

Our A-Fleet's Long on

Self-Sufficient Task Force Skipping A Lot of Potential Hosts in Its Cruise Around the Globe

By John G. Norris

Staff Reporter

TASK FORCE ONE, composed of the Navy's three nuclear-powered surface warships, has passed the halfway mark in its historic, though curiously circumscribed, show-the-flag cruise around the world.

Navy men had hoped and expected that this first global voyage introducing the new nuclear navy and demonstrating its unique advantage would arouse world interest and perhaps parallel the 1907-9 voyage of the Great White Fleet.

That earlier journey of 16 battleships marked the world debut of the newly built American fleet and the entrance of the United States onto the world stage as a major sea power.

SO FAR, HOWEVER, little has been heard of the atomic flotilla, composed of the huge aircraft carrier Enterprise and the guided-missile ships Long Beach, a cruiser, and Bainbridge, a frigate. This seems due in considerable part to the unusual and unexplained State and Defense Department restrictions placed on "Operation Sea Orbit," as it is known. The whole effort may end up as simply a footnote to history.

According to the Defense Department, the world cruise has a dual mission. First, it provides a test and a demonstration of the ability of atomic-powered warships to move over the world's oceans completely independent of support ships and bases — something impracticable for conventionally powered ships.

"Equally important, and immediately evident," the statement adds, "is the opportunity to win friends in areas not frequently visited by United States Navy ships and to show the world an all-nuclear element of the world's greatest power for peace."

While the first mission is being carried out, the goodwill phase of the cruise is definitely under wraps. There were clear Government orders to play down the operation and it was not announced until the ships — previously operating in the Mediterranean — had left Gibraltar.

The announcement itself withheld any word of countries to be visited en-route and inquiring reporters were told that this could not be released. Although the route of the voyage was known to skirt the west and east coasts of Africa, nothing further appeared about the trip until the ships reached the port of Karachi, Pakistan, where, of course, news services sent out brief stories of their arrival.

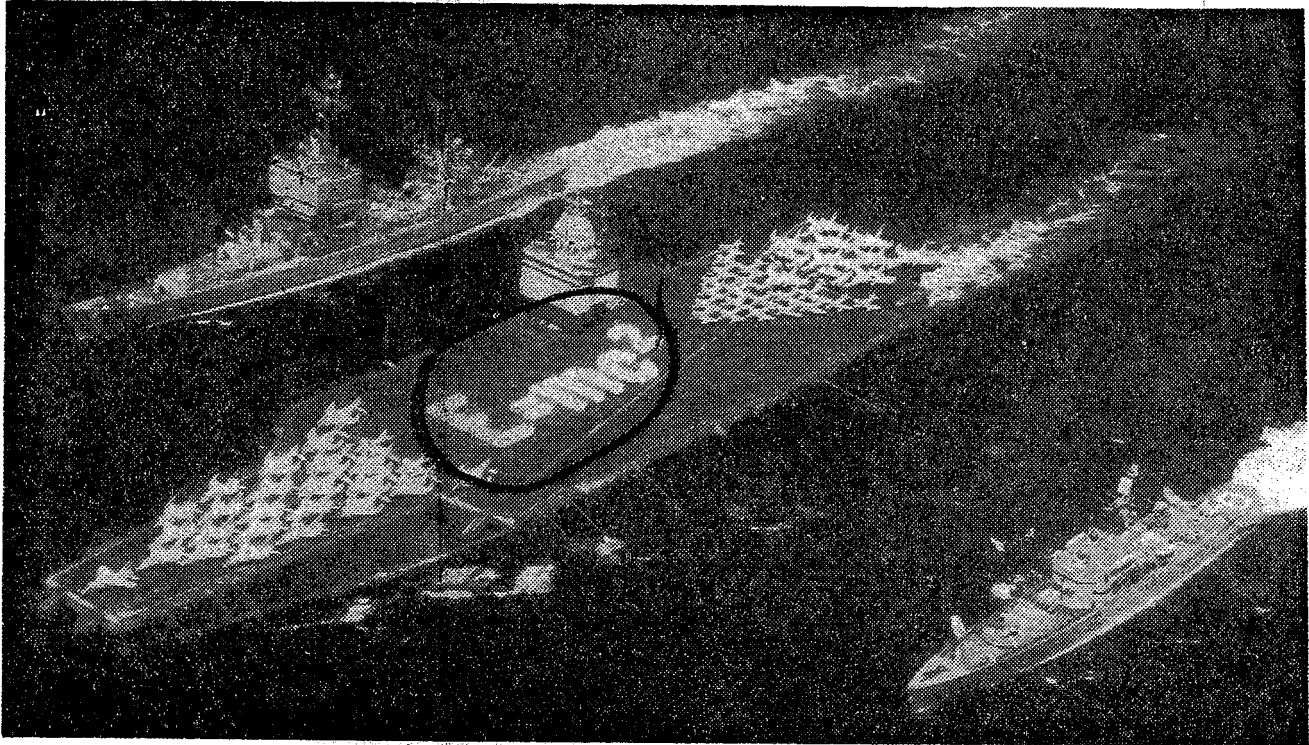
Then came a second Pentagon announcement disclosing that the Enterprise, Long Beach and Bainbridge had made what were called "under-way visits" to seven African nations. They were the friendly or neutral countries of Morocco, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Union of South Africa and Kenya.

