
FLIGHT DECK

A Pictorial Essay of a Day in the Life of an Airdale

WITH FIRST-PERSON COMMENTS BY EDWARD ATKINS

Since I am and was, literally, the only one involved in the creation of all aspects of this book, other than the fine work done by Kathleen Dyson designing its text-pages, I alone am responsible for any and all errors and gaffs such as misapplying words (“Brevity is the sole of wit” instead of “Brevity is the soul of wit”; a “grate injustice” instead of a “great injustice”, etc.). Depending as I do on a magnifying glass makes difficult my picking up these foolish phonic errors. Also, it’s an oxymoron to say a proofreading author: the book would never be completed. That being said, I hope and trust that this necessarily one-man volume will nevertheless be of beneficial effect to one and all. Now let’s see how it goes.

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FOREWORD

It was deemed appropriate, for those with limited knowledge of naval history, to very briefly describe in a broadbrush manner “how it was” during the the 1942-1945 time-period in the Western Pacific, according to the historians. The preeminent naval force in the Western Pacific during 1942-1945 was the aircraft carriers, as they were surrounded by the battleships, cruisers, and destroyers that provided protection to the carriers from Japanese air and submarine attacks. This group was called a “task force”. The battleships, cruisers, and destroyers also provided bombardment support to the Marine invasion forces in their efforts to secure the occupied islands from the Japanese. But it was the carriers, with their aircraft (along with the submarine) that were responsible for the almost total destruction of all the Japanese naval and supply ships in the Western Pacific. The carrier aircraft were also responsible for the almost complete annihilation of the Japanese air force. In addition, the carrier aircraft provided continuous air support to the Marines by means of aircraft bombardment and strafing runs against the Japanese ground forces. In sum, the carrier aircraft effected a terrible toll on the Japanese land, air and sea forces over a period of three and one-half years of warfare. The sheer size of the naval operations was staggering, covering many hundreds of square miles. It was a testament to the naval aviators’ endurance in accomplishing such a monumental undertaking. That they functioned over those vast stretches of open ocean is also remarkable (there were no sign-posts out there). WHERE DO YOU FIND SUCH MEN? Thus, though the battleship was the “Queen of the Fleet” during WWI, it was the aircraft carrier that was the “Queen of the Fleet” during WWII. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was the beginning of this reign. The Battle of Midway, where opposing ships never saw each other, reinforced this concept, and the clean-sweep of enemy aircraft and ships in the Western Pacific by carrier aircraft (and submarines) only validated this fact, as witness the intonation, by both sides, “GET THE CARRIERS!” It was, after all, the carrier aircraft (and submarines) that would, that could, hurt you. So it was that the carriers took the war to the enemy, and though some of them suffered

grievous harm in the process, they were the prime naval force that gave us “Victory at Sea”. They were the “fleet that came to stay”, in spite of the Kamikaze abomination. (Please look at the superb video series “Victory at Sea”. The Richard Rodgers score is worth it alone.) What follows, then, is essentially a pictorial essay of aircraft carrier activities, with first-person commentary by the author, of that “Queen of the Fleet”, the magnificent Essex-class aircraft carrier!

NOTE: A large portion of what follows will of necessity concern itself with the thoughts and opinions, the feelings and emotions, of an 18-19 year old neophyte as put into words by a 75 year old man, they being one and the same person. Since the Airdale’s job was basically repetitious, the sometimes melodramatic descriptions and impressions of what transpired on the flight deck were also somewhat repetitious. They are the reflections of that 18-19 year old as he experienced them, right at THAT moment, while the 75 year old man tried to modulate, tried to retain a more measured balance to the accounts. But then, please remember that it’s the pictures that are the focus of this book. It’s hoped that the reader will be drawn into the sights and sounds and the emotions of being a part of this mini-drama that one finds on the “FLIGHT DECK”. Immerse yourself, and imagine the essence of standing next to a very large, very noisy machine that spells “threat”. But not all is of this nature, and it’s a bygone world, never to be experienced again, ever. Be objective if you will, but also, I recommend that you turn yourself to the subjective and introspective. Transport yourself back to 1944-1945 when the world was a different place by far, and perhaps spend a little time living vicariously. If you do, this book will have been useful, in my humble opinion. And finally, there will no doubt be those who will consider that much of what follows in this book about the duties of the Airdale is too rhetorical, too excessive, too “blatant”, and too repetitious. I’m sorry about, but to have done otherwise would have been to diminish what it was that the Airdales did do, day in, day out. That I will not do, because this was how it really was.



