

black boots, and garrison-type caps cocked over one ear, waved and yelled at the Marines as the American ships tied up at the quay. A few British officers also in battle dress but with peaked caps, swagger sticks, and gleaming leather walked along the quay examining the ships and their Marine passengers. British officers came on board to welcome the Marines and in due course departed with some of the senior brigade staff to confer about landing plans, camp areas, and missions. The cargo ships and the 5th Defense Battalion had to unload at the quays, so the troop ships moved out in the harbor, from where they landed Marine style over a small rocky beach named



National Archives Photo 127-N-528662

The 5th Defense Battalion unloads supplies from landing craft tied up at the quay.

The Marines coming ashore from the transports appeared to be a motley crew wearing mixed uniforms and carrying odd personal baggage The British soldiers didn't know what to make of the spectacle. But to be safe, they saluted all Marines who wore the peaked caps and neckties their own officers wore.

Sketch by the author in the Marine Corps Historical Art Collection



"Balbo" using Higgins boats and a few tank lighters.

The Marines coming ashore from the transports appeared to be a motley crew wearing mixed uniforms and carrying odd personal baggage. Some wore service caps and some wore broad-brimmed campaign hats. Others were in working party blue coveralls, and still others in greens. Some Marines toted sea bags. Some had rifle-cleaning rods stuck in rifle barrels and strung with rolls of toilet paper, some carried their good blouses on coat hangers hooked to their rifles. The British soldiers didn't know what to make of the spectacle. But to be safe, they saluted all Marines who wore peaked caps and neckties because that is what their own officers wore.

One detail the British neglected to discuss with the Marines was the matter of tides in northern latitudes and neither the U.S. Navy nor the Marine planners seemed to be aware of the 14-foot tide which almost washed the landing force back from its small stony landing beach into the cold Arctic seas.

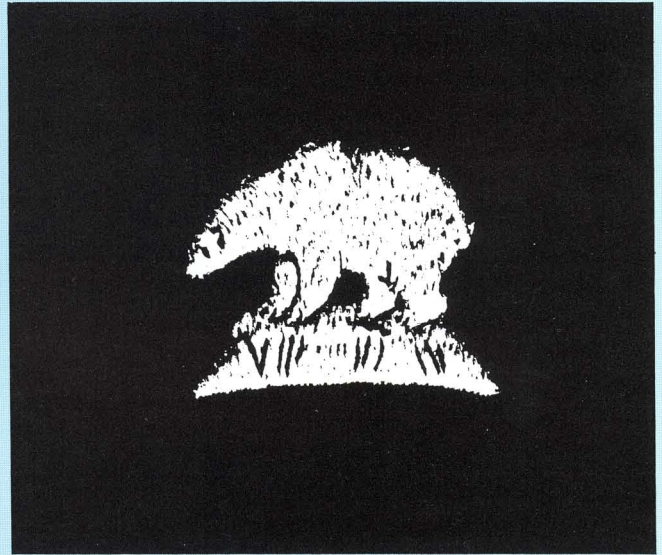
Marines unloaded the ships by manhandling bulk cargo, equipment, and ammunition from holds into cargo nets which were lowered into the

Polar Bear Patch

When British Major General Henry O. Curtis, commander of the British force's 79th Division, suggested that the 1st Brigade wear the 79th's Polar Bear shoulder patch, *The "Polar Bear" patch worn on the shoulders of the sergeants was the British 79th Division's unit insignia adopted by 1st Marine Brigade. The fourrageres on the sergeants' left shoulders were worn by the 5th and 6th Marines.*



General Marston agreed. It was worn on each shoulder and was a distinctive insignia the brigade took back when it returned to California in 1942.



landing craft alongside by the ships' large booms. The boats then ran the short distance to shore where Marine working parties again unloaded the cargo by hand and carried it up onto the beach. Because the Marines had few trucks, they were almost completely dependent upon Royal Army Service Corps two-ton lorries (trucks) to move supplies and equipment to destinations inland. It all went slowly and within hours the tide began to overtake the unloading. The sea came in and inundated the beaches and Marine supplies. Soon cardboard containers of rations, wool shirts, equipment, and supplies were awash or drifting out into the stream.

It took a few days to salvage and dry out some of the gear. Regimental supplies and equipment coming into Balbo beach became mixed and piled up in great confusion. The value of the few tank lighters was apparent and the need for a ramp at the bow of the LCPs was also evident. Motorized material-handling equipment, palletized cargo, and weatherproof packing were in the future.

