

# Naval Construction Maintenance Unit 537

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## *Historical Information*



*“Construimus, Batuimus”  
“We Build, We Fight”*



ON BOARD

<u>DATE</u>	<u>OFFICERS</u>	<u>MEM</u>	<u>AUTHORITY</u>
30 Jun'44		259	Recap.
1 Aug'44	5	257	R & MoR
1 Sep'44	5	253	MoR
1 Oct'44	5	264	MoR
1 Nov'44	5	259	MoR
1 Dec'44	5	250	MoR
1 Jan'45	5	249	MoR
1 Feb'45	5	241	MoR
1 Mar'45	5	244	MoR
1 Apr'45	5	244	MoR
1 May'45	5	241	MoR
1 Jun'45	5	232	MoR
1 Jul'45	5		<b>Roster</b>
1 Aug'45	6	215	BNP625 & R
1 Sept'45	5	213	BNP625 & R

C.B.M.U. #537 (INACTIVATED)

CBMU 537

NCTC - Peary (103rd CB)  
ABD - Gulfport  
Ready Date -  
Left ABD - 7 Dec'43  
Location - Noumea

LOG

- 9-23-43 - Original officers assigned from the 103rd CB.
- 2-28-44 - 1 Feb'44 report of 6th CB - CBMU 536 and 537 arrived at Noumea 20 Jan'44.
- 3- 2-44 - 1 Feb'44 report of CBMU 537 - CBMU 536 and 537 operating in a pool, taking over Public Works duties.
- 3-30-44 - CBMU 537 operating at Noumea taking over maintenance duties of the 3rd and 6th CB's. (1 Mar'44 report of CBMU 537)
- 4-17-44 - CBMU 537 detached from 2nd Reg. (Comsopac Conf. Disp. 290602 Mar'44 to subj. unit and others)
- 5- 8-44 - 1 Apr'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea and Ile Nou.
- 5-31-44 - 1 May'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea and Ile Nou.
- 6-29-44 - 1 Jun'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea.
- 7-12-44 - 1 Jul'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea.
- 8-23-44 - 1 Aug'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea.
- 9-26-44 - 1 Sep'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea with CBMU 536.
- 1- 1-44 - 1 Oct'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea.
- 2- 4-44 - 1 Nov'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating at Noumea.
- 2-29-44 - CBMU 536 is located at Noumea as of 1 Dec'44 (OMB Noumea Sec. disp to Comseronsopac 070540 dtd 16 Dec'44).

Location - Noumea

CBMU 537

- 1-3-45 - 1 Dec'44 report of CBMU 537 - operating and maintaining Public Works and Public Utilities at Noumea.
- 2- 2-45 - 1 Jan'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea.
- 3-28-45 - 1 Feb'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea.
- 4- 3-45 - 1 Mar'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea. Base being rolled up. Personnel of this unit have been pooled with personnel of the 536th. Det. of 34 men and 1 off. at Ile Nou.
- 4-16-45 - 1 Apr'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea. Working in conjunction with the personnel of the 536th CBMU. 34men in the Ile Nou detachment.
- 5-14-45 - 1 May'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea. Still working in conjunction with personnel of CBMU 536. 34 men in Ile Nou detachment.
- 6-9-45 - CBMU 537 included in list of activities at Noumea earmarked and ready later but no destinations assigned. (Comsopac sec disp 290535 May'45 to Comservpac)
- 6-16-45 - 1 Jun'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea.
- 7-20-45 - 1 Jul'45 report of CBMU 537 - located at Noumea. P.W. Annex camp at Ile Nou was inactivated on 1 June thus releasing 23 men for duty at Noumea.
- 8-22-45 - 1 Aug '45 report of CBMU 537. Located at Noumea.
- 8-30-45 - removed from alert status. CBMUs 536, 537, 538 & 550. (Comservpac Sec disp 242159 to Comsopac).
- 9- 4-45 - Comservpac rens approval to inactivate CBMUs 536, 537, 538 & 550. These units released from alerted status by Cincpac adv 220739 Aug of higher classification. (Comservpac conf spdltr ser 04961 dtd 27 Aug'45 to Cincpac).
- 9-15-45 - Inactivate immediately CBMU 537. Inform Comservpac when inactivation is completed. (Comservpac conf spdltr ser 05130 dtd 7 Sept'45 to Comsopac).

Location- Noumea

CBMU 537

- 9-20-45 - 1 Sept'45 report of CBMU 537. Located at Noumea.
- 10-6-45 - 1 Oct'45 report of CBMU 537. Located at Noumea. 65 men transferred to U.S. for discharge under the point system.
- 10-10-45- CBMU 537 inactivated 25 Sept'45. (Comservronsopac conf disp 280512 Sept'45 to Comservpac).

INACTIVATED

Date	Organization	Location	Reference	Notes
12/13/44	-	Noumea	-	Left U.S. Dec 1943
12/18	-	Noumea (Spic)	Combas Ocean Noumea sec diag 070540 Dec.	
9/28/45	-	-	Combas Ocean Conf. 2805-12 Sept.	Inactivated 25 Sept.
7/11/45	-	2300 - 2 Sept		
12/18/45	-	Noumea		



## TRAINS AND CAMPS . . .

SOME time in the latter part of May and the first part of June, 1943, the little town of

Williamsburg, Virginia, was invaded by drafts of prospective SeaBees who had come from the four corners of the United States full in their determination to build and fight in whatever part of the world that their ISLAND X would be found.

