



THE UNKNOWN 'BEE-29S' of World War II

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A tiny and fairly flat coral island 75 miles north of Guam, Tinian is about the same size and shape as Manhattan. As soon as U.S. forces captured it in August 1944, Seabees created a system of roads in the same grid pattern as Manhattan.

In order to transport the huge quantities of bombs and supplies up from the port at the southern end of the island, a divided four-lane highway—appropriately named “Broadway”—was built. The Bees gave the roads other typical New York names, such as 8th Avenue and 86th Street.

The main north-south road, Broadway, ran parallel to the other main north-south road, 8th Avenue. The eerie coincidence that Tinian had streets named after streets in Manhattan, New York, reportedly had no connection with the Manhattan Project atomic bomb development, although personnel involved in the project were stationed on Tinian.

Tinian became an ideal B-29 “Superfortress” base for World War II. As spoils of war go, four captured runways and bountiful coral construction resources made the island an outstanding catch. In their “Can Do!” manner, Seabees in jungle green fatigues with uplifted tropical baseball caps swarmed over the island expanse of coral and cane fields to carve out the huge airbases necessary for the

new bombers.

Seabees of the Sixth Naval Construction Brigade (6NCB), consisting of 12 battalions commanded by Commodore Paul James Halloran, Civil Engineer Corps, USN, soon built the largest airport then in the world. Tinian’s B-29 airport consisted of North Field and West Field. North Field had about 13 miles of taxiways and runways and West Field was only a fraction smaller. Tinian’s runway construction measured from 425 to 500 feet wide with the then unheard of runway lengths of up to 8,500-plus feet.

Battalion builders hauled, blasted and packed down enough coral to fill three times the volume of Hoover Dam. They built six huge B-29 bomber strips, each a mile and one half long and a block wide, along with miles of taxiways and hardstands sufficient to park 400 aircraft.

The thousands of Seabees on Tinian operated all types of construction equipment, including asphalt plants to pave the airstrips. Seabee equipment was kept busy 20 hours a day while their maintenance crews worked to repair bulldozers, shovels, trucks and other equipment damaged as a result of the rough construction activity. Sharp and abrasive coral was especially damaging to tires and work shoes. In typical Seabee fashion, one innovative construction

crew had a Marine tank team fire armor-piercing shells into the side of a hill so that dynamite charges could be placed to break up the coral.

In addition to the airfields, Bees put up Quonset huts and a wide variety of service buildings—including the shop in which the first atomic bombs were assembled. Every airstrip was completed on time and none required more than 53 days to build.

Not long after the arrival of Air Force B-29s, a special comradeship developed between Seabees and Airmen. Many Seabee battalions would adopt an aircraft by officially painting their logo and name on the B-29’s nose. The quality of life for the crew of the plane then would improve considerably—because the Seabees provided the crews of “their” Superfortresses with better Quonset huts, washing machines, better mattresses, ice cream, cold beer and other comforts of life.

Camps on Tinian were constructed to house up to 50,000 U.S. troops, and about 1.2 million pounds of crops were produced, all of which were consumed on the island. By August 1945, a year after construction started, Tinian was the largest airbase in the world and accommodated nearly 450 B-29s.

Arrival of *USS Indianapolis* (CA-35) on July 26, 1945, marked the delivery of the radioactive components for one of the new and highly secret atomic bombs. The ship anchored 1,000 yards off the shore of Tinian and Seabees of the 6NCB helped with the unloading of the components of the secret weapons.

The Seabees stored the elements in a shed they built and organized a detachment to guard the shed and its mysterious contents. Atomic scientists assembled the weapon in the shed with several Seabees assisting. ☉