

AMERICA'S UNSUNG BATTLECRUISERS

BY RICHARD H. WAGNER

(Originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Summer 2005)



USS ALASKA (CB 1)

DISPLACEMENT 34,253 tons full load

LENGTH: 808 feet

BEAM: 91 feet

SPEED: 33 knots

POWER PLANT: Steam turbine

ARMAMENT: 9 12-inch 45 cal.,
12 5 inch 38 cal.

56 40mm

34 20mm

3 aircraft

CREW: 1,517

LAUNCHED: 15 August 1943

They have been called "the least useful of all the capital ships built for the United States Navy during the World War II era". "White elephants" that historians have relegated to obscurity. However, as seen below, the battlecruisers of the ALASKA-class do not deserve such a reputation. They were built as a response to a real threat. Although that threat had disappeared by the time they were completed, they fulfilled an important role during their short service lives. Moreover, they were

retired prematurely based upon erroneous assumptions about the future needs of the Navy and thus were not available when needed.

The Perceived Threat

In order to place the decision to build the ALASKAs in perspective, it is necessary to go back all the way to the beginning of the 20th Century. Although both Italy and Japan were experimenting with fast, big gun ships, the Royal Navy, under the leadership of Admiral Sir John "Jackie" Fisher, took the lead in developing modern ships with the armament of a battleship and the speed and protection of a cruiser. Fisher's theory was that "speed is the best protection" and, thus, armor could be sacrificed to achieve speed. These ships could be used in independent actions against cruisers and as an adjunct to the line of battle in a fleet action. Accordingly, Britain, Germany, Japan, and other countries raced to build battlecruisers.

The British battlecruisers performed as hoped against German cruisers in the Battle of the Falklands in World War I. However, two British battlecruisers exploded and sank with massive casualties during the fleet action at Jutland. As a result, enthusiasm for the battlecruiser concept cooled and HMS HOOD, under construction at the

time of Jutland, was widely-predicted to be the last of the line. Indeed, after the war, Britain and America converted battlecruiser hulls into aircraft carriers and Japan rebuilt the KONGO-class as battleships.

Yet, there was to be a rebirth of the battlecruiser. In the Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended the war, the victors placed severe limitations on the German navy to ensure that Germany would pose no threat to them in the future. However, in order to act as a bulwark against expansion by the Soviet Union, the treaty left the Germans with nine obsolete battleships, all of which had been completed between 1902 and 1908. The Treaty dictated that no German navy ship could be replaced until twenty years after its launch date and that no battleship could exceed 10,000 tons.

The victors planning backfired. Because the battleships that the Germans had been allowed to keep were so old, the Germans could begin to think about replacing them shortly after the ink on the Treaty was dry. In addition, the Treaty forced the Germans to think in innovative ways of how to construct a modern capital ship within its severe limitations. Given the limitations of the Treaty, the Germans envisioned the role of the Reichsmarine as defending Germany in a Baltic conflict. The other Baltic powers did not have significant navies in the 1920s but since France had political ties with Poland, it seemed likely that France might send a cruiser squadron into the Baltic in the event of a conflict between Germany and Poland. Accordingly, German planning focused upon developing a ship that could operate against French cruisers.

This thinking led the Germans away from the battle line concept and

eventually to the panzerschiff or pocket battleship. The concept behind these ships was that they would be able to out-gun any ship they could not escape and would be able to outrun any heavier gunned adversary. In other words, they would be able to sink any existing French cruiser and would be faster than any existing French battleship. This concept came to fruition in the DEUTSCHLAND class, which included the GRAF SPEE, the ADMIRAL SCHEER, as well as the DEUTSCHLAND (later renamed the ADMIRAL LUTZOW). These ships carried a primary battery of six 11 inch guns in two turrets and had a speed of 26 knots which was considerably faster than any existing French battleship.

Concern about the German pocket battleships and Italian heavy cruisers led the French government in April 1932 to approve the construction of two 30 knot ships each with a main battery of 13 inch guns. These became the battlecruisers DUNKERQUE and STRASSBORG.

