Can Do!

The Story of the SEABEES

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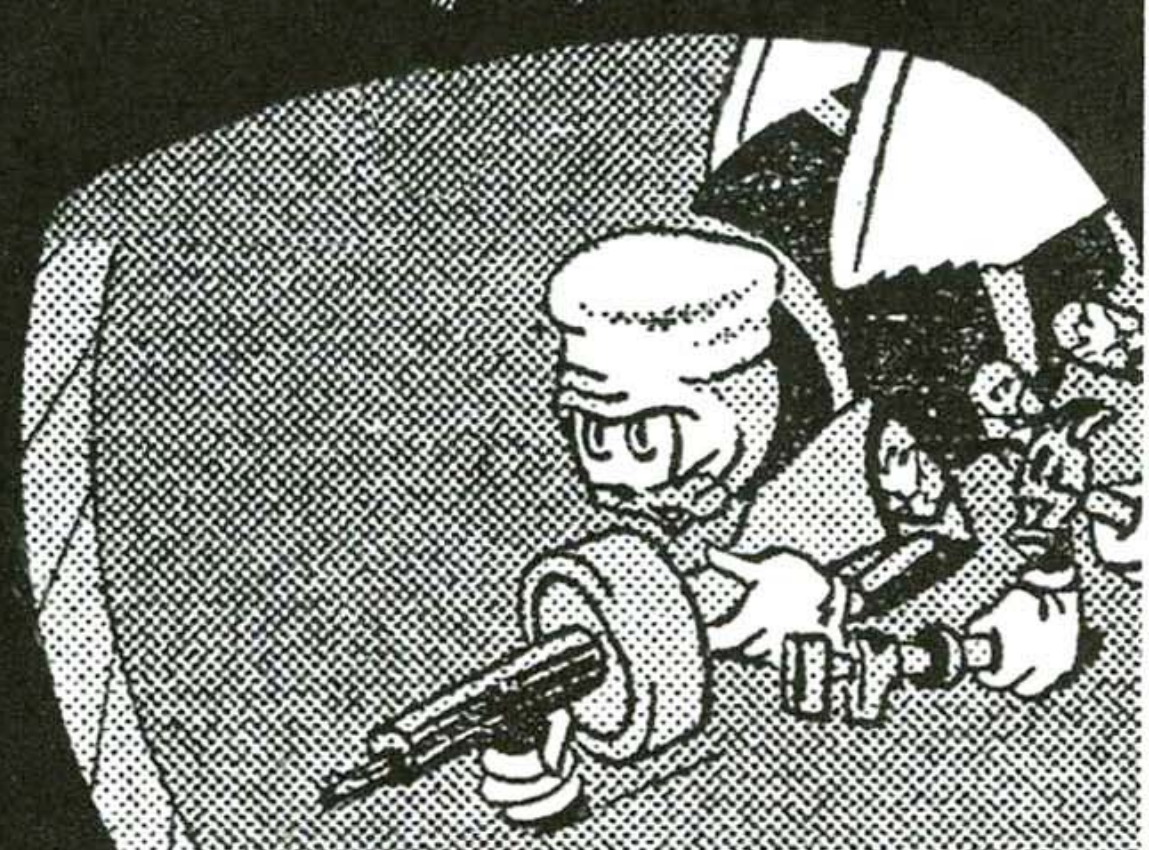

THIS NARRATIVE is a good-humored entry in the who's-winning-the-war argument. If it convinces you that a hell-roaring Seabee, mounted on a 20-ton bull-dozer, will lead the parade through the ruins of Tokyo, then it will have served one of its purposes. It makes no pretense to objective reporting; the author is a Seabee among Seabees, an advocate for his own gang, completely dedicated to the proposition that the Seabees are the goddamnedest, toughest and, withal, most efficient bunch of hairy-chested broncos who ever went to war under the Stars and Stripes.

Seriously, this narrative presents the war as seen and waged by the 8000 officers of the Navy's Civil Engineer Corps and the 250,000 men of the Naval Construction Battalions. This war is history's greatest air war, greatest sea war, etc., and it is also history's greatest construction war.

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Before there can be much air war, somebody has got to go somewhere and fight disease, mud and Japs, and build an airstrip. Then the airstrip must have such accouterments as a tank farm to supply fuel, widely dispersed magazines full of bombs and ammunition, gun emplacements to protect it, docks for supply, warehouses, and a complete American community around it. Before PT boats can make their glamorous runs, somebody has got to build a dock and figure out how to lift the boats out of the water and nurse them.

The Marines were at Guadalcanal, thank God, but the Seabees were there, too. The Marines did the fighting, and the Seabees had nothing else to do but (1) build and operate Henderson Field; (2) chase Jap bombs and shells around the field and fill up the holes faster than the Japs could blast them; (3) build the docks and unload the ships; (4) cut a few million feet of lumber out of the swamps and convert it into docks, warehouses and barracks; (5) drain the swamps and kill the mosquitoes; and then (6) build a few hundred miles of roads.

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The Seabees are the one big, *new* organization of this war. They were born in the hours of terrible emergency just after Pearl Harbor. Men with a lot of mechanical know-how in their hands had to be rushed to the Pacific islands; men who could fight jungles as well as Japs; men who were accustomed to loneliness and danger; men who could go into battle, if necessary, with little or possibly no military training.

In its desperate crisis the Navy turned to the nation's natural fighters; to mountain-movers who had built Boulder Dam; to sand-hogs who had tunneled under East River; to human spiders who had spun a steel web over Golden Gate; to timberjacks, catskinners, dockwallopers; to brawny, loud-cussing, straight-spitting men capable of driving a 10,000-mile road to Tokyo and stamping a few rats along the way.

Few of these men were subject to the draft. Their average age was about 31. They were men with families. Draft deferments and inflated wages in our shipyards and war plants were theirs for accepting. So the Navy called for volunteers, and 100,000 of these men volunteered to put on uniforms at service wages within a few months after the first call. It was from this cream of America's builders that the first Seabee battalions were formed; and, as rapidly as they could be outfitted, the battalions were rushed out to the danger points.

The story of how these men have contributed to our victories is as inspiring as any story that can be told of the war. You've heard how the war elephant feels to all the glamour boys—the Marines, the PT captains, the Commandos, the submariners, and the hot pilots. Here's how it feels to the Seabees.

It was a wet dawn in the Solo-

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mons. July 1, 1943. D-Day, H-Hour at Rendova. Through murky half-light, tropical rain fell in sheets. Heavy, flat-bellied tank lighters battered down the waves —krrump, krrump, krrump—as they pushed from the transports toward East Beach. In the boats tight-lipped Seabees, Marines and soldiers (Amphibian Task Force 31, composed of the 24th Naval Construction Battalion, the Ninth Defense Marines and the 172nd Infantry Combat Team) crouched by the wet flanks of bulldozers and watched the palm-fringed beach edge closer.

