Is the Aircraft Carrier Obsolete?

An M.P. Renew an Old Controversy

In reporting, last week, the “aviation” passages in the Naval Estimates speech made in the House of Commons by the First Lord of the Admiralty, we mentioned that one Member, in the debate which followed, questioned the value of the aircraft carrier in modern war, and we promised to quote some of his remarks.

The Member in question was Dr. Reginald Bennett (Con., Gosport and Fareham), and he began by saying that he spoke as one who “had some connection with the Fleet Air Arm for a number of years.” It was his contention that the Navy was “still about a generation out of date”—a generation among aircraft being some seven years—compared with the flying forces ashore. The aircraft inevitably were of limited performance because of the tasks they had to do, particularly those of getting on to the small deck of a carrier and getting off it, and with a remarkable collection of odds and ends; no angled deck or steam catapult would suffice to allow ship-borne aircraft to have performances comparable with those of aircraft ashore. Therefore, at all times ship-borne aircraft would tend to be a disadvantage compared with aircraft which they had to meet—unless they, too, were ship-borne.

Aircraft carriers had three functions: anti-submarine and anti-surface-ship tasks, strike; and fighter defence against the attack. He believed that the use of carriers for the first two jobs was now entirely mistaken. It was not yet entirely mistaken for the third but, taken by and large, the use of aircraft carriers in land-based fighter defence was well towards the end. No one expected that the most expensive possible way of operating aircraft over the sea. A carrier was very nearly as costly a loss if sunk as the whole convoy which it was trying to defend. Secondly, the escorts needed a carrier only for the number of aircraft which they needed as a number of squadrons which must be kept to keep the surface-vessel search; strike; and fighter defence against air attack. He believed that with the aircraft even now operated adequately covered by shore-based types. The mantle of security performance and would be far more efficient and economical to operate, in a transport role would need very expensive provision in the way of fuel, would cost only a small fraction of the cost of the sea-borne carrier. The first job could be done very well by a number of aircraft ashore, if need be, on smaller carrier which had to be anti-submarine and anti-surface-ship but be capable of even more skillful work in the role, compared with carriers. The second job, land-based fighters to deal with them. What was wanted was a fighter which could carry a few air-to-air missiles or even one which could direct ship-to-air missiles. But even before guided missiles came along, those of them who knew anything—came on the scene, the type of fighter necessary to shoot down a “deepsea” aircraft need be only of a moderate performance compared with its colleagues on shore.

Mr. Bennett turned to helicopters and flying-boats. He said that although the Navy had some helicopters it had not nearly enough; it would need complete squadrons. It had one squadron operating now, and it had been his privilege to talk with some of the officers of that squadron when it returned from the Western Approaches during a sticky period of the last war—recoverable. They could be facultative seaplanes; they could land on water or, with a skid, on shore; and the pilots would be able to take off from water after a runway, and recoverable, not written off, every time one came down on the sea. Merchant ships—particularly tankers, with all the space they had on top—might have an arrangement for catapulting off fighters, such as the Member for Woking (Mr. Watkinson) and himself had accompanied from time to time in the last struggle. He did not believe that the enemy aircraft which would be used for reconnaissance and convoy spotting in the Western Approaches would be fast, high-performance jet aircraft. Such types could not operate at low altitudes or have long ranges. The aircraft that could carry out reconnaissance over the Western Ocean would be propeller- or turboprop-driven so as to be able to fly low and slowly, and, therefore, they did not need the broad land-based fighters to deal with them. What was wanted was a fighter which could carry a few air-to-air missiles or even one which could direct ship-to-air missiles. But even before guided missiles came along, those of them who knew anything—came on the scene, the type of fighter necessary to shoot down a “deepsea” aircraft need be only of a moderate performance compared with its colleagues on shore.

As far as strike aircraft were concerned, standing patrols of aircraft at sea together with the amount of fuel, would cost only a small fraction of the cost of the sea-borne aircraft, the fuel, the carrier, the carrier’s crew and the escort. But as for strike aircraft were concerned, standing patrols of shore-based aircraft flying on patrol would work out as cheaply and could be on call permanently, without having to have an aircraft carrier present in the midst of all the danger.

