

SEABEE'S

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STEVEDORES

The Japs had their strategy for Pearl Harbor carefully worked out. They would swoop down on the warships at Pearl Harbor and before we could get up they would overtake all the strategic bases in the central, south and west Pacific areas. Under their iron boot heels they would drive all the natives of Guam, the Solomons, the Philippines, and other islands so that the U.S. could not use them to extend our supply lines. They would finally come to the United States to dictate the peace in the White House.

That's what the Japanese master minds figured on. And that's where they went wrong. One reason for their failure was that we uncovered an amazing, two-fisted organization of cargo handlers - stevedore battalions, each as big as the construction battalions which were formed to build bases on far-flung fighting fronts, and each determined to build a supply line as strong as the chain of factories which fed it.

In nearly every Pacific port we entered, whether under fire or not, the Seabee stevedores were on hand to unload ship cargo and move supplies from one place to another for the men who

got the medals. When the Japanese tried to gobble up the rest of the islands between Australia and Alaska, they were held back by the supplies that the wily Japanese war monger had been confident we could never bring ashore far from home in time to defeat them.

Future historians, weighing one organization against another, may well consider hereafter the part played by the Navy's stevedore battalions in WW II. These battalions worked mostly in the Pacific since the Navy could not use stevedore battalions in any U.S. port where civilian stevedores were available.

The Seabee stevedores organization began months later than the Construction Battalions. In October, 1942, the Navy's assistant chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, Rear Admiral Lewis B. Combs (C.E.C), U. S. Navy, telephoned a Bull Steamship Line Official in Philadelphia. The conversation was brief. If the telephone girl had her ear to the connection, she would have heard only an affirmative answer to the question: "Can you come down to Washington and have a talk with us about a new organization in the Navy to handle unloading of ships in combat zones."

The person who walked into Admiral Combs' office at the Navy Department the following day was a medium, well-built, 45-year-old man named S. Edward Mittler. Most of his years had been devoted to handling cargo at the docks and piers of Philadelphia, including a hitch in a stevedore regiment in WW I. Admiral Combs received the stevedoring expert with grave courtesy and outlined the serious bottleneck of supplies in the South Pacific.

Actually the outcome is history. Mittler was commissioned in the Civil Engineering Corps and set to work to build an organization of approximately 40,000 men and 1,350 officers, including 41 special battalions.

At the time he undertook the organizing job it took several weeks to unload a ship at an advance base. There were no skilled native dock workers at advanced bases. Unloading supplies from a ship at a marshy edge of some jungle-covered island without piers, cranes, and warehouses was no easy job. Nor was it easy to keep the ship's hook moving with Jap Zeros swooping down on their necks.

Another problem was the long-range use of modern aircraft and submarines in sinking supply ships as well as other ships. The success of the supply line depended on fast unloading of cargo at the war fronts and getting the ships out of the firing area before they were destroyed.

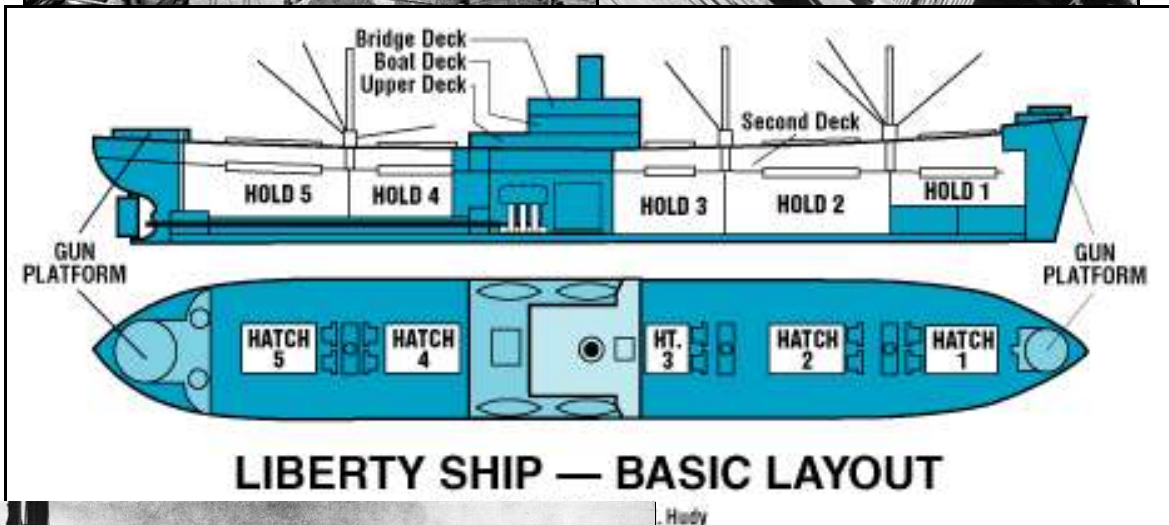
This was the monumental task which confronted Commander Mittler and the stevedore battalions late in 1942. Mittler quickly surrounded himself with men of practical experience in loading and unloading vessels from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Savannah, New Orleans, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and other busy ports. He also called in experts who had learned how to operate all special equipment which was required in wartime stevedoring.