The Lone Sailor at the Navy Memorial

The “Lone Sailor”, the author, about to take a journey to places and destinies unknown. It was to be a solitary journey, a journey into surroundings that were sometimes benign and interesting. But also, it was to be a journey filled with the sound and the fury that would be found in a “pack of relentless demons bent on doing one grievous harm”. What with that allusion, duty calls. So now, let’s find out what it was all about.



This is my graduation picture from Newark Academy. I attended Newark from September 1939, the start of WWII, to June 1944, the start of the invasion of Europe. These were five years of international tumult of a scale unknown to mankind and which times were amply chronicled in newspapers, magazines, newsreels and radio. In addition to college preparatory courses I participated in varsity football, basketball and elsewhere in baseball, tennis and a swim team. I was a member of the student council and by the time I was fourteen years old I achieved the rank of Eagle Scout with the additional Bronze Palm (it should be noted that I was fortunate enough to have gone to a two-month summer camp in verdant Vermont for nine summers since I was seven years old. Several of the staff were qualified scout Some of the merit badges I earned there were gardening (farming), camping, archery, tennis, horsemanship, swimming, Red Cross (water safety), canoeing and sailing. Perhaps this is why my father said I should do twice as much as anyone else (when I was twelve years old).

PROLOGUE

Since this pictorial essay will be a frankly personalized and sometimes “self-centered” account and a semi-narrative of my experiences on the flight deck of an Essex-class aircraft carrier during 1945-1946, I believe I should “put a face” on this book by providing a very brief outline of my origin. That origin was about as un-Navy as possible in that I grew up in a heavily tree-lined, benign, and pleasant town (Montclair) that was completely surrounded by similar towns that all merged together in Northern New Jersey, only 20 miles distant from New York City. I’ve heard it said that many Navy men come from the treeless flatlands of the mid-West because the wide ocean reminds them of home. In my case, it was far different. There was no place you could go where you weren’t a stone’s throw away from a large tree. I liked that. There was even a “mountain” in Montclair from which I would view the NYC skyline. The houses were all comfortable, two-story homes, all close to each other, where each street was a neighborhood, and for us, the stores were well within walking distance. We had ample parks, most of them large enough to play football or basketball or baseball or tennis. Car traffic was always minimal on the streets that were for the most part laid out in a gridiron fashion. This allowed for activity in the street in front of the house, with an occasional car passing through. Bicycling was the main method of getting around. The shops were centralized, “all” the fathers seemed to take the train to NYC, and all the mothers were at home. In a word, it was very pleasant, and very far removed from anything that was of a military nature. (But we did have an old WWI tank “planted” in one of the parks, and a statue of a soldier looking like a soldier. Also, although my uncle was a Colonel in the Army, and my father was an Army officer in WWI, I had no military tradition to refer to.) Instead, I grew up with Winnie-the-Pooh and Mickey Mouse and graduated to Tom Mix, the heroic cowboy, and “Buck Rogers of the 25th Century”, my hero. I also later followed the exploits of “Don Winslow of the Navy”, my one and only excursion into things of the sea. (I must admit, though, that I also had my toy soldier set.) Later on it was sports and Boy Scouts that occupied my time. Since I went two

months each of nine summers at a camp in Vermont, I was able to gain my Eagle Scout Badge with Bronze Palm in two years. (But my two brothers did even better than that.) One thing I did there, of which I was proud, was that during a 3-day hike we made a 1-day 30-mile trek with a 30-lb pack up and down two of Vermont’s highest mountains (Killington Mt. and Pico Peak) when I was 12 years old and the others were 14 years old. I was allowed to do that because I was an “old timer”. Anyway, when I was thirteen, I went to a prep school, and then the regimen was studies and the school football and basketball teams, plus the student council. Soon parties and dances were thrown into the mix, nicely flavored by the big band ballads. They were very “vanilla” according to today’s standards, and they were very satisfying. Not the least reason was that at fifteen I met and got to know “the very special” girl. It was not an unusual time with her; it was sometimes pangs of doubt, and sometimes days of bliss. A special girl has a way of having this effect on you. It should also be said that I never smoked and I was almost a teetotaler, a simple choice of mine, just as I was almost “as pure as the driven snow”. In a word, I was a pretty normal teenager, a la the 1940’s, where the movies were devoid of gratuitous violence that nobody missed in the slightest (however, we did have a full offering of wartime newsreels, magazines and newspapers). And so it was that on graduation from school I went into the Navy. I must confess that I tried to get into the V-12 (Navy Surface) and the V-5 (Navy Air) programs where they sent you to school to become a commissioned officer. But it was not to be: the Navy doctor said I had high blood pressure and I was thus disqualified. (My family doctor said “you have a sensitive nervous system”. Great!) But it was not so high that they wouldn’t accept me into the enlisted Navy which I chose so as to learn a trade, learn something useful. So that’s how I entered the Navy. Upon leaving home for destinations and destinies unknown, the only downside that concerned me was that “my” girl was regularly seeing a V-12 candidate (Naval officer-in-training) at a college very near her college. This generated all kinds of despair, and then utter dejection and despondency, beyond measure, and

