

To the Banks of the Bishi Gawa

by

Gerald B. Ingraham

130th Naval Construction Battalion

Camp Makibaru, Okinawa

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Preface

The following material is taken from chapter 5 of my World War II autobiography titled, "To the Banks of the Bishi Gawa." In that book, chapter 5 is titled, "The Last Act of War -- Okinawa." I was a member of the 130th Naval Construction Battalion, the Seabees, which created Camp Makibaru, subsequently known as Camp Bishagawa. I was then 21 years old and a Petty Officer First Class. We initially occupied the Makibaru area on April 13, 1945. I was one of the last of my mates in the 130th to leave Okinawa and return to the States. I departed November 13, 1945. The Battalion was decommissioned with completion of our mission at Makibaru. From there most all of us rotated home as the war had ended. I am pleased to help shed some light as to the origins of the camp on behalf of my Seabee mates and for the men who came after the 130th.

I have used considerable material and photos in the memory book published by the 130th Construction Battalion in 1946. I have this in my library.

In my autobiography I refer to the Okinawa campaign as the last act of war because it was the final battle of the Second World War. The only major action following Okinawa was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which brought the war to a swift conclusion. The Second World War was the last to be fought for wide held truths and beliefs. It was the last to be fought to a clear-cut conclusion. All conflicts since have been police actions, containments, holding actions, etc. that go on and on with no conclusion in sight.

Yes, the Second World War's last battle, that of Okinawa, was the last act of war in the literal and intelligent interpretation of the meaning of the word. In the conflicts since, more people

are dying than ever before for goals undefined and in conflicts of a new kind, international terrorism.

Our Arrival on the Southeast Coast, April 1, 1945



On April 1, 1945, LST-838 carrying part of the 130th and the convoy bringing the rest of the Battalion and the Second Marine Division arrived off the southeast coast of Okinawa. The Second Marine Division was assigned to conduct a feint landing operation on the Minatoga beaches 40 miles southeast of the actual landing beaches on the western coast. (About 1/3 of the Battalion landed on the Hagushi beaches on April 1st to build pontoon causeways and otherwise assist with L-day landing operations.)

In my book I discuss the feint operations from the perspective of LST-838 in some detail including descriptions of the heavy bombardment from the viewpoint of being on shipboard and our actions to help the survivors of LST-884 which was hit by a kamakaze and was in the next lane to us.

Landing on Green Beach, near Yontan Airfield



We finally received orders to land on the beaches. The ships in the landing force moved to the western side of the island, which had fallen to our main forces. The mouth of the Bishi Gawa River was reached just before noon on April 12th. We proceeded to our designated beach about 3 miles to the north at Green Beach near Yontan Airfield. Our LST was more or less in the center of the convoy surrounded by other LSTs. The outer defenses were the attacking Jap planes first targets. Their objective was the larger and more important vessels. However, if they had overshot their objective or had disposed of their bombs and torpedoes, they would machine-gun the lesser craft. On April 12 and 13, the Japs conducted their second major kamikaze attack, the "Second Floating Chrysanthemum."

This one instance the sky seemed filled with enemy aircraft, hundreds of them. I realize now that some of what appeared to be aircraft in the far distance was the burst of our outer fringes anti-aircraft guns. The scene was mind boggling with hundreds of planes in the sky diving towards the ships on the sea below. Now and then an aircraft exploded in mid air or spiraled toward the sea leaving a trail of smoke before a red ball bounded on the waves. Planes could be seen flying at almost sea level to release torpedoes that could pierce the side of a ship then explode in a blast followed by more blasts as the ship's own fuel and ammo joined in its own self destruction.

I was fascinated to the point of distraction of the precautions others were taking. I was out in the open at the ship's rail watching the scene before me, ignoring the entreaties of my mates to take a less exposed position. As the assault on the outer perimeter progressed inward towards us I still could not tear myself from the ringside seat until, out of nowhere, a wounded Jap plane crashed into the sea off our starboard sending a spray of sea water over the ship and myself. Luckily the plane's fuel did not ignite. The Jap plane was close enough for me to see the slumped pilot in the cockpit. Strangely my curiosity was somewhat satisfied and I retreated from the ship's rail to its bulkhead.