After 11 months of conquest and consolidation at Guadalcanal, our forces were at last reaching up the "slot" of the Solomons for the big Jap air base at Munda on New Georgia Island. From Rendova, the enemy airstrip on Munda would be within reach of our heavy howitzers.

The high whine of Jap .25-calibers cut across the water as the bandy-legged rats in the palms began sniping at our coxswains. The men cursed, crouched lower, gripped gunbutts harder. As though the rain weren't enough, salt water drenched the men as the

boats churned through heavy surf. The boats skidded in soft sand; ramps dropped; there was a brief, fierce skirmish; and the Japs who were left alive faded back into the coconut groves. Automatic-weapons troops pushed in 200 yards to form a defense arc, while the Seabees began furiously unloading trucks, tractors, heavy guns, ammunition and other varieties of supplies.

The Jap ground forces had been dispersed easily. Now the real battle was joined; the battle against nature and time and the inevitable Jap bombers. Men and supplies are vulnerable while they are in landing craft; they are even more vulnerable during the period they are on the open beach. So in every beach operation the Seabees must drive hard to get ashore; drive even harder to unload; then exert the last drop of energy to get the supplies off the beach, dispersed and hidden.

Leading the Seabees was 48-year-old Commander H. Roy Whittaker (Civil Engineer Corps, USNR, Philadelphia, Pa.), a pint-sized construction veteran with the energy of a jack-hammer. He described the action.

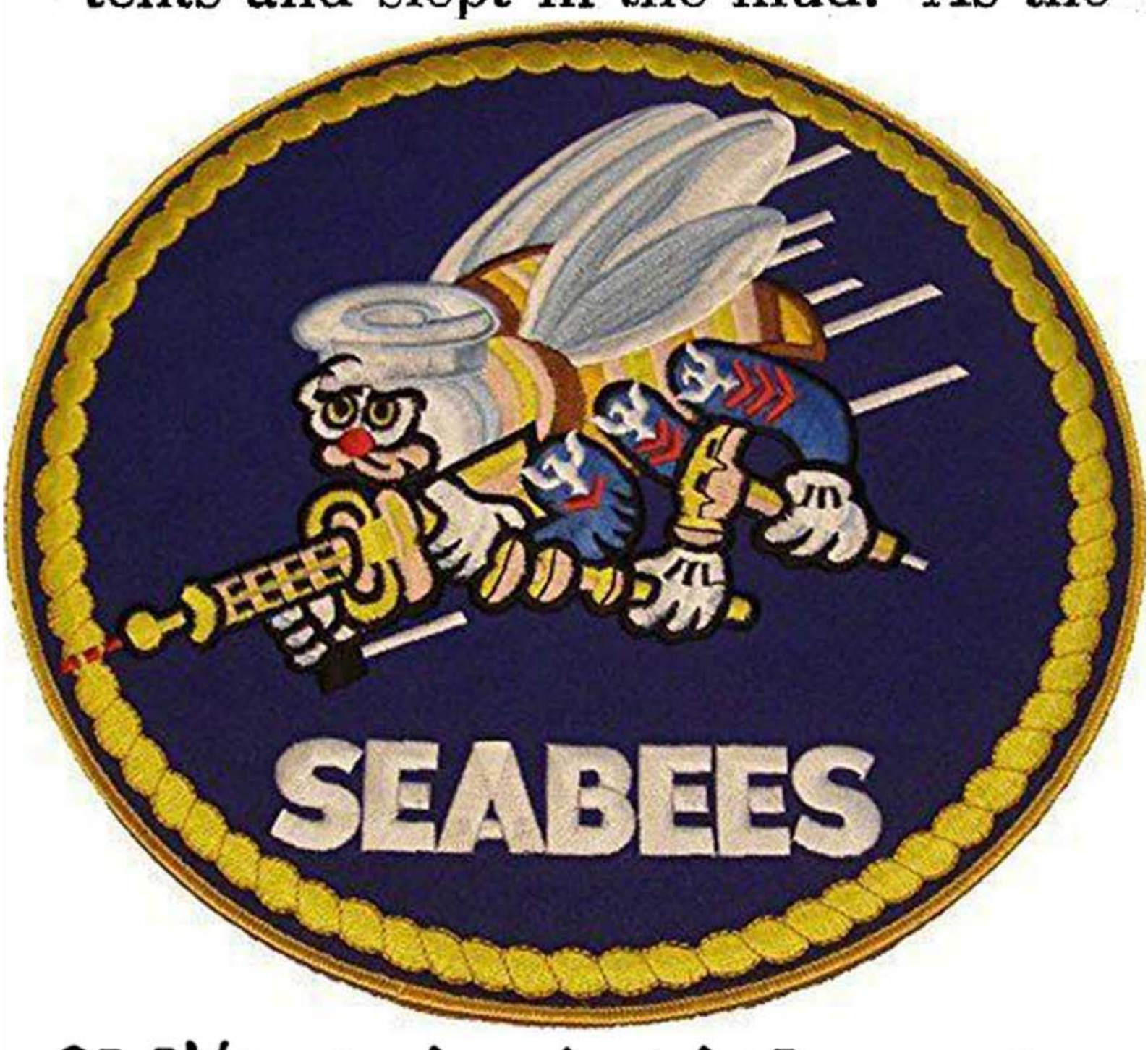
"Where we landed the soil was unbelievably marshy," he said. "The mud was deep and getting deeper. A swampy coconut grove lay just back of the beach, and we had to cut a road through there. Guns had to be transported from our beach over to West Beach so that shells could be hurled across the narrow strip of water onto the Jap positions at Munda. And still that rain poured.

"All day long we sweated and swore and worked to bring the heavy stuff ashore and hide it from the Jap bombers. Our mesh, designed to 'snowshoe' vehicles over soft mud, failed miserably. Even our biggest tractors bogged

down in the muck. The men ceased to look like men; they looked like slimy frogs working in some prehistoric ooze. As they sank to their knees they discarded their clothes. They slung water out of their eyes, cussed their mud-slickened hands, and somehow kept the stuff rolling ashore.

"A detachment under Irv Lee (Lieutenant Irwin W. Lee, CEC, USNR, Monmouth, Ill.) fought to clear the road to West Beach. The ground was so soft that only our biggest cats could get through. The Japs were still sniping, but in spite of this the men began felling the coconut palms, cutting them into 12-foot lengths and corrugating the road. Our traction-treaded vehicles could go over these logs, but the spinning wheels of a truck would send the logs flying, and the truck would bury itself. To pull the trucks out we lashed a bulldozer to a tree, then dragged the trucks clear with the 'dozer's winch.

