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## Rails of War

Steven James Hantzis

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# **RAILS OF WAR**

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**STEVEN JAMES HANTZIS**

**RAILS  
OF WAR**

**SUPPLYING THE  
AMERICANS AND  
THEIR ALLIES IN  
CHINA-BURMA-INDIA**

Potomac Books

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## Preface

This book is a personal exploration of the unsung China-Burma-India theater of World War II. My father, James Harry Hantzis, left behind a cardboard box of military keepsakes, a Madonna-and-child cameo ring that my wife now wears, and a captivating photo scrapbook entitled *India*. And he left behind father-and-son stories.

I guess it's natural for little boys to be fascinated with the military and to act out battles with fabricated weapons and imaginary consequences. At least it was normal where I grew up. A boy's imagination could be stimulated into militaristic overdrive with television shows like *The Big Picture* and Hollywood movies like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *To Hell and Back*, as was mine. I was lucky to have a younger brother I could enlist as a comrade or target as an enemy, depending on how our imaginations percolated on any given day. We attacked strongholds, propelled lethal objects at enemy positions, and built forts in our barn's haymow complete with booby traps and secret passages. It was good, clean fun. We were boys just trying to be like the men of my father's generation.

I've used the real names of men who served, men I felt I knew well enough to attempt to write in their voices, but their words are mine. There are no recordings of their conversations, so with the details I had at hand I took authorial license and wrote the dialogue. The stories and situations, the vignettes, are real.

From each monochrome kernel of truth I have attempted to grow colorful, dense flora to appeal to the mind's eye. But my humble apology must now be offered in advance. After working on the railroad for twelve years, then in the American labor movement for thirty, and after befriending the good men who served in the 721st Railway Operating Battalion and hearing their accounts first-hand, I confess with assurance that even my most imaginative and

crafty passages, those snippets where I manage to conjure vivid flashes and move along the narrative, are most certainly pale and poky compared to what really happened.

The story begins this way: In the generation before mine there were men of substance and courage, wisdom and wile who moved the weight of war on ribbons of steel. At this, the work of their lives, they were better than anyone, anywhere.

## Acknowledgments

A stone inscribed with the words *China-Burma-India* rests at the southern end of the National World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington DC, just a few miles from my home in Alexandria, Virginia. The marker is one in a constellation of stones presided over by the vaulted arch of the Pacific Pavilion rising to commemorate one of two great theaters in the global mêlée. Many believe the stone is not grand enough to evoke all that China-Burma-India meant to the war effort. The stone symbolizes a subaltern war often declared “the forgotten theater” by historians as well as the men who served. I’m thankful that not everyone has forgotten.

My father, James Harry Hantzis, inspired this book and provided not only stories but also a collection of black-and-white photographs titled simply *India*. His life was an unconscious example of the character of his generation and a model that I will forever strive to fulfill. He is long gone. But some of the men with whom he served in the 721st Railway Operating Battalion are still alive. Until just a few years ago they held a reunion every September in upstate New York. There, in 2002, I met Don Blair, E. O. Woods, George Lee, William Butler, Charles Graham, Lyle Sanderson, William Walsh, and Herb Witt. All of these men contributed not just stories and inspiration but artifacts and photographs, especially the engaging motorman E. O. Woods, president of the Reunion Committee.

But I never would have met these fine men and many others had it not been for the sparkplug of the battalion, the locomotive fireman Rocky Agrusti. Rocky is that rare, honor-bound individual who unabashedly holds dear his service to his country and that of his family as well as all who wore the uniform. Rocky kindly introduced me to his extensive network of friends and comrades

and provided a personal tour of his “museum,” a capacious collection of military items housed in a former sawmill on his lovely property in New York.

Rocky’s late-evening phone calls always served as a motivator when my writing seemed to lag. My wife, Kathleen, and I were honored to accompany him to the final roundup of the national CBI World War II Veterans Association on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war. Rocky’s lively cohort of seven hundred veterans, their spouses and families, were an inspiration. Many, Rocky among them, had more energy and love of life than the generation thirty years their juniors.