At first, political considerations prevented the Germans from doing anything more than discussing a response to the new French design because such a ship would have to exceed the Treaty limitations. However, in 1933 the German government changed hands and Hitler gave permission the next year to proceed with the next generation of panzerschiff in order to counter the French. Two years later, Hitler unilaterally renounced the Versailles Treaty, and, in 1936, the Germans launched the GNEISENAU and the SCHARNHORST. While it can be debated whether the DEUTSCHLANDs were big cruisers or battlecruisers, these new 35,000 ton ships were undoubtedly battlecruisers.

They were equipped with a main battery of nine new Krupp 11 inch guns, which were superior to all existing guns of that caliber, and a secondary battery of twelve 5.9 inch guns. They could also do over 31 knots.

As war with Great Britain became more likely, the Germans again rethought their plans for their capital ships. Britain had long been the world's premier naval power and it was unlikely that Germany would ever achieve naval parity. Thus, there was no point in planning for a traditional naval battle between opposing lines of battleships. However, as an island-nation, Britain was dependent on overseas trade. Accordingly, the Germans decided that they would use their capital ships against Britain's merchant marine. Not only would these raids disrupt commerce but they would force the British to use capital ships to escort convoys. The high-speed GNEISENAU-class ships lent themselves to hit and run attacks. Moreover, while the DEUTSCHLAND-class ships could be overtaken by the French DUNKERQUE battlecruisers, their all-diesel propulsion systems gave them enormous range, which was ideal for commerce raiding.

When war broke out in 1939, the DEUTSCHLAND and the GRAF SPEE were on station in the Atlantic and commenced commerce raiding activities that caused panic and disruption disproportionate to the amount of tonnage actually sunk. A subsequent five-month foray by the ADMIRAL SCHEER produced more actual damage than had been inflicted by her sisters combined. The GNEISENAU and the SCHARNHORST sank 33 merchant ships in one raid. And, in the Norwegian campaign, the two battlecruisers sank the British aircraft carrier GLORIOUS and

her escort destroyers. Thus, looking toward Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s, American planners could see that a hostile nation had an effective weapon that could disrupt American commerce.

Looking toward the Pacific, the planners also thought they saw a threat. Tensions with Japan were rising over Japan's expansionist moves in the western Pacific. A war in the Pacific would be fought over vast distances and the planners were concerned that in such a war, Japanese heavy cruisers might be used as raiders to attack the long lines of communication between the Pacific Fleet and its bases. Also, the Japanese heavy cruisers posed the primary surface threat to the fast American aircraft carriers because no Japanese battleship was capable of the speeds of the carriers. In addition, intelligence reported that the Japanese might be building a "super-cruiser" capable of sinking any American heavy cruiser.

It might well be asked why American battleships could not be used to counter the German and Japanese threats? The answer lies in the fact that America had observed the naval disarmament treaties that were negotiated between the major powers in the 1920s and 1930s. These treaties had placed limits on the number and size of the signatories' battleships. As a result, no new American battleship was completed between 1923 and 1941. The old battleships did not have the speed to counter the new battlecruisers. Furthermore, the planners of the day still envisioned that naval battles would be fought as at Jutland between opposing battle lines. Only twelve of the fifteen existing American battleships were suitable for a main fleet engagement and it was believed that even taking into

account the eight new fast battleships under construction and the two on order, the United States would not have superiority over the Japanese battle line until 1945. Moreover, with the German victories in Europe in 1940 and 1941, it began to look like the Germans would soon have effective control over the French, Italian, and even the Royal Navy. The common sense conclusion drawn by President Franklin Roosevelt and by Admiral Ernst King was that America needed its own battlecruisers.

Even though the first studies of a possible "cruiser-killer" that could be used to escort fast carriers, hunt down German and Japanese raiders, and to engage in commerce raiding, were undertaken in 1938, the concept was often debated and numerous designs considered. The final design called for a 27,000-ton standard displacement with an overall length of 808 feet - - longer than any U.S. battleship then in commission. They would have a main battery of nine 12 inch guns and a main armor belt of 9 inches tapering to 5 inches - - considerably less than on American battleships. However, the reduced armor allowed the ships to have a maximum speed of 33 knots. Although the Navy deemed these ships "large cruisers," they squarely met the definition of a battlecruiser and were, in fact, always treated as capital ships. In July 1940, Congress appropriated money for the construction of six of these ships as part of the pre-war attempt to rapidly expand the fleet.

It thus appears that the decision to build the ALASKAs was appropriate given what was known at the time. Hostile nations had similar weapons or were believed to be building them and there appeared to be no existing means of responding.

