

Bougainville Diary: The Naval Construction Battalion First Marine Amphibious Corps (53rd Seabees) on Bougainville

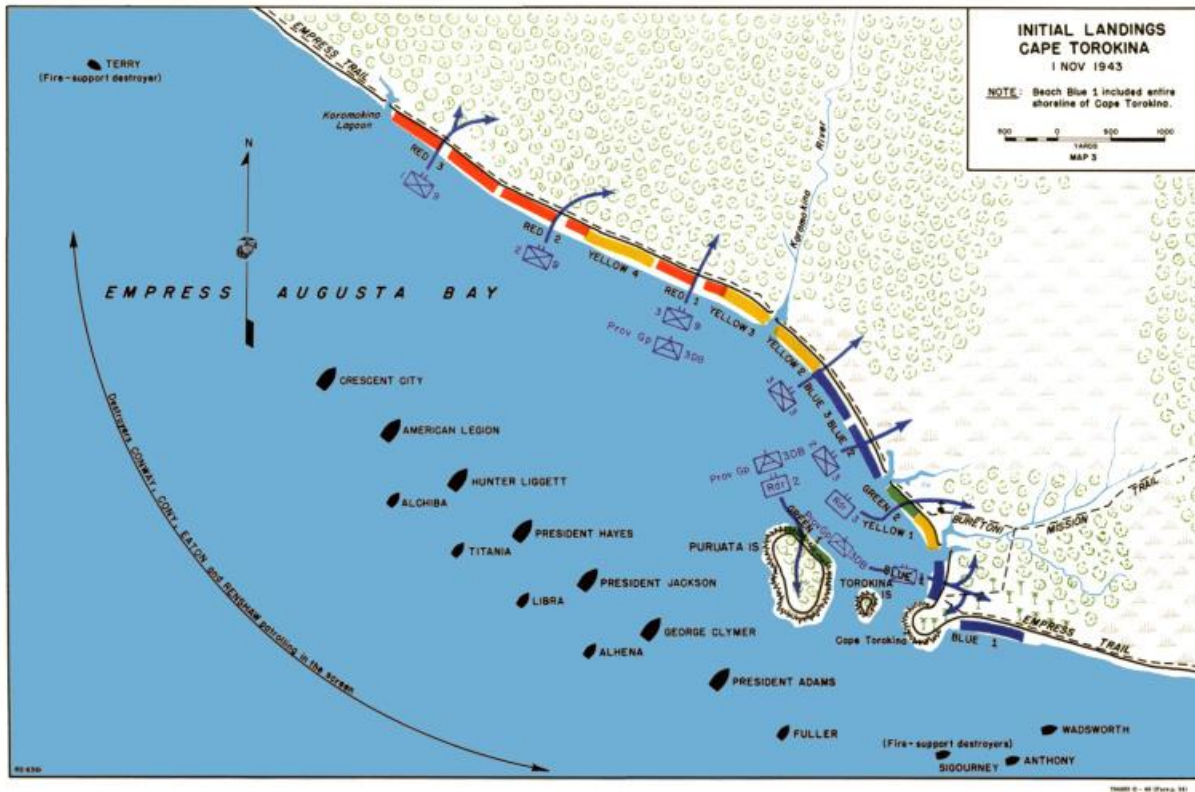
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While the Seabees were formed, in great part, to support the Marines as they moved across the Pacific, several battalions became intimately linked with the Marine units they fought with. One of these units was the 53rd Naval Construction Battalion, or as it became known, the Naval Construction Battalion First Amphibious Corps. This blog will discuss the months the 53rd spent on the island of Bougainville, and will use many pictures from their unit's cruise book to help tell their story.



Map showing the landing beaches along Empress Augusta Bay on the island of Bougainville on D-Day, Nov 1, 1943

On November 1, 1943, the entire First Marine Amphibious Corps, Seabees included, stormed the beaches of Empress Augusta Bay on the Japanese held island of Bougainville. According to the unit's official record: "Two hundred and Forty-four men, the Officer in Charge, seven other officers and one bulldozer landed in the second wave with the Second Raider Battalion on Beach Green 2." While these men spent the day unloading supplies from the USS *George Clymer* (APA-27), the other members of the 53rd who had landed on other beaches, unloaded supplies and hastily built defensive positions for the Marines on the beach. As the fighting intensified, other Seabees volunteered to serve as stretcher bearers carrying wounded Marines to safety as their comrades in arms continued the fight.



Seabees onboard their Higgin's Boat ready to assault their landing beach



Seabees unload ammunition for the Marines



Seabees unload rations and place them onto sleds to move them off the beach



Seabees load wounded Marines onto landing craft for transport back to the waiting fleet

The main task of the Seabees, though, was clearing paths through the jungle and building roads for the Marines moving inland from the invasion beaches. The main road from Empress Augusta Bay to the front lines was named "Marine Drive" and was "dedicated, with deep affection, To our very good friends, the fighting Marines." Once the Marines had moved far enough inland, the Seabees began the construction of two airfields for fighters and one for bombers to provide air cover for the forces on the island.



Clearing a path off the beach for the Marines



Clearing the jungle to construct "Marine Drive"



"Marine Drive" nears completion



Clearing of the jungle for the Torokina Point Airfield



Grading the aircraft apron



Laying down Marston matting

Among other tasks the Seabees completed were: "(1) Construction of operational dugouts for First Amphibious Corps." (Numbered among these was the elaborate one built for the personal use of Admiral Halsey.) (2) Hauling ammunition and rations on trailers to the front lines, until relieved of this duty by the Third [Marine] Division. (3) Start of development of a coral pit on Torokina Point. (4) Construction of emergency operating tent and hospital ward for Third

Defense Battalion Medical Officer, and the loan to him of the assistance of two Battalion medical officers and several corpsmen to care for Raider casualties during the first ten days.”



Air shelter for Admiral Halsey, Commander South Pacific Area, built by the 53rd Seabees

While the members of the 53rd Seabees that took part in the invasion of Bougainville faced “81 enemy air alerts in which enemy planes were overhead and bombs were dropped”, and enemy artillery, mortar, and sniper fire, they also enjoyed a Christmas meal. As stated in the official record: “the galley crews outdid themselves in an effort to transfer a little spot of home to our bleak, muddy foxholes. There was turkey-a-plenty... and an impromptu entertainment furnished by the more talented members of the Battalion!”



The Seabees initial camp shortly after the invasion



Resting near one of their "bleak, muddy foxholes"



Christmas turkeys



The Battalion Commanding Officer inspects the chow line while the men wait to get their Christmas meal



The men of the 53rd sit down to enjoy a well-earned Christmas feast

The men of the Naval Construction Battalion 1st MAC would end their time on Bougainville in the middle of January, 1944. They would be sent to the rear and set up camp on Guadalcanal to prepare for their next mission, the invasion of Guam.



A famous image of the war in the Pacific of a sign erected along "Marine Drive" on Bougainville