It was during a tour of the National World War II Memorial and Arlington Cemetery that Rocky revealed a salient truth of his generation. I had noticed that once the veterans observed their man-made surroundings, they turned their backs to the construction, formed small groups, and talked to each other almost oblivious to the monuments. Unusual, I thought; after all, the monuments were built to honor their accomplishments and bravery. When I asked Rocky about this he answered without hesitation, “It’s really all about the fellowship.”

There are two more members of the battalion who deserve special mention, both men I have yet to meet face to face. The first is Stewart White, who was a good friend of my father and has shared with me touching letters and photographs. The other is Alvin Carder, a Company B locomotive machinist who worked in the same shop as my dad. Alvin provided a colorful enlisted man’s history and is a fifty-year member of my father’s union and my employer, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

I also greatly appreciated Tom Foltz’s correspondence, reminiscences, and photographs. Tom served with the 789th Pipeliners Battalion stationed at Parbatipur and played the trumpet in the acclaimed camp orchestra.

My immediate family deserves thanks on many levels. My wife patiently lived with this project and its demands for fifteen years. Kathleen was my ever-ready traveling partner, critic, and

intellectual sounding board. My daughter, Sara, and her husband, Pat McSparin, both with firm literary grounding, provided instant editorial support. To my bright young nephew, Patrick, I owe appreciation for never failing to prompt me about the book's progress at our frequent family get-togethers. And I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife's mother, Mary Flaherty, who volunteered to be the first to read the vast unedited narrative and provided assistive comments, corrections, and encouragement. Most recently my gratitude goes to Jefferson Morley, who bravely confronted my 350,000-word draft and with the precision of a surgeon carved the steak from the beast.



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# 1

## *SS Mariposa*

The bow of the ship plowed through the blue-green Pacific with a mesmerizing determination. The men of the 721st Railway Operating Battalion were one day at sea, roughly 500 miles southwest of Los Angeles, and what worried them most were their guts.

The food was horrible. The sea was nauseating. Their quarters were cramped and the distractions few. Some men were violently ill, and more were queasy. To all, life had lost its charm. Only a lucky few seemed immune to the bow's plunge, the stern's lift, and then the wallowing roll. The cycle endlessly repeated without mercy, without a horizon to anchor the mind or an end in sight to soothe the soul.

To further confound the senses the ship zigzagged across the chop, changing direction unpredictably every few miles, as the captain maneuvered to throw off Japanese submarines. The thinking was that it takes an enemy submarine eight minutes to target and fire a spread of torpedoes, so the *Mariposa* changed course abruptly every six minutes.<sup>1</sup> Everywhere the men looked their fellow soldiers were covering their mouths and rushing down halls or to the railings. "Railbirds," they were called.

Their first meal on ship was a bad omen. Each man received a card with a large black letter printed on it: A, B, C, or D. When the ship's loudspeakers, hung in every corridor and deck, boomed, "All men holding B cards proceed to the midship stairway," off went the Bs.

After an hour's wait in line, what they found disgusted them. Some men, after sweating out the chow line, got a whiff of the food and bolted for the nearest place to get sick again. Breakfast was grease-soaked soybean sausages and salted mackerel. The only things edible were the bread and potatoes.

The fare seemed like a cruel joke compared with the fare at Camp Atterbury in Indiana, where they had mustered before taking a train to California. To add gratuitous insult to their culinary injuries, there were only to be two meals a day. Upon reflection the men couldn't decide if this was a good thing or a bad thing.

The situation went from disgusting to debilitating on the second day, when even the bread, now infested with mealy bugs, was inedible. Seeing no action after complaining up the chain of command, the men resorted to a tactic from civilian life: they went on strike. The culture of direct action, a common feature of their railroad employment, was alive and well even after a year of army discipline and top-down conditioning.

The men refused to eat, not the greatest hardship, or take part in the fire and lifeboat drills and physical training, a rather bigger problem for their superiors. With mutiny in the air an armed marine guard was posted for meals.<sup>2</sup>

The strike didn't last long. The officers and noncoms on board had the same concerns. No one was court-martialed or disciplined, and the food got better. But it would never reach the high standards set stateside, and as the men settled into a shipboard routine they grumbled all the way.

...

