

USS NORTH CAROLINA—"THE IMMORTAL SHOWBOAT"

On Navy Day of 1937, during an appropriate ceremony, the keel of a battleship was laid at the New York Navy Yard. The ship was officially named USS NORTH CAROLINA (BB55). But she would become known to the world as "The Showboat." Secretary of War Edison and others present that day knew they were witnessing no small occasion. NORTH CAROLINA was the first capital ship begun by this nation in 16 years – since proposed MASSACHUSETTS was started in 1921, only to be scrapped as a result of the Washington Naval Treaty of the next year. NORTH CAROLINA would be a class leader; first of the modern battleships.

Original plans for NORTH CAROLINA called for 14" guns, the maximum permitted by the Treaty. However, the State Department announced in July prior to the keel laying that "there is not a universal acceptance to the limit of gun power to 14 inches." (Japan the same year began building the 18" battleship YAMATO (LOG, Vol. 2, No. 3.) Therefore, final plans for NORTH CAROLINA specified fittings for the new 16" rifles. NORTH CAROLINA was commissioned 9 April 1941 as the most powerful sea weapon ever built by the United States. Her statistics: standard displacement, 35,000 tons; mean draft, 26'8"; extreme beam, 108'4"; overall length, 728'9" (NORTH CAROLINA was over 200' longer than WEST VIRGINIA, last "old" battleship completed in 1923).

NORTH CAROLINA had eight Babcock & Wilcox boilers in four engine rooms carrying GE equipment. She could develop 121,000 h.p. through geared turbines, producing 27 to 28 knots. The fuel was oil (2,150,166 gals.). The main battery consisted of 9-16" (45 caliber) rifles in three turrets; two forward, one aft. Other armament included 20-5" (38 caliber), 60-40mm, and 56-20mm guns. The ship carried 1,088 rounds of 16" ammunition and 12,800 rounds for the 5" guns. Two catapults were located on the ship's fantail and she could carry up to four reconnaissance aircraft (OS2U "Kingfishers"). Armor on NORTH CAROLINA consisted of a 12" belt amidships and 16" plating on the turrets. "Blisters" and a triple hull were designed to minimize the effect of a torpedo. During gunnery exercises off Casco Bay, shortly after commissioning, NORTH CAROLINA fired the first 19-gun salvo in modern naval history. One broadside sent 32,750 lbs. of steel at a target.

NORTH CAROLINA was still training off the East Coast when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Training was intensified. In June she became the first battleship to transit Panama Canal since the beginning of the war. Fleet Admiral Nimitz later recalled: "I well remember the great thrill when she arrived in Pearl Harbor during the early stages of the war when our strength and fortunes were at a low ebb. She was the first of the great new battleships to join the Pacific Fleet and her mere presence in a task force was enough to keep morale at a peak." At Guadalcanal and Tulagi NORTH CAROLINA screened carriers. Her position kept her out of the First Battle of Savo Island, but the fight would soon find her. On 24 August NORTH CAROLINA was steaming between Malaita and Stewart Islands with carriers ENTERPRISE and SARATOGA, four cruisers and eleven destroyers when the first Japanese attack specifically aimed at the ship developed. In the action (Battle of the Eastern Solomons), enemy planes swarmed over "The Showboat" and "Big E". NORTH CAROLINA threw up such a barrage that ENTERPRISE inquired, "Are you afire?" She replied, "Hell no, just fumigating the ship." When the smoke settled, NORTH CAROLINA had downed seven enemy planes, with as many probables. ENTERPRISE had taken three hits, but damage was under control and she was recovering planes. That