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Northwest Epic: The Building of the Alaska Highway

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Paul Stillwell traces the history of the old ship from her building and commissioning in March 1916 to her death in 1941. The narrative describes life aboard *Arizona* through the eyes of the officers and enlisted men who served in her. It is amply supported by numerous photographs in her various periods between alterations. The changes in her appearance and armament illustrate the changes made in all the battleships during the period from 1916 to 1941.

The book includes several interesting appendices. One describes the ship's employment and twenty-six-year life. Others list the names of her commanding officers, the over 1,500 men who were serving in her on 7 December, and those who died in her. Still another consists of drawings and technical data on the ship, and a last one presents a series of touching letters to the girl friend of an enlisted man who served in her.

Stillwell is not only an author of many books on naval history, but he also serves as director of oral history and editor-in-chief of the quarterly *Naval History* at the Naval Institute Press. He is a skilled and competent writer and an excellent interviewer, drawing on the memories of over a hundred interviewees for this study. The hundreds of photographs he chose are excellent. As a result, the *Arizona* comes alive with the words of the men who served in her. A bonus is that the book accurately describes life as it was on any of the other battleships of that era. Change the

name and the account could fit any ship and any battleship sailor.

This book will be attractive to any student of naval history or to anyone who likes the Navy or the sea. But it may be of special interest to the thousands of officers and enlisted men who served in battleships prior to World War II. From its pages their families and friends will come to know the life they led and the hardships they endured.

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Twichell, Heath. *Northwest Epic: The Building of the Alaska Highway*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. 368pp. \$24.95

Heath Twichell has done more than write a fascinating story chronicling a truly herculean task; he has produced a case history for decision makers and strategic planners.

World War II triggered the plan to build a road linking Alaska with the forty-eight states to provide communication and logistical and strategic access that could not be interrupted by the Japanese navy. It also included bending the route to serve airfields in the Canadian Northwest and Alaska, as well as constructing a pipeline along the MacKenzie River and over the Rocky Mountains to provide fuel from the oil fields to White Horse, Skagway, and Fairbanks.

The decision to pit man and machine against space, nature, and

time hinged on the assumption of a threat to sea communications by the Japanese, which was proven wrong. This was foreseen at the time by the ranking Canadian on the USA-Canadian Permanent Joint Board of Defense (PJBD). On 3 March 1942, after the PJBD had approved the U.S. Army plan to build a road through Canada to Alaska, Dr. Keenlyside told the Undersecretary of State for External Affairs that while Canada, for political reasons, could not bar the United States from land access to Alaska, "the strategic justifications . . . for the road are of questionable validity." He said also that while the major justification of a threat to sea communications by the Japanese navy might have been true at the time the decision was made, "if the United States programme of plane and ship construction is even approximately achieved, it will not be true in 1944. If the road could be built in two weeks instead of two years the argument would be valid."

In less than two years, the road (but not the pipeline) was usable for military traffic, but even when the first trucks made the tortuous journey in November 1942, less than a year after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese threat to sea communications with Alaska was minimal and fading.

Twichell covers this story from every angle and in detail. The author demonstrates commendable restraint in avoiding accusations. He applies his personal interest and compassion to areas that demand honesty and

understanding. The arrogance of racial prejudice, chauvinistic attitudes, military and civilian rivalries, and American insensitivity to Canadian sovereignty were factors then as they are today. But though the cost exceeded its wartime worth, the execution of that road by unprepared engineers, both military and civilian, was truly an epic accomplishment.

This work has a structure like that of a musical piece. There are themes and movements woven into a single opus that combine the influence of military and political leaders on events and the reciprocal impact of events on the great and the small.

Big people were involved. Senator Truman's handling of the CANOL pipeline investigation raised his presidential stock and lowered that of General Brehon Somervell, the Army's logistic czar, who relieved General Hoge from command of the Alaskan construction, probably for personal reasons (and thereby paved the way for Hoge to become a four-star combat leader in the European theater). Lesser leaders failed on the spot. Yet, it is the many unsung heroes (black and white, military and civilian, men and women) that fill these pages who warm the heart of the reader.

As a bonus, Twichell offers students of strategy an interesting comparison of how civilian entrepreneurs and military leaders treat large projects that are overtaken by events. For example, after the American Civil War, the Collins overland cable (planned to connect Europe and America through Canada and Russia, via the Bering

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Strait) was almost completed at a cost to Western Union of over \$3,000,000. In the summer of 1866 Cyrus Field's fifth try at an Atlantic cable succeeded, and the Collins project was stopped. During World War II, however, when it was clear that a Japanese threat to communications to Alaska no longer existed, the road and oil line continued. Professional pride plus access to the public treasury proved to be a hindrance to making hard and timely decisions.

Twichell is a former professor at the Naval War College. He is linked to Alaska through his father's role as an engineer officer in this epic and also through the drama of discovery in his first book, which covered the Alaskan feats of General Allen, for which the author won the Allan Nevins Prize in American History.

Students of strategy, logisticians, sociologists, and adventurers who are interested in Alaska, or anyone who loves drama will benefit from reading this book. Building the Alaska highway was not strategically critical, but it was a heroic accomplishment.

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Compton-Hall, Richard. *Submarines and the War at Sea, 1914-1918*. New York: Macmillan, 1991. 314pp. \$19.95

Most readers are familiar with the exploits of the German submarine arm in the two world wars, but few are

aware of the tactical and technical innovations that all the major navies had to develop to make the submarine a viable weapon system. Richard Compton-Hall has provided us with that information. *Submarines* is a book about the people, equipment, and tactics of a naval arm that most senior naval leaders initially considered at best a technical curiosity with some possible use in coastal defense.

Compton-Hall's narrative takes the reader aboard those early British, German, and Russian submarines and provides a feel for the primitive and dangerous conditions in which submariners then served. It was a perilous profession with little promise of career rewards. It is a view that strips away the romantic myths about the early days in submarine service. Compton-Hall explains why the naval leaders of the pre-World War I era expected so little of their submarine; yet, those early pioneers persevered and provided results that shocked the world and changed naval operations forever.

The author is a former career submariner in the Royal Navy, and from his past experiences he has an insight that few can match into submarine operations. Unfortunately, he periodically laces his narrative with chauvinistic pronouncements (such as that Royal Navy sailors had more spirit, were more chivalrous, did more with less, were more innovative, than anyone else, etc.). Such statements detract from an otherwise outstanding account. Still, that is only a minor