Despite the problems with the tide

and the narrow beach, the unloading proceeded around the clock. In four days the Marines manhandled and moved 1,500 tons of supplies and equipment from the three transports over the beach and into lorries and to the battalions' assigned camps, some as far away as 15 miles.

The question of command relations had surfaced early in the top-level discussions. The British desired that the brigade be placed under their direct command because they had the major force and its commander was senior to General Marston. But Admiral Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations, had reservations about attaching the Marines to the army of a nation at war while the U.S. was still ostensibly neutral. Subsequently, General Marston's orders read that he would coordinate his operations "with the defense operations of the British by the method of mutual cooperation" while reporting directly to the CNO.

When British Major General Henry O. Curtis suggested that the Marines wear the British forces' 79th Division Polar Bear shoulder patch,

General Marston accepted for the Marines. "The mutual cooperation directive was working to the entire satisfaction of the British Commander and the Brigade. The British complied with our requests and we complied with theirs. It was as simple as that. Our reception by the British has been splendid," General Marston reported to the Major General Commandant on 11 July. "They [the British] have placed at our disposal all of their equipment and have rationed us for ten days to cover the period of disembarkation." The Marine brigade would wear the 79th Division's polar-bear shoulder patch with considerable pride. The 79th Division's commander, General Curtis, became popular with the Marines of all ranks by a display of simple leadership and genuine interest in Marine activities, including trying his hand in their softball games.

A special board of officers established by the brigade shortly after its arrival estimated the Germans had varied capabilities to threaten the security of Iceland. They could attempt an amphibious or airborne at-

tack, they could bomb Allied forces and installations, or they could conduct some limited raids from the sea. However, the planning board judged that as long as the British Home Fleet maintained superiority in the seas north of Scotland and areas east of Iceland, the Germans would be unable to support any sizable or prolonged offensive against the Iceland base.

The Marine brigade's mission was two-fold: the British division commander designated the 6th Marines (Reinforced), as a "mobile force" for use at any point along the winding coastal road leading from Reykjavik to the naval base at Hvalfjordur. The 5th Defense Battalion served as an air defense unit with the mission of protecting the city, the harbor, and the airfield from German attack.

Brigade headquarters was established in the same camp where the

Dear Old Baldurshagi

(Sung to "Roll Out the Barrel")

Dear old Baldurshagi,
 Oh! what a hell of a dump.
 Rocks and hills all craggy,
 Stulkas [Icelandic women] to slap on
 the rump.
 If we ever leave here,
 Our thoughts will wander once more,
 Thoughts of building Montezuma,
 On Iceland's chilly shore.

6th Marines headquarters was located—Camp Lumley near Reykjavik. Further up the road, the 1st Battalion occupied two adjacent camps, Victoria Park and Camp MacArthur, about 10 miles from Reykjavik. The camps were near the Varma River, which was unique because its waters were hot, with a temperature of about 90 degrees. It was fed from hot springs nearby and afforded the Marines a warm swimming hole.

The 2d Battalion was located at Camp Baldurshagi, near the regimental headquarters. This was an attractive camp in a rocky valley with a stream feeding into a nearby river stocked with salmon. The Icelanders maintained strict fishing rights but the Marines were constantly tempted to cast a line.

In late September, the 3d Battalion was moved to Camp Brauterholt, which was on a wet, rugged, rocky peninsula located near the entrance of Hvalfjordur, the long, deep naval base fjord. The naval base anchorage was a key feature of the Iceland defense area. It was located some 45 miles up the jagged coast from Reykjavik and was surrounded by bleak high mountains with no civilian houses nearby. The entrance to the fjord was closed by a submarine net and gate tended by a small British naval vessel. The route leading north

Relations with the British

British officers frequently asked Marine officers to be guests for supper in their mess. The traditional "mess night" routine was usually followed. At the time it was new to most Marines, but in the years since World War II many Marine officers' messes have learned to enjoy a similar practice.

In Iceland, after sufficient drinks at the bar, the officers were piped, fified, or drummed to the dining table. They wore formal- or semi-formal dress, and were seated at a long table according to rank, with the senior ranking host and his senior guest at the head. The mess vice president sat at the foot. A good meal of several courses was served, then port wine was passed around in a decanter and all stood for toasts proposed and drunk to the King and then to President Roosevelt. The host usually made a few kind remarks about the Marines and the senior Marine would respond. If any cigars were available, they were passed around. Then all hands would retreat to the bar for songs, jokes, darts, gambling, and perhaps a bit of roughhouse. It was all very civilized and traditional, typically British.