Recruiting and training men was another problem. There were not enough stevedores and longshoremen wearing the emblem of a flying bee with a white sailor's hat perched on its head, a Tommy Gun in its fore legs, a wrench in one hand and a carpenter's hammer in the other. More stevedores were needed - tough-muscled men who knew something of the art.

Because of the lack of skilled stevedores, the Bureau of Yards and Docks began training country boys, store clerks, mill labors, and general roustabouts for special stevedoring



battalions early in January, 1943, at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Virginia. Captain Henry R. Patterson - sometimes called the daddy of stevedores - came out of retirement to organize and train the stevedore battalions there. The recruits went through 12 weeks of close and extended order drill like infantrymen so that they could use a rifle, throw grenades, or aim an A.A. gun at attacking planes when the occasion demanded.



Seabee officers also took 12 weeks of basic training. For the first four weeks they were trained separately from enlisted men, getting an intensive course in military drill, tactics, and regulations. At the end of that period the officers were assigned to the battalion that they were to lead overseas and completed their grounding in military organization.

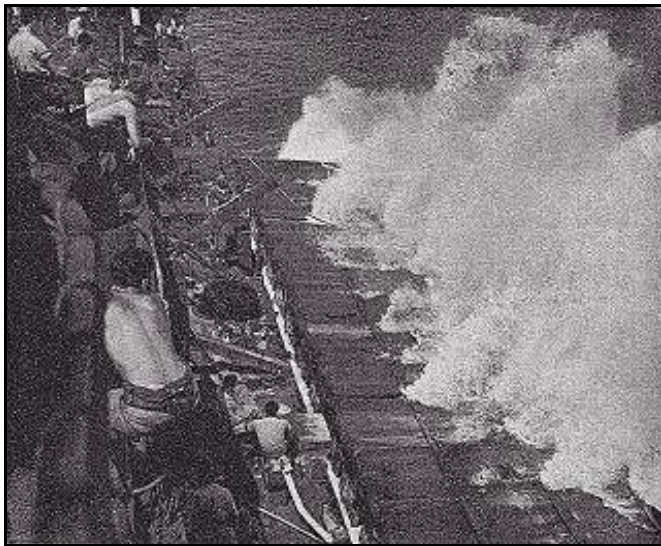
When the "Can Do" battalions completed their basic training, they were ready for work overseas. But not

the stevedoring battalions, for they had to know how to load and unload vessels efficiently and rapidly. Two wooden ships, models of a Liberty ship, [above] complete in ever detail of deck machinery - holds, cargo booms, wildcats, winches, and other stevedoring gear - were built at Peary to train the new comers. This would-be stevedores handled everything from bags of flour to tanks, planes, tanker trailers, including drums, barrels, boxes, and large pieces of machinery, until they knew practically every way of unloading and loading the models.

The cargo handlers also learned to use winches, booms, sling nets, fork trucks, and other machines. They learned to protect cargo. They hoisted all kinds of cargo in and out of the holds with the same type of winches and booms found on Liberty ships. Some even learned to make net slings, wire straps, and similar things as though they had been at it for years.

In the meantime one officer and four enlisted men from each platoon went to New York for four weeks of training in up-to-date methods of handling cargo. There they found a complete model of a Liberty ship, smaller than the “dry-land” models at Camp Peary, but whose sides were cut away to show the stowage of pocket-sized tanks, aerial bombs, oil drums in her holds. The model was named after Andrew A. Nelson, president of T. Hogan & Sons, Inc., who, with years of experience in pier management in the Port of New York, gave much of his time to train officers and men in cargo handling at the Navy’s Stevedoring School, Pier 59, in New York.

