

THE SEA WAR IN KOREA

Cagle And Manson

THE EMERGENCY AIRSTRIP ON YO-DO

As the air interdiction campaign to cut the Communists' rail and road supply lines in 1951 and 1952 intensified, there was a rise in the damage and loss of naval aircraft. Many damaged planes had ditched alongside the siege ships in Wonsan harbor in similar fashion to Commander Gray, although not as frequently. This fact highlighted the need of an emergency airstrip on one of Wonsan's captured islands.

To illustrate this fact, the helicopter ship, LST-779, had rescued 24 aviators-U. S. Navy, South African, U. S. Marine, and British-the majority of them in the vicinity of Wonsan.

To the Naval and Marine officers who were living on Yo-do during this period, the value of having an emergency airstrip was easy to recognize.

The naval officer assigned to Yo-do, LT James S. Lampe, Jr., also a naval aviator, has recorded how the idea of an airstrip on Yo-do originated.

"The credit for proposing an airstrip on Yo-do belongs to LTCOL Richard G. Warga, USMC, the Commander East Coast Defense Element (CTE 95.23)," said Lampe. "He and I were billeted together in our tent camp on Yo-do when the idea was broached. We had seen several planes ditch in the general area of Wonsan during the summer of 1951 and we had talked to most of the pilots. Winter was approaching, and ditching planes in that frigid water would make survival even more difficult.

"One morning in August, LTCOL Warga was hunkered over our Coleman burner on

the floor of our tent, frying the eggs I had scrounged from a destroyer the previous day. Warga asked me, as an aviator, if it wouldn't be possible to crash land a plane on one of the Yo-do beaches, rather than ditch it in the harbor. I told him no, it wouldn't because no beach of the island was long enough and the curvature of the beaches wasn't right. We then got to wondering if a plane could crash land in the 'valley' portion of Yo-do.

"As far as I know that was how the idea to build an airstrip on Yo-do germinated. After breakfast, COL Warga and I walked from one end of the 'valley' to the other several times, estimating its usable length, how much leveling would have to be done, and how much equipment would have to be moved ashore. We estimated that two bulldozers could make a 'crash' strip in a couple of weeks, and with additional time, a short landing strip. The possibility looked good to us.

"COL Warga sent a dispatch to CTF 95 recommending the project--not without misgivings, however. We both knew how close the airstrip would be to enemy artillery fire."

Of the several friendly islands of Wonsan, Yo-do was the only one suitable for an airstrip. Even so, the strip would be short and would accommodate only propeller-type planes--no jets. By running the emergency field completely across the island in the "valley" from northeast to southwest, a runway length of some 2,400 feet could be obtained.

But many obstacles to building an airstrip on Yo-do were evident. Could it be kept operational in such close proximity to the Wonsan shore batteries? The Kalma Gak batteries were 13,500 yards distant. The batteries on Hodo Pando were 10,000 yards distant. And the batteries behind Umi-do were closest of all--only 8,000 yards. Building a strip under the muzzles of these guns might be difficult.

And after it was built, could it be operated? Perhaps the enemy guns could keep the strip so pocked with holes that it would be useless for landing aircraft.

There was also some opposition to building a field on an island above the stagnant battlefront which, if a truce were ever signed, would have to be evacuated. Why build an airfield and later have to donate it to the enemy?

Finally, there was the consideration that the island of Yo-do might be recaptured. In Wonsan itself, the memory of the 28-29 November 1951 raid on Hwangto-do was still fresh. On the west coast of Korea, the Communists succeeded in recapturing one of the ROK-held islands in the Yalu Gulf (the island of Taehwa-do). On the east coast near Songjin an enemy raid had been carried out on the Yang-do islands, a tiny three-island group about five acres in area, on 19 February 1952. Thirty sampans had attacked the little island of Kil-chu at 0130. Destroyer Shelton (DD-790, CDR Stephen W. Carpenter), the New Zealand frigate Taupo (LCDR K. A. Craddock-Hartoff, MBE, RN), and the USS Endicott (DMS-35, LCDR L. W. Barnard) helped break up the attack. Two waves of enemy troops succeeded in getting ashore, but a stout defense by the defending 83rd ROK Marine Corps Company (led by former all-American halfback First Lieutenant Joseph Bartos, USMC) killed or captured the attackers. Of the 86 enemy raiders who had landed, 80 were killed and 6 were wounded. A simultaneous raid on the nearby island of Myongchon by 15 sampans was broken up, the ships sinking 10 sampans and inflicting heavy casualties in the remaining five. A near miss punctured Taupo's engine room and Shelton suffered 15 casualties from three shore battery hits.

Building an airstrip on Yo-do might invite its capture.

The Seventh Fleet Commander, Vice Admiral Robert P. Briscoe, took all these factors into consideration, but when considered in the light of how many Seventh Fleet aircraft might have been saved and might be saved in the future, the dangers

and obstacles were readily accepted. In fact, the salvage of a single plane would be worth the effort. The mental comfort such a field would give to Task Force 77 pilots was yet another factor in favor of the airstrip.

"We made an effort to talk to each pilot who ditched in Wonsan," said Lampe, "and without exception every one said that such a strip would be a great help and a great comfort when they were striking in the Wonsan area."

The Seabees of ACB-1 (Naval Beach Group One, Officer in Charge, CDR Wm. C. Bowers, CEC) were confident that if the Marines could hold it and the Navy operate it, they could build it.

With typical enthusiasm and zest, the Seabees (3 officers and 75 men) sailed from Japan aboard LST-692 on 3 June 1952, debarking on Yo-do and commencing work on the airstrip on June 9.

"The LST arrived at Yo-do with a long pontoon strapped to each side," said LT Lampe. "Each of these pontoons ran almost her entire length. Because of this, and because our only beach had a very shallow gradient, I anticipated some trouble in getting her close enough to the beach to offload equipment.

"However, the Seabees had it all worked out. Before beaching, the pontoons were dropped in the water, strapped together, and then pushed onto the beach with the bow of the LST. The Seabees were offloading their heavy equipment in jig time."

Engineers had estimated that 45 days would be required to construct a 120 X 2,400 foot strip. Despite annoying gunfire on two days (13 and 21 June), the Seabees finished the job in one-third the estimated time, reporting the runway operation on 25 June. By removing rock from one end of the field, the Seabees managed to widen the strip to 200 feet, and improve one end of the runway by adding ramps to the water's edge in order to facilitate the removal

of dud aircraft by barge.

The strip was first used on 15 July 1952 when seven Corsairs of VF-193 (Princeton), ran low on fuel after an afternoon's fruitless search for their downed comrade, LTJG Harold A. Riedl, who had been shot down 30 miles northwest of Hungnam. Three of the searching Corsairs refueled on Yo-do and returned to Princeton. The other four spent the night, and returned safely to their carrier the next day.

Although the Communists tried many times to neutralize the field with gunfire, they never succeeded.

In honor of the officer who had ordered it built, Vice Admiral R. P. Briscoe, now COMNAVFE, the airstrip was named Briscoe Field.

Briscoe Field was to prove of immense value the final year of the war, as it became the rescue point for many pilots and aircraft.