At 18,017 gross tons, the SS *Mariposa* was a large ship for her day. Designed by Gibbs and Cox, Inc. and built by the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation in Quincy, Massachusetts, she was launched for the Matson Navigation Company in Los Angeles in July 1931. She was laid out to accommodate 475 first-class and 229 cabin class passengers along with 359 crew members. On this trip she carried five times as many passengers. The *Mariposa* was the floating home—and potential Japanese target—for nearly 5,000 souls, including the 651 enlisted men, 21 officers, and 1 warrant officer of the 721st Railway Operating Battalion, a unit sponsored by the New York Central Railroad.

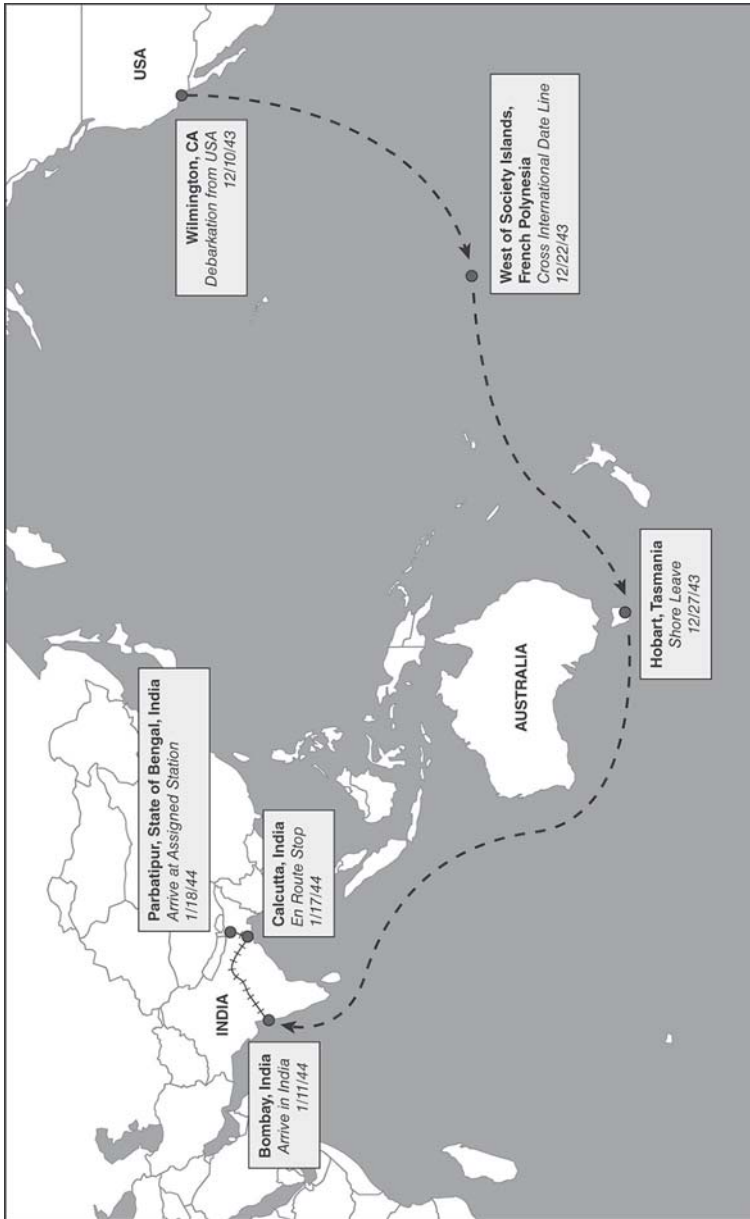
The men of the 721st weren't the only railroaders on board. They shared quarters with the 725th Railway Operating Battalion, which

consisted of men who had been working the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad; the 726th, an outfit sponsored by the Wabash Railroad; the 745th, from the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad; the 748th, associated with the Texas & Pacific Railroad; and the 758th, a railway shop battalion from Ohio. Also on board were the 705th Infantry Replacement Battalion, forty civilian engineers, ten nurses, a headquarters staff, a hospital staff, and even some civilian passengers, in addition to the Merchant Marine crew and the Navy Armed Guard.

