

LCM Pulling into Seabees' Pontoon Pier to Unload, Wolmi Do, Korea

Navy Engineer Support in Korea

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THE SEABEES are seldom designated as assault forces or assigned specific defensive combat missions. When in combat areas, they support the infantry by lightering supplies ashore, the artillery by installing pontoon causeways over which guns may be landed, and aviation elements by preparing airfields at the beachhead. Though Seabees may be providing more direct support to a particular unit of Marine flyers around the 38th Parallel in Korea, it is no more vital or important than the work of the hundreds of engineers and construction men who have spent the past two years building and maintaining the airfields at home where those same Marine pilots learned to fly.

INCHON

The most spectacular direct role of the Seabees in support of the Korean emergency was that of a small detachment of the 104th Naval Construction Battalion at Inchon. On D-Day plus 2, September 17, 1950, a small boat pulled alongside the Seabee's pontoons at Pier Charley in the inner harbor. All hands came to attention as a tall, strong-jawed man leaped lightly onto the pier and gave a quick glance around the harbor. General MacArthur had landed. Once again he stepped ashore from the Seabee pontoons, as he had six years before at Leyte. General MacArthur said that day that conception of the Inchon landing would have been impossible without the assurance of success afforded by the use of the Seabee pontoon causeways and piers.

Slightly more than five weeks before that day, the pier on which General MacArthur walked ashore existed only as a pile of individual pontoons and assembly angles in a storage yard at the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, California. Less than three weeks after the communist armies smashed south across the 38th Parallel, the first pontoons and their Seabee crews left the coast for the trans-Pacific

trip. In four more weeks (with less than a month to go to D-Day) the last of the crews with their construction gear boarded a fast transport for Japan. Nine days before the landing, less than a week after the last of their equipment had reached Japan, the Seabees were combat loaded and ready to go. At 3 p.m. on D-Day, September 15, at Inchon, the Seabees started their run for the beach on Wolmi Do.¹ Twice, a 4-knot tidal current swept the pontoon pier away before it could be anchored. A last desperate try was successful, but the swift-running tide prevented that pier from being used by LST's; although LSU's, LCM's and LCVP's put it to immediate use for landing troops, vehicles, ammunition, and other supplies.

On D-Day plus 1 another pontoon pier, usable for LST's, was brought into the inner harbor and placed in position for unloading these big sea-going moving-vans. It was over this pier that General MacArthur landed. With the principal waterfront work done, the Seabees established camp and set up housekeeping for themselves and their friends in their own special fashion. Even though the mess hall burned down one night, a new one was erected and in service for lunch the next day.

Some apparently usable locomotives were reported in near-by Yong Dong Po with a request for volunteers to go after them. A group of Seabees was selected for the mission and when they reached the locomotives, active fighting was underway only half-a-mile off. Korean dead littered the area and knocked-out Russian tanks were very much in evidence. Mortar and machine-gun fire from all quarters was quite a hazard. In spite of these conditions and a small ambush, several locomotives were obtained.

It was not long before a small theater was set up for the screening of movies "kumshawed" from the forces afloat. Originally planned to seat about a hundred spectators, the theater was soon showing to nearer a thousand — soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen.

Roadwork and salvage operations in the harbor filled the Seabees' days for the next two weeks. Then

¹See also "Operation Versatile, Korean Saga of the 2d Engineer Special Brigade," by Maj. Frank L. Mann in THE MILITARY ENGINEER for May-June 1952.

the 104th began to outload its gear from the port, which it had done so much to secure, in preparation for another operation with the First Marine Division—the landing at Wonsan.

SASEBO AND YOKOSUKA

While the Seabees were performing so creditably at Inchon, and while the Corps back in the United States was sweating and straining to get the ponderous construction program underway, other small groups of Civil Engineer Corps officers were busy. At the end of World War II, the United States Navy had taken over two former bases of the Imperial Japanese Navy: the secure and semi-secret port of Sasebo in the southwestern part of the Island of Kyushu, just across the Sea of Japan from the principal Korean port of Pusan; and the major Japanese Naval Base of Yokosuka—on Tokyo Bay below Yokohama. During the years following World War II, Sasebo had been reduced almost to a caretaker status when the Korean war broke out. Quickly, an operating Public Works Department was organized which, within a few weeks, comprised five officers, eighty-five enlisted men, and seven hundred twenty Japanese civilians.