"When night came we had unloaded six ships, but the scene on the beach was dismal. More troops, Marines and Seabees had come in, but the mud was about to lick us. Foxholes filled with water as rapidly as they could be dug. There was almost no place near the beach to set up a shelter tent, so the men rolled their exhausted, mud-covered bodies in tents and slept in the mud. As the



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Japs would infiltrate during the night, the Army boys holding our line in the grove would kill them with trench knives.

"Next day, at 1330, without warning, the Jap planes came in with bomb bays open. All of us began firing with what guns had been set up, but most of the Seabees had to lie in the open on the beach and take it. We tried to dig trenches with our hands and noses while the Japs poured it on us.

"The first bombs found our two main fuel dumps, and we had to lie there in the mud and watch our supplies burn while the Japs strafed us. One bomb landed almost under our largest bulldozer, and that big machine just reared up like a stallion and disintegrated. Then every man among us thought that his time had come. A five-ton cache of our dynamite went off, exploding the eardrums of the men nearest it. And that earth just shaking like jelly underneath us.

"When the Japs had exhausted their ammunition they flew off, leaving us to put out the fires and treat our wounded. I'll never forget the scene on that beach. In our outfit two of our best officers (Lieutenant Lee and Lieutenant George W. Stephenson, CEC, US NR, Klamath Falls, Ore.) and 21 men were dead. Many more were wounded, others were missing, and a number were out of their heads. Our galley equipment, most of our supplies, and all the men's seabags and personal belongings were destroyed.

" 'Okay, men,' I yelled, 'we got nothing left but what we got on, so let's get back to work.'

"All that night Doctor Duryea (Lieutenant-Commander Garrett Duryea, Medical Corps, USNR, Glen Cove, N. Y.) worked with our wounded. The biggest job was to get them clean. That's one thing about being a Seabee. Aboard ship you bathe, wash down with

antiseptic, and put on clean clothing before an action. In the Air Force you can take a bath before you take off. But when a Seabee gets hit, he's usually on a beach in the mud. Mud seems to be our element. When we die, we die in the mud.

"Next day, while we worked in relays, chaplains from the Army and Marines helped us bury our dead. Three more had died during the night. Not one of those boys would have ever thought of himself as a hero, but I felt proud to have been their commanding officer. They were construction men, most of them from the oil fields of Oklahoma and Texas, and, with never a complaint, they had died in the mud trying their damnedest to get a job done.

"By the morning of the fourth day we had opened the road to West Beach, but what a road it was! We had literally snaked those big 155's through two miles of mud, and the Marines began setting them up. We were also developing a storage area some distance from the beach and were trying desperately to reduce our hazards on the beach. It takes men with real guts to unload on an open beach without air cover. Our men had been under constant strain for 90 hours; at least 50 of them were running high temperatures from constant exposure to mud and water; they could only jump between gasoline drums and powder barrels when the Japs came over; and the beach, as always, was a potential torch with ammunition, Diesel oil and gasoline everywhere. The mud was too deep for trucks. To move the inflammable stuff back into the storage areas, the men had to emplace themselves in the mud in bucket-brigade fashion. For hours they'd work that way, passing the heavy packages back into the camouflage area and sinking

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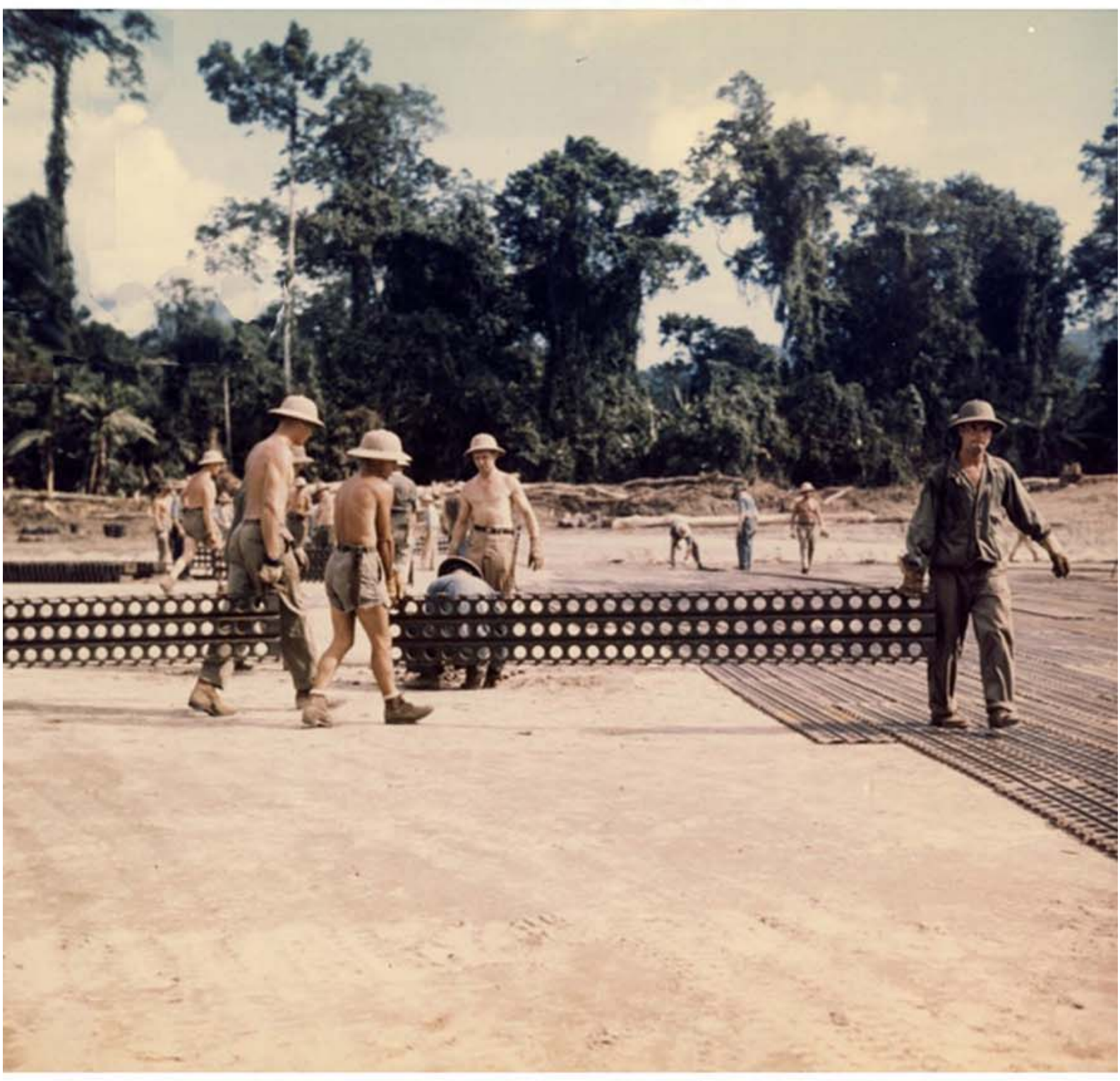

deeper into the mud each time they handled a package. And still the rain poured.

