

J. R. Ritter. *From Texas to Tinian and Tokyo Bay: The Memoirs of Captain J. R. Ritter, Seabee Commander during the Pacific War, 1942-1945.* Edited by Jonathan Templin Ritter. North Texas Military Biography and Memoir Series. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019. 188 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57441-771-5.

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In December 1941, James “Rex” (J. R.) Ritter was a thirty-nine-year-old civil engineer working for the Texas State Highway Department in the quiet city of Wichita Falls, Texas. Immediately after hearing the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, he applied for a commission in the Civil Engineer Corps of the US Naval Reserve. While Ritter initially hoped for shore duty in New Orleans or Corpus Christie, the navy instead commissioned him as a lieutenant in March 1942 and assigned him to one of the newly formed Navy Construction Battalions destined for service in the Aleutian Islands. The US Navy formed the Construction Battalions, colloquially known as the “CBs” or “Seabees,” following the Japanese capture of more than four hundred civilian construction contractors on Wake Island on December 23, 1941. The navy recruited men who already had civilian construction experience for the new Construction Battalions and gave them basic weapons training so that they could defend themselves in combat zones. The US Navy fielded more than 150 Construction Battalions during World War II, and Captain Ritter served in two of these battalions in the Pacific.

Before Ritter’s death in 1994, he wrote his autobiography, which included an account of his

time in the Seabees during the war. Ritter penned the story of his life with the precision of an engineer, and the number of names and dates he included in the work distinguish it from most other personal accounts written decades after the events they describe. Ritter avoided the common pitfall of trying to recreate substantial amounts of dialogue, and his reliance on documentary records in conjunction with his own memories make his account an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the wartime service of the 4th and 107th Seabee battalions. Ritter’s grandson, Jonathan Templin Ritter, discovered his grandfather’s autobiography after his death and ably edited the portion of it that dealt with World War II in order to facilitate its publication. Jonathan Ritter obtained a master’s degree from San Jose State University and provided an introduction, conclusion, and a number of useful annotations throughout the text. These notes define military terms that may be unfamiliar to general readers and offer context for significant places and events mentioned in the book. The result is an easy to read memoir that provides a rare firsthand account of a senior Seabee commander.

Owing to James Ritter’s age, civil engineering degree, and extensive prewar experience working

for oil companies and municipalities, he spent most of his time in the Naval Reserve at the rank of lieutenant commander. Following a brief stint at Camp Allen, Virginia, Ritter was given command of Company A in the newly constituted 4th Construction Battalion. The battalion completed advanced base training at Camp Bradford, Virginia, before traveling to California where its members learned that they would be sent to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. At Dutch Harbor, and later on Atka and Adak islands, Ritter's command built living quarters, ammunition magazines, roads, piers, airfields, and gun emplacements. On several occasions, Ritter and his men endured Japanese bombing raids in the Aleutians. After watching newly arrived US planes score four aerial victories, Ritter recalled how "we all stood and cheered wildly. You would have thought that this had been a football game—rather than a matter of life and death for human beings" (p. 56). Fortunately, Ritter's command suffered only one casualty from enemy action during the war, though he did lose two other men to tragic accidents. These episodes serve as a poignant reminder that more than 110,000 Americans died from noncombat related causes during World War II.

In addition to illuminating the types of projects the Seabees completed and the risks their work entailed, Ritter's memoir recounts the many institutional obstacles he encountered. Ritter occasionally met senior naval officers who disliked the Seabees and preferred the navy's former method of employing civilian contractors. Another difficulty for the Seabees in Alaska was the constant shortage of heavy equipment. Ritter proved adept at circumventing this challenge and obtaining the resources he needed to accomplish his missions by befriending and bartering with other officers. In describing these successes, Ritter demonstrates the importance of officers' personalities in dealing with civilian and US Army counterparts. After receiving a spot promotion to lieutenant commander, Ritter led a detachment of fifty Seabees on Amchitka island where they constructed barracks

capable of housing five hundred naval personnel. Ritter then briefly served as the executive officer of the 6th Construction Regiment before departing the Aleutians on May 22, 1943.

Following Ritter's return to California, he was given command of the newly formed 107th Construction Battalion. While the battalion was still in training, Ritter met a school teacher named Jeanette Rouyet through mutual acquaintances. Following a courtship of just three weeks, Rouyet agreed to marry Ritter after he returned from the war. In November 1943, Ritter received orders for his battalion to sail to Hawaii and then to Kwajalein atoll. As the unit commander, Ritter avoided the long sea voyage and instead flew aboard a luxurious Pan Am clipper. At Kwajalein, the 107th deployed on the island of Ebeye at the southeast corner of Kwajalein atoll. The Seabees first task on Ebeye, according to Ritter, was to bury the Japanese dead to try to rid the island of its dreadful stench. Ritter and his men then began constructing a seaplane base using captured Japanese materials and equipment. Ritter's Seabees constructed Quonset huts and sewer systems on Ebeye before moving to the island of Bigeje where they built a fuel farm and a fleet recreation center. In September 1944, Ritter's battalion moved to the newly captured island of Tinian, where they assisted in constructing the airfields that Army Air Force B-29s used to bomb Japan. In the spring of 1945, Ritter learned that his battalion would participate in the invasion of Japan. Fortunately, the war ended before the invasion could take place. Ritter returned to the United States in November 1945 and remained in the naval reserves until 1963, eventually attaining the rank of captain. After the war, Ritter married Rouyet and became a civilian employee for the navy. He eventually became the director of Maintenance for the 12th Navy Department before his retirement.

Jonathan Ritter is to be commended for making his grandfather's account accessible to historians and anyone interested in the Navy's Construc-

tion Battalions in World War II. As one of the few published wartime memoirs by a Seabee officer, the book will undoubtedly serve as an indispensable source for those researching the Seabees. It

will also appeal to those looking for information specifically about the activities of the 4th and 107th Seabee battalions in the war.

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