Upon landing, the Battalion off loaded the equipment from the LST, which beached across

the coral reef, opening its passageway for the bulldozers, loaded trucks, and construction equipment to land. Small boats came alongside to receive the high-test gasoline from cranes. When nighttime came the Beachmaster ordered us away for the night. During the night the Japs came over with their second large air raid since D-Day (called L-Day in Okinawa) and the sky was brilliant with tracers. We rode our dynamite laden vessels through that night of fireworks. The next day we returned to the beach and unloaded the rest of the equipment. As recorded in my diary, I went ashore at 1800 hours on April 13th.

The First Weeks Ashore



Camp Makibaru April 14, 1945



Camp Makibaru April 25, 1945



Camp Makibaru Command Post April 1945



Camp Makibaru tents May 1945



Aerial view of Camp Makibaru ca summer 1945

On the night of April 13th we set up camp at a place called Makibaru. The Battalion memory book states, "130th Camp built at the hub of invasion activities between Yontan and Kadena airfields. Camp site approached our first day ashore, April 13, 1945, over narrow Jap roads. The biggest problem was drainage....On Okinawa, though almost all manpower and equipment were needed for combat construction, we gradually dug and drained one of the best camps on the island out of the ruins of the town of Makibaru and the neighboring rice paddies." Hence, the camp was named Makibaru, which was situated just north of and bordering the south (main) branch of the Bishi Gawa River near a bombed out bridge.

The first weeks ashore were rough. Our foxholes were dug with care. The weather was lousy with almost constant rain at times. The Battalion memory book states, "Air raids were frequent. Every day saw Kamikaze planes striking for ship or shore installations. Every day saw a few Japs get through our outer air defenses to harass men and machines at work. We got along with little sleep. You would take your life in your hands walking about camp after dark. Lights were out to avoid detection by the enemy. In addition to the air raids, we were subjected to whistling mortar shells like missiles whining over our heads and onto Yontan and Kadena airfields."

The weather was horrible and caused as much misery as anything else. It rained most of the time sometimes coming down in sheets at the rate of an inch or two an hour. This turned everything into mud. Trucks and tanks got stuck making one of the most important jobs of the Seabees more difficult. This was the construction of airstrips and roads out of coral. The hills were mined for this building material similar to the way coal is strip mined.

The rain also cooled things down. It was times like these that contributed to the comparison of a foxhole buddy to a wife. My buddy and I would crouch close together and share our two ponchos for warmth as well as dryness.

Combat Duty with the Marines

Generally, night found American forces holed up in their foxholes. This was a time the enemy liked to sneak through the American lines or upon an emplacement. It was not wise for the American to leave his foxhole for any reason as he could just as easily be shot mistakenly by his own troops. The first night in combat and in the womb of the foxhole, no matter how benign, was a learning experience of some magnitude. The general rule was one man to a foxhole as this cut down on the dividend of a well-tossed hand grenade. Some disregarded this from the start. Later most did, there being comfort in having company and another set of eyes and ears.

I should point out here that the First Marine Division landed on L-Day near the Bishi Gawa River. During the initial period of the campaign, this Division was responsible for, among other things, hunting down small bands of enemy guerrillas and infiltrators throughout the center of the island. This included the Makibaru area. The enemy force in this area was the 1st Specially Established Regiment, ordered to fight a delaying action and then retreat.

The beaches were riddled with craters caused by bombardment from the sea and aircraft strafing them a short time previously. Some of the troops tripped and fell in craters 10 feet deep and had to scream for help to get out. As I said, the Japs had changed their strategy to

one of letting us come to them rather than meeting us on the beaches. The lack of early encounter gave us a false sense of security and a hope that this would be easier than it proved to be.

