

## Aircraft and their Carriers

## Then and Now

On 18 January 1911, an aviation pioneer from Iowa in America, Eugene Burton Ely, made history when he landed his Curtiss pusher airplane on a platform on the armoured cruiser USS *Pennsylvania* anchored in San Francisco Bay which was the first, successful shipboard landing of an aircraft. This flight was also the first ever using a tailhook system, designed and built by circus performer and aviator Hugh Robinson. As Ely later reminisced, "It was easy enough. I think the trick could be successfully turned nine times out of ten".

As described in the book *Carrier : a century of first-hand accounts of Naval Operations in War & Peace* edited by Jean Hood, "at 10:58 o'clock the lookout on the cruiser sighted Ely through the haze and the ship's siren roared a blast of welcome. He came on at terrific speed and circled around the fleet, dipping in salute to each ship, and then came up in the wind for the stern of the *Pennsylvania*. He was flying low as he neared the ship and touched down, lightly striking the platform about forty feet from the inner end. The hooks of

the aeroplane caught the ropes and stopped the bi-plane within sixty feet, coming to a standstill without damaging any part of his machine. There was a great outburst of cheers and a rush of the officers, visitors and sailors to greet the naval aviator.

Exactly one hour from the time he landed on the cruiser, Ely took his seat in the machine and gave the word to let go. The aeroplane swept down the 130-foot platform at high speed, dropped off the stern with a gentle dip and then rose rapidly over the ships in the harbour. The take off was as perfect as the landing had been. Rising to a height of 2000 feet, Ely circled over San Francisco and then headed for the aviation field and landed without any fuss. Thus history was made by this very first tailhooker."

Ely then got in touch with the United States Navy requesting service but United States naval aviation was not yet organised and Ely was destined to continue flying in exhibitions around the USA.