In preparation for their mission, the men of the 721st had trained for five months at Camp Cushing in the blistering sun of south Texas, studying the nomenclature of weapons and drilling with gas masks before going on to technical training. Most of the men in the battalion had railroad experience, but some didn't. The men with no mechanical experience were given crash courses on operating lathes, shapers, drill presses, and grinders under the tutelage of the Southern Pacific supervisors. Men with no experience operating locomotives and switching cars were bombarded with the golden rule of the industry: *There are no small accidents on the railroad! Work safe! Take your time and do things right!*

The shop crafts repaired air brakes, worked in drop pits, set valves, washed out boilers, ran water tests, lubricated everything in sight, and packed journal boxes. The car repair platoon worked on wheel trucks and couplers and replaced brass bushings on axle journals. The wreck crew worked with the steam crane and railed wayward equipment. The operating crafts switched cars, kicked cuts into sidings, learned to work a manifest, and practiced driving doubleheaders—two engines and tenders coupled together.

After their training was complete, they shipped out, first to Camp Atterbury and then to the final staging area at Camp Anza in the southern California desert. When they arrived at the dock in Long Beach, heads swiveled as the awestruck young men from the Midwest and other inland states catalogued their strange new surroundings: the squawking, insistent gulls, buoys gonging in the harbor, and the smell of salt water. It was the first time most of the men had seen oceangoing vessels and the massive equipment



MAP 1. Route of 721st Railway Operating Battalion (ROB) from the United States to its assigned station, Parbatipur, State of Bengal, India, December 10, 1943–January 18, 1944. Map by Erin Greb.

needed for their maintenance close enough to touch. These were men who, for the most part, were familiar with large industrial settings and oversized equipment, but this was something new. “My God,” more than one of them thought, “these things are enormous!”

Now they were sailing into harm’s way. The *Mariposa* was lightly armed. She carried a five-inch 38-caliber gun on the stern and a three-inch 50-caliber gun on the bow. Along her steering station were two three-inch 50-caliber guns, and she sported two Swiss-designed 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns on the foredeck and two more on the afterdeck. All the weapons were in raised gun tubs except for the four 20mm guns on the flying bridge. The fighting capabilities of the *Mariposa* were purely defensive. Should she find herself in contact with an enemy surface ship or submarine her standing orders were to turn away, put the attacker on the stern, and flee.

The *Mariposa* was sailing solo because the United States and Britain had taken a page from their World War I playbooks, where they learned it was less risky to transport soldiers on big, fast luxury liners than on slow troop carriers escorted by battleships. In August 1942 the two countries began using the French SS *Pasteur*, the Canadian *Empress of Scotland*, and the Cunard Queens, both *Mary* and *Elizabeth*, to move men across the seas.

...

Each day grew hotter as the *Mariposa* tacked southward. The men diverted themselves with board games: Chinese checkers, backgammon, Cavalcade, Horse Races (no betting), and Monopoly, as well as cribbage boards, cards (both regular and pinochle), card games (Pit and Rook), jigsaw puzzles, chess, checkers, and dominoes. A competent band was organized to serenade the passengers. Upon crossing the equator an ad hoc theatrical troupe put on a production of *The Court of Old King Neptune*, complete with a queen whose elbow-length blond hair displayed the versatile uses of a mop and whose faint falsetto voice registered with a pronounced New Jersey accent.

The journey south was also a journey west. Every day the men turned back their watches as time zones passed invisibly. The weather turned chilly, and the men wore their field jackets on deck. Then, just west of the Society Islands of French Polynesia, December 23 disappeared entirely. Calendars and diaries jumped forward from December 22 to December 24.<sup>3</sup>

...

When Christmas Day dawned, Jim Hantzis didn't feel well, and it had nothing to do with the ship ride or the bad food. They had been fourteen days at sea, and it seemed like a lifetime since he had seen his wife, Marilou. Six months before, Hantzis had wangled a five-day pass from Camp Cushing and taken a train to Indianapolis for their wedding in the Zion Evangelical United Church of Christ. At the altar, with Reverend F. R. Daries conducting the ceremony, Jim wore his dress uniform and Marilou wore a light blue suit with a single strand of pearls, earrings to match, and a red rose corsage. Their hands found each other, and they hung on for dear life. They had been dating for over two years and their familiarity was now their security.