In mid-morning of the second day the casualty group I was assigned to moved out with a number of trucks loaded with supplies. We were attacked twice by small groups of Jap infantry. They had no heavy armament so they were killed or repulsed with but few wounded on our side. This was the first time I saw who was shooting at me and whom I was shooting at. Regardless of the distance you were never sure if it was your effort that caused the target to fall or someone else's effort. But it gave you satisfaction to think it was your shooting that counted the most.

The assault was moving inland and in a few days the Seabee Battalion was well along in setting up camp near a captured airstrip. The term "camp" means temporary; "base" means more or less permanent. Even before living conditions were evaluated, the construction phase began.

The Marines and Seabee casualty groups were now a mop-up team whose job it was to hunt out the Japs who stayed behind the lines to act as snipers and to do diversion action. Along with the Marines I shot at burning Japs as they fled from their cave hideouts. I was never sure if I shot the fatal bullet, but I contributed. The second greatest smell I remember, second to dead and decomposing bodies, was that of burning human flesh. The smell of burning steak could never be confused with human flesh. For one thing, human flesh smells sweet. It was about this time that I got a Jap I could claim as mine. Four Marines and two of us casualty group members were sent on a side trail to check for any snipers or straggling bands that the Japs may have left behind. I would like to interject here that by now the members of the casualty group were accepted by the Marines as part of their cadre.

The reason for this hesitancy is that in combat you like to know your comrades -- who has had previous combat exposure, who is compatible and can be counted upon, and who may be questionable. So, the six of us made our way on full alert along the path that was about a wagon's width and most likely once used by native farmers. Vegetation had grown high along its sides but the bombardment had taken a good share of this down. We were especially aware of and watched the craters and mounds caused by this bombardment. We were spread out in military fashion, a fair space about each individual. We had progressed maybe a mile or so from our take off point when out in front of us appeared four Japs. They must have been crossing the path's clearing as they were taken by surprise as much as we were. They yelled something, as did some of us. In a twinkle of an eye, they started firing and charged toward us.

We dropped to one knee or flat on the ground and returned fire. Both sides were firing as fast as a trigger finger would work. We had the advantage not only because there were six of us but also because we dropped to a stationary position. The charging Japs were also firing as fast as possible but with little accuracy. This was a noticeable difference in the Japanese and American actions. In many cases the Japs liked to charge, perhaps thinking that this would unnerve their enemy, which it did. But not enough to compensate for the advantage of a steady aiming possibility from a stationary position.

It was all over in a few minutes. This time I knew I had got my kill. For in their charge one Jap got to within thirty feet of me when I hit him in the head and gut, the head hit being what counted. A gut shot, while in the long run often fatal, may not stop the shooting. In the short run a charging man can still function for a period of time, long enough to get off shots and cover some space of ground.

It had become the habit of both sides of the conflict to mutilate the bodies of the dead and leave them as a warning to others who might pass by. But we were far enough behind the lines that it was unlikely any other Japs would be passing this way. So we dispensed with this ritual. I don't think there was anyone among us who had the stomach for mutilating as the subject did not even come up as we drug the bodies to the side of the road and proceeded to whatever lay ahead.

What lay ahead was a second encounter with Japs within an hour. We first heard a laughing noise behind us and then running foot falls. We all dove into the underbrush beside the path, half on one side and half on the other side. We were not setting up an ambush necessarily until we knew the numbers. Well hidden we were and a good thing as about 15 Japs came jogging at a good pace right by us. They were within 15 feet of us. Such was the game of hide and seek in the Pacific on land as well as on sea, as the naval history of the Pacific War will tell you.

Our leader said we should return and report what we had just seen. That many Japs behind the lines may be significant in association with other intelligence being collected by other groups such as our own. On returning and reporting it seems that from other information gathered, the Japs were pulling back their harassment groups and snipers to strengthen their rear lines. This proved to be true.

My last assignment with the Marines was for our group to go back to the trail we had just returned from and cautiously prod forward till we found or met resistance; then to stop and send a runner back with the location. I imagine this act was repeated all along the area for some distance. We were not to engage if this was possible; just locate. Of course, everyone knew the likelihood of this was slight.