Under the Supervision of the Advanced Base training Section of New York Port Director’s Office, the Stevedoring School, started in a river front gear ship, had supplemented the tricks learned at Camp Peary. The SS Nelson, 27 feet long and 43 inches wide, had a scale model of a cargo gear in running order to show the students how the cargo is moved, in proper sequence, from the pier to the deck under combat conditions.



Unloading barges so as they can be loaded to land much needed supplies.

Those from the stevedore battalions became familiar with handling Liberty ship gear in harbors lacking proper facilities and using pontoon barges to land supplies. In case a Liberty ship were to arrive at an advance base with shattered hoisting gear, the Seabee hook-men were able to rig emergency booms to take the place of damaged equipment and to set up tractors for hoisting power if the freighter had no steam up.

Out on the piers where real Liberty ships were being loaded with supplies for our fighting forces overseas the stevedore wonders saw at first hand how to get the most into a vessel, how to stow the cargo safely and how to put it aboard in the correct order, according to its immediate

use at an advanced base.

Nothing was left out of the training of these stevedore battalions, but the training time of the First Special Battalions, as the Navy officially called the stevedore groups, was scanty. When, in December, 1942, some experienced stevedores and longshoremen turned up at Camp Peary for service with construction battalions they were yanked into the First Special with several

hundred other Seabee's who knew a little bit about stevedoring and embarked in tow echelons for Guadalcanal.

The situation at Guadalcanal threatened to cut the Marines off without food, ammunition, medicine, or reinforcements. The Japs particularly swarmed over ships where they found big hooks swinging up from the holds lifting precious cargo over the side to waiting barges. This meant that when a Liberty ship or a supply ship dropped her hook too long and nothing was done to unload her, she was a hazard to navigation and harbor operations. Then out of the dark, like a miracle, came a long line of tough, agile, bulldozing, sling-handling stevedores singing "Keep the hook moving."

The song was taken up by the Second, Third, and Fourth Special battalions which swept into the harbors of Guadalcanal on the heels of the First Special. They went to work to straighten out of jammed beaches. Keep the hook moving!

Within a matter of weeks, in spite of enemy bombing, ugly weather, and the chain of delays that naturally come in the stress of island warfare, the Seabee stevedores took cargo at high speed from a ship lying in a harbor and brought it to trucks on the beaches. Their efforts helped turn the tide of one of the most strategic battles in the Pacific.

In April, 1944, when the First Special was ordered to Auckland, New Zealand, for rehabilitation, 28 Special battalions of stevedores were handling cargo on 16 islands. This indication that the Special battalions were a well-traveled group of cargo handlers is given in a Seabee story a few weeks after V-J Day:

They humped cargo from Pearl to Japan, kept K-rations, beer and ammunition flowing from base to ship to the beachhead. ConBat stevedores swung the Big Hook in torrid heat and bitter cold; they hauled under fire, went in with combat troops, came out just as bruised and tired.

The fact that they got the goods up front and yet missed the medals awarded other outfits is typical of ship-to-shore stevedores. One seaman, Patrick Donnahue, of the Fifth Special which first operated in the Aleutians and later in the Philippines, was hauling depth charges in his truck when flames suddenly enveloped the gas tank. The seaman peeled off his parka as quick as a matador throwing a cloak in a bull's way and beat the flames with the parka until the fire was put out.

"The whole thing took a minute," said Leslie M. Kerrison, CBM, who witnessed the scene. "It was over so quickly that I didn't even walk over. It wasn't until a few minutes later



that my knees gave way and I had to sit down as I suddenly realized what a terrible catastrophe would have followed if Donnahue had obeyed a natural impulse - and run away.”

Later at sick bay where Donnahue was getting his burned arm dressed, the Chief proposed turning in the seaman’s name for a possible reward.

“Forget it, Chief,” Donnahue shrugged.

On September 15, the 17th Special, 500 strong, moved in an hour behind the famed First Marine Division on the beaches at Peleliu. This was the first time that a Special stormed a Jap island stronghold almost at the crack of the opening gun. It was also at this beach that the stevedores learned that just about everything can happen to them.

With the approach of D-day plus two, the First Marines got bad news. The Japs planned to make a stand at what was called Bloody Nose Ridge. A Marine sergeant, head of a demolition platoon, pushed through a moldy, wet, and soggy jungle and came to the ridge near an embattled airfield. Around the ridge he saw several caves with hot muzzles pointing out of them. The platoon was pinned down by fire. Finally the sergeant found himself short of men.