Service to the Nation

USS ALASKA (CB 1) was laid down at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in December 1941 but was not commissioned until 17 June 1944. Due to post-commissioning fitting out, an intensive shakedown cruise, a return visit to Philadelphia for new directors for her five-inch secondary battery, standardization trials, and training, the ship did not join the combat fleet in the western Pacific until 29 January 1945. On 13 March 1945, she was joined at Ulithi, the fleet anchorage in the Caroline Islands, by the second ship in the class USS GUAM (CB 2).

By the time the ALASKAs were ready for action, the ships that they had been built to combat were no longer a threat. SCHARNHORST had been sunk in a duel with HMS DUKE OF YORK in December 1943. GNEISENAU had been scuttled in port and LUTZOW, and SHEER were trapped in their Baltic ports. Similarly, the remaining Japanese cruisers lacked the fuel to sortie and, in any event, had never been used as long-range commerce raiders. Nor had the Japanese built a super-cruiser. As for American commerce raiding, the Japanese merchant marine already had been devastated by American submarines. Indeed, when ALASKA and GUAM made a commerce raiding foray into the East China Sea in July 1945, all they encountered were Chinese junks.

Although circumstances had changed so that the battlecruisers were no longer needed to address the threats they had been built to counter, they were far from useless as it was found that they were readily suited to fill other roles. First, with their ability to do 33 knots

and their extensive anti-aircraft batteries, the ALASKAs were well-suited to providing an anti-aircraft umbrella for the fast American carriers that had become the centerpiece of the fleet. This was no little assignment. The primary threat to the fleet was from the air. To illustrate, during the Okinawa campaign, 30 ships were lost and many more damaged by air attacks including kamikazes. Without the anti-aircraft umbrella provided by the ALASKAs and the fast battleships, the losses during the closing battles of the war would have been greater. Indeed, ALASKA is credited with driving off two groups of attackers in one night during the Okinawa campaign and with destroying a suicide bomber that was less than a half-mile from the stern of USS INTREPID (CV 11) during an action off the Japanese home islands. In addition to gunfire support, the battlecruisers were able to act as fighter directors as when ALASKA controlled three divisions of fighters from USS HANCOCK (CV 19) while escorting USS FRANKLIN (CV 13) which had been badly damaged by a kamikaze.



USS ALASKA (Photo: Naval Historical Center)

Second, the battlecruisers were able to use their main batteries for shore bombardment. Acting as an independent

task group, ALASKA and GUAM bombarded an airfield on Minami Daito Shima and radar sites on Okino Daito Shima. Without the battlecruisers, aircraft carriers would have had to have *Historical Center* been deployed and airmen put at risk.

ALASKA received three battle stars and GUAM two for their service during the war. Hardly, "white elephants".

Early Retirement

Following the Japanese surrender, the ALASKAs took part in a "show of force" in the Yellow Sea parading American power before the major ports. They then embarked Army troops that had been acting as an occupation force at Jinsen, Korea, and brought them home to San Francisco as part of Operation Magic Carpet. By February 1946, both ALASKA and GUAM were berthed in Bayonne, New Jersey where they sat in reserve until they were sold for scrap in June 1960.

Historians tend to focus on the logic behind retiring a ship or weapons system. However, politics should not be forgotten. At the end of the war, the Navy had 20 fleet carriers, 23 battleships, 2 battlecruisers, 22 heavy cruisers, 40 light cruisers, and many smaller ships. It knew that the fleet would have to be reduced but the country was looking for a "peace dividend," blind to the bear that only a few realized was in the woods. Accordingly, the fleet was cut beyond what the Navy had proposed and many useful ships were scrapped or mothballed.

Turning to the logic of retiring the ALASKAs, despite the Navy's insistence that these ships were cruisers,

they were grouped with the battleships in the planners' thinking. The war had demonstrated that naval battles would no longer be decided by lines of big gun ships blazing away at each other and, thus, the battleships were obsolete. The same too must hold true for battlecruisers.

In response to the argument that the fast battleships and the battlecruisers had demonstrated their ability to fill other vital roles, the proponents of retiring the big gun ships downplayed the significance of those roles in the future. First, the planners envisioned the next war as being fought against the Soviet Union on the plains of Europe where naval gunfire would play no role. Second, with the advent of jets and guided missiles, the anti-aircraft batteries of the battleships and battlecruisers would no longer be able to provide an umbrella for the carriers.