We got well beyond the point on the trail where we turned back from our last encounter with the Japs. It was getting dark and so we made our foxholes for the night with half of our force on one side of the pathway and half on the other side. We made the holes deep and the weather looked good. But in the island climate, minutes could change all this. Here the jungle had not received the devastation as some of the rest probably because we were in a gully or a narrow valley. The only sky you could see was directly overhead.

Something comes to mind. In Hawaii it was a pleasure to lay on the beach or outside the Quonset hut and look at the sky full of stars. This night as I looked up to get a tentative weather forecast, I realized it was the first time I had seen stars since I left the ship bringing us into the combat zone. You don't look up at the sky when in a combat zone. The sky is of no use to you. It's mother earth that offers you refuge as you dig into her and try to hide.

We had been in our foxholes but a short time after darkness enclosed us when shouting and rifle shots assaulted us from all sides. Fortunately, for some reason it was a few seconds

before the assault members exposed themselves. It was obvious at once we were outnumbered and while we were dug in and ready it would only be a matter of time before we would be over run.

But only moments after the Japs attacked, a large detachment of Marines came from what seemed like nowhere and they far outnumbered those who just seconds ago had the advantage. The battle lasted but a short time. There were many downed Japs but only a few Marines. I never did know if we were used as decoys or were just lucky. The Marines who rescued us were so confident that the encounter was over they bedded down in convenient niches without going to the trouble of digging foxholes.

The Marine body that rescued us proceeded on and our casualty group returned to our original base. The 130th Battalion was in full swing building roads and reconstructing Yontan. The 130th Naval Construction Battalion camp was set up not far from the banks of Bishi Gawa River that flowed west to the East China Sea. This was a place called Makibaru and, as stated previously, was at the hub of invasion activities between the two airfields.

The casualty group was with the Marines less than three weeks. We cooks were especially needed back with our units. Following casualty duty, we arrived at what was to be our camp and had dug our foxholes for the night in the area that would be the location of our tents and company streets. The Jap air force was in full action bombing the two air strips between which was our location.

Above the area that would be our home was a ridge at the top of which ran an irrigation ditch. The ditch was dry. The action overhead became very intense, enough so that our foxholes no longer seemed deep enough. So we took to the irrigation ditch. We stayed until we thought the worse was over. As we rose to go down to our foxholes below, a plane's roar assaulted my ears. I looked to my side down the trench and a shell, red and glowing headed straight towards me. I fell backwards into the ditch, the shell whooshing overhead. I am sure it was higher than I thought but it was close enough. I peed myself.

The location of the camp was unfortunate for the first several weeks as it was just off a direct line between the two airstrips. Thus, the attacking Jap planes sometimes strafed right across our camp as they struck one airstrip and in seconds were over the next. This brings to mind *Washing Machine Charley*. It was a Jap plane that flew nightly for awhile. It came alone and seldom strafed or dropped bombs.

But it came in the gathering darkness. Its motor sounded like it was on its last legs. Hence the name, *Washing Machine Charley*.

I recently had an electro cardiogram with ultra sound. The sound effects brought this long ago incident to mind. After a few times of diving for cover we felt so unthreatened that we just stood our ground and tried to see him. Why he was never shot down by our anti aircraft I don't know unless they decided also that he was no threat. Our fighter planes seldom left ground at night.

Post Invasion Duty



First temporary post office, Camp Makibaru



Permanent post office, Camp Makibaru



Mess hall, Camp Makibaru



Mess hall, night scene

I again became chief of my watch in the galley. I don't know if mine was the "port watch" or the "starboard watch," Navy lingo designating the two shifts. The first few weeks we handed out mostly C-rations, etc. But in no time supplies were flowing in.

To illustrate our normal cuisine after the camp was secure, the Battalion memory book states, "A typical supply issue on Okinawa was 425 cases of Spam, 90 cases each of corned beef and hash, 150 cases of eggs, onions, and potatoes, all dehydrated, 150 sacks of rice, and 150 sacks of Navy beans."

The galley is one of the first facilities to be constructed and supplied as the Seabees, like the Army, travels on its stomach. Our galley was the first fully functional one on the island and would remain so for some weeks. We became so popular we had to do the unthinkable and restrict our services to ourselves and, on the side, to our Marine friends.