"Late that afternoon we got our first big thrill. From over on West Beach the Marines opened up on Munda with the 155's. Our men stopped work and cheered almost insanely. The others stationed with bulldozers and winches along the road to West Beach joined in the cheer. No group of men had ever endured more in order for guns to begin firing. It hurts American construction men down deep to have to lie in mud and be strafed by Japs; and now those 155's were giving it back to the Japs with interest. The firing was a tonic to us. The men went back to unloading furiously.

"We had received some additional equipment, but that night we still had only enough tents and cots for our expanding sick quarters. The men had tried to pitch a few shelter tents, but the tents would sink in the mud. There was still nothing else to do but wrap yourself in whatever you could find and sleep in the mud. When you are sufficiently exhausted you can do that, but after you pass 40 you have one helluva time getting up in the morning.

"On the fifth day we continued to unload troops, supplies and equipment. Our storage areas be-

came more congested, due to our distribution difficulties and also due to delays in transshipments over to our positions on New Georgia Island, from which we were also attacking Munda. The Seabees sent many small working parties to help the Army and Marines, yet our beach condition grew worse under the continuing heavy rains. At 1400 the Japs bombed us heavily, but this time the damage was much lighter because of the furious anti-aircraft fire. The Army and Marines had many guns set up by this time, and the Seabees helped man the guns on 20 LSI's and two LST's at the beach. We were able to prevent the Japs from strafing us, and seven Jap planes came crashing down in our immediate area.

"Seabee casualties were only one man missing and one wounded in this raid, but our number of psychopathic cases had begun to mount. We had to evacuate ten men who had become hysterical. As men grow physically exhausted, they become more and more susceptible to nervous collapse under bombing.

"By the sixth day the 155's were pouring shells onto Munda almost incessantly, and we still had the supply road open, but our position seemed more impossible than ever. None of us could remember anything except mud and bombs. The rains seemed to get heavier. But somehow the men kept working. Word came that 5000 troops had been landed on New Georgia near Munda. Munda was doomed if we could just hold out and keep those 155's firing. The Japs knew this as well as we did, so at 1315 they came at us again. But this time it was a different story. Our own air forces were ready to take up the fight now, and our planes came in and tangled with the Japs right over our heads.

"We lay in those muddy fox-

holes for an hour and watched the air battle. Since we couldn't fire the AA guns without endangering our own planes, there was nothing else for us to do but lie in our grandstand seats and count the falling Japs. Each time a Zero would burst into flames our exhausted, mud-covered men would leap up and cheer wildly.

"Knowledge that we now had air cover improved our morale on the seventh day. Also we had managed to borrow three stoves from the Army and Marines and were providing the first hot food for the men. Three air battles were fought over us during the day, but our planes didn't allow the Japs to get close enough either to bomb or strafe us. That night the Japs came over three times, forcing us to hit the water in the foxholes, but most of us had given up hope of ever being dry again.

"On the eighth day we continued to unload supplies, repair landing boats and haul the ammunition through the mud to the 155's. The Marines kept up the shelling of Munda almost continuously. One enemy air attack in the afternoon lasted for 50 minutes, but our planes were opposing the Japs constantly, and we suffered little damage. During the day we evacuated seven additional cases of war hysteria. That night we had to hit the foxholes twice.

"On the ninth day the Japs attempted four large-scale raids, but our damage was slight. Our air cover was now functioning perfectly except at night. We evacuated three more cases of war hysteria, and that night we had to hit the water three times as the Japs bombed us rather heavily. But our bombardment continued, and our roads were still open in spite of the continuing rain.

"On the tenth day we had five light enemy raids, and evacuated some additional cases of war hys-

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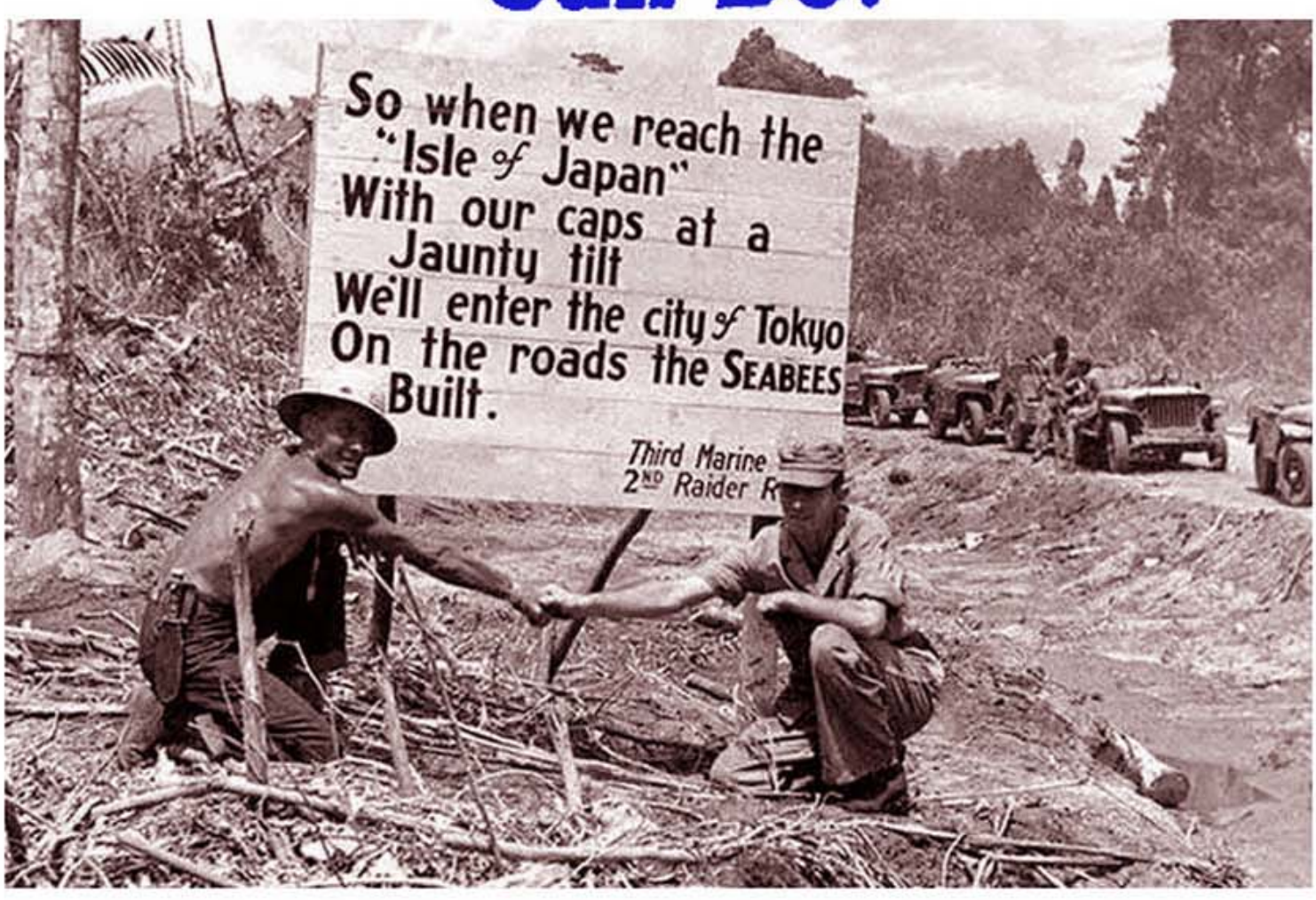

