

SEABEES REMEMBER KOREA

July 25-27, 2003, on the National Mall in Washington, DC, and all over America, the nation paused to give thanks to veterans of the Korean War. Like they had in the World War immediately prior, Seabees were in the thick of this one, too. An informal history.

STORY PROVIDED BY THE NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY FRED SIMON

Seabee history didn't stop between the Second World War and the Korean War, but it slowed down in one quick hurry.

Following the victories in Europe and Asia, the U.S. Armed Forces rapidly demobilized. The Seabees were part of this demobilization, and by June 1946 their number had fallen from peak strength of more than 250,000 men to approximately 20,000.

In the continental United States, the web of training bases and depots dissolved and all Seabee activity was concentrated at the Naval Construction Battalion Center, Port Hueneme, Calif. [The command was redesignated effective June 1 as the Naval Facilities Expeditionary Logistics Center. —*Ed.*]

As Seabee ranks continued to thin, the early post-war years saw only a few battalions and small construction battalion detachments scattered to naval bases and stations abroad. Despite the diminished strength of the force, Seabee peacetime activities took on a unique and diversified character. Besides maintaining advanced bases built during the war, they were confronted with many unprecedented construction assignments.

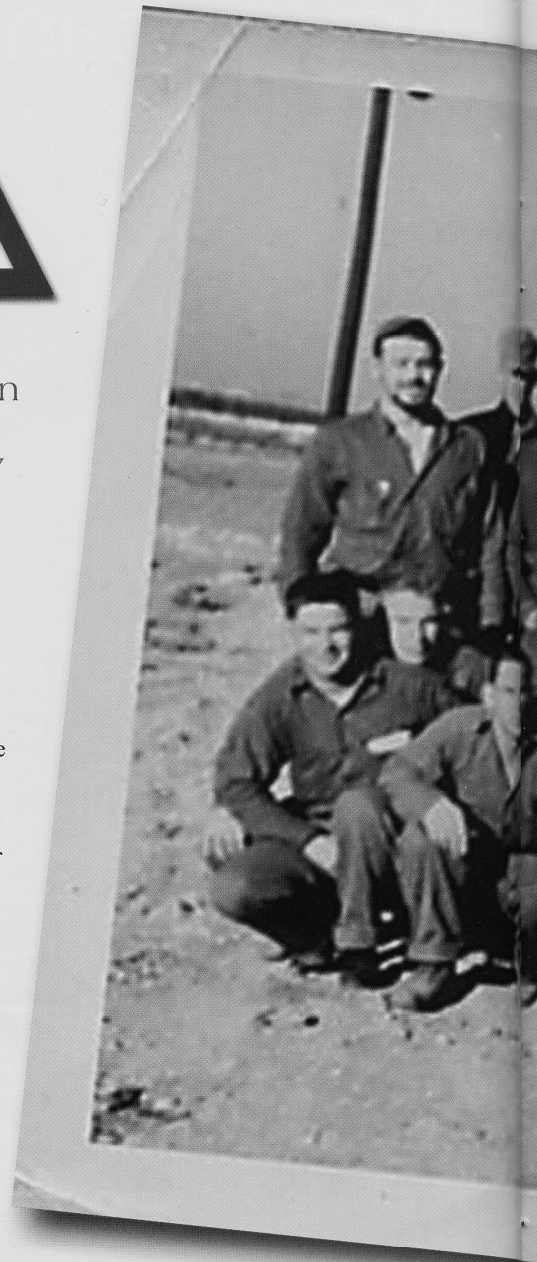
What could be more unusual than Seabees building a fleet weather station on Russian soil? Yet in September 1945,

Seabees of the 114th Naval Construction Battalion, stationed in the Aleutian Islands, were ordered to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula to accomplish just such a project.

They perhaps have the distinction of being the only Americans invited to do construction work in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Also in 1945 and 1946, six battalions of Seabees performed a variety of tasks on mainland China at Shanghai, Tsingtao, Tangku and other cities. Primary among their duties was the construction of harbors and airfields to be used for the evacuation of the defeated Japanese troops and the importation of supplies for the war-torn Chinese nation.

China was not the only nation to receive Seabee assistance after the guns fell silent. As part of the occupation force, 13 construction battalions and three special battalions were sent to Japan to aid US naval forces at Hiroshima, Kabayana, Yokosuka, Omura, Nagasaki, Sasebo and Kure.

Out of the post-war rubble, they rebuilt all types of facilities, including airstrips, docks, houses, electric and telephone systems, bridges, roads, recreation areas and hospitals.