Map with drawing by David Law

The center grid plotted by David Law [see photo 14] is the location of Makibaru. Note the curve in the river near the bottom of the grid and the entrance to the camp near the top of the grid. This shows the geographic relationship of the camp to the two airfields, Yontan and Kadena. The “modern bridges” highlighted on the above map would be where the Bailey Bridges were laid down by the 130th in April 1945. The Kadena traffic circle is also highlighted on this map, again the original circle being constructed by the 130th in April 1945.

The 130th Battalion made a lot of firsts. We had the first operating galley, the first hot shower, and the first to have our camp laid out and all personnel under canvas. We were the first camp with coral paved streets.



Makibaru Street Scene, 1945



My tent and mates, 1945

Our tent, shown above, was located behind the amphitheater and facing the street. Note how we improved the place with palm trees and pine trees. The little white picket fence made it seem real homey.



Mass at Makibaru, April 1945

The above picture was taken during the early period of our occupation at Makibaru. The priest offering Mass is an Army chaplain. This photo depicts a yearning for a belief in a higher power, which would see the troops through this time of difficulty. Remember, at this time in the life of our camp we were being subjected to strafing by Jap planes, which were fearful in themselves. Previously, I talked about an example of a round coming straight at me. Note in the above photo the water tower in the left rear. This indicates that this service was held near the mess hall and probably in front of it, at the head of the valley or gully where the amphitheater, Jake's Bowl, was built.



Jakes Bowl - the outdoor theater - during construction, May 1945



Jakes Bowl dedication, evening of May 29, 1945



Jakes Bowl, summer 1945

The 130th Battalion was also the first to have an amphitheater and, thanks to our chaplain who had the right connections, the first to show nightly movies. One of *Washing Machine Charley's* last visits was in the middle of a musical movie being shown. They did not even turn off the projector. But some of the less hardy souls left their sandbag seats. Yours truly didn't budge.

The idea for Jake's Bowl was undoubtedly born at Camp Ewa, Hawaii. During the 130^{th's} 10-month assignment at Ewa, they renovated the outdoor theater known as the Ewa Emporium. The Battalion memory book states, "Okinawa was a repetition of Ewa except that the nightly movie, augmented by an occasional stage show, was the major social event for the enlisted men on the island. After mail from home, movies were the most important item for morale."

One final comment regarding Jake's Bowl is worthy of mention since it provided an escape from the monotony and rigors of military life in 1945 Okinawa. On Tuesday, May 29, 1945, Jake's Bowl was dedicated before an audience of the entire Battalion. The weather was especially miserable during the period May 22 thru May 29 of 1945. Lots of rain and lots of mud.

However, on that Tuesday evening, the Battalion made entertainment history. The Battalion memory book states, "That was the night we dedicated 'Jake's Bowl' and for the first time Japanese civilians entertained American Service Troops. We sat in a drenching rain to see a group of five girls and two men interpret their native Okinawan folk songs and dances. As a finale of the show, the five girls sang "Auld Lang Syne" in Japanese. We all joined in with the American version, an experience we are not likely to forget.

Before closing this chapter on my Okinawa experiences I want to mention a few things about the overall mission of the 130th Naval Construction Battalion on Okinawa. We were sent to this island campaign not only to support the island's conquest but also to prepare Okinawa as the launching point for the invasion of the homeland islands of Japan. Initially, based on pre-invasion aerial photos, the military thought that Okinawa would support 8 airfields for the final Japanese invasion. By late April 1945, Admiral Nimitz concluded that the island could harbor 18 airfields, enough to handle the whole air force, which was planned for transfer from England following the end of the European campaign.

Our work included building and improving roads and bridges, extending and building runways and related facilities at Yontan airfield, putting up Quonset buildings such as Lt. General Jimmy Doolittle's quarters and staff buildings, building "Radio Okinawa" whose slogan was "A stone's throw from Tokyo," - just to name a few activities. We were one of five Seabee battalions on the island, which were organized into the 44th Naval Construction Regiment. Secondly and as time and resources permitted, our construction swabbies would build up and improve living conditions at Makibaru.



