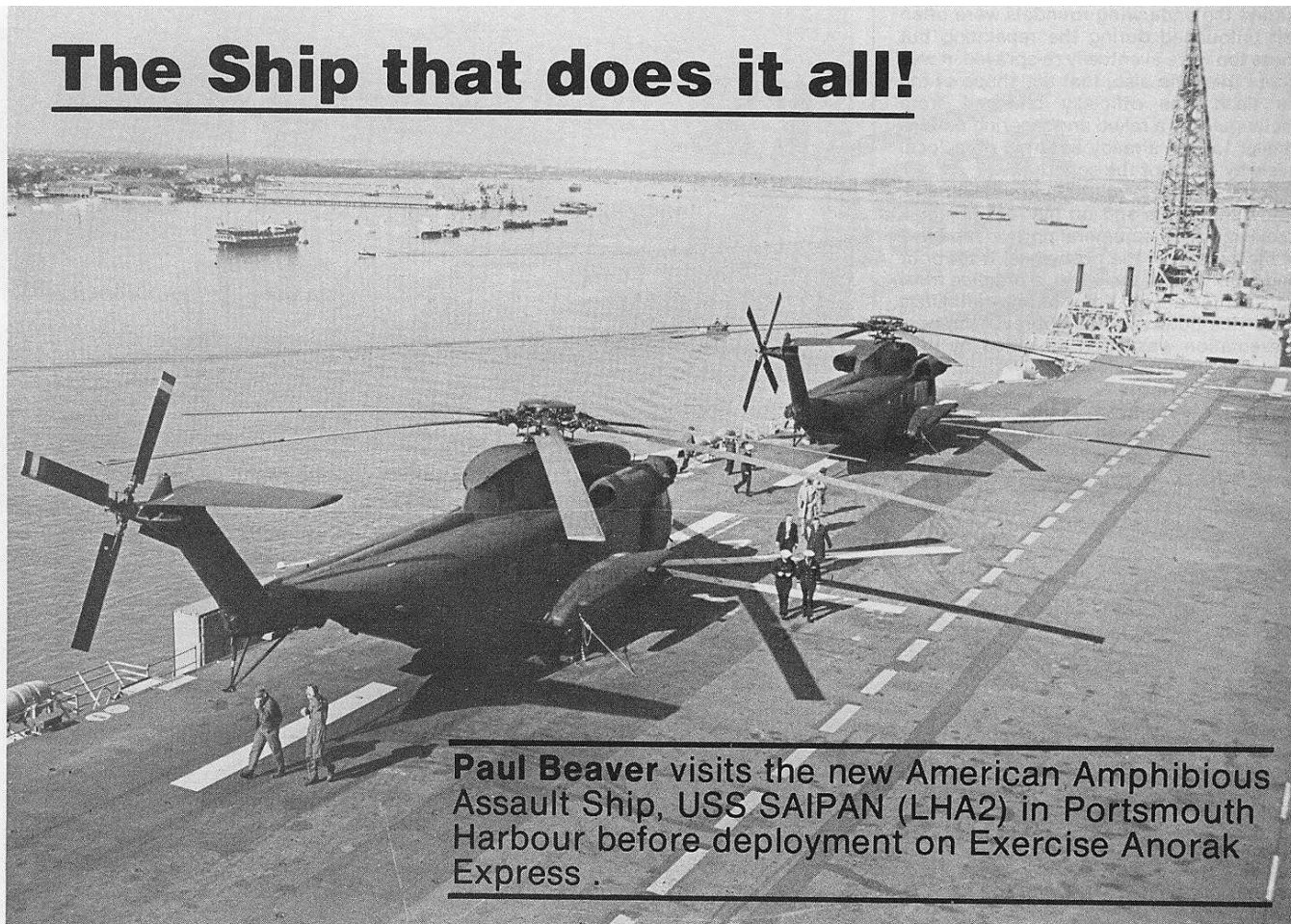


# The Ship that does it all!



**Paul Beaver** visits the new American Amphibious Assault Ship, USS SAIPAN (LHA2) in Portsmouth Harbour before deployment on Exercise Anorak Express.

For the first time, a Tarawa Class LHA paid a visit to a UK Dockyard. There are five of this Class of 39,300 tonnes carrier-type warships destined for US Naval Service, including the Saipan (LHA2) and the Nassau (LHA4) on the Atlantic Seaboard.

## The Ship

The main purpose of the Saipan and her sister-ships is to land a US Marine task force of 1900 Leathernecks by helicopter, landing raft or a combination of the two. A single LHA can perform any of the operational commitments which normally require four different types of conventional amphibious ships.

The ship's flight deck, which is strikingly angular and uncluttered, can operate nine assault helicopters (either CH-53Ds or CH-46Es) at one time. In fact, a normal air component aboard Saipan consists of attack AH-1T Sea Cobra, the UH-1N Huey, the CH-46E Sea Knight and the CH-53D Sea Stallion. The ship can also be configured to operate the USMC Harrier strike aircraft. The actual number and composition of the air group depends on the actual task ahead and the climatic conditions in which the ship will be serving.

The design is deliberately spacious and well-planned for the primary assault role and for the secondary emergency medical task. USS Saipan's medical facilities can hospitalise up to 300 patients and provide out-patient treatment for hundreds of additional injured. There is even a casevac lift facility from the flight deck to the sick bay area, allowing the injured to be flown aboard and speedily taken to pre-op.

Beneath the flight deck is a spacious hangar deck, and down yet another deck

where USMC vehicles, like the LVTP amphibious APC, are stored. There are two main elevators, one on the port side and one aft. Below the after elevator is the largest floodable well dock afloat and it is capable of taking four large LCUs (landing craft utility). This particular craft can cope with three M60A1 tanks or 500 combat troops. In addition there are 100-man LCM

(landing craft mechanised). In fact, a whole range of craft and amphibious vehicles can be carried.