The Navy's role at Sasebo was primarily logistic support of the fleet units. The Civil Engineer Corps provided the shore facilities with which to furnish that support. Several small graving docks were available at Sasebo for the small vessels of the fleet, but the large 1,100-foot dock, capable of handling the heaviest fleet units, was in very poor condition. In the demilitarization of the Japanese Naval Base during the early days of the occupation, the gates and pumping equipment had been put out of commission, and during the intervening five years the dock had been usable only as a wet basin. Utilizing Japanese civilians, contractors, and industrial firms for the bulk of this work, with a Civil Engineer Corps officer in charge, the dock was fully rehabilitated in just forty-two days. In this project, as in many others, the Public Works Officer at Sasebo was fortunate in having among the Japanese civilian employees several of the high ranking engineers and maintenance men

who had designed, constructed, and operated the base for the Japanese Navy in previous years.

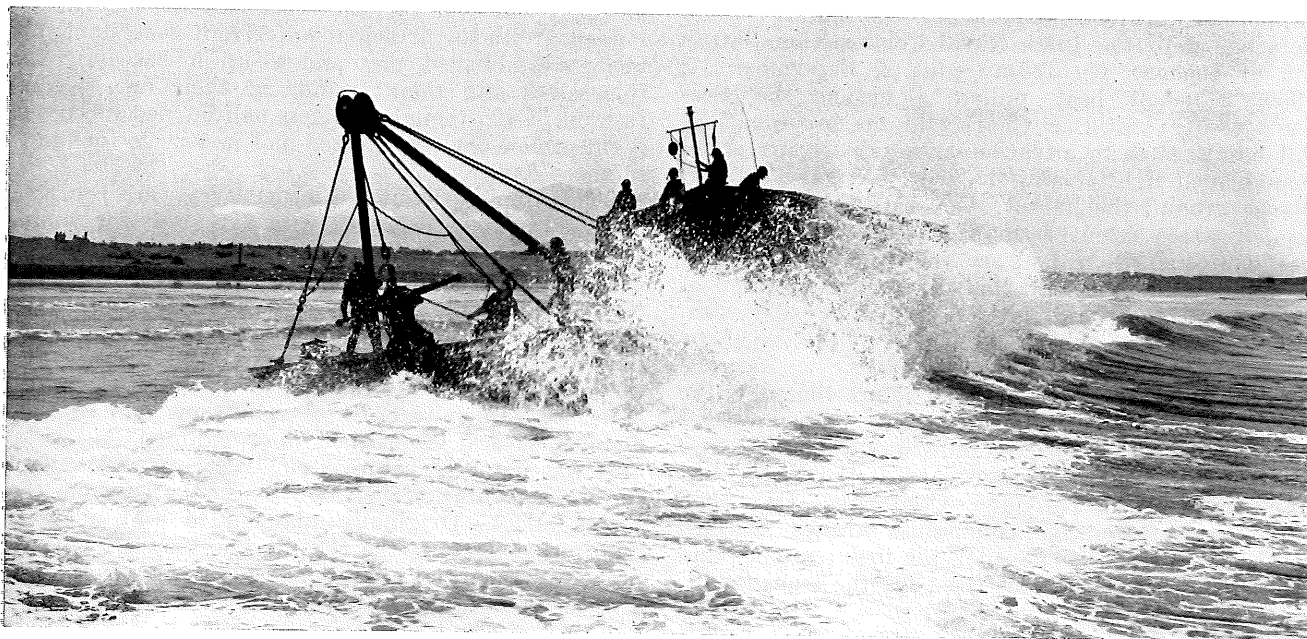
Along these same lines, it was interesting to note that the anti-submarine net, placed by our Navy across the mouth of Sasebo Bay, was anchored to abutments originally constructed by the Japanese for a boom during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, and used again in World Wars I and II.