He crawled through the jungle alone and brought back a Seabee stevedore who had just finished unloading ammunition. He gave the dock walloper an automatic rifle and directed him to fire the rifle into the mouth of a cave until he got back.

The rifle was new to the stevedore, but he kept his finger on the trigger. The Marine sergeant slipped around the cave, planted a charge of dynamite and returned to find the stevedore’s gun still smoking. The stevedore rejoined his platoon after watching the cave blow up, only to find the other stevedores acting as stretcher-bears and ammunition carriers for the hard-pressed Marines.

The entire 17th Special was double-duty conscious. The men who carried ammunition to the firing line and returned with stretcher bases later boasted, “We’re the only guys who can tell it to the Marines.” They fought side by side with the Marines in the forward positions, but they had to “hang the hook” to do it.

The stevedores had all kinds of experiences on the mud-clogged, coral-strewn islands of the Pacific. On one occasion, in less than two hours, 34 men unloaded 700 tons of cargo from an LST and shot down two Jap planes. Another detail at Leyte underwent aerial bombing, strafing, and torpedo attacks for 17 days while their ship lay off the assault beaches.

On still another island a stevedore battalion moved two 32-foot water towers overnight through city streets where telephone wires left a clearance of only 15 feet. How did they move the towers? Six stevedores, with wire snippers in their hands, rode on top of the first tower and snipped the wires that were in the way. On the after tank were half a dozen wire splicers ready to join the cut wires.

The Okinawa operation, however, stands out in the story of stevedore battalions. It climaxed 27 months of combat cargo handling. No operation juggles so many stevedoring problems as Okinawa did.

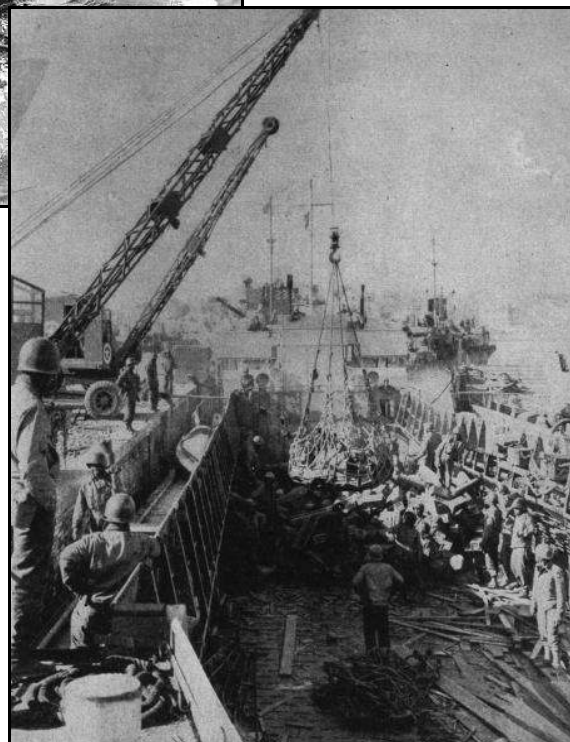
During the three months of the campaign seven stevedore battalions handled over 2,000,000 tons of munitions and supplies. If all of this cargo were split in three parts, the streams would surpass the cargo handled at the wharves and modern terminal facilities of Boston, Philadelphia, and Galveston, Texas, for the same period. The mountain of freight, enough to fill a train stretching from New York to Miami, was unloaded in spite of Kamikaze attacks, typhoons and ugly weather and bad roads.

The story of how the freight was juggled is more interesting than any list of statistics. To

begin with, Okinawa, about 360 miles from the Japanese home islands, was nearer than any previous operation to the Nipponese war machine. The Japs could chew on the supply line as often as they came around. That's why Okinawa should be of incalculable value to future logistics students.

The 11th Special was the first battalion assigned to Okinawa. On Easter Sunday, 1945, the 1010 men and 34 officers of the 11th Special, divided into 90 ship gangs, arrived at Okinawa and carried on unloading operations on the western beaches. Several weeks later, sometime in May, stevedores of the 3, 4, 12, 23, 27, and 36 Specials began arriving for the biggest logistics operation of the war.