When North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, the Navy was caught flat-footed. Numerous targets were within range of big naval guns but the only big gun ship left in active service was USS MISSOURI (BB 63), which had been kept in service only because of President Harry Truman's fondness for that ship. The Navy then struggled to reactivate MISSOURI's sisters. Although all four of the battleships did an excellent job of providing naval gunfire support, all four were mothballed in the years following that war.

The Viet Nam War again proved the planners had been wrong when they discounted the need for naval gunfire support. Aircraft losses grew as the war intensified as did the need for more firepower to support the ground troops and the need to interdict supplies flowing from North Viet Nam into the

South. Many targets could have been hit from the sea by big gun ships so the Navy scrambled to reactivate one of the four IOWA-class battleships. However, USS NEW JERSEY (BB-62) proved so effective that she was sent back into retirement in order to meet North Vietnamese negotiating demands. As a result, gunfire support had to be provided by cruisers and destroyers that did not have the range to reach many targets.

Subsequently, as demonstrated during the 1980s and in the First Gulf War, the big gun ships were still capable of satisfying the need for naval gunfire support. Because the ALASKAs had been scrapped in 1960, they were not available.

An argument can be made that since the Navy underutilized the four IOWAs during the post-war period, it did not need the smaller gunned ALASKAs. However, because the ALASKAs were somewhat smaller than the IOWAs, carried less armor, and needed a much smaller crew, they would have been less expensive to operate. Furthermore, if the ALASKAs had been available in the 1980s when the United States was scrambling to meet the growth of the Soviet navy, there would have been three more capital ships with which to build surface action groups.

The argument that the ALASKAs would not have been able to provide an effective anti-aircraft umbrella in the jet age is also fallacious. The Navy did not give up trying to defend the fleet from air attacks in 1945. Instead, as aircraft and missiles evolved, anti-aircraft technology evolved. Indeed, a study undertaken in 1946 concluded that the ships' anti-aircraft batteries could be improved with only a little weight added to the ships. Thus, it was only

because the ALASKAs weaponry was not upgraded that the ships became obsolete anti-aircraft defenses.

The story of the B-52 bomber provides an interesting contrast. Designed in the 1940s and built during the 1950s and 1960s, Strategic Command envisions flying these planes until the middle of the 21st Century. The Air Force recognized that these planes were an excellent platform and the technology onboard has been continuously upgraded. As a result, these "old" planes continue to be viable.

At various points, the Navy did consider mounting new technology on the battlecruisers. When the war ended, work on the third ship of the class, USS HAWAII (CB 3), was halted when the ship was 84% complete. In the 1940s, plans were drawn to convert the unfinished ship into the Navy's first guided missile ship. Nothing came of the idea. A subsequent plan to convert her into a large command ship was approved but no contracts were issued. She was sold for scrap in 1958.

In that same year, a study was undertaken looking toward converting the mothballed ALASKA and GUAM into missile ships. The first proposal would have replaced the main battery on each ship with Terrier missiles. This appeared to be prohibitively expensive and a proposal was made to remove the rear turrets and replace them with missiles. However, nothing came of this

plan. Ironically, these "improvements" would have rendered the ships less useful in the conflicts to come.

The battlecruiser concept did not die with the ALASKAs. In 1971, the Soviet Navy received authorization to build a series of large, fast, heavily-armed surface ships to be used as the flagships of anti-carrier surface action groups. It was envisioned that these ships' armament and sensors would change as tactical thinking and technology evolved. Armed with vertically-launched missiles, torpedoes, helicopters, and two 130mm guns, four KIROV-class battlecruisers were completed during the period 1980 to 1998. With the decline of the Russian navy, only one, PYOTR VELIKHIY (Peter the Great), remains in service. However, from time-to-time, stories surface that China is planning to build (or buy) a battlecruiser.

In sum, the American battlecruisers were not useless white elephants. Although they were not involved in any dramatic ship-to-ship duels, they carried out important functions during the Second World War. Rather than indicating their lack of continuing viability, their early retirement merely highlights that the planners were wrong in their predictions of what future conflicts would involve and what would be needed in those conflicts.