WHAT THIS meant was that as the task force sailed past the countries named, planes from the Enterprise picked up a few selected officials of those nations, flew them to the flotilla for a flight and firepower demonstration and flew them home again.

Beyond a later statement that the response from these countries had been "enthusiastic," all details of such comments and visits radioed back from the Enterprise were ruled to be "classified information." Still later, some photographs and other data about the visits were released, but by that time no one was interested.

The task force visit to Pakistan Aug.

Power, Short



Task Force One (from top): cruiser Long Beach, the carrier Enterprise and the frigate Bainbridge.

20-22 produced eight-column banners in the Pakistani newspapers. The Pakistan navy greeted the ships and conducted joint maneuvers with them as they approached. Top Pakistani naval officials went aboard to be welcomed by Rear Adm. Bernard M. Streat, Task Force One commander.

THEN THE FORCE headed for Australia, passing well south of Indonesia under Washington orders reinforced during the journey. The flotilla broke up to pay individual visits to the Australian ports of Fremantle, Melbourne and Sydney last week and this weekend it is rendezvousing off Wellington, New Zealand, en route across the lower South Pacific.

The ships will put in to Rio de Janeiro and make "under-way visits" to Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Sao Paulo and Recife on the South American east coast in late September. The flotilla is due back at Norfolk Oct. 5.

While the Australian and South American stops are providing some limited view of this showpiece of American sea power, many other proposed visits were eliminated from the itinerary. There were proposals for port visits in Africa and to points in South Asia, including a trip through the Straits of Malacca, separating Malaysia and Indonesia, into the waters around Indochina. These were ruled out for various and not fully explained reasons. Navy Officers can only speculate

on the reasons for the operation being put under such routing and publicity wraps. Some countries, of course, are sensitive to the presence of nuclear-powered ships in their harbors or off their shores. But many countries that might have welcomed the ships reportedly were not asked.

Some Navy officers wondered if the play-down of Operation Sea Orbit had anything to do with the fact that Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara killed a Navy proposal to build a second atomic-powered carrier and ordered a conventional type instead, despite a heavy volume of evidence that nuclear power was preferable.

While McNamara has indicated that he would favor nuclear power for sur-

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face ships once its cost became more comparable with that of conventional ones, the Navy's dream of an A-powered surface fleet has been dampened in this Administration. One additional nuclear-propelled frigate, the Truxton, laid down several years, is building.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED on Operation Sea Orbit is in sharp contrast to the world cruise of the Great White Fleet. President Theodore Roosevelt sent his new battle fleet around the globe to impress Japan. He called it "walking softly and carrying a big stick."

The visit to Japan and elsewhere evoked enthusiastic public reaction and goodwill but failed to impress the world's admiralties, for the 16-battle-ship fleet was largely dependent on foreign bases for its coal and other support.

But the Enterprise task force, while attracting little public attention, obviously is impressing world defense staffs. The ships are independent of any support from ports visited or from supply ships.

IN MOVING nonstop from Gibraltar to Karachi, the force traveled well over 11,000 statute miles, a record for ships. The trip took three weeks but could have been made in two thirds that time at top speed.

This demonstrates the ability of nuclear ships to move quickly into possible trouble spots far from home. A nuclear carrier bearing 100 warplanes can reach a danger spot halfway around the globe in about half the time it takes a conventional flattop if it has atomic-propelled escorts which do not need to be refueled en route.

Operation Sea Orbit is not the first world circumnavigation by nuclear vessels. The American A-submarine Triton went around the world completely submerged in 84 days in 1960, following Magellan's 36,000-mile route. Earlier, in 1958, the nuclear sub Skate "circled the globe" by traveling around the 12 miles of the North Pole in 50 minutes.