It was hot: hot, humid, sticky heat, that greeted these men, still dressed in their civilian clothes with no distinguishing marks about them save the confident look of men who knew their jobs and were sure that they could handle anything there was to be offered.

The first few days were hectic and rapid. We were introduced to barracks life and taught the rudiments of Navy procedure. Those days are still a little hazy in our minds, but a few of the highlights remain. Remember? Take a deep breath—hoooldd it! . . . the physical exam . . . the last look at our civilian clothes . . . GI issue in one mattress cover and one other big bag so full that only a tall man could avoid looking like an over-loaded Mexican Burro . . . that BOOT HAIRCUT . . . the ID CARD picture . . . double time to the Chow Hall over the longest possible routes . . . the grass stains on those overloaded "sack covers" . . . rolling clothes (it all fits, doesn't it) and the introduction to the Drill Instructors.

For six weeks, six and a half days a week, we drilled 55 minutes out of 60 under water discipline and grew leg-strong, tough and dehydrated. Camp Peary had been selected because of its climatic similarity to tropical conditions. There was a story at Camp Peary that there was a sign next to the Gate . . . "Come in; 20 degrees cooler inside My place . . . signed . . . LUCIFER I." Regardless of the heat and humidity we drilled and drilled for seemingly endless days (and nights in our sleep). We learned the manual of arms with Victory Rifles and later during this training period learned to fall, crawl, and fight with it and its CB companion weapon, the machete. We spent many hours slinking through the "tropical jungles" rehearsing the serious





game of sudden assault and sniping. There were hikes through and over what was called the woods, whose miles passed by drearily and seemed to never end. As a reward for our showing in the Area's competitive drills we sang the CB song for a scene in a CB training and morale film.

The six week Boot Training period with its "HUT-HOOT-HEET-HORT" was over and the dream of all BOOTS came true when we were given a 62 hour liberty. The luckier men who were able to get their wives close enough to the Camp spent those hours with their loved ones while the remainder went to Washington DC with their pockets full of their BOOT PAY. For 48 hours we reveled in our first freedom from the constant routine

of training and took the city over. All the sights that we had read about in our school books were visited and quite a few that had sprung into prominence since we had been children—the Capitol Dome . . . the Government buildings . . . Arlington Cemetery . . . the Monuments . . . the Amusement Parks . . . and the people . . . noise . . . music and gaiety . . . and no LIGHTS OUT!

As all good things end, the 62 hours sped fast and we were back on the train headed again for Peary tired but happy. Even then the Scuttlebut was flowing thick and fast as to where we were to be stationed for our Advance Training. Little did we know that a Yeoman and an IBM card machine had taken care of that detail and that upon our arrival back at Camp we would be assigned to platoons in the old 103rd Battalion and transferred to B6 Drill Hall to await traveling orders. It was in the Drill Hall that we met our first Commanding Officer, Lt. Commander Fred J. Early, and were further acquainted with being in a Naval organization.

The second leg of our journey began a few days later as we were driven to the Camp Peary Station in the palatial station-wagons furnished for that purpose. We were soon mustered as to cars and seated and the Band played the CB song and Anchors A'weigh while we slowly wound our way out of Camp Peary for the last time. The West Coasters were praying for California, the Southerners for Mississippi, and the Northerners were praying the loudest and most effectively, because hours later, sooty and full of coal dust from the "modern coal-burning engines," through a cold fog and mist we sighted the buildings of a large camp area . . . Camp Endicott, Rhode Island.

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**TRAINS AND CAMPS**—Continued from page 10

After Peary this camp was a Paradise. There were fully stocked Ship Stores in each area with real ice cream. (In Peary it was all chocolate, even when the container said vanilla.) There were Pool Rooms, Bowling Alleys and other recreational activities in each area, with Movie Theatres in at least four areas and water coolers in each barracks. It was at Camp Endicott that we met our present Commanding Officer, Lt. R. V. Hodgson, who became our Company Commander.

We spent a very few days getting everything shipshape in our new barracks and found suddenly that the oiled floor had a peculiar affinity for the Naval Dress Whites that we had to don to go on liberty. Here was a new experience . . . we could go into town and see the sights. This was indeed Heaven, but there was a catch to it . . . this was our Advance Training base and there was work to be done and new skills to be learned. Due to the highly accelerated training program all hands could not achieve an overall training in all the skills needed in a large Naval Unit, so certain groups of men were allotted to the speciality schools and the remainder were given training in military matters so that at a later date they would in turn become instructors in their special skills to their mates. There were classes in Dynamite and Demolition, Pontoons, Heavy Equipment, Huts and Tents, Diving, Water Front, Electrical Installation and Maintenance, Water Purification, BAR, Judo, Extended Order, First Aid, Machine Gun, Rifle and other schools and classes too numerous to list.

