter set off. Meanwhile Meteor fighters of 77 Squadron RAAF joined the Sea Furies and the downed aircrew helped to keep the encircling enemy troops at bay with their Owen sub machine guns. At 1715 the Meteors had to go but the Sea Furies, flown by Lieutenants Cavanagh and Salthouse, decided to stay despite being low on fuel. At 1725 the helicopter arrived having flown at 120 knots, some 20 knots above the accepted legal maximum, and landed. Its Observer, CPO Gooding jumped out and shot two enemy soldiers who had crept to within 15 yards of the downed aircraft. An hour later, the helicopter, with the two rescued aircrew and still escorted by the Sea Furies, landed at Kimpo airfield, just as darkness fell.

During a patrol by HMS Glory in January 1953 a different form of interdiction was tried. With the rivers and ground both frozen hard, road transport could easily drive round any damage inflicted. It was well known that railway bridges were always quickly repaired and so attacks were directed at railway lines at inaccessible parts of the routes: 33 cuts were made and, at first, repair activity was slow. On 5 January a Sea Fury piloted by Lieutenant D G 'Pug' Mather was hit by enemy flak after an attack on a railway line north of Chaeryon. It caught fire and he baled out but his section failed to see where he landed. For 90 minutes aircraft searched for him without success and a USAF helicopter, escorted by two Sea Furies, was sent to the scene. Unfortunately it was forced to turn back by bad weather and Mather was taken prisoner by the NKPA. One of the escorting Sea Furies, flown by Sub Lieutenant B E Rayner lost radio contact and was never seen again. Later in the day, a Sea Fury flown by Sub Lieutenant B J Simonds RNVR (Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve) spun from 3,000 feet and exploded on hitting the ground. Lieutenant Foster made a wheels-up landing at Pengyong do after a rough-running engine and electrical failure in his Sea Fury. The next day, a Firefly, flown by Lieutenant W R Heaton was hit by flak and ditched north of Kirin do. He was rescued from his dinghy by a USAF helicopter from Pengyong do.

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Great importance was placed on operational summaries, known in the US Navy as 'opsums', intended for the benefit of the press. This was something new to the British at the time

Some lessons learned
Photography was used extensively, being particularly useful for harbour reconnaissance in the enforcement of the blockade and for assessing the results of interdiction missions. In-mid 1952 a photographic interpretation officer was appointed to the operational carrier. His services were described as invaluable and the hundreds of images when expertly interpreted revealed many ingeniously camouflaged targets.

The value of the helicopter as a combat Search and Rescue vehicle was amply demonstrated on land and at sea. As a 'planeguard' during flying operations it was unrivalled for efficiency by day, but a destroyer operating close to the carrier was still necessary at night. At different times, RN aircrew were rescued by helicopters operating from bombarding cruisers at Wonsan and Inchon, from the LST minesweeping tender, from USAF airfields as well as their own carriers. Their morale value was important but their limitations had to be appreciated. These included a small radius of action, made even smaller by strong headwinds and a reliance on dead-reckoning navigation with its potentially large errors. Instrument flying capability was minimal and the range of their VHF radios was limited. For these reasons the ubiquity of basing was an important factor and some of the aircrew that were rescued would not have been recovered if only the carrier borne helicopters had been available.

HMS Ocean instituted pre-dawn missions and these proved very productive as the aircraft found enemy road transport that was still on the move. Many lorries were destroyed in this way and the experience gained by aircrew from this type of operation was of great value. The enemy was not slow to react, however, and Glory's aircraft soon had difficulty finding targets after the enemy introduced a simple but effective air-raid warning system. This comprised warning fires lit on the ground that appeared from two to three miles ahead of the aircraft. When the pilots looked back, they could see a long line of fires stretching behind them! A low approach was then adopted to deceive the enemy radar, but the foggy season intervened before the effectiveness of this method could be fully gauged.