The situation with respect to Yokosuka was somewhat similar. The expansion was almost instantaneous, with a build-up that reached its peak nearly a year later. The scope of the work at Yokosuka was of a somewhat more permanent nature than that at Sasebo. Yokosuka was, and is, the location of the Officer in Charge of Construction, Bureau of Yards and Docks Contracts, Japan. In some instances, plans and specifications have been prepared in the Public Works Design Division by Japanese architects and engineers working under the supervision of American Navy Civil Engineer Corps officers. In other instances, Japanese architect-engineer firms have prepared plans and specifications; and both sources of talent have been used to translate standard Bureau of Yards and Docks plans and adapt them to Japanese materials and construction methods.

The types of construction accomplished for us by Japanese construction firms ran the gamut of naval shore activities—everything from airfield paving and all sorts of buildings, to the conversion of large boilers from coal to oil burning. And in case anyone may be dubious about the ability of the Japanese to do good design and construction work, he should be reminded that the Japanese ran a pretty good navy of their own for several years.

Yokosuka is a complete naval shore installation with fuel depot ammunition depot, ship repair facility, supply depot, hospital, marine barracks, clubs for officers and men and even swimming pools, skeet ranges, and a football stadium, all of it, just as at home, constructed and maintained under the direction of the Navy Civil Engineer Corps.

In contrast to Sasebo, where the principal emphasis is on the rapid replenishment of ships so that they



Seabees Setting Sea Anchors from Warping Tug off Chigasaki Beach, Japan



Avgas Supplies for First Marine Air Wing Delivered by ACB-1 on Korean Beach near the Battleline
The pontoon causeway was a major factor in the solution of this difficult supply problem.

may quickly return to the operating areas, and where little more than tender repairs are usually accomplished, Yokosuka provides adequate facilities to effect major repairs amounting almost to overhauls.

ATSUGI

But while the Amphibious Seabees were on the beaches of Korea, and while the organizations at Sasebo and Yokosuka were preparing their logistic support bases, another group of Seabees appeared on the scene in the Far East. Operations in Japan and Korea were not visualized when Seabees were called early in 1950 to form trouble-shooting Mobile Construction Battalion Two (MCB-2). However, in the fall of that year this unit embarked at Port Hueneme for the trip across the Pacific. Thanks to MCB-2, the United States Naval Air Station at Atsugi, Japan, 15 miles southwest of Yokohama, is a potent base for naval air power today. The strength in the Far East of the Navy land-based patrol squadrons and carrier-based fighters and bombers stems in a large part from the newly expanded and modernized facilities at Atsugi.

When the advance party of twelve Seabees arrived at Atsugi in October 1950, they found the lair of World War II's Japanese *Kamikaze* pilots. General MacArthur had landed there when he first set foot on Japan at the conclusion of hostilities. Between 1945 and 1950, however, the Atsugi Air Station had deteriorated from abandonment and neglect. All utilities had to be redesigned and rebuilt. Roads were either a bed of mud or dust depending on the weather. Aircraft parking area and taxiway paving would not support the Navy patrol bombers. Buildings that never had met American construction standards had become unusable. Labor and equipment were on hand for the reconstruction job but high quality materials were lacking.

While the Seabees wrestled with doing an American-style job with substitute Japanese building materials a call for help came from an old friend of MCB-2 — Marine Aircraft Group 33 (MAG-33). These

two units first met on the West Coast during the summer of 1950. MCB-2 helped MAG-33 get packed into their ship and on the way. Now, MAG-33 planes were flying from an airfield in Japan that needed repairs. Asking MCB-2 to do the job was like bumming a match from a man loaded down with a sack of groceries in each arm. But in just 21 days the job was completed.

Back at Atsugi, the dirt and mud were moved for an extended airstrip, new taxiways, and parking aprons. Hulks of bomb-battered hangars were stripped to their still usable steel frameworks and riggers and carpenters got busy. Japanese-style plumbing was ripped from barracks, and American fixtures replaced it. Light electric wiring, a serious fire hazard, was pulled out and heavier, safer circuits replaced it. A run-down frame building was transformed into a modern, three-wing navy hospital-dispensary. The interior of the air station administration building was rebuilt with new floors, walls, and ceilings providing space for the staff of Commander Fleet Air, Japan, and the air station administrative offices.