We all had our try at the obstacle course and Judo during the first days while the training program was being organized. The toughest thing that we ever have had to face before or since then was the twelve foot wall obstacle after a twelve hour liberty in Providence. Each school put in a full eight hour day. One school, or class, practised the gentle art of Judo all morning, ate chow at a mess hall "miles" away, returned to the training ground, ran over the obstacle course on the double, and then practised, under Marine instructors, with Enfields and bayonets all the rest of the afternoon, and at the finish of the day dog-trotted back to the armory and then back to their home area.

There still are many unfond memories of the swinging steel mat bridge, the barbed wire, the ROPE some twenty feet from the ground that had to be navigated with hands and legs like a sloth, and the final touch was that nine foot wall at the end of the course that had to be taken with a frontal assault . . . jump and scramble . . . a thousand centuries from the starting spot.

For a week we were assembled in one of the large indoor drill halls and were introduced to the Carbine and DRY FIRE. We took the Carbine apart and put it together over and over again until each one of us could assemble it in the dark. Remember the positions—Standing, Sitting, Kneeling, and Prone? We practised the positions by the hour with the rifle and the art of holding and squeezing the trigger until it was an integral part of our makeup. The clicking of over a thousand triggers sounded like hail. Sun Valley Rifle Range

was our next little trip—up at the wee hours of dawn, and into the trucks that hauled us—Muster at the range. The week was a fast one, with two days of trial fire and then firing for record. Again the deer-hunting heritage of the American people proved itself and the majority of the men became Navy Marksmen. Each group fired one half a day and then studied their alternate weapon in the afternoon. One of the most vivid memories of that time in the writer's memory was the discovery that a BAR fires as long as the trigger is pressed . . . five shots as fast as one. Another rapid fire group were training at the Anti-aircraft school at Princes Neck, Rhode Island. Two members of our group set an individual and team record with a standard machine gun on the official range. N. E. Doyle M1c and L. G. Forbes M1c fired a 466 and a 462 respectively out of a possible 500, and as a team averaged a 464, which was at that time 8 points higher than any other Naval Record for the East Coast.

Another record was set by W. M. Raggio BM1c in another field, by attaining the highest individual merit award in the Pontoon school that had ever been achieved by any previous trainee.

With the Sun Valley training period safely passed and the training periods over, the first embarkation leaves were ordered for all those who lived east of the Mississippi River and points North and South. The largest portion of the Battalion left for their last days at home, while those ones left moved into another area and, while waiting for the return of their mates, discovered numbers of the sick Aunts and homecoming brothers who were in desperate need of the man's presence in that dreary city of Washington DC or some other such out of the way place. Many a heart-rending story was unfolded to the Liberty Officer's ears.

Nine days later the embarkees returned to the Camp and at the last moment there were surprisingly few that had to be asked to return to their home away from home. Soon the entire Battalion was practising for the ceremony at which the Battalion would receive its Battalion flags and become officially a Naval Unit. On 17 August, 1943, Captain Fred F. Rogers presented Lt. Commander F. E. Early with the Battalion Colors. Now we were a distinctive organization and again awaiting orders to report to an ABD Base for reshipment to our long looked for Island X.

It was soon afterward that the word was passed to Lash Up and Make Ready to Board. The Battalion marched back over the same route that a few short weeks before had been their entrance into Camp Endicott. After an invocation by the Chaplain for men who were soon to be sent overseas, the Battalion entrained, one Company to a section. Company A, our unit, left the Camp area first and was soon moving in a direction that made the West Coasters' hearts leap with joy. It was soon evident to all, however, a few hours later that we were heading back through country that we had seen before, and, despite all the compass reading and "body English" possible, the train was inexorably heading for parts that so far we had not yet encountered. What a train ride that was, for hundreds of miles we rode on tracks so thickly covered with grass that the engineer had a cow tied on in front in order to uncover the

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**TRAINS AND CAMPS—** *Continued from page 27*

track! At times it seemed that we were at sea with no compass; that was especially evident at chow time, when we had to wend our way through the whole train to the "Chow Hall." The trips took so much time that we walked off our chow going to and coming from. The triple bunks called sleepers were fine, but the ones in the top bunks had the sensation of being suspended in thin air. The ever bright memory of this trip was the ever increasing wonder of the Officer at how, at each stop, some mate's wife was there to greet him and put lumps in the other mates' hearts at the kisses that they were missing. After a number of days the order was given to don our Blues and the train came to a slow wheezy stop. From there we were nursed into camp by an engine that had snorted wood smoke at Gen. Grant when he started towards Richmond. The tracks were close to the area where we were to be stationed and as we stopped for the final time and disembarked from that symbol of our Naval Careers, we were greeted by the members of the last section who had arrived some twelve hours sooner. They had come through civilization and we, as ever, were the explorers.

Two days after our arrival at Camp Holliday, Mississippi, our Battalion was called on to become an integral part of the construction and reclamation projects at the base. During this period the Battalion set a number of construction and reclamation records that still stand. While Company A cannot take all the credit for all the records and accomplishments, it is noted with pride that our Officers and Chiefs were in key positions in the majority of the projects and in charge of a goodly portion of the overall plan.

