SECTION II

Military Construction, Continental United States

The transfer of the military construction mission from the Quartermaster General to the Corps of Engineers was one of the most important events in the Corps' wartime history. The timing of the transfer was unintentionally dramatic: the President signed the legislation on 1 December 1941 and the law went into effect on 16 December 1941. Just as the nation geared itself for the greatest war in the 20th century, the Corps of Engineers launched the greatest military construction effort in American history.

The Corps was prepared. Its long history of civil works construction gave it a large work force experienced in the design, construction, and contracting of large-scale projects. More recently, its assumption of the construction mission for the Army Air Corps in November 1940 introduced the Corps to the requirements of this relatively new and soon to be prominent weapon of war. The legislation enacted in December 1941 culminated a period of intense maneuvering and debate, which is outlined in the first essay in this section. Both its long construction history and its recently proven ability to undertake new missions placed the Corps in a good position to assume the entire Army's military construction responsibilities.

In the months after December 1941, the Corps' mission grew to vast proportions. The most urgent and pressing construction projects had to do with defending American territory from enemy attack and building the facilities required to mobilize the country's vast resources of manpower and material. One of the first facilities needed was an office building for the huge staff that would direct the nation's worldwide war effort. Designed over a weekend and built with amazing speed, the Pentagon became the symbol of America's preeminent military power, which had its origins in World War II.

The Alaska Highway contributed to both defense of American territory and mobilization. Pushed through the wilderness of Canada and Alaska as a hasty pioneer road, it became a link between the lower 48 states and an American territory under very real enemy threat. Eventually the highway helped open up the resources of the northwestern part of the continent for the war effort. The Corps' role in this important war effort is the subject of the third essay in this section.

Construction of the Pentagon and the Alaska Highway were unusual projects notable for the attention they attracted. At Corps offices scattered throughout the continental United States, thousands of officers and civilians labored at the less glamorous, but no less important, projects that made the huge overseas war possible. Countless plain, even spartan barracks, hospitals, administration buildings, warehouses, rail sidings, ammunition plants, runways, and other types of facilities sprang up on camps, forts, and air bases all over the country. Corps of Engineers district and field offices did the work that made these less glamorous facilities possible. One important, but in most ways typical, Corps district, headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, far from the battlefields of the Pacific or Europe, illustrates the important contribution that the Corps' field organizations made to the mobilization of the country.

The last essay covers probably the most secret project of the American war effort: the development and production of the atomic bomb. Because the project required such a huge construction effort for facilities that had to be designed from scratch and because of the intense need of secrecy, the Corps played a prominent and sometimes controversial role in what was clearly the greatest research and development feat of the war. Whatever the postwar controversies about the bomb and its use against Japan, veterans of the Pacific war remain convinced that it shortened the war and saved countless American lives.

The essays in this section on military construction in the United States only touch briefly on a few of the myriad of projects accomplished by the Corps during the war. They do illustrate, however, the broad scope of Corps' activities and their contribution to the war effort.