

**DURING THE 1950s, MANY NEW AND UNUSUAL AIRCRAFT DESIGNS WERE BUILT AND TESTED. FEW, HOWEVER, WERE AS INTERESTING — OR**

# THE BALTIMORE

**CONTROVERSIAL — AS MARTIN'S MAGNIFICENT P6M SEAMASTER**

# Sea Monster

**BY STEPHANE NICOLAOU**

At the end of World War II, a triumphant US Navy had no less than 98 aircraft carriers in service and, even if 70 of them were smaller escort CVEs, one-year later this incredibly powerful armada had been drastically reduced to only 25 ships. Such a rapid decrease was not just the result of the victory over Japan but was also due to the presence of an important and powerful new service — the Air Force.

The nuclear flashes that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki had also heralded a new military era and given strategic planners a never-dreamed-of weapon, the atomic bomb.

Despite the Navy's overwhelming victory in the Pacific, the Air Force had stolen a march on both the Navy and its Marine Corps auxiliary. With the Boeing B-29 Stratofortress — the only vehicle capable of dropping the A-bomb — the Air Force had achieved such a strong position on Capitol Hill, that its leaders obtained not only the right to create five individual commands — including Strategic Air Command in March 1946 — but had also succeeded in separating the Air Force from the Army, when President Truman signed the National Security Act on 18 September 1947, creating the third independent and co-equal service of the Defense Department.

The relationship between the new upstart Air Force and its two senior services immediately turned chilly at a time when appropriations money became difficult to obtain. To Congressional lawmakers yearning for a return to peacetime priorities, keeping the peace by means of the ability to deliver atomic weapons seemed the cheapest and most expedient method of determining the size and makeup of the armed services, and this attitude favored the new Air Force.

Furthermore, in their enthusiasm for the capabilities of their own service, USAF generals tried to eliminate fixed wing aircraft, not only from the Army, but also from the Navy, leaving just token air cover for the Marines. After all, wasn't that the purpose of this new branch, to control the air?

Naturally, the admirals reacted fiercely, fighting vigorously to keep alive a reduced carrier force — even if most politicians thought the Navy would be of little use in a nuclear war. Such pronouncements, however, did not deter the admirals and they were soon agitating for the deployment of a giant aircraft carrier able to accept transonic fighters and medium bombers on its deck.

Fully expecting to retain the nuclear exclusivity it had labored so diligently to acquire, the Air Force objected vociferously, arguing that buying more bombers would be a far better investment compared to naval spending on obsolete and vulnerable vessels — especially large ones that offered such tempting targets.

To counter this, Cedric North, a civilian employee in the Navy Department, supported by Capt. John G. Crommelin, an outspoken crusader for aircraft carriers, presented the press many arguments against the Air Force's latest bomb hauler — the Convair B-36 Peacemaker, the B-29's successor in Strategic Command inventory.

During the fall of 1949, the fight went public. At hearings before the Armed Services Committee, Adm. Arthur W. Radford did not hesitate to brand the B-36 program "a billion dollar blunder!" Rear Admiral Ralph A. Oftsie criticized the concept of strategic bombing as both "militarily unsound and morally wrong!"



The M-270, photographed on 6 May 1952, was no small aircraft.

A great many less colored technical arguments on the weaknesses of the B-36 were voiced, but in the end the Air Force won again and the super carrier USS *United States* was cancelled a few days before its keel was to be laid.

## A TOTALLY NEW CONCEPT

During what had turned out to be a nasty, vitriolic debate, some air-minded admirals believed, as did many citizens, that both services were weakened by such controversy. To eliminate any chance of recurrence the Navy had to find new opportunities offered by the incredible technological developments in aviation, and then propose new concepts in aerial warfare that it was especially suited to exploit — concepts the Air Force could not fulfill.

Among several possibilities, the Seaplane Striking Force was considered as one of the most promising. It was built around a very high-speed seaplane or flying boat, which projected progress in both hydrodynamics and aerodynamics — making for an extremely viable and versatile weapons carrier.

To avoid protest from the Air Force, the Navy adroitly pointed out that its new seaplane would complement rather than replace Air Force bombers. It would be

employed primarily as a mine-laying aircraft, able to operate from indestructible water runways far from hostile coasts. Although the aircraft would also have the capability to drop other weapons, including those with nuclear warheads, Navy strategists neglected to comment extensively on these features so as not to irritate some of the more outspoken SAC generals, chief among them being Gen. Curtis LeMay, who had built Strategic Air Command into an empire unto himself.

The very idea of flying boats, upon which the pre-war Navy had relied during the 1920s and 1930s, had been somewhat eclipsed by land-based reconnaissance and bombing aircraft during the last years of WWII. After all, why deploy water-borne aircraft, when the US controlled so many land bases all over the world?

That thinking may have been valid when much of the world was still under the control of friendly colonial powers, or just emerging nations, who were hesitant to confront the USA over the right to utilize bases on their territory.

Moreover, our war-weary Allies were eager to trade protection for landing rights, while Third World nations — at least for a time — received more from leasing bases to the American military than they did from civilian trade in any one sector of their struggling economies. All this has changed, however, and when rampant nationalism is



SeaMaster #4 charging down Middle River during taxi tests. When these tests were being undertaken, the crew door was often left open for improved ventilation.