We helped salvage an Army Bomber from the swamp near the Camp in seven days after Army engineers had given up the job, completed 340 Quonset Huts in 20 days complete for occupancy, speeded up the barracks remodelling from one barracks a day to six with an improved ready cut method, were instrumental in laying complete, with the ditch back filled, 435 lineal feet of 2x3 sewer tile in six and three-quarter hours, the remodelling of an area Beer Hall without interfering with its operation, and the Pontoon Bridge Pontoon Drydock and the repair of the West End Pier were the windup of the projects. The last three projects were filmed for Movie Newsweek.

During the windup days for the Construction and Reclamation work the remainder of the men were given their embarkation leave, and from personal experience, the less said about the train services between New Orleans and the West Coast, the better.

Upon arrival back at the Base at Gulfport we found a change had been made. There was no longer a 103rd Battalion, as the Powers that Be had willed that there be four Maintenance Units formed from the personnel of the larger organization. It was with satisfaction that the men of the Old Company A discovered that their current Company Commander, Lt. R. V. Hodgson, was to remain and become the OinC of CBMU 537, as we were to be known as from that date on. The formal presentation of the Unit's Colours was held

23 September 1943, and the real life of the men as an absolute, positive Naval Organization became at last.

An excerpt from a newspaper formed shortly after the CBMU's commissioning by Lt. Hodgson reads as follows:—

"Since our formation I have seen a great deal of spirit develop in the Unit, a splendid response of enthusiasm and a sincere effort on the part of all you men to weld yourselves into a fighting, working bunch of SEABEES. This is the right spirit, and whatever the future may hold for us I am satisfied that if the going gets a bit rough you'll all be in there doing your job."

With all the construction work completed on our schedule, the emphasis shifted to physical fitness and resumption of military training. We were issued our pieces and again introduced to DRYFIRE (in case the term escapes you, is the same thing as kissing a girl through a heavy veil—the motion and feel is there but that final sensation escapes you). Daily hikes were the rule of the day, 10 miles and better, both in the morning and in the afternoon. We spent many days in simulated bivouac areas, pitching pup tents, forming areas and then returning to the Camp on the double.

We established another first while at Gulfport by hiking to the Rifle Range, a distance of 30 miles, with full pack and equipment. 537 started among the last units for the range and was the first one to arrive, and again established a record for the trip. It was on this first major undertaking as a Unit that the spirit of CBMU 537 crystallized into an undying belief and action that they were leaders in both name and action which has never been relinquished at any date to any other Unit or Battalion.

While at the Rifle Range the Unit fired again on a regulation Range and all showed improvements over their scores at Camp Endicott. We all experienced a saunter through a simulated battle zone full of dynamite charges and unexpected obstacles. For the first time the cry of "HIT THE DECK" came into its full and actual meaning. At the first charge there wasn't a man to be seen, each one was pressing himself into the arms of Old Mother Earth with all the tenderness generally reserved for moonlight nights and romance. The entire trip was a forced march, save for time out at the Bivouac for a K Ration snack.

Still following the policy of adapting his men to any condition that they might ever face on Island X, Lt. Hodgson planned in succession for the invasion of Cat Island, and at a later date Ship Island. It was at Cat Island that quite a few of the men discovered that the Boy Scout manual was right about pitching tents on high ground after they nearly floated back to the Base during a terrific rainstorm. Despite the inconvenience, everyone had a grand time and did a fine job in refitting the Camp site for the next organization to attack the Island. Ship Island was the next Island X to be invaded, and again the officers and men proved that CBMU 537 was a leader. With a minimum of tools and a maximum of ability they "practically rebuilt" the lighthouse, to quote the Officer in Charge at that station, repaired the galley.

**TRAINS AND CAMPS**—*Continued*

erected "comfort stations," squared away the entire area for the next coming Units and Battalions and left behind, as a permanent landmark, a nameplate with CBMU 537 embedded in concrete in front of the entrance of the Fort. We caught some of the biggest fish there that had been seen, and returned to his native habitat a six foot "hilligator" that one of the fellows had tried to tame.

Upon return from Ship Island, there was a hurry and bustle in the office that had never been there before. There were a number of transfers being made, most of them into the Unit, and as the new faces appeared the scuttlebut grew in force and power. For days now each time an Officer looked at a map the entire fate of the Unit was changed, our destination altered and the war had shifted to a new front. A number of the transfers had been in other CB organizations and had been "ACROSS" and became magic oracles of things to come.

In these last closing days, the men of the four Units organized an entertainment group and presented an old-fashioned vaudeville show for the Hospitals near the area. The group received numerous plaudits from high ranking Hospital Officials and members of the American Legion. Ten of the cast of twenty were from our Unit, and the Producer, Publicity and Stage Manager were all three of CBMU 537.

