

A Brief History of USS FORRESTAL

©2010,2024 . . . by Kenneth Killmeyer, Historian, USS Forrestal Association, Inc.



The FORRESTAL story began well before the ship herself was born. In the closing months of World War II, Admiral Mark Mitscher made the first recorded suggestion for an aircraft carrier with the general characteristics of the FORRESTAL class.

On 12 July 1951, the Navy announced that Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company had been awarded a contract to build CVA-59, the "World's First Super Aircraft Carrier."

CVA-59 would be named FORRESTAL in honor of the late James Vincent Forrestal who served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Secretary of the Navy, and, finally, as the first Secretary of Defense. USS FORRESTAL's nickname would be "First in Defense."

The keel for this great ship was laid on 14 July 1952, and within 30 months USS FORRESTAL was launched. In 1952 USS FORRESTAL would be the largest vessel ever constructed. She would displace 60,000 tons, be 1,039 feet long, and have a flight deck width of 252 feet. From keel to mast she equaled the height of a twenty-five story building. Within her many decks she would carry the latest technologies and crew comforts. Her huge voids and compartments would hold more food, fuel, and stores than any other naval vessel. She is a sight to behold being the "World's First Super Aircraft Carrier."

USS FORRESTAL was the "first" carrier built from the keel up to operate jet aircraft of the Atomic Age. To accommodate the larger and heavier jet aircraft, FORRESTAL's design was revolutionary. Among FORRESTAL's many "firsts," her design called for an angled flight deck which allowed for simultaneous launchings and landings of her aircraft. Additionally, she would have four powerful steam powered catapults to quickly launch the heavier jet aircraft. She also received the innovative mirror landing system to assist pilots' landings. Her design called for an armored flight deck and hangar deck. The flight deck would be the strength deck. Aircraft handling was greatly improved by the addition of four huge deck edge aircraft elevators. These elevators allowed the quick movement of aircraft from the four-acre flight deck topside down to the safety of the 75,000 square foot, 25 foot high, hangar bay below. FORRESTAL's bow would be enclosed. Her eight boilers and four powerful engines produced over 260,000 horsepower allowing FORRESTAL to steam at speeds up to 33 knots.

On 1 October 1955, USS FORRESTAL (CVA-59) was commissioned and home ported at Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, Virginia. With a strong beginning under the command of her first Commanding Officer, Captain Roy L. Johnson, USS FORRESTAL began her distinguished service. After her first shakedown cruise from 24 January to 31 March 1956, FORRESTAL and crew were ready to play a major role in projecting our country's Naval Air and Sea power. Early in FORRESTAL's nearly 38 years of service she was called upon to steam at short notice to the Azores during the Suez crisis of 1956 and to the mid-Atlantic during the Lebanon crisis of 1958. FORRESTAL and her Air Wings were deployed to the Mediterranean Sea twenty-one times. With one combat deployment to Vietnam and three cruises to the North Atlantic, USS FORRESTAL's distinguished career sent her to operate with the Second, Sixth, and Seventh fleets. She played a major role in winning the "Cold War." Her final deployment to the Mediterranean Sea and Aegean Sea began in May of 1991. During this final deployment, FORRESTAL's Air Wing conducted 911 sorties in support of operation "Provide Comfort."

During those 38 years of operation USS FORRESTAL embarked six separate Air Wings which operated 32 different aircraft types from the tried and true AD-6 Skyraider to the sleek F/A-18A Hornet. Seventy-seven distinguished U. S. Navy and Marine squadrons deployed with FORRESTAL through those many years. USS FORRESTAL was commanded by thirty distinguished naval officers and manned by nearly 130,000 men and women. During her service to the Republic, the ship logged nearly 400,000 nautical miles and attained more than 376,500 arrested aircraft landings. With her air wing embarked she operated with an average crew size of 5,000 men.

USS FORRESTAL's long service was not without a cost. Two hundred seventy-seven men made the ultimate sacrifice while serving their country aboard FORRESTAL. Of those 277 deaths, 134 were killed on 29 July 1967 while FORRESTAL and Air Wing SEVENTEEN were conducting combat operations on Yankee Station off the coast of North Vietnam.

In July of 1975 FORRESTAL's designation would change to CV-59 and her homeport became Mayport, Florida, but FORRESTAL's role would remain the same for many years to come. FORRESTAL's mission was not only sea power projection. Many times FORRESTAL and crew were called upon to provide medical, humanitarian and rescue assistance to hundreds of civilians and United States and foreign military servicemen.

FORRESTAL constantly received the most modern equipment to keep pace with the changing technologies of today's Navy. FORRESTAL's major defensive system while operating was her excellent and versatile aircraft. Her original self-defense system consisted of eight, 5 inch, MK54 guns, which were later replaced by a Sea Sparrow Missile Defense System. During a \$550 million, 28 month Service Life Extension Program overhaul in 1983 - 1985, designed to extend her life by 15 to 20 years, her self defense was strengthen with additional Sea Sparrow missile launchers and the Phalanx close in weapons systems. These overhaul periods gave FORRESTAL performance and other capabilities equal to the much younger nuclear powered aircraft carriers.

On 4 February 1992 USS FORRESTAL's designation was changed to AVT-59 when she became the Navy's training carrier with a new homeport of Pensacola, Florida.

In September of 1992 FORRESTAL steamed to Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, Philadelphia Pennsylvania for a scheduled 14 month, \$500 Million dollar complex overhaul, designed to extend her service life an additional twenty years. The overhaul was progressing ahead of schedule until February of 1993 when the Secretary of the Navy announced work would be halted to meet budget goals.

On 11 September 1993, USS FORRESTAL was decommissioned after nearly thirty-eight years of proud service. Today, the "World's First Super Aircraft Carrier," USS FORRESTAL, is moored at the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Status Update: On 4 Feb 2014, the USS FORRESTAL AVT-59 was towed from the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, Philadelphia, PA; enroute to All Star Medals, Brownsville, TX for disposal. On 18 Feb 2014, the USS FORRESTAL AVT-59 arrived at All Star Medals, Brownsville, TX for disposal.



(Above) FORRESTAL at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Photo provided by Ron Woodcock