Of the fighter purpose, Dr. Bennett supported the views of an earlier speaker (Mr. R. Allan, Paddington, South) in the debate; as he had said, there was a great deal of point in the evolution of a light fighter, ship-borne and catapulted, but—even those used in the Western Approaches during a sticky period of the last war—recoverable. They could be facultative seaplanes; they could land on water after a runway, and recoverable, not written off, every time one came down on the sea. Merchant ships—particularly tankers, with all the space they had on top—might have an arrangement for catapulting off fighters, such as the Member for Woking (Mr. Watkinson) and himself had accompanied from time to time in the last struggle.

In answer to questions about the Princess flying-boat, he said the engines were available had now been given up. (Later, on March 17th, the Minister of Supply, Mr. Sands, declared that it would be a “tragedy” if all the work that had gone into the Princess project came to nothing.)

Dealing with the Provost-Vampire training sequence, Mr. Ward said the first course of Provosts ought to start in autumn, and the training on the Vampire would start early 1954, as soon as the first Provost-trained pilots were available. The Minister of Supply, Mr. Sands, declared that it would be a “tragedy” if all the work that had gone into the Princess project came to nothing.)

Mr. Ward then turned to further criticisms about the decision to close down more flying schools and said that, in this connection, it must not be forgotten that the training of Coastal Command was done in the old schools, and the training was done by Coastal Command and the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy had missed the opportunity of getting Coastal Command when the Air Ministry were not interested in it, but they now had a chance of operating flying-boats. They should look at this question and make the most of the opportunity, because now was the time for them to assert themselves in the air, even though they had failed to do so hitherto.

MORE ABOUT THE AIR ESTIMATES

FURTHER attention was given by the House of Commons to the Air Estimates when, on March 19th, they were considered in committee. The general remarks then made were reflected in the summing up by Mr. George Ward, Under-Secretary of Air.

He first dealt with a comment by Mr. Arthur Henderson (Lab., Uxbridge) that the Prime Minister seemed to imply that the whole conception of using the Princess flying-boat when the engines were available had now been given up. (Later, on March 17th, the Minister of Supply, Mr. Sands, declared that it would be a “tragedy” if all the work that had gone into the Princess project came to nothing.)

Dealing with the Provost-Vampire training sequence, Mr. Ward said the first course of Provosts ought to start in autumn, and the training on the Vampire would start early 1954, as soon as the first Provost-trained pilots were available. The Minister of Supply, Mr. Sands, declared that it would be a “tragedy” if all the work that had gone into the Princess project came to nothing.)

Mr. Ward then turned to further criticisms about the decision to close down more flying schools and said that, in this connection, it must not be forgotten that the training of Coastal Command was done in the old schools, and the training was done by Coastal Command and the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy had missed the opportunity of getting Coastal Command when the Air Ministry were not interested in it, but they now had a chance of operating flying-boats. They should look at this question and make the most of the opportunity, because now was the time for them to assert themselves in the air, even though they had failed to do so hitherto.

in a transport role than the Princess flying-boat was likely to be. Mr. Ward denied a complaint by Mr. Tinkham (Lab., Uxbridge) that his remarks seemed to imply that the whole conception of using the Princess flying-boat when the engines were available had now been given up. (Later, on March 17th, the Minister of Supply, Mr. Sands, declared that it would be a “tragedy” if all the work that had gone into the Princess project came to nothing.)

Mr. Ward then turned to further criticisms about the decision to close down more flying schools and said that, in this connection, it must not be forgotten that the training of Coastal Command was done in the old schools, and the training was done by Coastal Command and the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy had missed the opportunity of getting Coastal Command when the Air Ministry were not interested in it, but they now had a chance of operating flying-boats. They should look at this question and make the most of the opportunity, because now was the time for them to assert themselves in the air, even though they had failed to do so hitherto.

Mr. Ward then turned to further criticisms about the decision to close down more flying schools and said that, in this connection, it must not be forgotten that the training of Coastal Command was done in the old schools, and the training was done by Coastal Command and the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy had missed the opportunity of getting Coastal Command when the Air Ministry were not interested in it, but they now had a chance of operating flying-boats. They should look at this question and make the most of the opportunity, because now was the time for them to assert themselves in the air, even though they had failed to do so hitherto.