With the entertainment group busy and organizing for a request appearance at a Naval Hospital at New Orleans and the athletic groups winning their games and the training program functioning at full blast, an order came, to be effective on the anniversary of the blackest of days in our nation's current history, that started CBMU 537 on the last journey before they would become eligible for overseas pay. Even after we had boarded the train there was little feeling that this was the beginning of an exciting adventure. We had been on trains before and the closest water we had had been in Bays or Gulfs. We were probably finally going to the West Coast, and again the West Coasters prayed . . . and lost. Miles away from Gulfport, then Ensign P. C. Vickers, accompanied by CBMAA J. O. Wenneberg, came into each car and made a solemn announcement . . . "This is it! All letters will be censored from now on. . . . Keep your windows closed. . . . Talk to no one besides your own mates. . . . Loose talk sinks ships." . . . And then, as they left for the next car, there was a hush. It finally had come, after three Camps and thousands of miles. . . . God! It gives a man a weird feeling to know for sure he is to sail away from all he knows and holds dear . . . and at each click of the rails that destiny was approaching. Sleep was light that night. . . . Not from fear, just thinking and wondering and perhaps a little wishing and hoping—and a little regret. . . . Next morning all those thoughts were gone or hidden. This was what we had volunteered for, and by all that was holy we were going to give it the best we had and do the job right . . . and the train kept rolling along, speeding the time. . . .





## IT WAS ENOUGH FOR US . . .

*A running story of the  
trip over to ISLAND X*

By BRUCE LESTER RUSSELL Jr., Cm 2.c

AS it had always been before, we are on a train again heading for some unknown camp or station. We had been told that this was IT, but from past experience with military practice we had to see a ship with our own eyes. We had trained at three camps and as there were a few more on the same side of the USA that we hadn't as yet encountered we were sceptical. Even now our worst fears were being realized because our train had stopped and our engine had disappeared and left us stranded at a siding next to a large Navy Camp. Disappointment was rife and the proverbial griping roared forth. At the climax of the griping and second guessing, a switch engine began shunting us back and forth, and with a sudden spurt of energy swept us grandly into another track which led directly to a dock area and there were enough ships for all.

This was IT! The day that we had trained for, or at least the starting point to the Island X that had been the inspiration for all our activities. With a snort and a final toot of the whistle our little friend left us and it was greeted by an inward yell from all hands aboard the train.

Dressed in Dress Blues, our packs and pieces and our ditty bags in our hands, we fell into platoon formation and marched for the ship. Because of military practice, no distinctive gear had been ordered, so there was a small formality that had to be observed before we could board ship. By platoons we stacked our packs and pieces, donned our coveralls over our Blues and unloaded our sea and duffle bags into a large warehouse, removed our Dress Blues, put on our Undress Blues, put enough clothing to last for a period of seven days into our bedroll, gathered our pieces, re-formed platoons and then, after circling the dock, were ordered to board ship and stow our gear. With a large duffle bag, a carbine, a ditty bag and other personal sundries, each man was checked against the master muster roll, dodged through companionways and hatches and descended into the hold that was to be our home for more days than we ever expected possible.

Of course our troopship, because we were aboard, had a special interest to us, but the exploring that would come later was dismissed while we were being assigned to our bunks. The space to sleep and move in in a troopship has been likened to a sardine can, but a sardine would be a victim of under-population in a can in comparison to us. There were three tiers high, six feet of canvas

bound space in length, and squeezing room sideways for each man. Like Medieval armor, they had been built for men of small stature and were just as comfortable.

Thirsty for tales of the sea, and above all, devoured with CB curiosity to see what made things tick, bed gear was hastily stowed and a steady stream of men clothed the gangways to and from our compartment. From crew members and the Marines attached to the ship, we learned that our ship had speed, courage and an envious combat record in both World Wars, and what was more encouraging than anything else was the fact that the ship had never lost a man in enemy action.

Next morning was full of interest. We ate aboard the ship for the first time and were introduced to the chow line routine . . . the Navy breeds patience. . . . After chow the decks were lined with our Unit watching the remainder of the passengers come aboard, and discovered that one of our sister Units was aboard and was even in our compartment. They had come aboard late the first night and we had been sleeping, lulled to a sweet sleep by the slow rocking of the harbor. Scuttlebutt came into its own again because of the presence of the other Unit and wasn't settled for many days to come.

The second day during late morning chow the screws started to turn and the lower decks were cleared for stowing of the mooring gear. Our ship swung out into the harbor and headed for the open sea to join a convoy. Ships as far as we could see were forming into their convoy places . . . the welcome lines of a destroyer could be seen far to the starboard, and then another one and still another.

Now even the hardest iconoclasts were convinced that this was the time that we were actually on our way. . . . It would be too much trouble for the ships to turn back and return us to another camp.

All hands were in good spirits, the breakfast had been Navy beans, no one was feeling the least bit squeemish and seasickness was far away. Our Officers called us back into our compartments and described for the umpteenth time the signals that would govern our lives aboard ship and made certain that we knew where our Abandon Ship Stations were because they knew things that we didn't. At the Chow Call we were dismissed to find our places in the serpentine line that wound round the ship like green and blue ribbons that undulated and swayed with the waves, never ending and always shifting forward.

