

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

Seabees in Korea, 1950-1953

The worldwide US network of WWII bases and stations remained after the war. The Navy's were still in existence in the late 1940s — and Seabee units were deployed around the globe.

STORY BY CAPT. LARRY G. DEVRIES, CEC, USNR (RET.)
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY PAT MORRIS



Above, Seabees set up a pontoon pier to unload supplies from landing craft at Inchon, Sept. 19, 1950. Below left, a CBD 1804 "class picture" at K-3, Spring 1953. Below right, a rock crusher operating at K-3.



The story of the Navy Seabees and their performance during the Korean Conflict begins in the immediate post-World War II years. As with all of the US armed services, the Seabees were part of the wholesale release of active personnel during the 1945 to 1947 period. The World War was ended and more than 12 million uniformed personnel were released from active duty beginning in 1945.

Several events during the post-World War II period drew attention to possible future US military actions. The period was one of developing world tension. The Soviet Union took over Hungary in 1947 and Czechoslovakia in 1948. The East Germans and the Soviets blocked the land access to the Allied sections of Berlin causing the Berlin Airlift during 1948-1949.

The US armed forces, including reserve forces, were engaged in the Berlin Airlift. The explosion of an atomic bomb by the Soviet Union in 1949 continued the escalation of tensions.

Seabees on active duty dropped from over 250,000 during World War II to a level of 3300 active duty Seabees by 1949. That number increased to 6000 by 1950, primarily due to increasing demand for construction and maintenance support at naval bases and stations worldwide. In general, the post-World War II period was a time of smaller operations and austere budgets for the Navy and the Marine Corps.

When the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel June 25, 1950, and entered South Korea, US forces were shocked initially and absorbed the attack while withdrawing to the south. The theater commander was GEN Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander, Allied Powers Japan.

The Naval Forces Far East Command had been under the command of ADM C. Turner Joy, USN, since August 1949. He reported in Japan to General MacArthur, who was later designated, Commander in Chief, UN Command. The Far East Command, including the mission of logistics support,

was located in Japan and its principle bases were at Yokohama, Guam and at Subic Bay in the Philippines. All were significant distances from any action in Korea. The operating fleet was the Seventh Fleet under VADM Arthur D. Struble, USN.

Reacting to the need for personnel for Korean operations, President Truman called out the nation's Reserve and National Guard units July 19, 1950. As an example of the speed of mobilization, the first Marine Corps Reserve units reached Camp Pendleton, Calif., July 31, 1950. By Sept. 1, 1950, call-ups had brought in about 256,000 men into the three services.

The Seabees supported the Marine Corps in Korea as they had done in World War II. This was especially true of airfield maintenance and construction, because the transition from prop-driven planes to jet aircraft occurred during this time. From an engineering viewpoint, the Pierced Steel Planking (or Marston mat), used so successfully as main runways in World War



to the 1st Marine Division. It was part of Task Force 90 and *Operation Chromite*, US Army X Corps, during the Inchon landing and was part of landing of The Wonsan Campaign of October 1950.

The ACB-1 Seabees were landed on Inchon as part of the landing force. Their effort was directed at providing the pontoon causeways necessary to unload LSTs.

In May 1952, ACB-1 managed to build an emergency airstrip on the small island of Yo. While under heavy enemy fire, they built a 2400-foot airstrip in

by their name. The more important of these airfields included:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| K-1 Pusan West | K-13 Suwon |
| K-2 Taegu | K-14 Kimpo |
| K-3 Pohang-dong | K-16 Seoul |
| K-5 Taejon | K-40 Cheju-do |
| K-6 Pyongtaek | K-46 Heongsong |
| K-8 Kunsan | K-47 Chunchon |
| K-9 Pusan East | K-55 Osan |
| K-10 Chinhae | |

The Seabees grew from their strength of 3300 just prior to Korea up to 14,000 at the peak strength during the conflict. The authorized strength of a Mobile Construction Battalion was 550 men, but actual strength often varied.

The standard issue rifle was the M-1 .30-cal Garand rifle, but some Seabees were reportedly issued M-1903 .30-06-cal Springfield rifles in training, a carry-over from World War II. The .45 cal. pistol was a standard sidearm.

The Seabees' uniform was a mixed assortment. Seabees on active duty in-theater Korea wore Marine Corps-issue uniforms, while some of those in training in the States, including Reservists, wore the white "Dixie cup" cap with blue work dungarees and a Navy work jacket.

RADM Joseph F. Jelley, CEC, USN, had been Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks (BuDocks), and the Seabees, since Dec. 1, 1949. The worldwide US network

Seabee CE3 Pat Morris, with CBMU 1 at Chinhae, Korea, in 1953.

II for piston-engine aircraft, did not stand up to the punishment meted out by jet aircraft. That fact demanded new methods and materials in airfield runway construction and a six-inch blacktop layer was often used.

Cold weather, approximately that of northern Maine, and hot weather, approximately that of Washington, DC, contributed to the stress on the work and the Seabees. The shortage of native skilled labor and lack of local supply sources contributed to the challenges of construction.

The Navy's Seabee battalions were not deployed to Korea as complete Mobile Construction Battalion units. Active duty Bees were called upon to provide smaller construction units.

NCB-104 was formed by reactivation of a World War II unit in 1947. It arrived at Camp McGill, Japan, at the outbreak of the Korean Conflict. It was shortly converted into ACB-1. GEN MacArthur successfully landed with the United Nations forces at Inchon, South Korea Sept. 15, 1950, and drove north. The Seabees of ACB-1 were attached to the 1st Marine Division and were part of the landing force under RADM James H. Doyle, USN, Commander, Amphibious Force at Inchon.