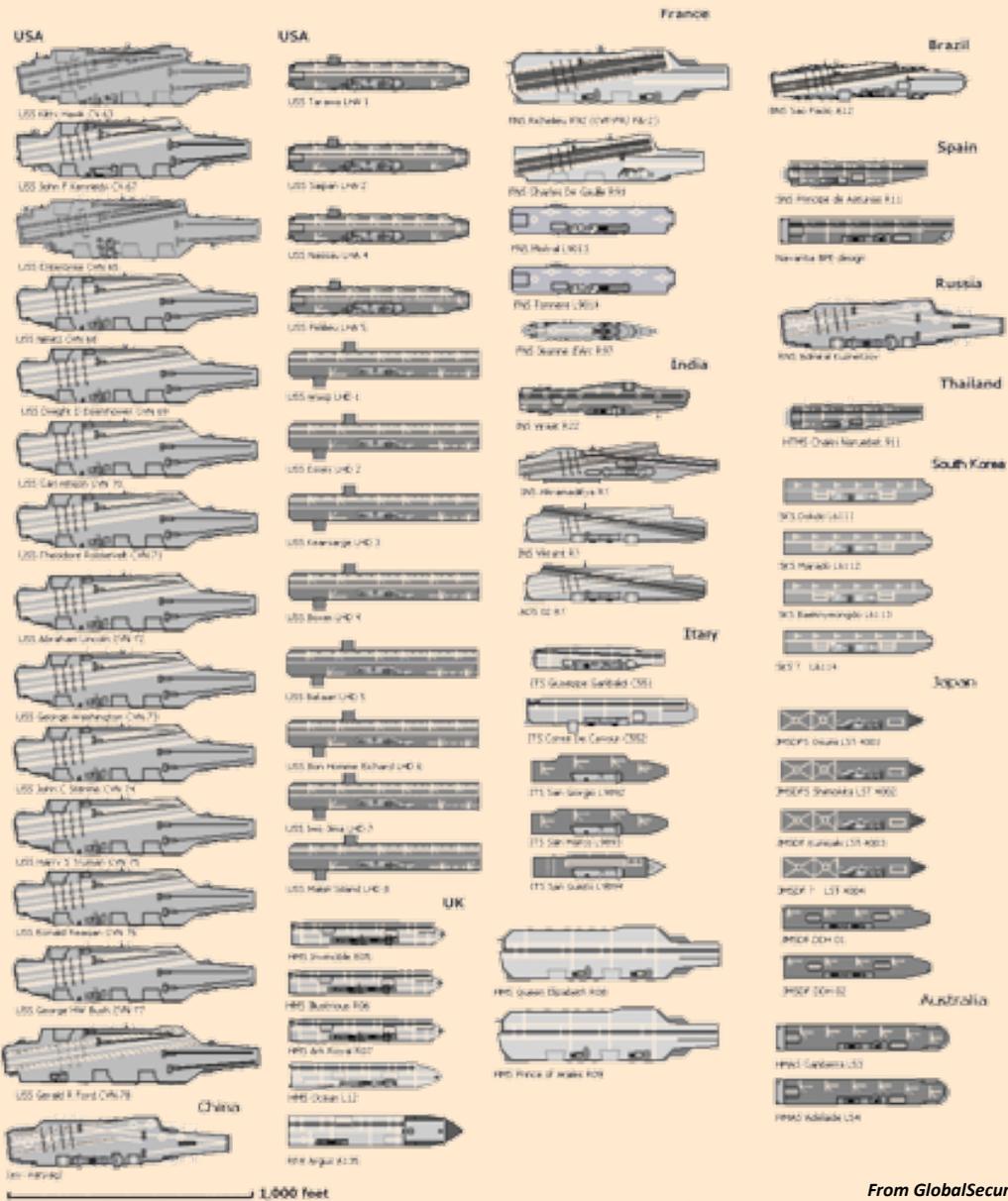
*C'est la vie !*

100 years after Ely's historic flight, nine Navies of the world today operate aircraft

carriers, led well ahead by the USA, with eleven, Britain awaiting the first of their new carriers while Italy has two. Then, France, Russia, Brazil, Spain and Thailand have one each, while the Indian Navy will augment its single carrier with another two over the next few years. Another ten vessels are under construction or being rebuilt : they comprise China's first three aircraft carriers, a second for Spain, the first of a new *Gerald R. Ford* class for the USN, apart from the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales* for the Royal Navy. Other navies including France and Russia are considering their own medium-term options in a rapidly changing world that has been hit by economic recession and in which nobody can predict with any certainty exactly what kind of military conflicts will have to be resolved in the future or what means will be required.

Aircraft carriers and the aircraft that operate from them are expensive, to state the obvious as are the many highly-skilled personnel aboard them. There is a very long lead time between the signing of a contract and commissioning of the ship

# Aircraft Carriers of the World



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or the entry into service of a new fighter or helicopter. Critics have argued that too much is invested in them, that the loss of a carrier to enemy action would be a catastrophe for a Navy and so it is hardly surprising that at various times over the past century, various governments have viewed aircraft carriers as 'flag flying luxuries' or irreverently as 'dinosaurs'. Nevertheless, as the past century records, aircraft carriers are arguably the most versatile and potent means of projecting a nation's power overseas.

Above all, the aircraft carrier is much more than a powerful warship. Wherever it is sent it remains a sliver of superbly-equipped sovereign territory. In international waters it acts as a self-contained air base independent of the consent of foreign governments. Of course, its traditional adversary, the submarine, has become ever stealthier and potent but modern ASW, along with AEW and anti-missile systems, have correspondingly become more sophisticated. The aircraft carrier and its complement of strike

fighters and air defence aircraft plus helicopters is likely to remain a cornerstone of naval policy for decades to come.

Who can forget the exclamation of then US President Bill Clinton during his visit to *USS Theodore Roosevelt*: 'When word of crisis breaks out in Washington, it's no accident the first question that comes to everyone's lips is: Where is the nearest carrier?'

With converging US and Indian interests in the South China Sea, it could well be the new *INS Vikrant*!