Noon show was delicious—salty ham, boiled cabbage, coffee, a dessert, bread, soup and the sundries that make a hungry man full. The VOICE, an invisible ex-train announcer from some foreign country, ordered all hands below after chow to await some new order. Life jackets were laid on the bunks, card games were started and the folded leaves in those pocket edition books were sought and quiet reigned. Suddenly, with that deep squawking croak that we had become to regard as a nuisance, honked the Abandon Ship Signal. With some amount of boredom we walked to our stations and the endless task of

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answering muster was soon in progress. The sea was rougher than it was before chow and there was an appreciable list and roll to the deck. Some wag rushed to the rail and burlesqued an age old ritual that requires a ship's rail as a prop . . . or was it burlesque? There was a tenseness about his shoulders and a writhing motion near his belt line . . . another joined him, then another, then by twos and threes, then by platoons, and then en masse. As Neptune has no respect for rank or rate, neither has his curse on landloving man, and braid as well as dungarees clung to the rails and payed tribute to the waves. There were only three classes of men that day—those who didn't, those who couldn't and those that did. Even crew members joined the hanging throng as the waves lashed higher and higher and the afternoon slowly and painfully drained away.

The mark of an uneasy stomach was the enlisted man's private utensil of a thousand purposes . . . the steel shell of the helmet. Some unfortunates carried their shells for the entire journey and were haggard at the journey's end, while others welcomed the pitching waves because of the ease of a small chow line and the chance for seconds. . . . Right there it was enough for most of us—even when our Platoon Chief pulled that old rabbit about a weak stomach. . . . "Hell," he said. "I'm tossing it as far as the best of them."

The zig-zagging of the convoy and the endless, restless roll and toss of the ocean proved to be a never ending source of comment those first few days; the newness was still bright and there were still things to be seen and discussed. The Abandon Ship honker sounded every day for testing, and once every afternoon there was a drill that was regarded as just another one of those things that a man in uniform must put up with because of some ruling or other. A regulation had been given by the VOICE that all passengers must lay down to their quarters before their regular chow hours to expedite the feeding of the numbers of men.

While we are wearing the uniform of the Navy, we are primarily a land force and relatively unacquainted with ship procedure. Most of the rules and regulations aboard ship are accepted as a matter of course, but as time goes by, the necessity for these rules and regulations fades in our minds. It is easy to be lulled to negative obedience when you can see no evident need for orders given.

When we were in Boot Camp, we had been told that there is a reason for everything that is done or ordered in the Navy. The constant drill and locating of stations aboard ship soon became one of the most boresome routines, yet there came a day to be long imprinted on our memories. On that day we reaped the benefit of the constant vigilance of the Navy and gave thanks for the days of endless routine. The habits that had been established protected us . . . there WAS a reason for everything that is done in the Navy.

Following the "little experience," we returned to our bunks, just a little reluctantly, because it was a beautiful night out. The moon was shining in all

its splendor. . . . Many stayed topside for a time just to watch the great calm waves rolling with silver shimmering moonlight mingled with the milky foam of the ship's wake.

Two ships moved into a port somewhat south of the one they had left a few days previously and the passengers were disembarked for a stay at Army camps near the docking areas. 537 was fortunate in being assigned to an old established camp that was more like a small city than a military camp. at least judging from our past camp experiences. For a week we reveled in the lap of luxury—motion pictures, basketball games, sightseeing at the fort, eating meals at the cafeteria, attended one dance, and brought the first snow that that part of the USA had seen for over fifty years.

Orders came again to embark and set sail. The buses were loaded and back to the dock we went, to restart our journey once again. We had been able to see the States again before we left for good, and with all the near tragedies that might have happened, we still felt lucky.

We were lonesome the rest of the trip; we didn't have the company that we had before and the days grew monotonous. Eat, sleep, read and try to find a place anywhere on deck to sit or stand . . . every available space was taken by someone with the same idea in mind. Then the one sided game between the ship's crew and the passengers began. As soon as a group became settled in one spot, a swabbing detail with hoses would start scrubbing the decks and the bulkheads. Then the migrations would start. There was no place else to go in the mornings, as the compartments were cleaned for daily inspection, and the milling, bewildered masses shifted from deck to deck and passageway to passageway. Always the crew won and gave rise to the saying that the regular Navy men were born with a swab in one hand and a bucket of paint and a brush in the other. No matter the inconvenience, it was good exercise and gave us all something to occupy our minds.

The temperature had changed, and, instead of nearly freezing in our hold, we were roasting. The passengers were allowed to take salt water showers, as the facilities were not extensive enough to afford the passengers fresh water showers. With the memory of the unexpected "little experience" still fresh in our minds, only the very brave would venture up on the darkened deck to the head for a cold, sticky shower. The absolute inescapableness of humanity billowed forth at night, the air hot, moist and sleeping feet to head made the "sleep of a baby" an unattained goal. Then, too, there was the nightly inward struggle over disrobing, and after that debate was settled, there was always that mental rehearsing the position of all your clothes, life jacket, mentally planning on what you would do "in case" and then the wooing of Morpheus. It was on these nights that thoughts of home gave troubled dreams.

