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**HISTORICAL RECORD**

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"SEABEES BETWEEN THE DRAGON AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA"

The secrecy was recently lifted from a group of fighting Navy Seabees who built a vital airfield 50 miles behind Communist lines in Korea.

This was Briscoe Field, named for the Navy admiral who demanded the construction of this badly-needed airfield space where it would do the most good.

After the armistice was signed, Amphibious Construction Battalion Unit ONE and Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit ONE were revealed as the Seabees who built the strip on tiny Yodo Island which had been held 14 months, defying the heaviest concentration of big guns on the enemy coastline.

Yodo, a hilly rock island in Wonsan Harbor, was used by the allies as an emergency landing strip, helicopter base and observation post. It was the Navy's only airfield in Korea and the only UN-held airstrip behind enemy lines.

Seabee Chief Fredrick GROSSMAN, Wappinger Falls, N. Y., Officially rated a chief construction driver, U.S.N., was putting it mildly when he said that Yodo was "a pretty important piece of real estate." The lives of an estimated 160 Navy airmen and millions of dollars worth of aircraft were saved by the Yodo Seabees and their Navy airfield.

The Seabee work on Yodo began June, 1952, when the historic siege of Wonsan was in its 16th month. The island had been held by a garrison of ROK Marines under the command of a U. S. Marine Corps officer even when Wonsan and Hungnam were evacuated. They still held it when the truce was signed.

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When the Seabees moved in Navy carrier-based planes were raiding the key supply and transportation point of Wonsan almost daily. A few of the planes which swarmed over this Red stronghold were hit by enemy fire or caught short of fuel. Pilots of these planes were faced with two choices: They could crash land in North Korea and put themselves at the dubious mercy of the Communists, or they could ditch their aircraft in the icy waters offshore and hope that a friendly ship could reach them in less time than the few minutes it took to freeze. To make a slight change in an old saying, they were literally trapped between the Chinese Dragon and the deep blue sea.

It was during the bitter air-sea battles early in 1952 that the Navy saw the urgent necessity for a landing strip on Yodo. Vice Admiral Robert P. BRISCOE, then Commander Seventh Fleet and later Commander Naval Forces Far East, was the prime mover behind the plan to help pilots caught between the dragon and the sea. Why not KEMP them between the two evils--on Yodo between the heavily fortified enemy coast and the frosty waters of the Japan sea.

At Admiral BRISCOE's insistence the Seabees made a study of the barren granite rock inland, so small and obscure that it was marked on only the most detailed maps. It would have been hard to find a level spot long enough for plane landings.

But the Seabees repeated the battlecry that still echoes through the caves and jungles of Guadalcanal, Guam, Saipan and Iwo Jima-- "can do!" Then they sailed for Wonsan Harbor to prove it.

They utilized the only rice paddy on the island, and pulled down a hill to fill and level it.

Twenty days later, nine Corsair pilots became the first men who didn't have to make the dreaded choice between the dragon and the sea. They landed on a 2700-foot-long runway on Yodo Island when they ran short of fuel in an extra-long battle with enemy anti-aircraft guns.

Building the strip hadn't been easy for the 100 sailors of Amphibious Construction Battalion Unit ONE, but it was one of the most worth-while operations of the Korean war. In that first emergency landing, nine lives and almost two million dollars worth of airplanes were saved.

It wasn't easy, but the Seabees were too busy to think about that. In 19 days, heavy construction equipment was landed and put to work grinding through solid granite hills, and bunkers and trenches were dug to protect men from the fire of nearby enemy shore batteries which faced the Seabees on three sides. They worked for 19 days and 19 nights,

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always within point-blank range of the heavy guns which make Wonsan the most infamous city on either coast of North Korea. When the Seabees finished the strip they called it Briscoe Field in honor of the Admiral who knew that a tough job had to be done and that the Seabees could do it.

Radio Yodo began broadcasting the call "steak for dinner," a code phrase that meant the field was standing by for an emergency landing. The hundreds of Navy pilots flying from Task Force 77 aircraft carriers continued their devastating strikes at North Korea with a new confidence and vigor. They knew that if they were hit there would always be "steak for dinner" on Yodo.

During the summer months that followed, when clearing weather permitted ever-increasing numbers of Navy fighter-bombers to range the coasts of North Korea, Yodo became one of the allies' most important outposts. An average of three planes weekly landed on life-saving Briscoe Field.

Each pilot who came in was asked to put a copy of his squadron insignia on the wall of the mess bunker. The wall began to look like a colorfullindex of who's who in the Navy.

After all construction on Yodo was finished, the main force of Seabees moved on to another Korean base and left an 8-man maintenance crew in charge of the field.

Nearby Wonsan, although reduced to smoking ruins by the Navy's blockading force and aircraft carriers, was the enemy's most important east coast city. Troops and supplies headed for the Communist front had to go through Wonsan. Since Yodo overlooked the entire city and harbor, it was used as an observation post to get intelligence information. It gave the Navy an invaluable peep hole through the enemy's back door.

Some Navy planes striking the Wonsan area were so badly damaged that the pilots couldn't quite make it to Yodo. They were forced to land nearby in the harbor or even on the Red-held mainland. But Yodo Island still came to the rescue with helicopters from Briscoe Field. Even before planes crashed, helicopters were shirling on their way to pick up the pilots. Often they were hovering directly over the crash scene to immediately snatch otherwise-doomed airmen from the dragon's claws.

In February, 1953, the men of Amphibious Construction Battalion Unit ONE went to Japan for a long-overdue rest and Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit ONE took over.

The Yodo Seabees received many grateful and sincere words of thanks. Perhaps the most memorable of these was the praise of Rear Admiral Francis X. MC INERNEY, USN, of Cheyenne, Wyo., then Commander of Service Squadron Three. Admiral MC INERNEY is famous in the Navy for his unique

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way of applauding outstanding accomplishments. He sent to Seabees the following Message:

"Good luck. God bless you. Your picture is on our piano!"

The many pilots whose lives were saved by Briscoe Field don't have pianos aboard their aircraft carriers. But if they did, in all likelihood there would be 160 pictures of the Yodo Seabees on the ships on Task Force 77.

When the truce was signed, Yodo had to be evacuated because it was far behind the line of demarkation. Again the Seabees went on a 24-hour working schedule. Under terms of the truce they had 10 days to move, and the Seabees went to work determined to move all valuable equipment off the island. What they could not move they completely destroyed, to keep it from falling into Communist hands. They did a thorough job, and with typical Seabee efficiency completed the 10-day project in five.

The last thing the Seabees did was to destroy their own bunker-- a fest which the Communist shore batteries had attempted in vain for 14 months. The Reds stood in their gun caves watching with binoculars as the Seabees made Fourth of July fireworks with their living quarters, then loaded onto a landing ship. When they steamed out of Wonsan Harbor they left behind them a useless island.

The great siege of Wonsan is over now. Yodo Island lies barren and deserted in the harbor. But it will always be a silent reminder to the Communists that if they strike again, the "can do" men of the Seabees may come back to rebuild a U. S. Navy airfield in the enemy's own backyard.