

2018

Target Hiroshima: Desk Parsons and the Creation of the Atomic Bomb

Xavier Maruyama

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Maruyama, Xavier (2018) "Target Hiroshima: Desk Parsons and the Creation of the Atomic Bomb," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 53 : No. 3 , Article 19.
Available at: <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol53/iss3/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact daniel.desilets@usnwc.edu.

222 Naval War College Review

painful lessons. Whether those lessons will be heeded remains to be seen.

ROBERT G. SULLIVAN

Captain, U.S. Naval Reserve, Retired

Christman, Al. *Target Hiroshima: Deak Parsons and the Creation of the Atomic Bomb*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. 305pp. \$32

The roles of J. Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard, Leslie Groves, Paul Tibbets, and other participants in the creation and use of the atomic bomb have been well documented in a host of articles and books concerning the Manhattan Project. Even relatively minor players (such as Louis Slotin, who died of a radiation overdose in a criticality accident) are known to us through fictionalized versions of the popular movie *Fat Man and Little Boy*. In these and other accounts, a uniformed naval officer appears briefly, and we have wondered, who was that man? Al Christman, who was the historian for the Naval Weapons Center, China Lake and for the Navy Laboratories of the Naval Material Command, presents an in-depth biography of that man—Captain William “Deak” Parsons. Deak Parsons, ordnance expert and associate director of Los Alamos, provided the practicality that turned the physicists’ creation into a deliverable weapon.

Christman portrays Parsons as the complete naval officer, subordinating his personal aspirations for more glamorous operational assignments in order to do what his country required. Deak Parsons was rare: a scientist, engineer, and military man who combined detailed technical expertise with the leadership abilities of a seafaring line officer. He exemplified the close professional partnership that existed during World War II between the nation’s scientists and its military.

Al Christman believes that Parsons was uniquely qualified to bridge these two cultures. He had been involved in the development of radar and the proximity fuse, and he had been crucial in making them operationally useful. He was the “atomic admiral” who provided technical direction to Operation CROSSROADS, the postwar series of nuclear weapons tests that changed the atomic bomb from a test bed into a weapon.

Parsons’s last shipboard assignment prior to America’s entry into the war was in 1939, as gunnery officer on board the USS *Detroit*, flagship of the commander of destroyers of the Pacific battle force. Shore duty came next, at the Naval Proving Grounds, Dahlgren, Virginia, and at the Applied Physics Laboratory in Silver Spring, Maryland, where he made possible the introduction of the proximity fuse

for combat use. By 1942 he thought he had paid his dues and would be sent to sea, duty for which he was long overdue. If he had had his choice, Parsons's next assignment would have been as executive officer of the light cruiser *Helena*. Instead, the president's science advisor, Vannevar Bush, drafted him into the atomic bomb project. On 5 May 1943, Parsons received a call to report to Admiral Ernest King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet. King dashed Parsons's hopes for wartime sea command. King told him that the services of an ordnance officer were needed to supervise the production of an atomic bomb. Like the military leader of the Manhattan Project, General Leslie Groves, Deak Parsons put aside his personal desire for combat duty to make greater contributions to the total war effort—helping to create “a perfectly functioning atomic bomb that could end the war.”

In today's climate, where lip service to “technology” is often given by many who themselves lack the detailed knowledge needed to participate in its development, the example of Parsons, with his expertise, should stand as a model for officers. Parsons did his duty, sacrificing “careerist concerns.”

Al Christman has done his homework, synthesizing the results of research from recently released Manhattan Project records with

personal interviews, conducted over thirty-plus years, of prominent World War II scientists and officers. *Target Hiroshima* is a “must read” for those who wish to understand the role of a military officer in technological innovation.

XAVIER MARUYAMA
Monterey, California

Kimball, Warren F. *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Second World War*. New York: William Morrow, 1997. 422pp. \$16

Some casual readers of World War II history have the simplistic notion that the Anglo-American alliance was a natural, inevitable coalition against the evils of Hitlerism and that following America's belated entry into the war, the Anglo-Saxon powers, with a bit of help from the Soviet Union, were foreordained to defeat Nazi Germany. In this view, these nations formed a noble, almost selfless alliance dedicated to the unconditional defeat of a monstrous regime that could not be allowed to survive.

The reality was, of course, much more complex. Far from sharing a unified view of the war, each of the three allied nations had its own divergent national interests and imperatives throughout the war. Most readers are aware of the divergence between the Soviet Union on the