Nights were always the longest because at before sunset, the VOICE would announce "The Smoking Lamp is Out." all lights would go out on all weather

IT WAS ENOUGH FOR US—*Continued*

decks, cigarettes would glow briefly with the last puff and the ever restless ocean seemed to calm itself in preparation for the eternity of darkness. The sun would sink into the pulsating watery mass with wild blazes of multi-colored glory and leave us leaning on the ship's rail watching . . . watching the sea, the foam of the ship's wake, the nearness of the cloud banks, wanting a smoke, yet fearful of that fateful glow that would signal hostile craft, tired and sleepy, but the idea of descending into the hold to sleep kept us clinging to each waning moment of light. . . . Then orders to all ship's passengers from the VOICE to secure to their holds till dawn. The Bosun's Mates in charge of the section, with bored voices would herd the most reluctant finally to their holds. The inky darkness below was pierced only by faint red battle lamps that distorted rather than revealed, and the task of getting to your bunk began, fumbling along the narrow spaces between the bunks, the lurching of the ship causing you to slip and jar some sleeping person to fretful awakenedness, then, when your little spot was found, to disrobe and crawl into that canvas-bound cell to lay in wakefulness for hours, it seems, until sleep finally conquers.

We sighted lights on the horizon last night just before the VOICE secured us below. Great beams of light that seemed to stand like giant swords and crossed each other at great height. Where were we? It must be land, and if so where? And why the lights? In our monk-like existence such a display of light was a sacrilege . . . a direct temptation to the devils that lurked in the deeps. And all questions that we put to our ship were answered by a new zig-zag in the course. Dawn came soon and far to the stern we could see the mountains and marks of land, and we were content for a while, knowing that there was some land amongst all the ocean that we were surrounded with.

Year-like hours passed, drill after drill, the morning glory chow lines crept round and round the ship and full days became mature. All indications point to the Panama Canal as the next stop. Amateur pilots plotted the course from heresy and our quartermasters reassured us that there was nowhere else to go in this part of the world, and sure enough, there were the escort vessels to guide us through the proper channels. The numbers of planes and blimps that circled overhead even before our escorts met us had made it positive that we were near a vital military establishment and had freed us from the ever present thoughts of undersea perils. The thought of the sight of good solid land was like the first Christmas with all its enthusiasm and avid anticipation. We dock tonight and will go through the Canal tomorrow. The Canal is a symbol to all construction men; its bigness has been overshadowed by other projects, but it still remains the Champ., the connecting link between two oceans, and is distinctly a US product.

A rush to secure the best spots on the ship to see anything was made long before the signal to ease off was given and even climbing room was at a premium. From the impression that most of us had, the Canal is a long

**IT WAS ENOUGH FOR US—Continued**

series of massive locks. To our amazement, the Canal was composed of a few locks on both ends and the Canal itself was in a lake bed which was full of scattered little islands. The green foliage was bright; it looked like a color photo instead of real. We saw people and Army, little railroads with open cars for passengers, strange birds and fresh water. . . . The crew dropped pump lines over the side and pumped the fresh water to the deck, and for the first time in long days all hands took fresh water showers and reveled in the luxury. Even a brisk rain failed to keep anyone from going below except for towels and soap, and then it was all over with, we dropped from lock to lock, towed by those squat, powerful electric engines, and suddenly we were at the Pacific end of the Canal. Our ship nosed into an anchoring spot and hawsers were fastened. There was smoking allowed above decks, even sleeping was permitted, but there was a catch to that, as we were to find out later—there are tropical showers at night.

Next morning we moved to an oil loading dock, and, after the ship was secured, the word was passed about that all ship's passengers were to be allowed to have a "foot" liberty in the city. The order was Undress Blues, and within the hour we were mustered on the dock, and the inspection parade was led by our Exec. Officer, Lt. J. P. Mapes. The memory of that hike will live long because as soon as we had passed from sight of the ship the afternoon rain started to pour down on us. Despite the unceasing downpour, none faltered, and through the two cities the Unit went, wet, sodden, inquisitive. There were women who smiled, little children, happy and laughing, and the customary ONE DOLLAR fellow that wanted to sell Panamanian coins. As an anti-climax, as we halted before the ship, the rain magically ceased and by the time we again boarded ship we were nearly dry.

Up anchor again and we head out toward the open sea. There is no sight of a convoy, like the one that we raced into the Atlantic entrance of the Canal. In fact there are no other ships in sight. We are going it alone! There is endless debate about the advisability of this among the CB strategists, but it finally boiled down to a deep satisfaction that we were alone. We had previous experience with a convoy and we had learned to trust implicitly in our ship and its Captain. Day after day slipped by each other, slower and slower. The watches that we had set up throughout the ship were no longer interesting, save for an occasional flurry of humor from the Sub Watch, when a torpedo was reported on our port bow, with teeth. We saw an occasional bird, ones that are new to us. We are sure that we have passed within sight of land several times, but there is no way of telling from our decks. The ocean is a smooth table, with nothing but gentle swells.

**LAND HO!** We are swinging in toward an island that juts up from the sea like a monster fist. A pilot picks us up and we begin the entry into this island.

**IT WAS ENOUGH FOR US**—Continued

We wind through the channel and come to rest near an oil line. We asked the crew members the name of the island. It's ————. The natives swarmed around the ship in their canoes, selling trinkets and souvenirs. Trading was brisk. The men handling the oil line wore Navy clothes and GI shoes . . . the mark of the CB . . . and upon inquiry we found out that they had been in the same camp we had left, but had beaten us out by a month or two. We envied them their tropical paradise . . . then.