The growing supply problems were not easy to solve. The stevedores were forced, as in other operations, to land the cargo over reefs and open beaches by means of landing craft and barges. Once they hit the end of the water route, the stevedores had to truck the cargo to the right supply depots.

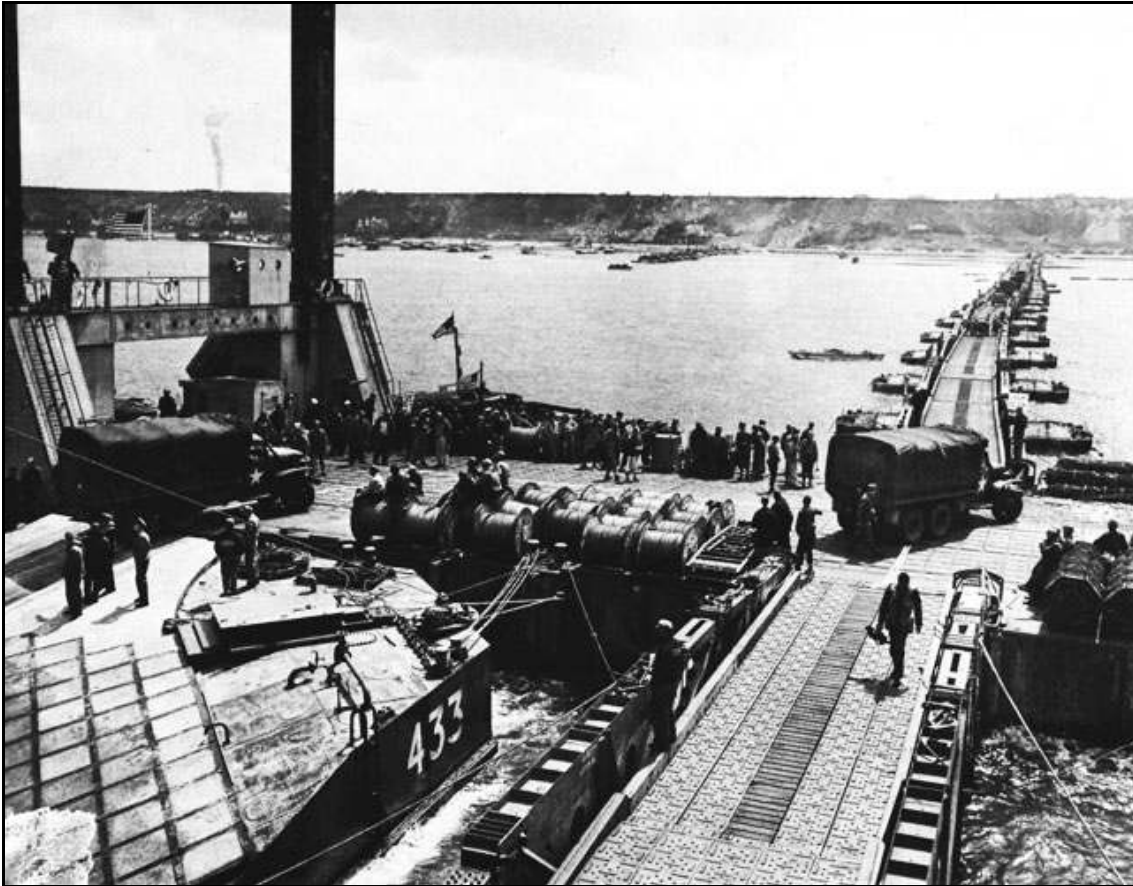


That was where the juggling came in. Since the Navy, Army, and Marines were in on this operation, the stevedores could not possibly know what supplies were destined for whom. To prevent any rough spots in handling the freight, the only thing to do was to co-ordinate the stevedoring, lighterage and trucking services.

The plan, set in operation about June 1, 1945, was called the Joint Freight Handling Facilities and had a number of advantages. It created a single authority under Commodore Francis M. McCarthy, who led the First Special down at Guadalcanal more than two years before, to take over the handling of cargo between the

ships' holds and the consignees' depots ashore, including the work of getting the cargo to the beach and trucking it to the supply dumps.

Under JFHF there were full-time liaison officers and their staffs from all branches of the armed forces. Even Red Cross field directors were included. All worked closely together and because of this no barges, small boats, trucks, and cranes were improperly taken away from the job of unloading cargo.