Then came another call for help from MAG-33, situated at a small airstrip near the 36th Parallel in Korea. There chuck-holes in the failing concrete opened up faster than the Marines could repair them. Taxiing planes actually got stuck in them.

A few days after the urgent message was received a special detachment from MCB-2 was on its way to help. With the tide of the Red invasion turned back toward the 38th Parallel again in April 1951, MAG-33 could not afford to ease the pressure on the communists. There was no chance of closing down the airstrip while the Seabees repaired it. The Seabees graded, poured, and patched while the planes kept right on flying. The plan was simple but extremely dangerous. The strip was 160-feet wide. Seabees laid concrete on one half while Panthers and Corsairs, laden with rockets and bombs, used the other half. The Marines were so pleased with the job that recommendations were made and approved for the organiza-

tion of a permanent Seabee detachment to be assigned to the Wing. MCB-2 men feel that they are the "proud parents" of Construction Battalion Detachment 1804, a Seabee unit now in Korea with the First Marine Air Wing.

At peak strength while in Japan, the Battalion has had several times the originally intended one hundred men and three officers. In peace time it will be reduced to this core strength. In the meantime, coming home to Port Hueneme again, they will re-equip for another assignment.

WONSAN

Back in Inchon Harbor early in October 1950 the Seabees of the Amphibious Force were outloading their gear for a try at assaulting the east coast of Korea. The attack was grim, as thick mine fields and a dysentery epidemic aboard ship kept the troop-laden assault fleet circling offshore while Korean troops hacked their way up the coast until Wonsan, the objective, was behind the lines. The fact that there was no immediate shooting going on did not deter the Seabees from running in their pontoon structures and setting up an operating port for any amphibious shipping that might want to unload.

Without strenuous harbor construction or camp operation tasks to fill their days, the men of the 104th branched into somewhat unusual tasks. A North Korean mine layer, well stocked with mines and tor-

Seabees set out by LSU with explosives ordnance disposal men to help retrieve as many samples as they could. Then having had this experience they were able to assist the bomb disposal personnel in the removal of large quantities of enemy explosives from storage tunnels in the hills surrounding the port. And with plenty of mechanical skills for which there was



A Portable Galley of ACB-1 in Korea

at the moment no urgent requirement ashore, the men of the battalion went aboard repair ships to assist in renewing damaged and disabled vessels of all sorts.

WITHDRAWAL FROM HUNGNAM, WONSAN, INCHON

Then with the North Koreans just about beaten, and a winter of mopping up in sight, the Chinese Communists attacked. Harbor operations were cranked into full speed. At Hungnam, Wonsan, and Inchon, where the Seabees had helped to put overwhelming forces ashore, their same pontoon structures were burdened with mechanical and human cargo going the other way. Wonsan was cleared. Then Hungnam was cleared as the weary, frozen Marines attacked their way down out of the hills which they had assaulted from the sea just a few weeks before. Inchon was cleared, as Red forces advanced down the Han Valley past Seoul and Kimpo. There, as at Hungnam, all the troops and hordes of civilian refugees were taken out through the port, over the beaches, and across the pontoons. All the pontoon structures could not be saved, and some remained to be demolished with the harbor works.