teria, but morale continued exceedingly high."

On August 15 the 24th Battalion, which had fought the mud battle at Rendova, arrived at Munda; and with the 73rd Battalion, set to work to make Munda a major base. The Japs had dug an elaborate tunnel system in the coral, and many of them had died in the tunnels from our flamethrowers. The Seabees cleaned out the Japs and converted the tunnels into de luxe living quarters where a man could sleep comfortably and never have to jump up and run for a foxhole.

In November, 1943, Admiral Bill Halsey declared that Munda was the finest air base in the South Pacific.

THINK OF the beach around the bay at Salerno as a 12-mile arc. As you enter the bay, the town of Salerno is at the end of the arc on your left or north side. Moving your vision clockwise around the arc from Salerno, you see hills rolling back to become mountains; then on the southern half of the arc you see gently rolling scrubby country, with an old stone tower breaking the landscape.

For purposes of the British-American landing at Salerno, the 12-mile arc was divided into halves. The British were to land on North Beach; the Americans

were to land on South Beach. North Beach was divided into two sections—Red and Green. It was known that the 16th Panzer Division was emplaced in the hills overlooking North Beach. It was thought that two Italian divisions were guarding South Beach; and since the Italians had surrendered, it was hoped that our operations on South Beach could move rapidly and that forces landed on South Beach could come very quickly to the assistance of our forces landing on North Beach.

Here was the landing plan: The vast invasion fleet, composed of everything from tiny LCVP's to heavy cruisers, would begin entering the bay shortly after midnight on September 9, 1943. At 0330 a detachment of Commandos and Raiders would begin landing in small craft on North Beach. Simultaneously, units of the 36th (Texas) Division would begin landing on South Beach. Mine sweepers would push in behind the small landing craft so that the big LST's could come in and begin unloading as quickly thereafter as possible.

Among all our specialized landing craft, the LST is the ship that carries the punch. It's the big two-deck, 330-foot ship that disgorges heavy tanks, big guns and truck-and-trailer loads of ammunition and supplies. The small craft can put men ashore—men with grenades, flame-throwers and bangalore torpedoes to knock out pill-boxes and barbed wire; men to clear the mines and other obstructions on the beaches—but we can't really sock until the LST's can charge in, open their cavernous mouths and start vomiting the heavy stuff. Our troops on a beach can't advance very far against a prepared enemy until the LST's can land.

All of the LST's at Salerno were American and most were operated

by the United States Navy. The British were landing the Eighth Army far to the south. But the LST's at Salerno which were to land at North Beach carried the 46th British Division, and those which were to land at South Beach carried the 36th American Division (formerly Texas National Guard).

The first LST to go in to North Beach was Number 386, carrying Platoon "C" of the 1006th C. B. Causeway Detachment led by Lieutenant Willis H. Mitchell (CEC, USNR, Long Beach, Cal.) and Warrant Officer Richard A. Look (CEC, USNR, Iron Mountain, Mich.). Lt. Comdr. W. A. Burke, Jr. (CEC, USNR, Stamford, Conn.) officer-in-charge of the 1006th, was aboard the same LST. Lt. Comdr. Burke tells the story of the landing.

"Our LST, together with several score others, made up a Task Force, carrying the 46th British Division. The convoy consisted of approximately 50 ships and craft, with the 15-inch gun British Monitor *Abercrombie*.

"Around 1600 on 'D minus 1' we sighted the Island of Capri off the Italian Coast. A hostile plane swooped down along the right flank of the convoy and dropped bombs far ahead, getting a YT in the distance. It sent up a tremendous pillar of dark smoke. About 2000 the British Radio announced the unconditional surrender of the Italian government. Some of the boys were pretty optimistic and thought that the war was over and that next day's landing would be done under a flag of truce. Their optimism was shattered an hour and a half later when we underwent a severe bombing attack from the Luftwaffe.

"On D-Day, 9 September 1943, we were up at 0200 to prepare the causeways for launching. British

destroyers were shelling Red and Green Beaches and adjacent strong points. About 0320, in pitch darkness, the rocket craft let go their barrage. As we lay to in the calm water of the bay some four to five miles off the beach, it was a fascinating sight to watch, through field glasses, the terrific discharge of the rocket batteries. They were fired in bunches, enveloping their craft in brilliant sheets of flame, then soaring high up, over and down toward the beach where thunderous explosions took place.

"At 0330 — H-Hour — the first waves of the assault Rangers and Commandos landed in their small craft, to be followed by waves of LCVP, LCI's and LCT's. The theory was that a few hundred assault troops should seize the beachhead and squelch enemy resistance prior to the main assault landing of the LST's which would follow at about sunrise. Sometime around 0430, shortly before dawn, four German artillery shells fell in the water close to the causeway. Shrapnel fragments fell over the causeways and pounded against the sides of the LST. Warrant Officer Dick Look and 22 of our men were on the causeway, fully exposed to the fire, but fortunately no one at all was hit.

"At 0525 our ship, with causeways rigged for 'momentum beaching' was ordered into Green Beach. We were following the course of the YM mine sweepers when, about a mile off shore, a large-size Italian mine which had been swept to the surface, but not exploded, loomed in the path of the ship. The forward lookout saw the ominous round shape and a frantic effort was made to veer the ship to port, but not enough. The curved end of the inboard causeway hit and rode up over the mine which bounced along under the bottom for about 70 feet be-

fore going off against the side of the ship.