ACB-1 was organized in 1950 from NCB-104. It served at Inchon, Wolmido, Red and Blue Beaches and Yo Island in the Bay of Wonsan assigned

16 days.

During the work, they were forced to repair the new shell holes made daily by the enemy batteries across the bay. During the year it was used, it saved more than 60 fliers and at least \$10 million in aircraft.

During the Korean War, the UN Far East Air Force (FEAF) used some 15 air bases in Japan to support combat operations in Korea. In addition, the Air Force either improved or constructed some 55 airfields. These air bases were all numbered and some became better known by their number than



PHOTO COURTESY CONRAD LAWLOR

of World War II bases and stations remained after the war and the Navy's were still in existence in the late 1940s. BuDocks, therefore, still had responsibilities and missions in many places around the globe, including Seabee units deployed in the Atlantic, Caribbean, European and Mediterranean areas.

A Korean-era project that occupied many Seabees was begun in the Philippines in 1951. It was at this time that the Seabees began building the naval base there at Cubi Point. About 3000 Seabees from MCBs 2, 3, 5, 9 and 11 spent the next five years expending over 20 million man-hours building the installation for the Navy's Seventh Fleet.

Reserve Seabees

As we know, the Seabees were created in World War II and their ratings were considered Reserve ratings. In fact, all World War II Seabee construction personnel were designated "USNR." All Seabees remaining on active duty continued in that status before the Navy made them a permanent part of the Navy and classified construction ratings as permanent "USN" in 1947.

The Naval Reserve had existed since 1916, but the Seabees were not a part of the Naval Reserve as the Seabees had been created during World War II. After a period of post-war review the Seabees became an official part of the Naval Reserve on December 31, 1947.

The Reserve Seabee program consisted of 234 Seabee Companies, with about 1100 officers and 9000 enlisted, organized in about 200 Naval Training Centers. Reserve Seabee Companies were not deployable organizations, so no "Reserve Seabee units" per se served



in the Korean era.

Seabees from the reserve component, however, had a profound effect when the Korean Conflict began. The Navy called on the Seabee Reserve for skilled construction men to bolster the regular force.

Within a few weeks, individual volunteers from across the country had been activated and had proceeded to their ports of embarkation.

Within a few months, more than 60 percent of Seabees on active duty were Reservists. 🌐

I was there: An Oral History

RICHARD COULSON

BU2s Jack Kaelin (left) and Richard Coulson, "apparently trying to figure out what we were doing there." >>



"DURING THE KOREAN WAR, I served two tours in Korea with CBMU 1 and CBMU 101. They were attached to the 3rd Marine Air Wing out of Orange County, Calif., at the old El Toro Marine Base, now closed.

"All in all, I owe so much to the Seabees for getting me started in a useful career in construction, being a contractor and a consultant, and today owning a large, successful general engineering and construction consultancy. But prior to enlisting, while in high school and college, I joined the Navy as a Reservist. While in school during and after World War II, many of my friends had joined the Army Reserves in California.

When the Korean Conflict started, all who belonged to the Army Reserves were called to active duty with the famous 40th Division, which went directly to Korea. I didn't want to wait for my call up, so I went to Los Angeles and enlisted in the Seabees. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

"I was advised never to volunteer for anything, but I volunteered for everything that came along. It often really paid off. While in Korea, my commanding officer asked for a volunteer to fly to the island of Cheju-do and make a survey for a later radar site. One of the Marine pilots flew me over in his plane and I was there for two weeks.

"The island was a training base for Republic of Korea (ROK) Marines. While waiting for my plane ride back to base, I spent time with the famous Ama community. In their culture, women go diving for food, for kelp, lobster and abalone, while the men stay home and take care of the children. Having done some diving in the waters of Southern California, where I was born and raised, I

felt I could free-dive with the best of them. Was I ever wrong! Those Ama women divers could hold their breath for three to four minutes at a time. I couldn't even approach that time.

"For the most part, CBMU 1 was stationed at K-3 at Pohang-dong, on the east coast near Taegu. Our unit's project was to construct and maintain an airfield for the 3rd Marine Air Wing — one of whose pilot members was Ted Williams, at the time probably one of the best professional baseball players in the world. I had played some baseball in school, as most all students did in those days. There is just no comparison between the ball we played, though, and the ball played by Ted Williams. This by itself was worth the trip to Korea to be able to say, 'I played baseball with *Ted Williams*.'

"I later was stationed on Guam with Construction Battalion Detachment 1506. While there, I would volunteer to look for Japanese stragglers from WWII. Either they didn't know the war was over or didn't believe it. They hid in caves during the day and came out at night to scour local ranches for foodstuffs.

"During my tour, we captured three such holdouts that were shipped back to Japan. While on Guam, I volunteered for temporary duty at such exotic places Saipan, Spain, Tinian, Kwajalein, Bikini and Eniwetak.

"The photos I was able to salvage after 50 years were taken by a Kodak Box camera that I carried with me, a present from my Mom. I apologize for the quality, but that's all I had. I really did join the Navy to see the world — and any success I have had in the business world is due to my time spent with the United States Navy Seabees."

— Richard Coulson

SEABEE Magazine expresses its profound appreciation for the personal photos former Seabees pulled — from their wallets and Web sites.



Seabee scenes, clockwise from upper left: Local workers help build the airstrip at K-3; baseball legend Ted Williams, a Marine Corps fighter pilot in WWII and in Korea, walked away from an unscheduled hard landing there. A Korean English teacher and his family. An officer departs for home. "Military Payment Certificate" was "American money" in Korea. Ray Sorrentino and Tex Groves at CBD 1804. Bees from CBMU 1 open their Korean new "super-highway." Seabee Supply at K-3. Below, another Seabee Quonset hut goes up.