In general, pilots had not been trained in night deck landing techniques and so night interdiction was not possible throughout the war.

Command and control
It was clear from the outset that the United States would bear the heaviest share of the fighting and, since there was an existing US command structure in Japan, it was natural that the naval contributions from the Commonwealth navies should fit into it. Operational command was the most significant since the British Far East Fleet had its own logistic and type support structure. This was able to support the Australian, Canadian and New Zealand units since they all operated ships and equipment of British manufacture. Personal relations between American and British officers were effective and cordial throughout the war. Misunderstandings and differences of outlook were inevitable but were always overcome. Many arose simply because of the difficulty of arranging verbal contact with the American operational commanders, most of whom exercised their commands afloat. In contrast, the three British Admirals who acted as FO2FEF during the war exercised their command from Sasebo in Japan, only proceeding to the operational area with a small staff on special occasions.

The chief difference between the American and British systems lay in the rigidity of the former. Orders were extremely detailed and direct communication on a junior level with another Service or even task force was frowned upon. All communication was supposed to go back up the chain of command, through the top and down again. 'Information' addressees did not take action until told to 'comply' by the immediately superior authority, even when it was obvious that such action would have to be taken. Practically no discretion was left to the 'man on the spot'. In the British Commonwealth command structure, anticipation and initiative were expected and exercised. USN ships attached to the West Coast Blockade Group very much appreciated the reduced reliance on signals, instructions and demands for situation reports. Later relations between the USN and RN benefited greatly from the perceptions of mutual confidence that grew from these operations.

The enemy was allowed to fight on his own terms and many of the advantages possessed by the Allies were negated

Another difference was a rule in the USN that the officer in tactical command of a carrier task force or group must himself be an aviator. It accepted that less efficient Anti-Aircraft (AA) and Anti-Submarine (AS) screening and co-ordination between forces might result and the RN view was that non-flying factors might suffer in consequence. The fact that none of the British flag officers were aviators made it difficult for the Commander 7th Fleet to understand how they could command a task group that contained two light fleet carriers. At one stage it was suggested that they should be taken out of Task Force 95 and, though continuing to operate in the same area in the Yellow Sea, placed under the command of Task Force 77 — the heavy carriers that usually operated in the Sea of Japan. The British vetoed this.

Communications
The rigidity of the US system of command threw a heavy strain on communications. Operation orders and plans reached prodigious dimensions and contained so much detail that, from a British perspective 'some of the wood could not be seen for the trees'. Time was wasted while orders were passed down the long chains of command and 'Americanisms' such as RFS — Ready for Sea initially caused confusion. On the whole, commonwealth warships had little difficulty in using the US system but had to augment the equipment and manning levels in order cope with the increased signal traffic.

The strain on communications was amplified by the large number of situation reports, reports of intentions, action taken and so on, required from ships at sea by US commanders. Great importance was placed on operational summaries, known in the US Navy as 'opsums', intended for the benefit of the press. This was something new to the British at the time although it was to become familiar to a later generation during the Falklands War.

British perception of the interdiction campaign
Complete interdiction of a battlefield has always proved difficult but circumstances in Korea seemed to offer special opportunities. The complete blockade enforced by the overwhelming UN naval forces entirely ruled out supply by sea; the meagre rail and primitive road communications of North Korea seemed vulnerable to the almost undisputed UN air power. Additionally, important road and rail centres on the east coast were open to naval bombardment. The vulnerability of the railways seemed to be enhanced by the large number of bridges and tunnels forced on them by the mountainous terrain of North Korea. For example, the eastern network, scene of most naval interdiction effort, included 956 bridges and causeways and 231 tunnels in 1140 miles of track.

