

HEADQUARTERS
COMMANDER NAVAL FORCES FAR EAST
Public Information Office

27 October 1953

Supplementary Material on Yodo Island, Wonsan Harbor, Korea.

There is no cost accounting system for war. Still in the case of Yodo Island it would be possible to open a ledger showing neat columns of debits and credits. Yodo Island's Briscoe Field was established and functioned in a business-like manner to salvage and conserve-salvage aircraft and conserve lives.

It cost approximately \$5-million to cut the 2700-foot runway known as Briscoe Field across the rocky island. In 12 months time it tallied up a neat "profit," saving nearly \$10-million worth of Navy and Air Force planes from certain destruction or capture by the enemy.

But a ledger cannot reveal everything. Before UN forces withdrew from Yodo as provided in the armistice terms, two graves stood on a rocky hillock. One cross read: "Sge. C. E. Barnes, Royal Marines, Killed in Action 29 August 1951." On another: "Lieut. J. G. Harwood, Royal Marines, Killed in Action 29 August 1951."

Nor can a ledger enter the sum of 60 or more airmen who would have died in the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan or fallen into the hands of the Communist if the airstrip, far behind the front lines, had not existed.

Yodo, one of several islands within Wonsan Harbor, was only four and one-half miles from numerous enemy shore batteries which could bracket the island any time the Communists chose. Ships supplying Yodo had to venture under the guns of the harbor. Cargo planes touching down at Briscoe Field had just enough time to unload before they became the target of 76 and 105mm. projectiles plopping into the airstrip.

Thus, if sailors, marines, seabees, air force men, and other UN personnel didn't have a variety of tasty food, a PX, and a movie theater, they really didn't expect these amenities. As long as the supply planes and boats got through with the necessities of life they were content. A lot of the men, after arriving, found that life on Yodo wasn't as grim as rumor claimed.

Chief Boatswain's Mate Joseph W. Sessoms, Paramount, Calif., in charge of the island's small craft, said that before he arrived he had been told the island was shelled every day.

"It turned out," he declared, "not to be quite that bad. Because of bad weather they hit us only 50 out of 80 days."

Living quarters could not compare with a ship's compartment or a post barracks, but they were warm in the winter, had electricity, running water, and more important, they were relatively safe during a bombardment. They were timber-lined bunkers dug in the side of hills. The only major discomfort the men found while living in them came during the heavy spring rains when

(more)

2---YODO

water seeped through the roof.

The destroyers patrolling Wonsan Harbor were a primary source for cigarettes, candy, and toilet articles. Almost every day a small boat rendezvoused with one of these ships to pick up this precious merchandise. The destroyers also brought mail, which arrived at the island in five to 20-day intervals, and took on bags of mail for the folks back home.

Lack of variety of entertainment was one of the many drawbacks of having duty on Yodo. The South Korean marines, the island's defense element, had a movie projector but no films, while the Americans, having no projector, could obtain some of the latest reels from Hollywood. The resources of the Two groups were pooled and all personnel--Korean and American alike--attended the movies in the ROK mess hall.

For other recreation a man was left to his own imagination. Leather work and photography were common activities and reading was a widespread pastime during winter nights when snow piled up to two-foot depths outside the bunkers.

Yodo had one feature, at least, to recommend it--no KP duty. Koreans did the cooking and managed the mess hall. Considering the unfavorable conditions under which they worked and the limited selection of foods available, the food was excellent. "They did a darned good job," declared A. A. Dowiat, engineman first-class. "Even the greatest chef couldn't turn out his best dishes if his kitches was being shot at," he added.

Nor would a diner particularly enjoy the food if he had to run for cover half-way through dinner.

Dowiat, a native of East St. Louis, Ill., came to Yodo three days after the airstrip went into operation. For many months he managed the boat pool without assistance. With Koreans for crews, he was confronted with a perplexing language difficulty in organizing his fleet of small craft. These boats were not only the primary means of supply and communication for Yodo but for three other UN island outposts in the harbor as well.

Always operating under the threat of deadly enemy shore fire, Korean crews unloaded freight vessels anchored in the harbor, landed the cargo on the island and, under the cover of darkness, took provisions to these other lonely, besieged islands, some of them close enough ashore to receive hits from enemy small arms fire.

Dowiat was impressed with the Koreans' skill as boat handlers. "They were dependable and absolutely fearless in carrying out these risky jobs," he said.

A village of Koreans, numbering some 80 adults, and children too numerous to count, remained on Yodo up to the cease-fire. Most of them had never been beyond the confines of the harbor. While their chief occupations were waising rice and fishing, the military establishment brought them other occupations for livelihood. They provided Yodo's only laundry service, did manual labor,

(more)

and marketed the fish and crabs caught in nearby waters. Aircraft landing at the field were a constant source of fascination to these people who previously had seen them only from the air.

Their fishing trips did not always yield fish. One morning a pair of Yodo fisherman paddled their tiny boat back to the island with a dour-faced oxen patiently standing in the middle of the craft. Due to language difficulties, American personnel could learn only that the fishermen had "liberated" the beast from the Communist mainland. How they lured the animal into the boat, how they kept it from capsizing the fragile craft in the choppy waters of the harbor remains a mystery. It is certain, however, that the oxen found a better way of life with the South Koreans. It became Yodo's most celebrated character, had a house of its own, and was lavished with fodder and affection. It paid for its newly-found freedom by providing the motive power for the ancient, creaking rice mill.

It is said the oxen possessed uncanny powers to foretell Communist bombardments. If the weary, plodding animal disappeared from its usual habitats it was taken as a sign to run to the nearest cave--another bombardment was at hand. Perhaps the old oxen's prescience contributed a little to the fact that casualties during the 12-month siege were amazingly low.

One curious aspect of the fierce bombardments was that the Reds, despite relatively accurate gunnery, were never able to destroy a single plane on Briscoe Field. Their guns could hit the field with ease, putting countless craters into the flight strip which were rapidly filled and smoothed by tireless Seabees.

A Navy plane bringing in mechanics to repair battle-damaged aircraft once became a target shortly after landing. In a few minutes 80 rounds of high explosives had dropped around the plane. Although it was severely riddled with shrapnel, not a single shell touched it. The sturdy TBM, patched up with masking tape, safely returned to its home base.

Because Communist guns were kept in caves when not in use, it took approximately 25 minutes, it was observed, for the gunners to ready their artillery for action. Planes landing on Yodo, after being hastily unloaded, were towed behind a hill where they would not be visible to enemy spotters when the bombardment began.

Mechanics flown to the island were able, in most cases, to make repairs on the "crippled Chicks" so the craft could leave Yodo under their own power. A few planes, however, needed the facilities of a well-equipped machine shop to become airborne again. These badly damaged planes were pushed aboard a pontoon barge standing off the Yodo beach and were towed by tug boat to a landing ship waiting at the entrance of the harbor. Eventually they reached a Navy aircraft overhaul and repair facility in Japan. For a certainty, in a few weeks most of the "Crippled chicks" were back in action over North Korean skies.

###