The British were a happy influence on the Marines who picked up much of their Allies' amusing vernacular, traditional Army songs, and ability to find simple pleasures on foreign duty. The British Army had been serving in "hardship" places worldwide for several centuries. They knew how to make the best of it. Iceland Marines sang British Army songs at Marine club bars for years afterwards.

An officer of the Tyneside Scottish Regiment in service dress is shown with a 1st Marine Brigade officer. MajGen John Marston later reported to the Major General Commandant "our reception by the British has been splendid."

Sketch by the author in the Marine Corps Historical Art Collection





Deployment of 1st Provisional Marine Brigade in Iceland.

to the fjord consisted of a desolate, one-way gravel road with frequent turnouts for passing. Buggy tundra ran along the roadside for some stretches. One side of the road was flanked by water and the other side by steep mountain slopes. The British, worried about parachute attacks, had prepared road blocks at selected locations along the road with fortified strong points. Small garrisons had orders to hold out against any attack until reserves could arrive. When the 3d Battalion assumed this

mission, it posted a rifle platoon in a few huts at the key Saurbaer pass. A reinforced rifle company was also sent to the town of Akranes on the north side of the entrance to the fjord.

Camp Brauterholt was a small unfinished camp recently vacated by the British. At Brauterholt and the outposts there was no electricity and no plumbing, only open air heads and mud. The officers mess consisted of an Icelandic cow barn made partially livable by a British officer, a theater

designer in civilian life, who painted the barn's walls with scenes of an English village pub. With a large mess table and an adequate galley, it became a center of officer life in the camp.

Upon landing and offloading its equipment, the 5th Defense Battalion immediately coordinated with the British command and was integrated with the British defense forces around the port and airfield. The battalion command post was established at Camp Ontario and then moved to Camp Hilton in September. Within a week of landing, the battalion was training, establishing gun positions, and performing camp routines and maintenance.

In addition to its three batteries of 3-inch antiaircraft artillery and a battery of 36 .50-caliber heavy water-cooled, antiaircraft machine guns, the 5th operated a number of searchlights and three SCR 268-type radar sets which were most secret and closely guarded. These were the first radars employed by U.S. Marines in the field. No one was allowed near the large rotating, bed-spring-like units, and they remained too secret to even discuss.

With a strength of about 950 officers and enlisted Marines, the battalion was widely dispersed among a number of camps at their battery positions covering a considerable area. Battery personnel were located in some 10 small Nissen hut camps in the Reykjavik port and airfield defense sectors. The batteries supplied camp construction working parties which erected many of the Nissen huts and other camp and gun installations. Such construction projects continued until the battalion was redeployed back to the States.

During its time in Iceland, the defense battalion performed routine gun watches and training. With conditions of bitter cold, high winds, and extreme dampness, the maintenance of gun positions and standing at con-



National Archives Photo 127-G-524195

An aerial view of Camp Baldurshagi, campsite of 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, shows it set in the midst of nowhere and surrounded by barren terrain. Nonetheless, it was an attractive camp in a valley with a stream stocked with salmon.

tinuous gun watches became demanding tasks.

The British army camps taken over by the Marines had been purposely laid out in haphazard arrangements of the huts so that enemy air reconnaissance could not identify company or platoon areas. This complicated

billeting arrangements for the Marine units, for Marines had been accustomed to uniform, neat, and military camp designs, but in combat zones, they would learn to live in huts and tents dispersed in tactical groupings.

British units moving out left a few

officers and other ranks in each camp to assist the Marines in getting settled. The British troops enjoyed American rations so much that it was difficult to persuade them after a few days that their assistance was no longer needed.

The British veterans were properly

This cow barn at Camp Brauterholt was used as an officers' mess first by the British and then later by the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines. With a very large mess table and an adequate galley, it became the center of officer life in the camp.

Col Chester M. Craig Collection





Col Chester M. Craig Collection

The interior of the barn was decorated by a British officer, a talented and successful theater designer in civilian life, to resemble scenes of an English village pub.

concerned about the German capability of mounting air and parachute attacks. Iceland was well within range of German forces occupying Norway, and during the late summer months of long daylight the Germans sent lone reconnaissance planes high over the island on photo missions, usually before reveille on Sundays.