"At the time of the explosion I was sitting on some sand buckets in front of the pilot house. My first blinding impression was of a terrific explosion forward. Thinking we had been hit by an aerial bomb, I threw myself to the deck to avoid shrapnel and fragments. There was a blinding flame, water towered up, objects were hurled aloft, then a blast of air and a deluge of water and oil fell on us. Luckily fire did not break out, although how the numerous gasoline tanks of our cargo escaped being ignited will always be a mystery. The explosion ripped into troop quarters, killing and seriously injuring a number of British soldiers.

"The ship was still under way, but the causeways were gone and rapidly drifting astern. In the dim light it was possible to see a pontoon or two drifting free, but we did not at first realize that those shadows piled up on the forward weather deck were pontoons blown from the sea. Fortunately a couple of small craft were in the vicinity which went to the assistance of the Seabees aboard the wrecked causeways. We found out later that there had been sufficient warning of the explosion for the men to run to the extreme aft end of the causeway where, although they were violently stunned by the terrific detonation, only two were killed; a big, strapping farm boy from Iowa named Jim Achterhoff, and a chap named Jones who had married the day he came into the Navy. Dick Look's eardrums were punctured and several others were seriously wounded.

"We did not know whether the ship would stay afloat long enough to reach the beach as she was listing badly. We grounded about 0600, without our causeways, some 250 feet off the shore line

with about 11 feet of water at the bow ramp. It was immediately apparent that the beach had not yet been taken. Batteries of 88's and mortars had the range of the beach and kept up the shelling all through D-Day. When the extent of the mine damage was finally ascertained, and it was found that the ship would remain afloat, it was decided to retract and attempt to put our combat cargo ashore over one of the other sets of causeways or via LCT's.

"When we were about a half mile off the beach, a British destroyer laid down a smoke screen which protected us from further fire from the shore and enabled us to anchor in the transport area between the Flag Ship *Biscayne* and the Monitor *Abercrombie*, transferring our cargo to LCT's."

THE SEABEES who have toiled along the North and the South Atlantic roads may deserve more credit for their work than their fellows who happened to be assigned to more active war zones. Most men who have to go to war prefer active war theatres; they'll choose bombs to boredom every time. It's easy for Americans to perform prodigious feats of construction under fire; what isn't so easy is to stick to the long, difficult job when the weather is muggy, the food is lousy, the equipment doesn't arrive, and the only enemies for you to fight are the insects.

When this war is finished I hope someone will devise a medal with a lot of gold on it: a medal suitable for those members of the Army and Navy who "fought" the war in the lonely, uncomfortable places of the world; who never heard a shot fired; who never saw

a cameraman or a newspaperman; who never once marched in a parade; who cussed and groused and griped; but who, somehow, were able to generate enough motivation within themselves to get the job done. A lot of Seabees who worked at places like Freetown, West Africa, or the Galapagos Islands will qualify for this medal.

In August, 1942, 40 Seabees arrived at Kissy Flats, near Freetown. They called themselves the "Dirty Forty," and they were the forerunners of the 65th Battalion, the first Seabee battalion to serve on the other side of the Atlantic. The temperature was 140 degrees. Ten-foot-long snakes were as plentiful as earthworms around a pigpen. Some docks had to be built. The Dirty Forty had been rushed in to take over; to repair the rusting machinery; to get the job going again. New equipment was "on the way," but the Dirty Forty had no fancy illusions as to when it might arrive. There were a lot of submarines between them and America.

Give a Seabee a pair of pliers and a roll of baling wire, and there is almost nothing he can't do with it. The Dirty Forty repaired some steam shovels and started tearing up the face of Africa. To keep the natives from standing around in the way, they put the natives to work hewing gumwood piles. The piles were 50 to 80 feet long. The harbor bottom was of hard volcanic lava, so hard that the piles had to be iron-capped first before they could be driven.

The old pile-driver at Freetown was powered by steam and designed to work from the shore. The Dirty Forty converted it from steam to compressed air power. They mounted it on a barge. When one of its motors expired, the Seabees took a truck engine, rigged it up with a chain drive taken

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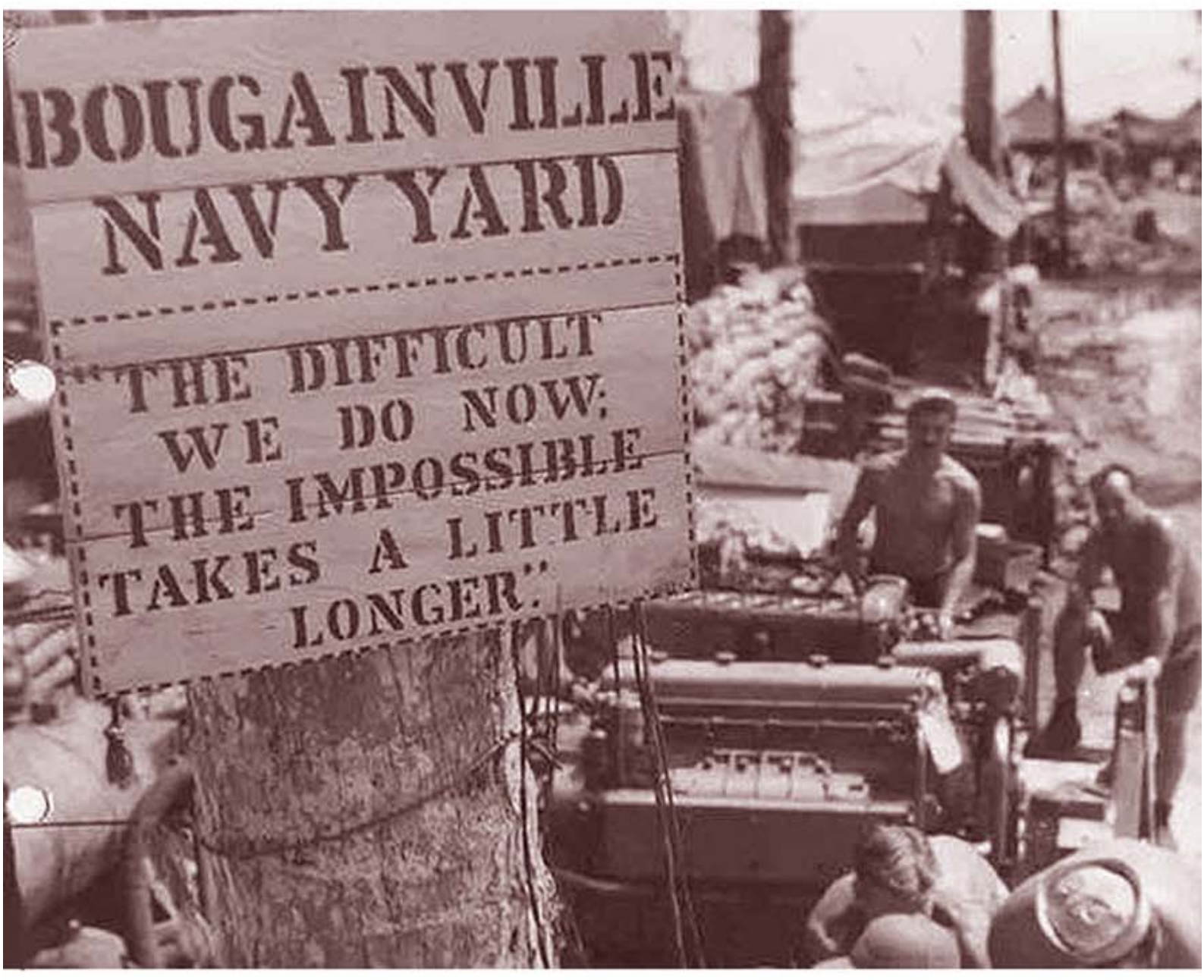