After the limitation of the Chinese offensive, the main effort of UN air operations was directed at interdiction. This was the primary responsibility of the US 5th Air Force, supported by allied contingents and all available naval and USMC aircraft. The efforts of the USAF and USN were never co-ordinated at theatre level, one result from the lack of a unified joint command. Gradually, it came to be accepted that, broadly speaking, the USN would deal with the east coast railway and highway systems and the USAF dealt with the west coast where it interacted with the Commonwealth carrier efforts. Except when circumstances dictated other temporary employment of aircraft, this policy continued for 20 months. Immense damage was unquestionably inflicted on the enemy communications systems and all movement by rail or road was confined to the hours of darkness but full interdiction of the battlefield was never achieved. Throughout the campaign, the Communists were always able to launch an offensive if they wished to do so.

The causes of this failure in British eyes were primarily due to inhibitions accepted by the UN for political reasons, and partly to tactical and operational conditions. In the former category the ban on sources of supply in Manchuria robbed aircraft of targets which might well have been decisive. The static war, accepted during the protracted armistice negotiations, enabled the Communists to keep their strongly fortified front lines sufficiently supplied in a way they could never have done in a war of movement. The enemy was allowed to fight on his own terms and many of the advantages possessed by the Allies were negated.

When it was initiated in January 1951, the interdiction campaign had the object of impeding the Communist advance and was undoubtedly justified although opposed by Admiral Struble, CTF 77, who felt that his aircraft would be better employed providing close air support for the Army. Its continuation throughout the long armistice negotiations savoured dangerously of trying to win the war by air power alone, while the army and navy were relegated to comparatively static and defensive roles. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this strategy, which certainly suited the Communists, was continued for too long and that better results would have been obtained by the adoption of a more aggressive strategy implemented by the three Services working together in the closest co-operation in support of each other. With hindsight, the exertion of the mobility and flexibility given to the UN forces by their command of the sea and the air should have been used to force a war of movement that the enemy could not have sustained. This might well have compelled the enemy to accept more satisfactory armistice conditions at an appreciably earlier date.

Summary and comment

At the outset, Rear Admiral Andrewes had stated that it would be wrong to regard a single light fleet carrier as representative of what naval aviation could achieve in any theatre. Even taking into account the conditions under which the war was fought, the endless coastline around a narrow peninsula and the lack of naval and air opposition, the performance of the Commonwealth carriers was, however, remarkable. The intensity of flying, the operational lessons and the length of the war, throughout which the Commonwealth maintained a carrier on station brought many squadrons and their people to a high pitch of professionalism and efficiency matched in few other arms of the British Services. In turn, this produced a corps of experienced aircrew and maintainers who were well equipped to handle the new generation of aircraft, such as the Buccaneer, and to use the new equipment and techniques being developed in the UK that would revolutionise carrier aviation.

The light fleet carriers provided the most conspicuous aspect of Commonwealth operations in the Korean War. Their performance was admitted on all sides to be outstanding, but was possible only because of the lack of serious naval and air opposition. Had these existed on an appreciable scale, more ships would have been needed and more effort would have been required for fighter defence and escort to the detriment of offensive operations. The results achieved were the result of hard work, much improvisation and the driving of machinery — in some cases beyond the limits for which it was designed.

The signing of an armistice on 27 July 1953 ended hostilities that had lasted 1,128 days and involved naval forces from Australia, Canada, Colombia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the USA.

The seal of Royal approval was set on the Commonwealth effort two days after the armistice was signed when the following message from Her Majesty the Queen to the Board of Admiralty was signalled to the Fleet:

"Please express to all serving in the Commonwealth Fleet my deep appreciation of the splendid service they have given throughout the fighting in Korea."
(Signed ELIZABETH R)