When the Germans flew over, warning sirens, bells, gongs, and whistles went off. Foggy Marines milled around, half dressed, as they donned helmets, gas masks, and their clothes and took up their arms. British anti-aircraft artillery fired a few rounds, but usually the Nazi planes were long gone. Because the U.S. was not yet at war, the American flag was not flown over any Marine camps purportedly to keep the Germans from identifying them as such. However, some Marines manned

.30-caliber anti-aircraft machine gun positions and acted as though an invasion was impending.

Building their own camps and preparing for winter became priority missions. In addition, the Marines had to ready housing and facilities for the U.S. Army troops who were expected to arrive any day.

The Marines' defense mission and the extended area of tactical responsibility resulted in the battalions moving into the key strong points and field fortifications already started or developed by the British. Most of these trenches and weapons positions along with extensive barbed wire obstacles were within short marching distance of the Marines' camps, and so could be occupied fairly quickly. The rifle platoons and weapons squads worked on the positions to strengthen and improve them.

Barbed wire was extended, tactical phone lines were installed, and range cards prepared for crew-served weapons. But none of these chores took very long as the defense plans were relatively simple. The brigade devoted most of its time to house-keeping once it had fulfilled its tactical responsibilities.

Most Marines enjoyed their new friends in the British Army because of their colorful language, good humor, and seemingly natural affinity for soldiering in the field. These troops were polite, disciplined, and exuded regimental pride and esprit. Their military mannerisms rubbed off on many Marines who found themselves bashing their heels together and swinging their arms in proper British style. Probably most infectious was the British practice of singing ribald pub ditties.

The Marines and the British also found some amusement in the one sport they seemed to have had in common—boxing matches. The finals of the Anglo-American boxing tournament were held in the town hall of Reykjavik, kindly loaned by Reykjavik civic leaders. General Curtis and his senior officers sat on one side of the ring while General Marston and his Marine officers sat on the opposite side. The British adjutant announced that the Marine band would play the "Star Spangled Banner." All hands stood at attention as the band played. Then the adjutant announced that the band would play "God Save the King." Nothing happened as the Marine musicians searched frantically for their sheet music. Finally a mortified band leader whispered, "Play 'My Country 'tis of Thee'—slowly."

In August, the first elements of U.S. Army units arrived in Iceland and brigade Marines were assigned to unload their ships. The arrival of the American soldiers was welcomed because the British forces were planning to return to England for deployment to the fighting in Africa. The

Marines also expected to be replaced by the Army units.

The first small Army contingents to arrive, on 6 August, was a Curtiss Warhawk P-40 air defense fighter squadron and an engineer battalion. Upon their arrival, the P-40s were assigned to fly air patrols, which generally kept the Germans away. These two units initially reported to General Marston, until a senior Army command group arrived later in September. To meet the date of the Army's arrival and build facilities for the incoming units, the Marines had to make a maximum effort. Before deploying to Iceland, the Army's new 5th Infantry Division and supporting units slated for duty overseas had to reorganize by transferring out draftees and transferring in individual regular Army personnel from units all over the States. Army units arriving in Iceland were well supplied with the latest clothing and equipment, and the Marines saw and soon acquired some of this gear.

On Saturday, 16 August, the Iceland Base Command was visited by Prime Minister Churchill on his way home from a meeting with President Roosevelt at Argentia Bay in Newfoundland, where they had forged the Atlantic Charter. The British and U.S. Marine forces put on a grand review and parade which consisted of several miles of troops with

An aerial view of British Camp Halgoland showing the unaligned arrangement of the buildings, different from the usual precise and uniform Marine camp layouts.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 185269



Sketch by the author in the Marine Corps Historical Art Collection
Before winter begins, a Marine heavy machine gun position is dug in outside one of the camps as part of the 1st Brigade's extended areas of tactical responsibility.

platoons in line stretched along a major road under a bright sky. Mr. Churchill, with his cane and cigar, walked the entire line, and everyone claimed Churchill looked him in the eye.

When Churchill passed along the ranks of the 6th Marines, he stopped to speak to some of the older men wearing campaign ribbons. One senior Marine staff sergeant of German descent had groused earlier about parading for the British Prime Minister, but when Churchill stopped and asked him, "You're an old soldier

aren't you?" The Marine retorted, "I'm an old Marine." Churchill then said, "Well an old sea soldier, is that a good term?" The sergeant replied, "Yes, sir. We like to regard ourselves as sea soldiers." Churchill asked him if he would shake hands with another old soldier. Mr. Churchill won over that Marine and all others he spoke to that day.

