

Universal Carrier 1936-48: The 'Bren Gun Carrier' Story

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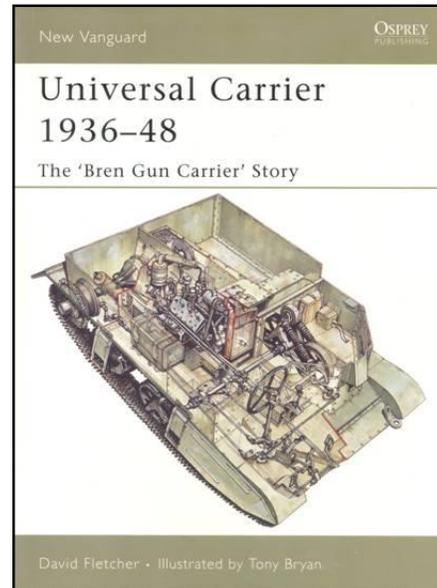
Text by David Fletcher; illustrated by Tony Bryan

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Comments:

Light, fully tracked carriers were a ubiquitous part of virtually all commonwealth armed forces during World War II but are rarely given much attention. For most wargamers, they are usually Bren Gun Carriers. (No doubt due to the Airfix Bren Gun Carrier kit.) In reality, there were many types and this Osprey volume briefly documents the development and use of the predecessors, as well as the Universal Carrier itself.

Written by David Fletcher, of the UK Tank Museum, he starts the story in the mid-1920s with a brief overview of the tracked machine gun carriers and light artillery tractors that Vickers-Armstrong combined and simplified in 1928 to produce a new prototype with superior suspension and steering. He then relates how this led to the development of several related but distinctly different carrier types with about 2,000 being in service at the start of World War II.

Pre-war experience, reinforced by the fighting in France, highlighted the requirement for more carriers in many roles. To meet this need, it was recognised that a single

øuniversalø design would be needed and what wargamers generally call a øBren Gun Carrierø was developed ó the øUniversal Carrier.ø

The first quarter of the book outlines this evolution from the prototype through the early carriers to the Universal Carrier Mk I. The development and combat experiences of the pre-Universal Carriers in France is examined, before attention is turned to the introduction of the new Universal Carrier Mk I in Egypt and the UK in 1941.

In 1942, with the immediate threat of invasion passed, the book looks at the Universal Carrier Mk II and the upgrade of many of the Mk Is to the new standard. This Universal Carrier Mk II is recognisable as the subject we are most familiar with. It featured the more vertical front valance (track/mudguards) and front-mounted spare wheel. The Mk III versions are mentioned before turning to carrier production abroad.

The next section, øWith The Infantry,ø looks at the employment of the Universal Carrier in the army, particularly in North West Europe. Half a dozen paragraphs each are used to look at the most common variants; the basic carrier, 3ø mortar, medium machine gun and observation post carriers, as well as the deep-wading modifications developed for D-Day. A couple of paragraphs cover the use in the Far East and a page or so covers other uses, such as anti-tank gun towing, reconnaissance, ambulance etc.

The øFirepowerø section looks at experiments and field modifications carried out to give the carriers more capability and firepower, from captured MG42s to attempts at mounting the 2-pdr. anti-tank gun. A page on øPost-War Activitiesø completes the main text before the last four pages give details on the Tony Bryan colour plates mounted in the middle of the book.

Overall, this volume delivers Osprey's familiar format. The focus is on the development and employment in western Europe, with only a page or so about use elsewhere. A significant proportion, about 25%, is devoted to the various early, pre-Universal Carriers.

Gaming relevance is mostly provided by an abundance of reference images, though the text contains numerous snippets of interest to skirmish gamers in terms of carrier use and scenario opportunities from brief after-action reports. It is, however, an invaluable first step for gamers interested in understanding the actual use and development of the models they field in their table top forces. The carriers were part of many commonwealth units and this Osprey volume is the only easily available and moderately priced book giving a concise historical overview of such a widely used vehicle.

--Chris Sims

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