In mid-1946, Seabees were assigned the task of constructing facilities on Bikini Atoll in preparation for the historic atomic bomb tests there.

That same year, *Operation High Jump* brought Seabees to Antarctica for the first time. An initial detachment of 173 men accompanied Admiral Richard Byrd to Little America to build new facilities and unload supplies and equipment.



When Vieques Island, off the coast of Puerto Rico, was chosen as the site for an inter-service war exercise code-named *Operation Portrex*, Seabees performed a dual function. They were on the scene prior to the main-body arrival to reclaim the island's abandoned wartime defense facilities. They then returned as participants in the exercise and

successfully built a pontoon causeway that brought the arriving army units ashore.

During World War II, the Seabees were a Naval Reserve organization, created specifically for that war. Most Seabees were "USNR" and served "for the duration plus six months." After the war,

however, it was clear that the Seabees, having more than proved their worth, would be a valuable new addition to the regular, active duty force. In 1947, the Seabees became part of the regular, peacetime Navy.

In December 1947, a Seabee Reserve Organization was established to augment active-duty Seabees during national emergencies. Many of these first Seabee Reservists were Seabee veterans of World War II who wished to continue to serve the nation. The first Reserve Seabees were organized into a number of divisions in each Naval District. Each Seabee Reserve Division initially consisted of five officers and 40 enlisted men. Although by 1949 the number of active duty Seabees had dwindled to 3300, the reserve organization served as a ready force for expansion in the coming emergency in Korea.

Seabees Enter the Korean War

In June 1950, following the invasion of South Korea by the armies of communist North Korea, the Seabees found themselves at war again. As part of the U.S. contingent of the United Nations force, they rose to the challenge in the tradition of their "Can Do!" predecessors. By a calling up of Reservists, the active-duty Seabee force was expanded to more than 14,000.

On Sept. 15, 1950 U.S. troops and Bees landed at Inchon in what has come to be known as one of the most brilliant amphibious assaults in history — and the Seabees achieved renown as the men who made it possible. Battling enormous 30-ft tides and a swift current while under continuous enemy fire, they positioned pontoon causeways within hours of the first beach assault.

Following the landing, the incident known as the "Great Seabee Train Robbery" took place. The need to break the equipment bottleneck at the harbor inspired a group of Seabees to steal behind enemy lines and capture some abandoned locomotives. Despite enemy mortar fire, they brought the train engines back intact and turned them over to the Army Transportation Corps.

In October, Seabees ran their pontoon structures ashore again and set up another operating port at Wonsan. When the strenuous harbor construction and camp operations ceased to fill their days, they branched into the unusual tasks of inspecting North Korean armament on an abandoned mine-laying ship, clearing mined tunnels and performing repair work on nearby ships.



When the Chinese Communists joined retreating North Koreans to launch another full-scale invasion of South Korea, the Seabees were compelled to redouble their efforts — this time to help the retreating UN forces. At Hungwan, Wonsan and Inchon, where Seabees had been instrumental in putting UN forces ashore, Seabee pontoon causeways were now loaded with troops and equipment going the other way.

By February 1951, however, the tide turned once again and the Seabees returned to Inchon for another landing. They found their previously constructed harbor facilities in a state of ruin, but miraculously enough, some of their sturdy pontoon structures were still in place. After a rapid repair job, men and equipment streamed ashore again.

Seabee participation in the Korean War was certainly not limited to amphibious operations. Another of their outstanding contributions was in that specialty of their World War II predecessors — airfield construction. Seabees could be found

throughout the war zone constructing, repairing, and servicing the K-fields of the various Marine Air Groups. The Seabees were broken up into numerous detachments and each was assigned to an airfield designated with a "K" number, such as K-3 at Pohang, K-18 at Kimbo and K-2 at Taegu [See page 67. —Ed.]

Keeping the planes flying was an arduous and often dangerous task. At one small airstrip on the 36th Parallel, chuckholes were opening up in the failing concrete faster than the Seabees could repair them.

As it was absolutely vital that the field remain open, the undaunted Seabees graded, poured and patched one side of the runway while bomb-laden aircraft continued to fly off the other side.

Seabee relations with the Marine Corps were further cemented by a group of nine Seabees who kept a 21-mile stretch of road open between an isolated Marine intercept squadron and its source of supplies. The Bees worked round-the-clock in below-zero temperatures to successfully fulfill

their promise to rebuild any damaged bridge within six hours.

One of the most incredible Seabee feats of the war took place on the small island of Yo in the Bay of Wonsan. In communist hands again in 1952, Wonsan was a key supply and transportation center for the enemy. As such, carrier-based aircraft strikes against Wonsan and points deeper in the interior were numerous and constant.