Then Mr. Churchill mounted a small reviewing stand with the official party, including the senior Marines, General Marston and Colonel Hermle, and the march-past stepped off led by the brigade Marine band and the 6th Marines. The parade was relatively long and the smartly turned out troops were impressive. For many Marines a stirring highlight was the skirling of the bagpipes and the beat of the drums of the Tyne-side Scottish pipe band. The "Marines' Hymn" was played loud and clear by the Marine brigade band as the Leathernecks gave Churchill their best. Churchill was later quoted as saying the "Marines' Hymn" so impressed and moved him that it stayed in his mind long afterwards.

Shortly after they arrived, the Marines commenced the activities that

were to take up most of their time in Iceland. They repaired and expanded their camps. The reasons given for the Marines having to devote their efforts to building camps for other than their own use were: First, somebody had to construct camps to accommodate the expected arrival and buildup of U.S. Army forces and neither Icelandic labor nor British troops were available to do so. Second, it became apparent that the Marines were not going to leave soon, so they had to work on improving their own camps in preparation for the coming winter. They constructed new camps, setting up dozens of the British Nissen huts. They built and maintained roads, constructed defense installations, and functioned repeatedly as stevedores at the Reykjavik docks — but putting up Nissen huts seemed



Marine Corps Historical Collection
Brigade Marines assist Army units in unloading after arrival at the Reykjavik docks.

Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill takes the salute of the Iceland garrison troops of the British and U.S. Army and Ma-

rine Corps units as they pass in review. Mr. Churchill was en route home following his meeting with President Roosevelt.

LtCol Harold K. Throneson Collection





Author's Collection

LtCol Maurice Holmes, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, and his staff, await review by Prime Minister Churchill, who walked the entire line of British and American units.

to be their never-ending task. Some officers in the regiment described themselves as a "labor regiment."

Battalions given the mission of constructing additional Nissen hut camps sent platoon-sized working parties to selected sites and with the technical supervision of a few Royal Engineer NCOs turned to and demonstrated American speed and industry. Sixteen-hour work days were not unusual and numerous additional camps were constructed in a matter of weeks. The Marines quickly learned how to assemble the pre-fabricated huts after a few halting starts.

As the Nissen huts were being constructed, the Marines were told to bank sod three- to four-feet high around the foundations and to tie down the tin roofs with strands of barbed wire. This seemed to be foolish and excessive precautions until

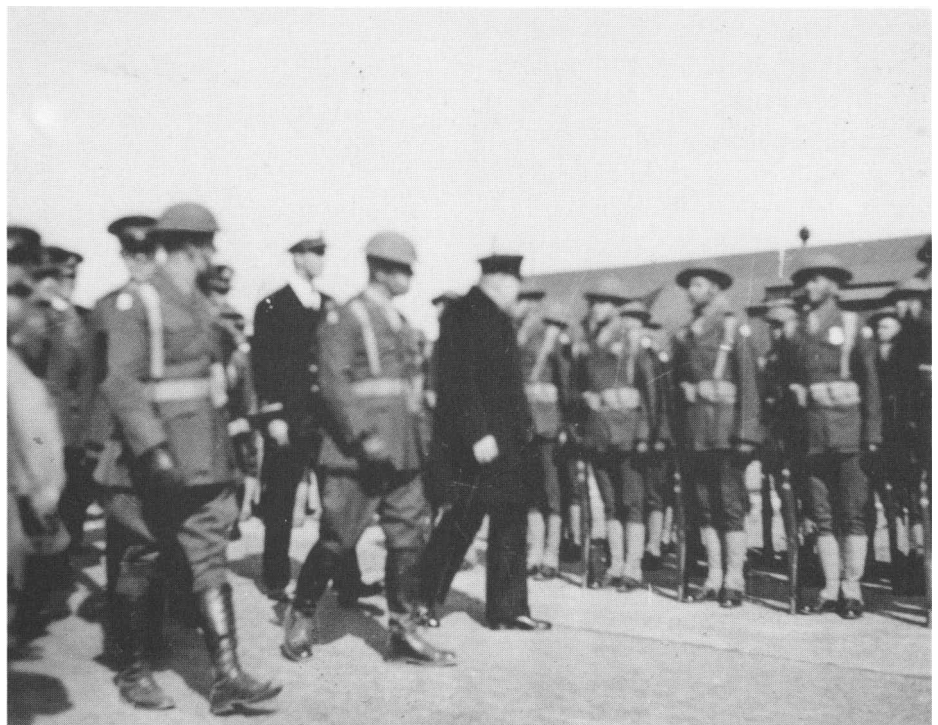
months later when the winter gale winds commenced to blow. Huts shuddered and shook and a few had their ends blown out. Eventually the Marines even built camps for the Army engineers, which was considered an ironic and amusing twist of duties by the Marines.