Pump station for camp water supply, Bishi Gawa



Pump house view from river

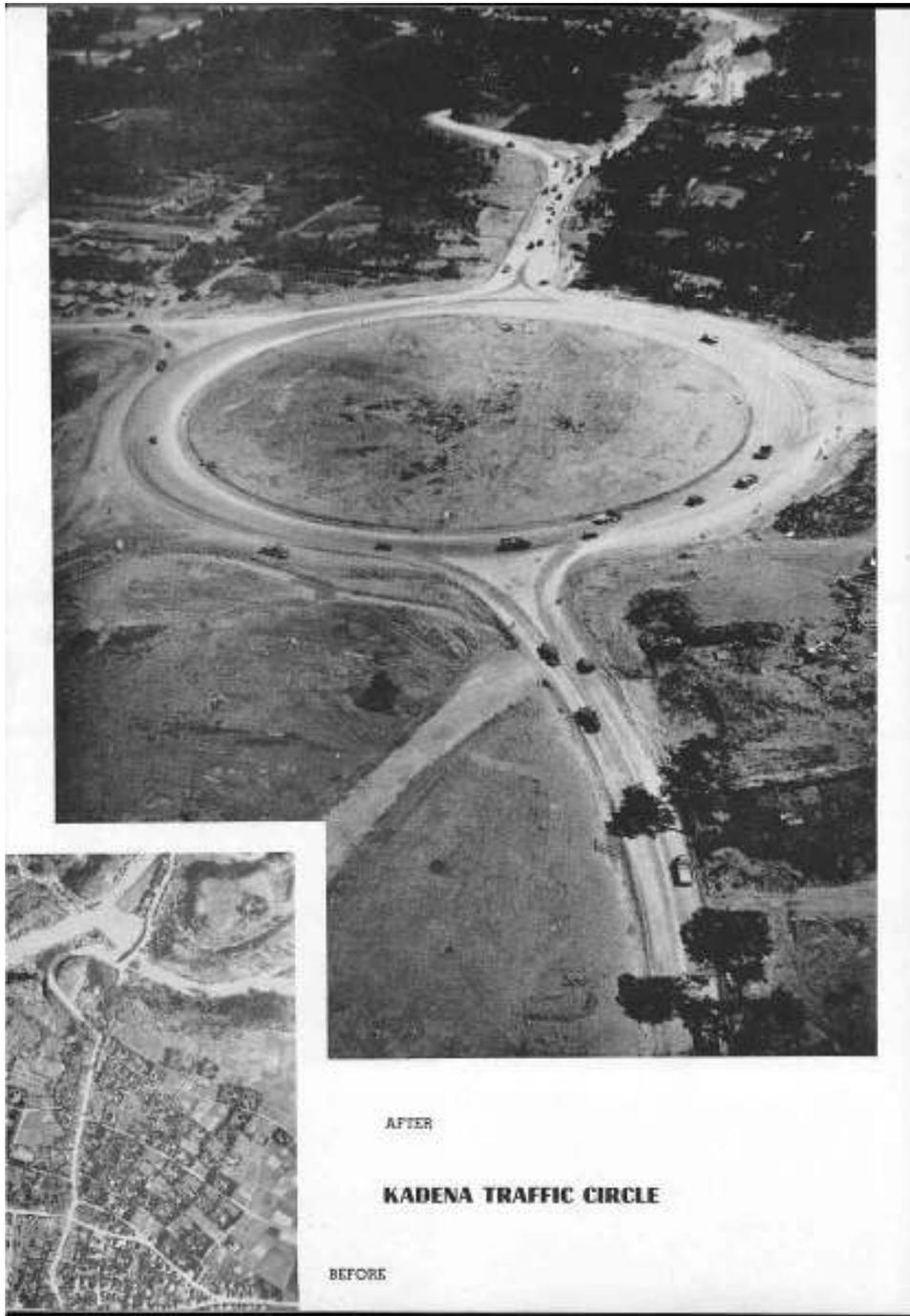


Makibaru water tower and distillation unit

The next few photos pertain to our camp water supply the source of which was the Bishi Gawa River. This river was also known as the Bisha Gawa River, but is referred to in both ways by the Seabees. I have chosen to use the Bishi Gawa for purposes of this historical record. The Battalion memory book states, "Upon arrival at Okinawa, another subdivision was added to the department [mechanical department on the 130th NCB construction organization chart], the camp water plant. River water was pumped 800 feet from the Bisha Gawa to the water purification plant where it was discharged into 3,000-gal. Tanks to provide flocculation and prechlorination. After standing quietly for 45 minutes, a chemically formed floc (white, fluffy, precipitate) settled