The screws started again and the Island Paradise soon faded into the ocean. Again stretched the long days and the longer nights, the drills, and classes had been in function for a considerable time, and the men were talking more about their assignments, trying in their minds to visualize Island X.

The peaceful Pacific, which had been tranquil so long, began to surge and swell. Steel helmet shells came out of hiding again and the waves mounted higher and higher. The crew were rigging life-lines on the decks, and soon afterward all passengers were ordered below decks. We were then told that we were on the outskirts of a tropical hurricane. For hours we were tossed from wave to wave and from heights to the depths. The chow hall was secured. Everyone stayed in the bunks as much as possible. Finally the wind and the waves died in their intensity. This was the ocean's final reminder that it was the master and that we were just privileged to pass over at its will, even though we were qualified Shellbacks.

We had been escorted for several days by a DE, so we knew that we were close to land and we thought we knew now where we were going. We were desperately tired of the ocean. This trip had lasted for weeks instead of days. How much longer were we to sail the broad Pacific to find our Island X? **LAND AHEAD!** There, majestically thrusting itself into the sky, lay an island. The pilot boat bobbed like a cork coming along side, and the journey started into the harbor. There were buildings everywhere, and ships lined the harbor. Instead of docking at one of the main docks, we sidled into a pontoon pier and anchored. **ISLAND X**—our final destination! We were organized into unloading details on trucks and rode with the bags into town and secured them in a warehouse. There was a city there, not like ours at home, but with houses and people, and even in the dark we had seen a pair of good looking gals. We spoke to them and found what the handicap was . . . their's was a language not of our own. For the socially ambitious, that language difficulty presented many a pitfall.

Upon return from the unloading details we discovered that there was a Mail Call. The Ship's Mailman had picked up our mail and as it was sorted it was given out to the Platoon Mailman. Men received as many as 100 letters all at once and spent all their free time for the next few days answering them. With mail and knowing for sure that this was to be our home, all hands went to

IT WAS ENOUGH FOR US — *Continued*

sleep at various hours during the night peaceful and rested for the first time in weeks.

Bright and early next morning, the passengers were ordered to disembark and finally our turn came to leave the ship. The dock area was lined with trucks to haul us and our gear to our permanent camp area. The drivers were from the Battalion that we were to relieve. As always in the Service the cry of "Enybody ferm Brooklern . . . California . . . South Dakota . . . Wisconsin . . . Texas?" was hurled back and forth, and as men sought new and old acquaintances among the drivers we were given the order to load up and hand on.

Over a winding mountain road, down past the bay, past several other Service camps and then the trucks slowed to a halt and turned in at a sign which read ██████ Naval Construction Battalion. Where was our Camp? The trucks pulled up near a terraced hillside, and the drivers said: "This is it, Mates, all out!"

So this was our Island X. At least it is good solid earth, well elevated from our bosom companion the sea. Orders were to pitch tents on the terrace, with the maximum of six men to a tent. Evidently there had been someone else that had lived on this area, as the tent spaces were well marked, and as each Platoon Section was designated, there was a friendly scramble to get into a tent with a mate's buddies. Questions about liberty weren't important now; there were homes to be erected, bags to sort, and personal belongings to be put away. Someone found a scrap pile which reappeared as lockers. Inside of 15 minutes later all articles that could be used in the tents were procured and sat on for security. Trucks arrived with tents, and tent poles and pegs appeared. Tents were going up all over the area. Organization was keynote . . . four men put up the tent, the other two men located the bags and other essentials and procured boxes and scraps for furniture. Soon the tents were in order and cots and nets were issued. The tents began to look like small homes.

Then started the exploration of the area, and we discovered a shower room with real water. . . . After indulging in that heretofore rare pastime, we located the theatre and ship's store in the neighboring area, ate chow, and then relaxed.

The long trip was over. We had our homes. It was a new place, with new ideas to meet. We met the fellows from the Battalion and learned of what we had to expect. Tomorrow we will start to work. What it is we do not know for sure, but we did know for sure that there won't be any of it too tough for us to handle. Tomorrow we will take our ISLAND X in hand, but now for a good night's sleep on good OLD MOTHER EARTH . . . and not a damn train in sight!



## **CBMU 537**

The twin unit of 536, CBMU 537 was activated at Camp Peary with personnel from 103rd NCB. Leaving Gulfport Dec. 7, 1943, MU 537 reached Noumea Jan. 20, 1944, accompanied by MU 536. On Aug. 1, 1945 the outfit was still at Noumea.

**DECLASSIFIED**

ITINERARY OF CONSTRUCTION BATTALION MAINTENANCE UNIT #537

Formed at NCTC, Camp Peary, Williamsburg, Va., from the 103rd Construction Battalion.

- 7 Dec 1943 Departed Gulfport for Noumea with CEMU 536.
- 20 Jan 1944 Arrived Noumea.
- 1 Aug 1945 Located at Noumea.

NOTE: This itinerary based on records available in the CB Operations and Personnel Section, Bureau of Naval Personnel.

30 August 1945.

C.B.M.U. 57  
37



1944



**NO  
PHOTOS  
AVAILABLE**