



China's Carrier Aviation Unit Improves Training

OE Watch Commentary: China's first Aircraft Carrier, the Liaoning (previously the Russian, Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier Varyag), has transited the Taiwan Strait on its way from its homeport in Qingdao, Shandong Province to its training area in the South China Sea twice this year, first in January and again on 20 March. Before heading to another area to conduct regular training, the Liaoning participated in a fleet review held on 12 April, which marked China's largest fleet review since 1949. Xu Ying (徐英), Commander of the Naval Aviation Regiment aboard the Liaoning, piloted one of the first aircraft in formation during the review.

Xu's unit is playing an important role in laying the groundwork for future carrier aviation units. Commissioned into service in September 2012, the Liaoning began its first carrier landings later that year. While China has at least two facilities onshore with ski-jumps to practice carrier operations (Huludao, Liaoning Province where naval aviators are trained for carrier operations, and Yanliang Air Base outside Xi'an, Shaanxi, home to China's Flight Test Establishment), the full range of support operations can only be practiced aboard the Liaoning.

Carrier operations are difficult even for nations that have long experience carrying them out. For China, it has been an uphill battle. In 2014 it was reported that two pilots had died during landings on the Liaoning. Other mishaps have occurred in the unit training future carrier pilots. In April 2016 another aviator training to join the carrier-based unit, Zhang Chao (张超), died while landing during a routine training onshore. In the same month, another even more experienced pilot, Cao Xianjian (曹先建), suffered multiple spinal fractures after being forced to eject in a similar accident onshore. It is unclear from Chinese media reports if, or how many, enlisted personnel have been involved in accidents, though given the number of years China has been practicing carrier launch and recovery operations, a number have likely occurred.

China has made additional efforts to improve its pipeline of new carrier pilots. New pilots are being trained by the Navy, rather than being recruited from the Air Force as before (Xu, for example, was previously a PLAAF pilot). More advanced jet trainers such as the L-15 are entering service to more quickly familiarize pilots with the conditions of modern fighter jets. Experienced carrier pilots continue to contribute to the force's knowledge base to improve carrier operations. Dai Mingmeng (戴明盟), the commander of the Liaoning's Carrier-borne Aviation Force (舰载航空兵部队) and the first pilot to land on the Liaoning, still regularly flies. Cao Xianjian, the pilot who suffered grievous spinal injuries, quickly returned to flying after the accident.

China's first indigenously produced aircraft carrier (Type 001A) was launched on 26 April 2017. Though not expected to be commissioned into service until 2020, it puts Xu and the other carrier aviators' intense training into context. While China's carrier aviation is still nascent, the amount of resources devoted to improvement—and China's industrial capacity and eagerness to build a large number of carriers—are worthy of careful monitoring. **End**

OE Watch Commentary (Wood)

Source: “海军航母编队体系化训练逐步常态化” (PLA Navy Aircraft Carrier Formation Step-by-Step Systematizes Training), CCTV, 15 April, 2018.
<http://m.news.cctv.com/2018/04/15/ARTI1Tk3gTbYcHD8iG1IK0Go180415.shtml>

Chen Xiaoyong (陈小勇), a “Yellow Shirt” or Aircraft Launch Assistant (起飞助理): The efficiency of aircraft flight operations directly affects the combat capability of an aircraft carrier. When launching aircraft, the individual support teams must work together closely. The aviators, flight deck operators, mechanical inspection teams must all cooperate to ensure that the aircraft can take off safely.

Chen Yueqi (陈岳琪), Commander of the Liaoning Carrier Formation (航母编队): Currently we have completed all of the tasks of the Carrier Formation exercise guidelines, and organized all systems, elements, and processes of weapons live-fire exercise, realistic opposition force training and long distance, inter-regional mobilization training. All of this has deepened the integration of the formation, and currently our cooperation is organic and natural, commands are followed smoothly, operations proceed smoothly, we have improved the 3-dimensional sensor awareness capabilities, naval air-attack and comprehensive defense capabilities of the formation.

Xu Ying (徐英) Commander of the Liaoning's Carrier-Based Naval Aviation Regiment: During this mission we explored various techniques for deck operations to optimize the support team's processes. At the same time, we pushed our equipment to the limit to discover new capabilities.



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Carrier-Based Multirole Fighter J-15 (2016).

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