Construction crews became quite proud of their skill and speed in assembling the huts. The 1st Battalion desired to show General Marston how fast they could put the huts together. He showed up at dawn one day with his camera to take pictures showing daily progress. He planned a few pictures each day. He should have taken them hour by hour. By 9:00 p.m., the crews were completing roofs, doors, and windows, and installing stoves. The crews completed 16 huts in a day—a not-unusual performance.

Marines did their own laundering with soap, brushes, and buckets which were issued to them. The long summer days were warm enough to dry laundry hung outside—except during Iceland's frequent rain showers. In the winter, with the short days

As he reviewed the 1st Brigade, Mr. Churchill is said to have looked into every Marine's eyes. He then mounted the reviewing stand for the march past by the garrison.

Author's Collection





Author's Collection

The 6th Marines' colors are dipped as the color guard passes the reviewing stand.

and bad weather, and freezing winds, drying clothes outdoors became impossible. As a solution to the problem, many camps provided Nissen "drying huts" with laundry lines and continuous heat from burning stoves. Most officers did their own laundry and hung the wash in their sleeping quarters.

On 22 September 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the Marine brigade to report for duty under Major General Charles H. Bonesteel, U.S. Army, the newly designated Commanding General, Iceland Base Command. Historic prejudices and differences of methods and discipline, and Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb's memory of service in France where the Fourth Marine Brigade served under the Army, prompted him to protest this new arrangement to the Chief of Naval Operations. But command relations were changing world-wide and the Iceland Marines were directed to carry out their orders.

The law provided that Marines could be ordered by the President to detached duty with the U.S. Army. When this occurred, the detached Marine organizations became an operational part of the Army. They were then subject to the Articles of War and were no longer governed by the Articles for the Government of the Navy. The Marines had to convert to the Army courts-martial and legal systems which tended to conflict with traditional Marine Corps disciplinary procedures. The brigade did not relish the new arrangement.

Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall directed the Marines to adapt to the Army's administrative system as well. General Bonesteel made a point of expressing the Army's gratitude for the Marines' "splendid assistance in the preparation of the various campsites and numerous other ways prior to and during our arrival in Iceland. The amount of hard and extended labor

The pipes and drums of the Tyneside Scottish parade for Prime Minister Churchill.

Author's Collection



Nissen Huts

The Nissen hut was fairly simple to assemble. The ends of each hut were made in three wooden sections constructed so that they could be assembled in a few minutes. The deck consisted of wooden panels resting upon a frame of two-by-fours, while the roof and sides were made of corrugated metal. Two layers of metal were used on the lower sides and a single layer above on the roof, and the whole supported by curved I-beam steel ribs. The interior was lined with sheets of insulation board. Each hut was issued with a complete kit of tools and hardware. The only on-site fabrication was production of the concrete or lava block foundation piles. A crew of six or more men could erect a hut in a few hours, and teams specializing in various parts were even faster. The Quonset hut of the Pacific War was the more deluxe and larger American offspring of the Nissen hut.

Living in the Nissen huts was basic and simple for all ranks. The tin-roofed buildings had a few small windows and doors with wind-baffle vestibules at the end or on one side. Insulation board lined the interiors. The huts had bare wooden decks and the outside foundation was banked with dirt and sod. Interior lighting was furnished by kerosene lanterns until eventually all camps had gasoline generators which provided electricity to light the few bulbs in each hut. Heat was provided by small British coke-and-coal stoves until later when the U.S. Army brought some larger potbellied stoves to Iceland. At no time was it ever warm enough to dispense with the stoves. They provided heat for wash water and to help dry clothing strung on lines. Each

camp had its supply pile of large, coal-filled bags. Wooden kindling for firing stoves was at a premium because there was no natural source of wood in Iceland. All boxes and shipping crates were carefully saved and hoarded for fire-making.

There were about 24 men assigned to a hut. They had wood and canvas folding cots, a thin cotton mattress pad, mattress cover, and two woolen blankets. The primary furniture was wooden boxes collected by all ranks for toilet gear and bunkside storage. There was nothing to sit on except the cots and a few folding canvas chairs which accompanied company and battalion field desks.



Marines constructing Nissen huts mix cement in an old mixer for their foundations.

LtCol Harold K. Thronson Collection