The night before, Jim and Marilou had partied with their friends at the Westlake Dance Club. Now, at their modest wedding reception, these same friends mingled with family members, the young couple danced to Tony Martin singing "Tonight We Love," and Marilou drank blackberry wine.<sup>4</sup> In the morning, after the couple spent the night at the Hantzis house, Jim's mother greeted the late-rising Marilou with "Good morning, bride!" Then Jim headed back to Camp Cushing. Except for a brief rendezvous in November, when he was stationed at Camp Atterbury, he and Marilou did not see each other again before he sailed off.

In the privacy of his stateroom Jim took off his wedding ring and in the dim light tried to make out its simple inscription, *MLH & JHH 6/13/43*. Thoughts of his wedding day helped lift his mood, but there wasn't a lot the *Mariposa* could offer for Christmas cheer. The men got some turkey with their second meal and savored their portions as they shuffled along in the aluminum room. And

of course the company clowns fashioned Santa hats from socks and decorated the corridors with cardboard cutouts of Rudolph posed in a variety of traditional and not-so-traditional acts.

Two days later the ship docked at Hobart, Tasmania, beneath the snow-capped peak of Mount Wellington, and the men got a brief shore leave. But less than thirty-six hours later the stout mooring lines holding the *Mariposa* in port were cast to the dock, where they landed with a thud. The same dull release was felt in the hearts of her departing visitors. As her powerful turbines settled into their familiar drone, the ship's forward assembly area filled with officers and noncoms. They were finally going to hear from the brass about where they were going.

All the rail battalions received their orders in turn, and the 721st, being the lowest numbered battalion, heard first. Their destination was a place they had never heard of: the city of Parbatipur in the State of Bengal, India. They would disembark in fourteen days at Bombay, on the other side of the subcontinent.

The sergeants, who received a further, technical briefing involving area maps, terrain analysis, logistical details, and cultural specifics, then went to the enlisted men with what they had been told. The briefing of a squad in Company B went like this:

**SERGEANT HANTZIS:** (Reading from his clipboard.) In fourteen days, with the cooperation of the Imperial Japanese Navy, we will debark at the port of Bombay, India, and proceed by rail with our equipment to Parbatipur in the State of Bengal. There we will establish a camp and conduct railroad operations, without the aid of modern block control or classification yard systems, over approximately 120 miles of single-line main. The other battalions will operate to the east with a final terminus at Ledo.

Ledo is the end of the line, and it straddles the India-Burma border. It is currently under the protection of the British, American, and Chinese armies.

From Ledo the supplies that we transport will be flown by aircraft over the Himalayan Mountains to British and American special operation forces in Burma and China as well as regular army



units of the Kuomintang. Eventually, when the Ledo road is complete, these supplies will be trucked from Ledo to China.

The railroads we will operate are of three different gauges: broad gauge, narrow gauge, and metre gauge. The terrain is hilly to mountainous, with swamps and numerous bridged waterways. One water passage will be by ferry.

The native workforce is composed of Indian Hindus of various castes and Mohammedan laborers. The Hindus and Mohammedans dislike each other, and the Hindus won't speak to someone not in their caste.

There are no municipal amenities such as running water or sewage treatment. Disease will be a constant threat, and personal vigilance will be necessary to avoid infection from typhus, malaria, and dysentery. There are numerous poisonous insects and reptiles and reports of Japanese sympathizers among the Indian independence movement. This movement is particularly strong in the State of Bengal.

Any questions?

WISENHEIMER # 1: Sarge, is this where the tigers live?

(Chuckles in the squad.)

SERGEANT: Yes, and don't pet 'em.

(Laughter all around.)

WISENHEIMER # 2: What's a Mohammedan?

SERGEANT: Someone who believes in a religion different than yours. It's their country and their religion. Treat them with respect.