from a decrepit steam roller, and had that pile-driver driving like hell out in the middle of the harbor.

The British were amazed. Forty Americans had turned Freetown upside down. They had all the ancient machinery coughing away; natives were scampering around with undreamed-of energy; and a few of the natives were even operating machines.

The Dirty Forty and the other detachments which arrived to help make up the 65th Battalion worked around the clock seven days a week. For recreation the men fished and explored with the natives. The West African natives are funnier and more interesting than the natives in the South Pacific area.

The men of the 65th found native undertakers a constant source of amusement. Competition among them is as fierce as among their American counterparts. One ingenious fellow enjoyed a temporary business boom when he installed a bar in his "parlors," but a competitor retaliated—apparently with American connivance—by offering free American cigarettes with each of his funerals.

Cigarettes prove powerful incentives to native effort. And the makers of Kools may have this advertising tip free from the Seabees. One day a member of the Dirty Forty handed a native a Kool, the

cigarette with menthol in it. The native took a puff, rolled his eyes as though he had been bewitched, then grinned: "Good! Good! Make you feel good!" That night the tom-toms were beating telling the news of the new cigarette, and next day 500 natives were clamoring for work and the new cigarette. Many pilings were hewed that week for Kools.

David M. Belasco, Shipfitter third, Redwood City, Cal., joined a native tribe. Instead of a tattoo on his chest, he wears an acid brand put there by a native girl. All the men were offered wives for ten dollars; but one of the men was offered a special bargain.

One old chief tried to sell a daughter for eight dollars. When refused, he offered his son's wife; and when she was turned down he tried like hell to sell his own wife!

The 120th has made an earth-shaking discovery which may cause a mass migration to Africa when the war is over. It seems that there is a combination of wind and sun at Arzew which restores life to dead scalps and causes luxuriant growths of new hair.

"European princes suffering from baldness in youth," writes a 120th correspondent, "came to the blue sea to the south where the balmy sea breezes and medicant sunshine restored life to the dead cells and produced new hair. The sun here is also supposed to diminish and eventually erase all trace of freckles. With regard to the latter we have no positive proof, but with regard to the former it is a known fact that some of the Seabees of this battalion were as bald as any billiard ball when they came to Africa and they are now sporting a new crop of hair. Others have noticed that they have more hair, while still others have remarked on rapid hair growth."

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This report, circulated widely among the Seabees, has brought an insistent demand that all bald Seabees be placed in one battalion, and that the "Bald Battalion" be assigned one year's duty at Arzew.

Can Do!

WHEN THE Seabees arrived on Guadalcanal for the organization's baptism of fire, they were in a difficult position. In contrast to the Marines whom they were reinforcing, the Seabees lacked all the elements which usually inspire confidence in a military force: superb equipment, training, spit-and-polish, service traditions. The newest branch of the service was being thrown in beside the oldest and proudest; the poorest-trained and -equipped beside the best-trained and -equipped; the essentially civilian machinist was taking his place alongside the professional fighting man.

Also, the Seabees were "old men" in a "young man's war." Because they must be both skilled and experienced, Seabees are the oldest men in the service. The average age is about 31, and many of the officers and petty officers are veterans of the first World War. The average age of the Army is 27; of the Fleet, 22½; of the Marine Corps, 20½. The Seabees looked like fathers to the 17- and 18-year-old Marines on Guadalcanal.

Watching the Sixth Seabees come ashore, the Marines chortled: "What the hell, pop! Are we running out of men at home already?"

"Say, pop, didn't ya get'cha wars mixed up?"

"Watch ya false teeth, pop. You'll lose 'em when the next bomb goes off."

"So this is the Seabees! The Confused Bastards! What the hell are you going to do in here?"

It was a difficult moment, but, luckily, American construction men are a thick-skinned variety who can dish it out as well as take it.

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"What are we doing here?" the Seabees roared back. "Why, goddamit, we were sent in here to *protect* you goddam Marines!"

That word *protect* saved the day. Nothing, of course, could be more galling to the Marines than the insinuation that they needed *protection*, so the Seabee had his *raison d'être*. He was the man who "protected the Marines."

By the time the Seabees got ashore the Marines were already chuckling: "Never hit a Seabee, for his son might be a Marine." At another island Seabees stamped out "Junior Seabee" buttons which they announced would be given to Marines who had put in enough months of service to prove they were worthy of the "honor."

During the early fighting on Guadalcanal, the tanks had one woeful weakness: an open sprocket over which the tread revolved. A Jap could leap out, jam a crowbar through the spokes of the sprocket, and stop the tank dead. A Seabee machinist took one look and provided a remedy in 20 minutes. He cut the top out of a fuel drum with a torch, welded the circular piece over the sprocket so that the crowbar couldn't slip between the spokes, then walked away muttering something about having to "protect these helpless Marines."

Far from being deplorable, this intra-service razzing is one of the strengths of Americans at war. It's our way of building team spirit; of combating tension and boredom. It's the Giant-Dodger or Georgia-Georgia Tech feud staged deliberately to provide purpose and relief. Pride-of-outfit is an essential in wartime; it gives a guy something to fight for—a simple, easily understood reason for carrying on. Four Freedoms and Atlantic Charters are forensic stuff; what drives men through muddy death is pride-of-outfit. The Sea-

bees have built their pride-of-outfit on "Can Do"; on their ingenuity; on being the world's finest war builders; and on being "the goddamnedest, toughest road gang in history." Seabees are the men amongst the boys. Marines only *capture* territory; it's the Seabees who *improve* territory.