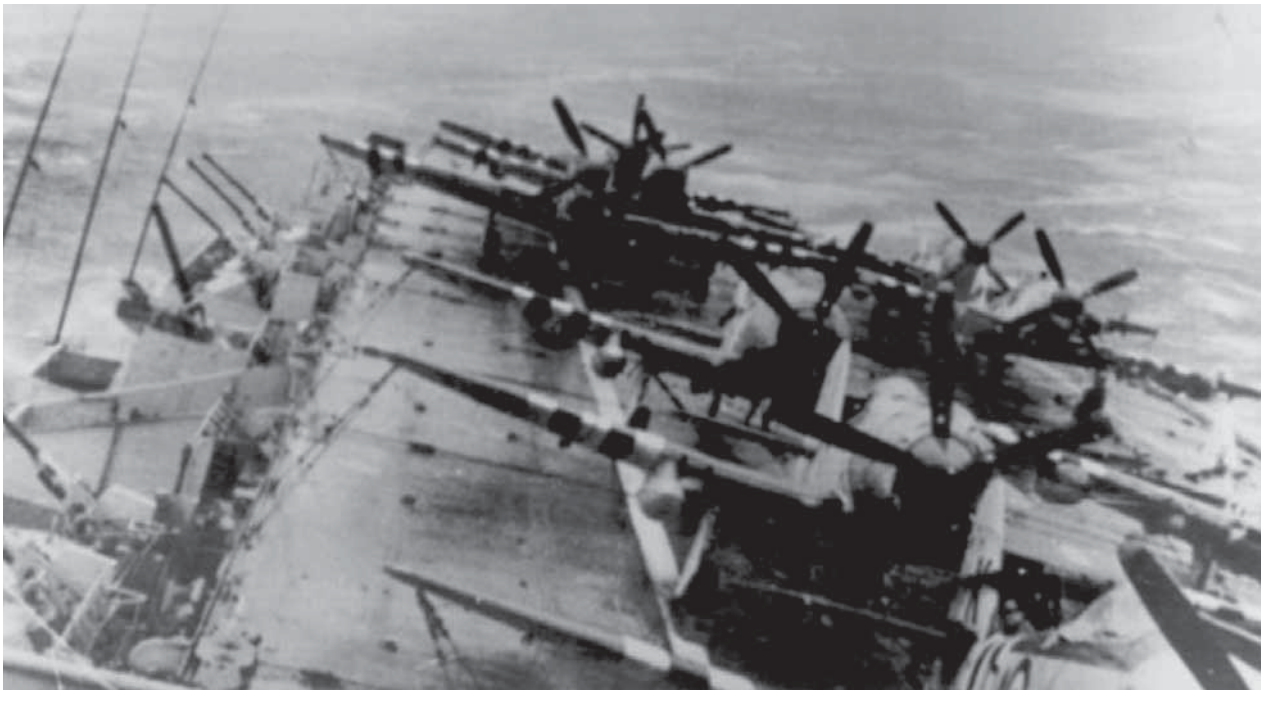
Statistics

- During the war, 76 ships of the Commonwealth Navies and their fleet auxiliary services served in the combat area for varying periods: 32 warships of the Royal Navy included 5 carriers, 6 cruisers, 7 destroyers and 14 frigates; 9 warships of the Royal Australian Navy included 1 carrier, 4 destroyers and 4 frigates. Their combined casualties totalled 191.

- 17,000 officers and men of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service served afloat in Korean waters and 4,300 more served ashore in Japan: 165 officers and men were decorated for gallantry and 289 were mentioned in despatches. British warships steamed 2,100,550 miles and used 632,150 tons of fuel. Carrier aircraft dropped 15,200 bombs of various sizes, fired 57,600

rockets and 3,300,000 rounds of 20 mm cannon ammunition in 23,000 operational sorties.

● 4,507 officers and men of the Royal Australian Navy served afloat in the war zone: 57 officers and men were decorated for gallantry. Australian warships steamed over 419,000 miles and carrier aircraft dropped 802 bombs of various sizes, fired 6,359 rockets and 269,249 rounds of 20 mm cannon ammunition in 2,366 operational sorties.



HMAS Sydney, the first Commonwealth carrier to go into action and a great credit to the Royal Australian Navy