## Modelling the LHA

A fine representation of the Tarawa Class is available at 1:720 scale from Revell. The kit, released in 1977/8, contains 72 parts for the ship herself with additional helicopters,

**Above:** This view from the port bridge wing shows the complex system of flight deck markings which characterize the LHA Class. The helo-spots are white and the longitudinal lines are yellow. Lifts are marked with red/yellow half checks.

**Below:** CH-46E 157707:36/CJ wears the toned-down matt olive drab and black scheme of operational USMC helicopters. The ship modeller should also find this view useful when detailing Saipan's superstructure.



landing craft and vehicles. Unfortunately, the kit paint scheme is inadequate and the following notes may be helpful to the modeller.

The hull and superstructure is painted in the usual US Navy medium grey. On the flight deck and gun/missile deck surfaces is the usual dark grey non-slip paint. Markings are in white (helicopter embarkation spots and hull number) and yellow (deck lines). On either side of the superstructure sides are large white hull numbers outlined in black. Black is also the colour of the various radar antennae and masts.

### The Air Squadron

Estimates of the number of rotary-wing aircraft carried aboard vary, but, depending on size, between 25 and 35 can be easily accommodated.

The largest type is the Sikorsky Sea Stallion in its CH-53D variant which is used to transport supplies, men and equipment from the flight deck to the assault area. It can carry 37 combat-equipped marines at 150 knots.

Examples of the helicopters on board, from HMH-461, a composite USMC Squadron, were painted in both overall olive drab with black insignia and lettering, and in the more traditional USMC semi-gloss



**Above:** A close-up of CH-46E Sea Knight 153369:32/CJ and the box-like 'island' of Saipan.



**Above:** No, not Vietnam — but the peaceful countryside just north of Basingstoke. The helo is CH-53D 157734:3/CJ.

green with white legend. One example of the CH-53D was even seen on deck in a mixture of the two! In the assault role is also to be found the Boeing-Vertol CH-46E Sea Knight twin-rotor helicopter. Of slightly smaller size, the Sea Knight is also used in the Casevac role. A kit of the Sea Knight was re-issued by Airfix last year at 1:72 scale and it is the simple process of a 'paint conversion' which produces one of the examples found aboard Saipan.

For utility purposes, the USMC deploys the ubiquitous Bell UH-1E Huey. For the modeller, there are several kits available from American manufacturers including Monogram at 1:48 scale and Revell at 1:32 scale. Finding the right decals for any scale of USMC model should present no mammoth task to the modeller, who, if he cannot find the necessary material in his spares box, can easily obtain them from the specialist American producers.

Perhaps the most striking (no pun intended) helicopter aboard Saipan is the Bell AH-1J and AH-1T Sea Cobra; the latter variant is equipped with a new and not totally successful TOW anti-tank weapon. Designed to give escort and battlefield fire support to heli-borne assaults, the Sea

Cobra has a low profile fuselage which is quite characteristic of the Cobra family.

Matchbox originally produced a Huey Cobra in the mid 1970s and with a little work, this 1:72 scale kit can be converted into an AH-1J or AH-1T. Monogram also produce a cobra at 1:72 scale, whilst Revell's AH-1G is at 1:32 scale.

### The Leathernecks

The raison d'être of the Saipan and her class — Tarawa, Belleau Wood, Nassau and Pelileu (ex — Da Nang) — is to carry a reinforced battalion of United States Marine Corps troops.

The task force carried by Saipan during her visit to Europe last winter was the 36th Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) and they participated in the joint-allied training exercise called Exercise Anorak Express, when 18,200 troops were landed 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Two other Amphibious warfare vessels — USS Ponce



**Above:** Quite large vehicles by British standards are carried in Saipan, such as this 'Cat' fork-lift. The helicopters are CH-53D Sea Stallions of HMH-461.

(LPD15) and USS Newport (LST1179) — were also in company with Saipan.

The 36th MAU have five M60A1 tanks, 34 LVTPs, six 10.5cm howitzers, eight Husky amphibious cargo carriers, 45 trucks and jeeps — some of which are equipped with TOW. The total personnel strength is 153 officers and 1,788 enlisted men.

The MAU make-up includes the Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, Second Marines of the 2nd Marine Division who are normally based at Camp Lejeune in the States. The 2nd Marine Air Wing at New River (also in North Carolina) provides the airlift equipment of HMC-461 and these helicopters with their crews form an integral part of the MAU, along with MAU Service Support Group 36 (part of 2nd Force Service Support Group).

When it comes right down to it, the strength of the MAU is really the men — the team. The MAU is unique in that all of the elements involved are combined under one commander — in this case, Vietnam veteran Colonel P. L. Cacace, USMC.

The 'ship that does it all' and the 'power from the sea' are a highly effective combination — but let's hope they are never used for real! Acknowledgements: the author would like to thank the USN's Public Affairs Office, the men and marines of Saipan, MoD (Navy) and RAF Northolt, for their assistance.

**All photos: credit Paul Beaver.**

**Right:** An immaculate 'Marine Green' Huey (180445) used in a utility role as well as in the rapid combat assault or medevac roles.

**Below:** Right down in the garage deck are parked some of the Assault Amphibian Personnel Vehicles (LVTP) which can carry 25 Marines ashore and then operate as a standard APC.



**Above:** The raison d'être of the Saipan is to land some 2000 'leathernecks' in any part of the world in any season. Illustrated here is a squad of Marines from the 36th MAU equipped with the standard M16A1 rifle and the M203 grenade launcher.