was in good part why I was a classic loner (but not a recluse). Thus it was that one evening at about 10 PM, I said good-bye to my parents, walked to the bus-stop, awaited and then took the bus about 20 miles, through the Lincoln Tunnel, to the bus terminal. From there I walked to the old Penn Station on 34th Street, through those famous Roman Colonnades, and to the train that would take me to boot camp. And so this journey of mine began. It's primarily told in pictorial form as it was sensed and experienced and perceived by me, an 18-19 year old, who had yet a lot to learn. But without further ado, to the task at hand, the magnificent Essex-class aircraft carrier.

NOTE: A word about the group called "veterans". My own, my personal, perhaps unique interpretation of the word "veteran" is the following: a veteran is that person who was actually under strong enemy fire for at least a day's duration. With that definition, I categorically exclude myself from having been a "veteran". Instead, I was an "ancillary" But as an "ancillary", I was certainly a useful part of the war effort, as were the many others in uniform (and out) who did not see enemy action. So here's to the veterans who served so well, and who are given their due, very briefly, in the last chapter.



Just out of boot-camp and still "wet behind the ears" while just ahead would be the Receiving Station at Newport, RI where I was assigned to the U.S.S. Antietam in the Navigation Department as the Antietam was nearing completion at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. It had been my intention of joining the Navy because I had thought I could learn a technical trade there better than in the other services. During the first years of the war we heard a great deal about such things as radar and communications and fire control (shooting down enemy aircraft) and the nascent electronics field. However, I was shamelessly beguiled by the prospects of standing watch on the bridge of a large fleet aircraft carrier and so I chose to be a quartermaster striker (Navigation Division). As it turned out, I was transferred to the flight deck crew after about four months but not before I was able to spend some time at the helm of the ship steering it during our shakedown cruise at Trinidad. This was particularly enjoyable when the Officer of the Deck ordered full right and left rudder during gunnery practice. I've made every effort to be as accurate and precise as possible, about both the activities and my thoughts and feelings. Memories may fade but not, mind you, about those things that had a vivid impact on various events of one's life (as an Airdale).

INTRODUCTION

To my knowledge there are no books that feature the aircraft carrier Airdale. In the larger scheme of things, an Airdale was a very minor player and had a fairly simplistic job: he had to pull wheelchocks, put wheelchocks, push aircraft around the flight deck, put out aircraft fires, and clear up after aircraft crashes. Simplistic or not, no aircraft could be launched, much less moved, unless and until an Airdale pulled the wheelchock. This then isn't a book about the broad scope of naval strategy, or tactics, or about the historical significance of naval battles, or of how this decision or that decision affected the outcome of this or that engagement. Instead, using the premise that a picture is worth a thousand words, this book is a first-hand account of the daily life of the Airdale topside, what he did, what he saw, and sometimes, what he thought as he performed his duties on the flight deck day after long day, week after long week, month after long month. Because there are no books about the Airdale, and because "time is running out", and because my naval service was that I was an Airdale on the Essex-class aircraft carrier U.S.S. Antietam (CV-36), and because I believe it'll be a (small) contribution to a very significant part of our naval heritage (the naval activity in the Pacific Theatre during WWII), I'm taking it upon myself to put together this book. My picture-source has been the wealth of official photographs of U.S. Navy activities during WWII that reside in the National Archives. I looked through thousands of them, and that was but a fraction of the total. I chose what I thought would be a fairly good representation of the Airdales' day, considering the required limitation of 365 pictures. Most of the pictures are to the point, but there are some that add a flavor that could not be withheld. And there are some few that were chosen for, frankly, their artistic effect and merit. Since the Antietam saw no enemy action, the short tenth chapter is included only to round out the presentation, and as an exclamation-point finale to this aircraft carrier genre.

