Aircraft carriers rule the Pacific

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James Bice may not have realized it at the time, but he was playing a small part in a revolution in naval warfare.

Naval battles for centuries had been ship against ship, slugging it out with the weapons they carried on board. These weapons progressed through history from rams to cannons to huge naval guns.

World War II in the Pacific was different than the European war. In Europe, most of the fighting took place on huge land masses. Once the Allies landed in Italy and France, for example, it was all land to Berlin. Except for the Asian mainland (China-Burma-India), the war in the vast Pacific Theater was mostly fought in the air, on sea, and on islands---some very small and others very large. There was no land route to Tokyo, so aircraft and ships were the essential to traverse the expanses of ocean between islands. Ships that could carry aircraft would rise to prominence in this environment.

The first United States aircraft carrier was the U.S.S. Langley. It had been launched in 1912 as a coal and oil supply ship. In 1922, the superstructure of the ship was removed and replaced with a flat deck that could accommodate 33 aircraft. It was the only aircraft carrier that the United States had for five years. After two more aircraft carriers were added to the fleet, the Langley was converted into a seaplane carrier in 1936.\(^1\)

Even before the Langley became an aircraft carrier, Milwaukee native General Billy Mitchell was showing that ships could be destroyed by airplanes. In 1921, his aircraft sank an old German battleship in his zealous quest to prove that the navy was obsolete. A report he wrote in 1924 after a tour of the Pacific even laid out a scenario for a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.\(^2\)

The United States entered World War II with its Navy still centered around battleships, the most powerful warships of the time. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, with planes delivered by aircraft carriers, devastated the U.S. Pacific Fleet by sinking or damaging most of its battleships. If the U.S. aircraft carriers had been docked at Pearl Harbor instead of out at sea, the attack could have been crippling.

Although Pearl Harbor had demonstrated the vulnerability of docked ships to air attack, no battleship had ever been sunk by aircraft while at sea. That changed just three days later on December 10, 1941. A British task force of six ships had sailed from Singapore to attack Japanese invasion forces, and the British commander refused air cover from the Royal Air Force. Japanese bombers and torpedo planes sank the battleship *H.M.S. Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *H.M.S. Repulse* with the loss of 840 men.\(^3\)

In May 1942, American forces scored a strategic victory in the Battle of the Coral Sea, the first naval engagement in history where the opposing ships never saw each other. The entire battle consisted of aircraft attacking ships.\(^4\)

The Battle of Midway in early June 1942 is widely regarded as the turning point of the Pacific war. Through a combination of intelligence work, courage, skill, and some luck, American planes from aircraft carriers sank four Japanese aircraft carriers and destroyed 322 Japanese aircraft.\(^5\)
The next three years saw Allied ships, aircraft, Marines, and soldiers on the offensive against Japanese-held territory. The strategy of "island-hopping" meant attacking some islands while bypassing others. Ships and aircraft cut off supply lines to the bypassed Japanese strongholds so they would, in General Douglas MacArthur's words, wither on the vine. Each conquered island served as a naval and air base for the next attack on the way to Japan.

Aircraft carriers, such as James Bice's ship, were vital in this campaign. Aircraft from the carriers cleared the skies of enemy fighter planes, attacked their ships, and bombed their troops. They also protected friendly forces from air and ship attacks by the Japanese. Aircraft carriers became the main force in naval operations, with other ships mostly in supporting roles.⁶

The United States had 105 aircraft carriers of all types in World War II. Sixty-four of them were of the smaller escort carrier type. The larger attack carriers had crews numbering from 1,000 to 3,500 men. ⁷ The large majority of these were in action in the Pacific.

Bice's ship, the U.S.S. Intrepid, was one of 17 Essex-class aircraft carriers commissioned during World War II. Each of these 17 ships was home to 3,500 men and 100 aircraft.⁸

Japan had just 22 aircraft carriers during World War II.⁹

Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher, the commander of Bice's task force, was born in Hillsboro, Wisconsin. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1915. After serving in World War I, Mitscher became heavily involved in naval aviation. He was the commander of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Hornet, the ship from which Jimmy Doolittle launched his famous retaliatory air raid on Japan in 1942, and it was an important combatant in the Battle of Midway. In his later commands, his ships and aircraft were instrumental in destroying the Japanese navy and its aircraft.
What is not mentioned in the article above is that James Bice was injured on November 25, 1944 when a Japanese airplane crashed into the aircraft carrier Intrepid, killing 32 men. Bice was working in the hangar deck when it was engulfed in flames caused by the crash. While these fires were being fought, another Japanese plane crashed into the flight deck of the Intrepid, killing and wounding more sailors. It looked like the ship might have to be abandoned, but the fires were brought under control after one-and-one-half hours. After repairs, the Intrepid rejoined Task Force 58. James Bice received the Purple Heart medal for his injuries in this incident.¹⁰

After his three years in the Navy, James Bice studied electrical engineering for two years at the University of Wisconsin. In 1950, he earned a bachelor’s degree in industrial arts at Stout State University and joined the faculty at the Coleman Vocational School in La Crosse (later Western Technical College) as an instructor in the trades and industries department.¹¹ He taught driver’s education,¹² home mechanics,¹³ cabinetmaking,¹⁴ and electronics.¹⁵

His father, Raymond Bice, was a veteran of World War I, co-founder of a lumber company, home builder for many years, and a member of the Wisconsin State Legislature from 1946 to 1968.¹⁶ Raymond Bice also wrote two memoirs: A Century to Remember and Years to Remember.
Aircraft carriers and thousands of men like James Bice were a big part of winning World War II in the Pacific.

Bice’s ship, which was launched in 1943, remained in the fleet during the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The U.S.S. Intrepid was also used as a recovery ship for space capsules during the manned space program in the 1960s. It was decommissioned in 1974, but it can be visited in New York City as part of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum.17

(Bill Ingalls, NASA)

Battleships continued to serve during the Korean War, Vietnam War, and smaller conflicts into the 1980’s. They are no longer part of the active Navy inventory. Some can be seen in various cities around the country preserved as museums, while aircraft carriers remain the centerpiece of United States naval power to this day.

Jeff Rand
Adult Services Librarian
La Crosse Public Library

Sources & Notes:


Ellis, 294.

Ellis, 295. Germany had some feared battleships, but it had no aircraft carriers.


"Vocational School Fall Term Enrollment List Greatest In History; Classes Begin Thursday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 3, 1950, page 12.


"Offer Wide Variety Of Homemaking Subjects This Year To City, Area Women At Vocational," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 27, 1951, page 21.


