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Aircraft Carriers Today

THE carrier controversy—it centres on the question whether aircraft carriers today represent value for money—is one that has raged for a long time, one that has received a new impetus with the coming of atomic weapons, and one which is unlikely ever to be settled. To avoid possible misconceptions, we must state at once that we have no intention of becoming directly embroiled in the argument, or of presuming to pronounce in favour of either side. Nor should any special significance in this connection be attached to our decision to devote a number of pages in this issue to a review of British aircraft carriers.

It must be apparent to everyone that the popularity of the aircraft carrier as a first-line weapons system has lately been subject to a favourable pendulum swing. Even the antagonists at home are probably British enough to have an affection for aircraft carriers as such, just as, instinctively, they have for all ships; but that is not the subject of dissension.

These self-contained air forces afloat seem to have regained ground in official and public esteem; one main reason, we believe, is the great increase apparent in fighting efficiency of the modern carrier. New devices to assist and make safer carrier flying, new radar and, especially, new aircraft with performance immensely superior to that of their predecessors—these are the things that have given a new lease of life to the aircraft carrier. And this has happened in spite of the development of nuclear weapons. In fact, aircraft capable of carrying atomic bombs can now be operated from the large carriers.

We have already stated that the controversy is unlikely to be settled. Any new hot war would no doubt show whether or not a carrier force could defend itself from successive enemy air attacks. But even this would only be part of the answer, because such a naval formation is now seen as a highly mobile advanced striking force, and it might well be able to justify its existence before it is even located by the enemy. A case for the carrier and a description of its new devices (though not on this occasion its new aircraft) may be found in the review to which we have referred.

Individual Action

ONE outcome of the nuclear developments which have been keeping the capitals of the world buzzing is to place a premium on the initiative and skill of the individual and the efficiency of small groups. In the past, so long as the seat of government has been intact and the lines of authority and communications have remained open, the conventional methods of conducting a war and of administering a country could be carried out. But on this we can no longer reasonably depend.

The Chief of the Air Staff referred in a recent speech at the Royal Air Force Flying College to the possibility of squadrons and stations having to fight on as autonomous units. This provides one example of the increasing reliance to be placed on the individual. It emphasizes the need to select commanding officers with tremendous care, and to give them every opportunity to become experts in the operational and technical aspects of their Service's work, as well as in administration. The same trend is seen in the picking of captains (in future to be of a rank not lower than flight lieutenant) and crews for our new V-bombers. Their responsibilities will be immense, far transcending anything hitherto experienced in this field of operations.

It is after the initial phases of nuclear warfare that a country might have to depend most upon the initiative of isolated groups of individuals. It is not difficult to imagine the importance in such circumstances of even a few dozen active communities. If these could be joined in a short time by other self-contained mobile units with their essential services intact, a first step towards survival and reorganization would be possible. We see in this depressing picture another new role for the aircraft carrier and its squadrons; it is perhaps, no more than an extension of the Royal Navy's traditional task of keeping the seas so that vital supplies shall be able to reach our shores.