on the bottom, taking with it the dirt, impurities, and other foreign matter in the water. The water was then discharged through sand and gravel filters, and additional chlorine was added. A distillation plant was operated as a subsidiary. It provided additional water, steam, and hot water for showers."

The 130th constructed a cooling tower for the blood bank. Over 15,000 gallons of refrigerated whole blood were flown from the States to Okinawa, helping reduce the mortality rate. Cooling towers made this possible.

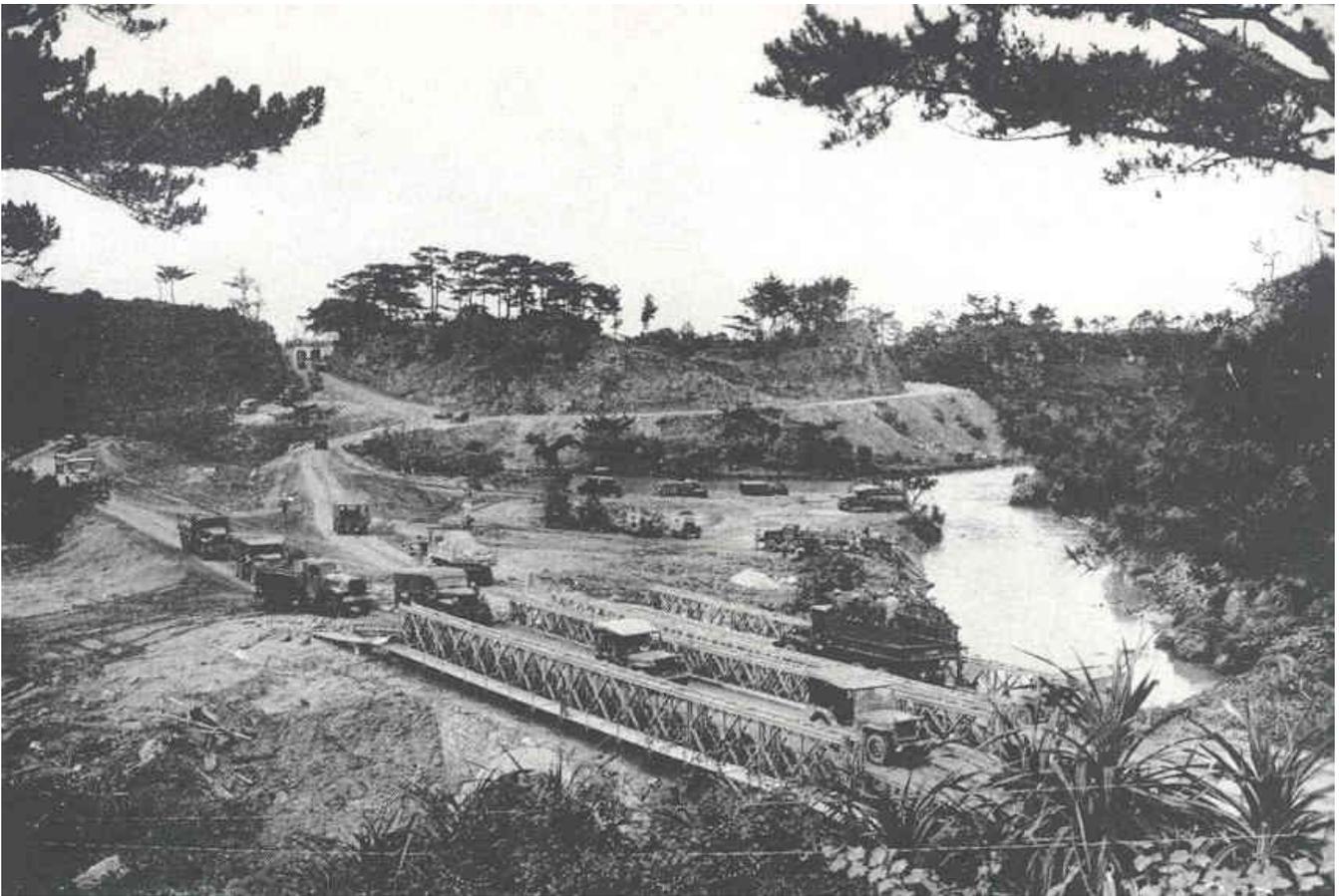
The Battalion memory book states that the 130th "...completed the road to Island Command, pushed route 16 west to Purple Beach (immediately south of the Bishi Gawa river mouth), widened the causeway at Yellow Beach so that four LST's could be unloaded simultaneously, and helped the 84th NCB build the landing strip and parking apron at Yontan."