At the very outset, I'd like to say that I've made every effort to be scrupulously accurate in all things found in this book. This applies to

both objective as well as subjective subjects. All of the objective items, such as specifications, have been found in published sources, while the subjective thoughts have followed the paraphrased maxim to "tell it like it WAS!"

NOTE: The author served on board the U.S.S. Antietam (CV-36) from January 1945 to May 1946, and served in the Pacific from April 1945 to May 1946. The U.S.S. Antietam carried the name of the Civil War battle that claimed 23,000 casualties, the bloodiest single day in American history. Ocean-going Navy men are a traditionally superstitious lot, and this is especially true of a ship of the line that has no place to hide from those bent on doing it grievous harm, especially if it goes in harm's way. A brief recitation of the author's path in the Navy will be given in narrative form: "After boot camp, it was off to the receiving station in Newport, RI. It was here that I was assigned to the U.S.S. Antietam and was to be assigned to a rating. Ignoring my previous determination to apply for a technical rating, such as electronics or radioman, I instead chose the Navigation Division which had the bridge of the ship as the duty station. I'm afraid I was beguiled by the fact that I'd be where the captain of the ship would be, with all the decisions going on, and that I'd have the opportunity to steer the ship as helmsman. Both things happened and it was good duty. But it only lasted until March of 1945. The reason was, I believe, the following briefly told episode: being in the Navigation Division, we also had sea details whenever we came into port. My detail, that day, was to raise the Ensign flag when the bugle sounded as the anchor was dropped. We were just heading into the Chesapeake Bay to go all the way up to Baltimore to onload bombs and ammunition. Sea Detail was sounded and we proceeded very slowly. It was a cold March day, especially when the wind-chill was factored in. After about an hour of this, I was FREEZING. It seemed such a stupid thing to be doing, standing there in the cold for no good reason, especially when no one else was out on deck. So I "defiantly" strode from my post at the

very front of the flight deck to the island structure about 100 yards away. This was in plain view, obviously, of everyone on the bridge. The chief petty officer (Navigation) could have stepped out onto the outside bridge and redirected me back to my post if he had wanted to do so. But he did no such thing. So what did happen was that about 10 minutes later, here he comes, huffing and puffing and very perturbed. “Where the %*! have you been?! I’ve been all over the ship looking for you!” (Ha. I was in the most obvious place of all, inside the island structure.) Not to make excuses, but here is a guy (me) just eighteen years old, just out of civilian life and obviously lacking the required military department, doing what at the time seemed to be an entirely rational act: getting out of the cold if you’re not doing anything useful. To make a long story short, soon after that incident the Navigation Division’s Ensign officer stopped me and said “Atkins, you’ve been transferred to the V-1-F Division (Airdales) effective immediately.” As explanation he said that the Assistant Navigation officer had a family friend in the Airdales and that he wanted him in the Navigation Division. I was the one to make room for him. When he said this, the above Sea Detail incident naturally came to mind. So, in one fell swoop I went from the most prestigious rating (Navigation), the top of the totem pole, to the least prestigious one (Airdales), the bottom of the totem pole. But, *c’est la guerre*. Naturally I was disappointed. “How could someone who had been accepted to Yale University be so ignominiously demoted?” one could well say. (And therein lies a tale, best left alone, at least in this book.) I, being young, didn’t look back, but rather looked forward to doing something with “real clout”; after all, this (Airdale) is what a carrier is all about: serving the aircraft onboard ship. This is what an aircraft carrier did, and I was going to be an integral part of it. So I reported to the Airdale Chief Petty Officer (yellow-shirt) right away. And what was his response? “Oh, OK”, and he then walked off without saying another word. In fact, he never did say anything to me again for the rest of the tour except that about a week later he said only “Here, you’ll need these”, handing me a pair of non-skid flight deck shoes, goggles, a blue shirt, and a blue cloth-helmet. In fact, no one, not anyone, ever did talk to me about what my duties were, what to do, what not to do, what to be aware of, when to do what I should be doing, how to do what I