But the amazing thing is not that in one of the largest operations of the war the different services got what they had coming, barring ship sinkings. The amazing thing is that in spite of bombing, muddy roads, and other hazards of war the goods were delivered to the foxholes. For the delivery of food and supplies to the troops on the necks of the enemy required a lot of behind-the-scenes planning. It was something to work out the functions of the Joint Freight Handling Facilities and see that everyone did his part to make them work.

One of the most important functions was to determine from advance copies of manifests the final destination of all cargo before it arrived at Okinawa. The information was passed on to all the facilities so that they could get the cargo out of the waterways before the Japs had a chance to send their planes over. Depots and dumps were prepared to receive the cargo as fast as possible from barges, small boats, and trucks.

Each outfit had its own troubleshooter to trace and expedite its own cargo. The central freight handlers took care of all inquiries from units of their type of service in order to prevent confusion and duplication of effort. Finally officers familiar with their type of material, supplies,

and equipment advised the hatch bosses in order to prevent the stevedores from breaking or damaging anything.

The plan paid off. In June, when the Joint Freight Handling Facilities first began to operate, the war in the hills of Okinawa had bogged down in heavy rains. Fortunately because the stevedores had unloaded 706,860 tons of cargo from 373 ships in the first part of the campaign, the troops had enough supplies behind their lines to take care of an army twice their size.

But despite the heavy rains the troops had advanced considerable distances and the roads were impassable. A new and complete supply system had to be devised almost overnight. That is just what JFHF did.

If improvisations give you a headache, just imagine the difficulties of the Okinawa stevedoring officers. It was not easy to rush ammunition across a valley of heavy mud to an artillery squad so that the artillerymen could have enough powder to fire at the Japs. Cargo ships were emptied of their wares at selected beaches, as close to the troops as possible, and weighted anchored with casualties and natives caught in the path of the advancing troops.

The stevedores, working in gangs of 10 to 15, reloaded the cargo from one type of amphibious craft to another until the ammunition reached the shore batteries. They could do it in no other way.

Even when they won a port with modern docks like Naha, the capital of Okinawa, the stevedores stuck to the practice



Just one of 100's of Liberty's that was 'stuffed' with supplies for the troops...from socks, chewing gum, food, beer....all the way down to toothpicks

they developed early in the war of unloading ships offshore. The large, oval-shaped harbor of Naha could hold 50 or 60 ships at a time. Out in the stream with their booms out, the ships could unload their goods from holds 1, 3, and 5 on the starboard side and from holds 2 and 4 on the port side on self-propelled barges.

The cranes on the piers, in turn, were used to unload the barges.

Although this method required more men to handle the freight, it discharged more cargo than if the ships had tried to warp into a berth. It would take 600 feet of pier frontage to unload three average Liberty ships whereas out in the stream the small craft could do the job without limitations of space. Instead of unloading three ships at the same time as they would have to do by docking the ships, the stevedores could unload as many ships as there were out in the harbor without worrying about mooring lines and space.

Then, too, there were the Japs to worry about. The cargo handlers hated Jap planes which halted operations and dispersed ships and lighters, creating delays and confusion, but in July they sensed that everything before merely had been a grim preliminary. Two typhoons completely halted unloading for nearly six days while the ships sought the safety of the open seas. Despite these delays, the Joint Freight Handling Facilities were still able to meet all demands for supplies. In June alone more than 613, 200 tons of cargo were unloaded.

Supplies which weren't as important as food and ammunition, such as construction to build base facilities, were unloaded last. The ships usually dropped their anchors nearest to the depots that would take most of their cargo. It was not practical to shift a ship from place to place to unload parts of her cargo except during the month of June when the cargo had to be spotted for various tactical forces.

Surveying the entire stevedoring operation at Okinawa, Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, commanding general of the 14th Army Corps, was extremely pleased. "Logistically, Okinawa imposed burdens upon the service forces such as never before encountered in the Pacific.....yet the troops were supplied better than in any other campaign."

When the word was finally flashed over the radio on August 14 to cease all firing....the order had not stopped the work of the stevedore Specials. The job of rolling up bases occupied their time until they piled up enough points to go back to civilian life. As the size of the battalions shrunk, the low-point men were transferred to other battalions.

And so now you can have some idea of what went on 'behind' the troops....every bullet, every meal, every thing that it took to keep our man in those foxholes ready and able to fight had to be sent over by ships....man-handled and assembled as well as delivered to where it was needed by the Seabee stevedores.....what a job they did!!!!

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