

REVIEW

'OPERATION HIGHJUMP'

[Review by H. G. R. King* of Lisle A. Rose's *Assault on eternity; Richard E. Byrd and the exploration of Antarctica, 1946-47*. Annapolis, Maryland, Naval Institute Press, 1980, x, 292, illus. Hardcover. US\$ 19.95.]

US Navy Antarctic Development Project, 1946-47, better known as 'Operation Highjump', has received little attention from historians. Walter Sullivan, who reported the expedition for his newspaper, the *New York Times*, gave it three chapters in his book *Quest for a continent* (McGraw-Hill, 1957) and there have been other brief accounts. Now, over 30 years after the event, there is an abundance of archival material upon which to base a fuller account and Dr Rose, who has the benefit of experience on 'Highjump's' successor, 'Operation Deepfreeze,' has made good use of it to produce a book that gives us a detailed and readable account of a massive naval operation which was to establish the USA, then and subsequently, as a major Antarctic power.

Though historically eclipsed by operations connected with the International Geophysical Year and the subsequent 'Deepfreeze' expeditions, 'Highjump' was remarkable for a number of reasons. In the first place it was the largest Antarctic expedition ever put into the field, involving over 4 700 men and 13 ships, in addition to such novelties in Antarctic waters as icebreakers, helicopters, and aircraft combining skis and wheels and equipped with jet-assisted take off gear; there was even a submarine in attendance though this proved more of a liability than an asset. Secondly, though intended to test men and machine for cold weather warfare, 'Highjump' was significant as a political manoeuvre designed to counter British and other national claims in the region. From a base at Little America IV on the Ross Ice Shelf, and from carriers situated off the ice-edge round the coast of Antarctica, a three-pronged attack was designed to photograph from the air a vast stretch of the Antarctic coastline, and deep inland, with a view to compiling accurate maps—valuable ammunition for a potential claimant nation. Some 70 000 photographs were taken in all, but ground control proved inadequate to fix accurately the majority of them for mapping purposes. In the event no claims were ever made, and indeed it was largely through US initiative that Antarctica became politically neutralized for 30 years by the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.

The central figure of Dr Rose's study is Richard Evelyn Byrd, 'Admiral of the Antarctic' and officer in charge of the project. Byrd's presence was largely intended to add lustre to an expedition that was essentially controlled by war-time professionals like Admiral Richard H. Cruzen and Captain (later Admiral) George J. Dufek. In practice Byrd seems to have had little in common with these veterans and remained throughout a remote and solitary figure. Like so many naval expeditions 'Highjump' suffered from conflict between the needs of logistics and the needs of science. The efforts of men like Dr Paul Siple, best known perhaps of all 'Byrd's boys', who was responsible for testing clothing and equipment for the US War Department, did much to weld together these apparently incompatible elements. 'Highjump' which began with a bang ended with a whimper. Political considerations and the tides of economic recession were to combine against further naval involvement in the Antarctic for nearly 10 years, and a tentative 'Highjump II' was abandoned.

Dr Rose has made full use of the official, unpublished military and diplomatic records, family papers and the unrivalled riches of the Center for Polar and Scientific Archives in Washington, DC. He has also spoken to many of Byrd's intimates who are still with us. It is unfortunate that Admiral Byrd's papers still remain inaccessible, and until these are released there can be no hope of putting his contribution into proper perspective.

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