Planes were hit by enemy fire daily, leaving their pilots with the unhappy choice of either ditching at sea or attempting to land in enemy-held territory. The need for an emergency airstrip was critical and, under the code-name Operation "Crippled Chick," a detachment of Seabees came to the rescue.

Put ashore on Yo Island, they were given 35 days to construct a runway. Working under constant artillery bombardment from neighboring enemy positions, they managed to complete the 2400-foot airstrip in only 16 days. By a prearranged signal — "Steak is Ready" — the Seabees signaled that the job was done, and nine damaged aircraft landed on the new field that same day.

The rapid demobilization that followed the Second World War was not repeated after the signing of the Korean Armistice in July 1953. Crises in Berlin, Cuba, Africa, South America and especially in Southeast Asia created the necessity to maintain military strength and preparedness. Seabee Reservists had helped meet the Korean crisis, but the onset of the Cold War had indicated the need for a basic reorganization of Seabee capabilities as well as for increased Seabee numbers.

Accordingly, between 1949 and 1953, 13 battalions of two distinct types were established. The new establishments signified a gain in greater battalion mobility and specialization.

The first type, the new Amphibious Construction Battalions, were landing and docking units. An integral part of the fleet amphibious forces, their mission was to place causeways and ship-to-shore fuel lines, construct pontoon docks and perform other functions necessary for the expeditious landing of men, equipment, and supplies.

Mobile Construction Battalions constituted the second type. They were responsible for land construction of a wide variety, including camps, roads, tank farms, airstrips, permanent waterfront structures and many other base facilities. 🌐

I was there: An Oral History

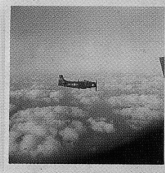
FRED SIMON

"I HAD JUST FINISHED A JOB with Construction Battalion Detachment [CBD] 1802 on Okinawa and was living with the Army's 29th Infantry Division at Kubasaki, surveying an old Japanese airstrip and the Buckner Bay Harbor. When finished, I flew to MCB 2 NAS Atsugi Japan.

"In November 1951, CBD 1804 was formed and, like CBD 1802, we were mostly surveyors. We were to travel to Po Hang-dong, Korea. Our job was to survey the existing air strip being used by the 1st Marine Air Wing, Marine Air Group [MAG] 33.

"The strip was too short for the larger planes and had to be extended. The Navy bussed us to Itami, Japan where we were issued foul weather gear and asked, 'Where would you like your body sent?' I said, 'Nowhere! I'm bringing it back with me.'

"We flew to Korea in a Military Air Transport plane and with us was the escort shown in the attached picture. We were given a wooden barracks in the Marine compound and other than an incident when a Marine Corps officer barged in screaming for us to grab our weapons and get outside, life was fairly routine. We enjoyed the company of the Marine airmen.



"While surveying the strip, we were right down the center with our instruments when the tower fired a flare. We ran for the foxholes around the perimeter and a Grumman F6F 'Hellcat' came down with a bomb hanging from its wing. It seems the old WWII planes sometimes had trouble detaching bombs from the aircraft and many times, after trying to shake it off, would come in with it dangling.

"Such bombs usually came off when the plane touched down and they skipped across the strip and came to a stop without detonating. The F9F 'Panther' jets didn't have that problem.

"Our two Marine squadrons flew many sorties and there were also some night bombers that took pictures over the battle areas.



"We had this thrill quite a few times while completing the survey: We saw a Vought F-4U 'Corsair' catch fire while attempting a take off. We threw snow on the engine and helped the pilot get out safely. He said, 'Did you ever try to get out of one of those with a parachute on?' Of course we hadn't, but it was quite a sight seeing *him* squeeze out. He also said he was trying to get it flying in order to take it to Japan to trade it in on a better plane.

"The final estimate was one million square yards of earth fill to make the runway long enough, another good job that was completed by Navy Seabees. We were quite impressed with the men of MAG 33 and joined them in their Christmas of 1951 and New Year's celebration of 1952. The chow was good and the quarters were usually as warm and comfortable as an oil burning stove.

"We didn't experience any air attacks, as the squadrons were a good deterrent, but the siren went off a few times and we wondered what we'd do, as our foxholes were half full of frozen water.

"The attached picture [above] is how we kept warm outside, as modeled by Rod Howard and Paul Sweeney. The motto on the 'Welcome' sign [left] says 'Trans Korean Airlines — Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Small Fields a Specialty.' The detachment picture [previous page] shows me as the fourth from the right, bottom row, behind the flag, which is hanging on my wall now."

— Fred Simon