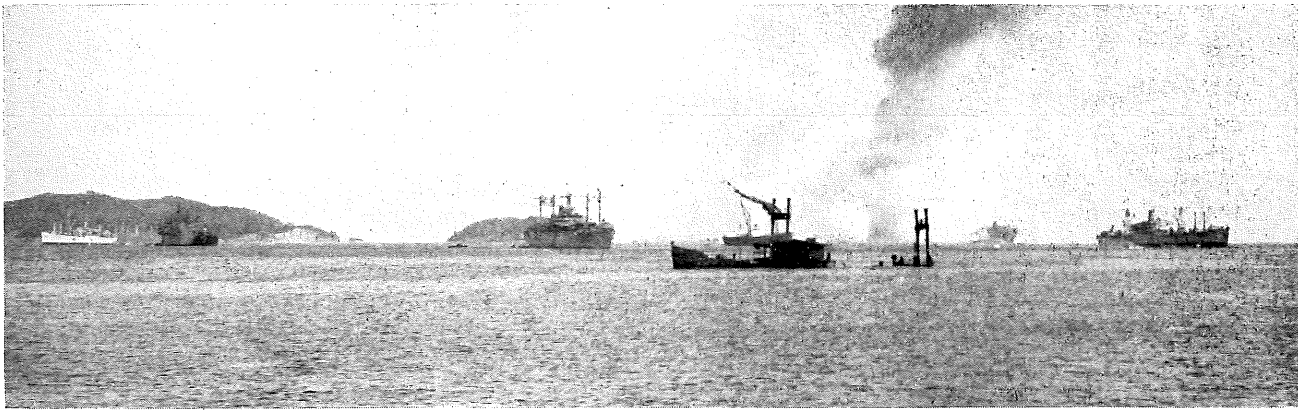
Troops ashore held, fought, and fell back to new lines. The Navy

bombed and shelled the Reds wherever they could be reached. The Civil Engineer Corps officers and the Seabees at Sasebo and Yokosuka worked feverishly to supply more ships, fuel, and ammunition. With renewed endeavor, as far back as Coronado and



Seabees Leaving Inchon Harbor

pedos, had been abandoned a few miles north of the harbor. Since the recovery of this ordnance would afford an opportunity to determine the type and quality of the harbor defense obstacles being encountered by our forces, a group of men from the Amphibious



Ships Waiting to Evacuate Troops from Wonsan, Korea, as Smoke Rises from Demolitions Ashore

Hueneme, there was urgent action to provide new men, new equipment, and new pontoons for the men of the 104th, who had been redeployed to Camp McGill in Japan to recuperate and prepare for new and unknown tasks. With the replacements, when they arrived from the United States in January, came not only new men and new gear but a new name. The old 104th Naval Construction Battalion had become Amphibious Construction Battalion ONE.

BACK TO INCHON

Slowly the southbound communists blunted their forces against our unyielding ground troops. The men of MCB-2 made fields ready for Marine flyers. Construction men in the United States turned out new plants and facilities for the weapons and manpower of war. Sasebo and Yokosuka were beehives of activity. And the men of ACB-1 prepared for whatever might come.

By February the tide was turning and in that month we went back into Inchon on the heels of the retreating Reds. The waterfront was a ruin, the locks of the tidal basin distorted into seemingly irreparable chaos². But some of the pontoons were still there and with the assistance of welders from the Army 2d Engineer Special Brigade they were made usable and

²See "Raising the Tidal Basin Lock Gates at Inchon, Korea," by Maj. William McCollam, Jr., in THE MILITARY ENGINEER for March-April 1952.

cargo once more poured ashore through the port.

At about this time, emergency airstrips up near the line on the east coast were retaken and the Seabees of MCB-2 and CBD-1804 were there to do their part in building and maintaining the strips. Fuel and bombs, however, were lacking, and the roads and railroads were impassable. Once again supply by sea was needed. The Seabees, with their pontoon causeways and barges, brought over the beaches and into the Marine fields, within hearing distance of front-line artillery, mountains of filled fuel drums and bombs. They continued to do so as long as the ground forces could be given close support by pilots flying off the fields supplied over the pontoons of ACB-1.

CHAIN OF SUPPORT

Typhoons came to strip the beaches clean of all man-made floating structures, but there were more pontoons waiting just across the Sea of Japan in Sasebo and back of them were more cells and angles ready for assembly in the storage yards of Yokosuka.

And as the planes support the infantrymen; as the Seabees support the flyers; as Sasebo supports the operations along the east coast of Korea; as Yokosuka supports Sasebo; and as all the naval activities at home support all the activities overseas, so do engineers of all branches, military and civilian, support and provide the means to fight to our armed forces.



LST's Outloading for the Withdrawal from Hungnam, Korea