should be doing, etc., etc. That’s to say, my “training” for this job was absolutely nil. It was pure and simply “on the job training”, sink or swim. But then one could say, who needs training for such a “simplistic” job? Well yes, it was a simplistic job, but it wasn’t SIMPLE. Therefore I did the only thing I could do: observe what the other Airdales were doing and emulate them. It was very dicey at first, especially when I was without the flight deck shoes. But after a while it became more “comfortable”, if it’s possible to feel comfortable during flight operations. However, there were always a lot of times when it was NOT “comfortable”, and there were other times when it was downright ANXIETY-time (such as going to a wheelchock during launch operations, or standing next to an aircraft as it’s being parked.) After a while, I became “acclimated” to the routine, and in a subdued way I became pleased to be an Airdale because this was where things were happening and this was what an aircraft carrier was all about and because I felt I was, in a mundane way, doing something worthwhile. That said, I was NOT a risk-taker as people are wont to typically say about teenage boys who are looking for excitement. No, this was, to me, only a job, and even an interesting job because of all the activity that was always going on on the flight deck. (Heck, I won’t even go near a roller-coaster. That should give some idea of my intrinsic daring.) The flight deck was no place for daring-do people. It was, instead, a place for doing a necessary job, and deep down, I felt a genuine pride in what I was doing, trivial though that job might appear to outsiders. I believe the Airdales understand of what I speak. To reiterate, this book will be an account of an Airdale’s life on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, and what he did there, during the latter part of WWII. It will also be a personal account of what I thought, what I felt, what I experienced, and what I observed. In effect, this book will be a tribute to ALL the Airdales, as they underwent the trials and tribulations of doing what had to be done, thus doing their part in enabling an aircraft carrier to fulfill its assigned mission. While it’s true that I was an Airdale from April 1945 to May 1946, it is also absolutely true that this book is in no way a self-tribute. That would do damage to all the other Airdales to whom this book is dedicated, and it would be unforgivable. I’m sorry if this book seems to be self-serving in some way or other. But it would be a DISservice to the

Airdales if I didn't tell it, and "flavor" it, like it really was. I'll do no less than what the Airdale genre deserve based on what they did out there on the flight deck, day after long day, regardless of how I might appear by telling it like it actually was. (How does one praise the group without praising the "teller"? I'll do the former, and let the latter take care of itself.) Thus, the focus of this book will be the set of pictures it contains and what they represent. The captions are merely thoughtful reflections of the intrinsic content of the pictures, and sometimes, of my personal involvement with, and thoughts of, the same. Again, may I take the liberty to say the following: I'd like this book to be a tribute to all the Airdales, they who served unstintingly, often under extremely difficult, arduous, harrowing conditions, EACH day, for months on end. So it is to them, the unheralded, that this book is dedicated.

NOTE 1: Some of the accounts that appear in the following pages must take into account the fact that I was 18-19 years old. Thus, some of the things written must be viewed from this perspective, and that which seems somewhat melodramatic was in fact melodramatic for someone as ill-prepared for such things as I was. Some of the descriptions of events that took place on the flight deck are those of an 18-19 year old neophyte, someone who had led a life far removed from anything that could have been in any way construed as menacing. So it's a nineteen

year old's thoughts and impressions that are to be found in this book, not those of an "old salt". (But at the same time, I must insist that at no time did I shirk my duties or cower physically at anything that was happening on the flight deck. Instead, I adjusted sufficiently to the point where all my actions were, I believe, "professional", if were not my emotions.) So, to sum up, this book concerns events on and around the flight deck of an Essex-class aircraft carrier during 1945-1946, as experienced and perceived by an 18-19 year old, but also as modulated by a mellowed 75 year old man.

NOTE 2: The flight deck was a tight little world unto itself. This means that repetitions were an integral part of that world, and so also will be some of the text. But this was the essence of that world: do this, and then do it again, and again, andThus, "this" is described this way, and then that way and then another way. And so it goes. At the same time, this sameness had an "infinity" of flavors and ramifications. Each day was a new "adventure", a new set of happenings and possible eventualities. It was always "stay tuned". And yet the days dragged on and on because of those possible eventualities. It was a peculiar anomaly: stimulating adventure, yet dreary drudgery. You be the judge.

Now, to that magnificent ship, the Essex-class aircraft carrier.