As soon as the Seabees had watched the Marines clean out a Jap rat nest, and as soon as the Marines had watched the Seabees operate under bombs and shells on Henderson Field, each outfit knew that the other was good enough to play on his team. Seabee battalions became integral parts of Marine combat divisions. Marine combat reporters became the warmest journalistic friends of the Seabees. Seabees and Marines became natural allies in the ancient feud between men in the Navy who operate ships and those who do not. Marines and Seabees stand at one end of the bar, the "sailors" at the other end. The "Fleet Navy" is on one side; the "shore Navy" on the other. But when no third parties are around, Seabees and Marines wrangle over which outfit is the toughest, which one is winning the war.

The sharpest banter concerns the jealously guarded Marine prerogative for always getting everywhere *first.* For years Marine poets have been proclaiming that when the Army and Navy get to Heaven they will find Marines guarding the streets. Now the brash Seabee poets insist that when the Marines get to Heaven they will find that Seabees have *built* the streets! And the argument as to who will get to Tokyo first grows louder and lustier by the hour.

The Seabees pounced on an incident at New Georgia Island and rubbed it mercilessly into Marine hides. In July, 1943, during the Munda operation, a Marine detachment made the classic dawn as-

sault on a New Georgia beach. As they came tearing up on the beach looking for Japs, a party of white men stepped out from behind trees and waved to them. Marine jaws dropped as the party approached and Seabee Lieutenant Bob Ryan, of Santa Paula, Cal., extended his hand to shake with the Marine major.

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"Major, the Seabees are always happy to welcome the Marines!" Lieutenant Ryan said warmly, with a heavy tongue in his cheek. Then a Seabee boatswain's mate walked over, clapped a Marine private on the back and quipped: "What kept yuh, bud?" The quip was almost too much for a self-respecting Marine to take. Great oaths rent the air and there was much stamping of earth before the Montezuma Boys got around to appreciating the Seabee jest.

Lieutenant Ryan's party had been scouting for an airstrip location when they spied the Marines approaching. The Marines insisted that the whole affair was a frame-up, but the Seabees contend that it is typical of the manner in which they must "protect the Marines."

To support their claim to being the toughest, don't-give-a-damnedest outfit in the service, the Seabees have accumulated many stories, both factual and apocryphal.

On a certain Pacific island, it is said, natives were mopping up the remaining Japs. One day a group of natives wiped out a party of Japs, but the natives hesitated to kill a strange animal which the Japs had brought to the island. The animal was a goat, and after observing the goat curiously, the natives returned to their chief for instructions as to whether or not they should kill the strange beast.

"What manner of beast is it?" the chief asked.

"Oh, he's very strange, majesty," the natives replied. "He has fierce eyes, long horns, a shaggy

beard, will eat anything, and stinks like hell. "

"Spare him," the chief ruled at once. "Don't kill him. No, he must be saved. He's what the Americans call a Seabee."

AS THESE last words to this account are written, our forces are involved in tremendous, climactic action in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. In the Atlantic the Seabees have completed their great highways; the big construction job has been done; what lies ahead is a blasting operation to be followed by the unloading of endless ships. When the invasion was launched, we knew Seabee pontoon detachments would be riding barges and causeways just as they did at Salerno. Some of them will die—many of them have died—but they are the kind of men who don't turn back. Across Navy pontoons and docks roll the machines which are liberating a complete continent.

In the Pacific, too, the long roads are nearing completion. In the north the road from Seattle to Attu is finished; the supplies are stocked and ready; there are enough airfields and docks to ser-

vice all the sea and air fleets we shall need there. In the central Pacific, the Hawaiian group of islands bristle with every conceivable installation of war. The Gilberts and the Marshalls are ours, and it was the Seabees who helped convert Tarawa, Kwajalein and Eniwetok into bristling naval hedgehogs; into armed filling stations to service the vast one-way parade toward Tokyo.

The 10,000-mile road through the South Pacific has reached up through the Solomons and on out to Hollandia in New Guinea. Ironically, the nearer we get to Japan the easier becomes the task of the Seabees. It's easier to repair an air strip than it is to build a new one. These American craftsmen who are so superior to the Japs can take advantage of the work which the Japs have done. The faster and farther we go, the more Jap supplies and equipment we capture.

The Philippines and China appear to be the two principal remaining spots where large construction will be needed. Many Seabee battalions may have to be poured into the Philippines, but they will be aided by thousands of willing native workers, many of whom are skilled by American standards. On the China coast American brain and Chinese brawn will create the plant from which our air and surface fleets can batter the life out of the Japanese monster.

Back down the long roads that they have built, the Seabees can look with the satisfaction of free men who have done a big job voluntarily and well. They are men who have asked little, given much. They have asked only for the privilege of serving their country; for the right to be well led by intelligent and courageous men; for the opportunity of working and staying busy and "getting on with the goddam war." Of all the men in

the service, the Seabees are the ones who have the least patience with *snafu* and *tarfu*; with delay and incompetence. They are the happiest men in the service when they are at work on purposeful jobs; they are the most rebellious when they are made to feel that they are wasting their time.

Because the Seabees are civilians with the thinnest veneer of military training, they have been completely free of service jealousy. They have never cared who was working with them or whom they were fighting beside, so long as they were getting on with the job. They have worked beside black men in Africa, brown men in Samoa, white men from Canada, Australia and the British Isles. They have worn Army gear, Navy gear, Marine gear—or native breech cloths—and they have died alongside flyers, sailors and infantrymen. Wherever there has been a gun to pick up or a shovel to put into action, the Seabee has grabbed it and asked no questions.

A few labor unions may have appeared selfish and injudicious on the home front, but the 200,000 union men in the Seabees have impressed every observer with their unselfishness and enthusiasm. The only demand they have made has been for speed and devotion to duty; to "get on with the job so we can go home."

Somewhere in the South Pacific there is a 20-ton bulldozer called "Old Faithful." It's a battered old monster who has butted down a thousand trees and moved several mountains of earth. A half-dozen Seabee battalions have had "Old Faithful" at one time or other. Six different islands have groaned under the big treads. Scores of Seabee mechanical doctors have tinkered with "Old Faithful's" innards, improvised parts and held the monster together

with spit and baling wire.

The Seabees have only one request. When they land in Tokyo, they want "Old Faithful" to roll down the ramp of the first landing boat. They want to drive "Old Faithful" through the rubble of Japan's "Fifth Avenue." Then, after they have paraded through the streets of Tokyo, the Seabees want to go back down to the beach and act as welcome committee for the Marines.

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