Kadena traffic circle



Bailey Bridge construction



Bailey Bridge operation

One of the 130th Battalion's first projects was to alleviate traffic jams on the main north-south highway (called Highway 1) which is described in the Battalion memory book as a "wide cow path." The book states, "Deep ruts and frail one-way bridges bottle-necked traffic. Roads had to be rebuilt many times. Heavy combat equipment churned them into a reddish chocolate whip."

One such project was to build the Kadena traffic circle to more efficiently move tens of thousands of military vehicles from north to south and east to west. Just north of the traffic circle was the crossing point over the Bishi Gawa River - a one-way traffic nightmare holding up tons of equipment and supplies from being moved quickly from the invasion beaches to the battlefield a few miles away. The Battalion replaced the Okinawan one-way bridge with two Bailey bridges which were portable and of prefabricated steel construction. These bridges were laid down at night in spite of torrential rains and two air raids; the work was done in 8 hours earning the Battalion a commendation from the 44th Naval Construction Regiment of which we were under.

The work at Yontan was the primary construction effort of the 130th as we were camped nearby at Makibaru between Yontan and Kadena. Yontan had been the scene of an abortive Jap attempt in May to land five planes of air-borne troops as well as many air raids. Such action required runway repair work in addition to runway extensions and additional runways.

Return Home

Organized resistance on Okinawa ceased June 21, 1945, with the suicide of the Japanese commander, General Ushijima, the following day. The Okinawan campaign formally ended on July 2, 1945. World War II ended August 15, 1945, with the Japanese emperor declaring in his first public address the following day that Japan would surrender unconditionally. Formal surrender ceremonies took place on September 2, 1945, aboard the USS Battleship Missouri. I have a copy of the surrender document in my library. How I came by it I do not know.

My world changed rapidly and, surprisingly, I did not feel for the better. There were those among us, usually younger but not always, who had adapted to this island life to the point of not being in a hurry to leave. Generally this did not include the older Seabees (construction men) who had significant lives before the service and also wives and children waiting for them. These were the ones most wanting to pack up and leave at once.

After the island was secure we became tourists when we were not on watch. We visited the airfields, taking pictures of various aircraft. I have many photos, some in my book, of B17s, B24s, B25s, B29s, B32s, P47s, P61s, and other combat aircraft.

The Navy developed a system of points to decide the timing of rotation home. These points were determined by age, marital status, children, time in service, and health, in that order. Guess where people like myself ended up. We were young and single, had no children, had some time in service, and were healthy. Points thus added up to the fact, last to leave.

About the middle of September 1945 the rotations home began. By the end of October most of the original 130th Naval Construction Battalion was gone. I left November, 13, 1945 and arrived in San Francisco Bay December 3, 1945.