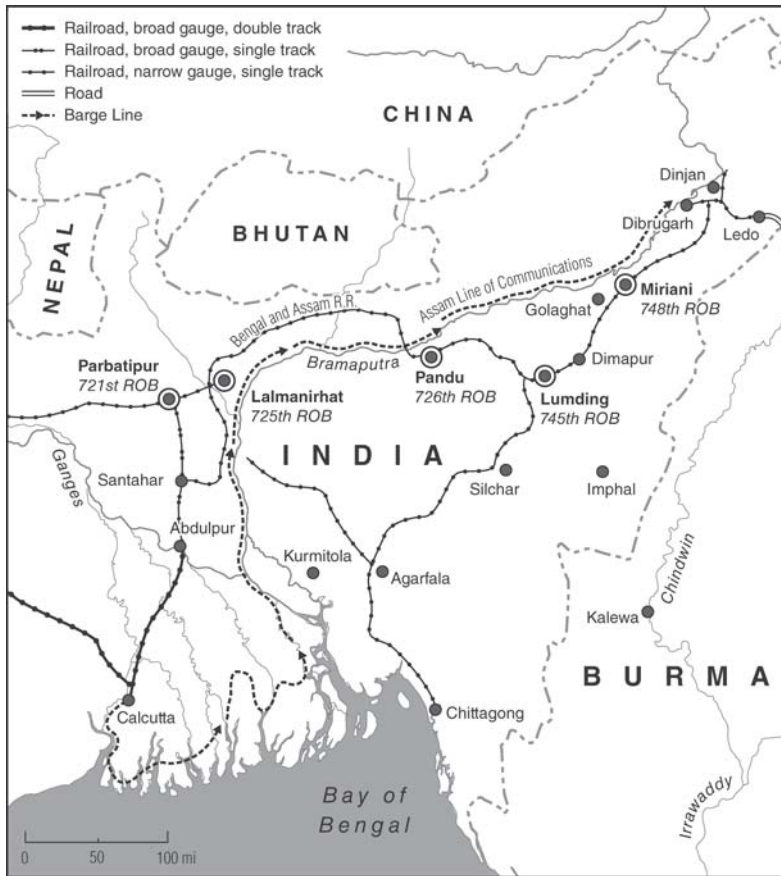
(Silent acceptance.)

WISENHEIMER # 3: Will we get to see the Taj Mahal?

SERGEANT: You'll be lucky to see a pool hall.

(Some laughs, some moans, and a plaintive whine of "Ah, Sarge, come on.")

SERGEANT: You will familiarize yourselves with this document from the War Department. (He holds up a brown four-by-five-inch booklet from the War and Navy Departments, *A Pocket Guide to India*.) This booklet will allow you to fit in and respect the native culture. I emphasize: *Respect the native culture*.



MAP 2. U.S. Army Railway Operating Battalions, Bengal and Assam Railway, March 1944. West to east: 721st, Parbatipur; 725th, Lalmanirhat; 726th, Pandu; 745th, Lumding; and, 748th, Miriani. Map by Erin Greb.

In addition to this document you are expected to listen to the Hindustani language lessons that will be broadcast on the ship's PA and make a conscientious effort to learn phrases and words that will facilitate your communication with the native population. WISENHEIMER # 4: Some of dees guys from Brooklyn need to learn English before they can tackle Hindu-whatever. (Chuckles all around.)

(From the back of the squad comes a defensive, high-pitched voice: “Yaaa! Well some of yooze hicks couldn’t recognize a sophisticated linguist if he up and popped you in the schnozola.”)

(Chorus of laughter from the rest of the men.)

SERGEANT: Fight the enemy, not each other. And one more thing: we couldn’t take on as much fresh water as we planned to in Hobart. Therefore we’re placing guards on the water taps and expect that no fresh water will be wasted from here to India.

Finally, the ship’s captain has asked that all you guys who are pounding your British coins into souvenir rings remember that a sound like that carries through the water like a telegraph, and unless you want to make the Japs’ job of sinking us easier, knock it off!

(Silent acceptance.)

SERGEANT: That is all. Don’t forget to sign up for water guard duty. Now get to work.

When the joking subsided reality sank in. The American soldier railroaders were going to build, rebuild, and operate the rail infrastructure that would supply Allied forces fighting to oust the Imperial Japanese Army from the China-Burma-India theater. It was, said Gen. Brehon Burke Somervell, commander of the Army Service Forces, “the greatest engineering undertaking of the War.”<sup>5</sup>