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Kwajalein:
Corps' Resident Office closes after 50 years
Engineers impart legacy of technical improvements

By Dino W. Buchanan, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 16-09) For some it's Paradise. For others it's a place brimming in military history so real you can still see and feel it.

But for the nearly 1,600 residents who live here year-round – including a select group of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel – it is home.

This is Kwajalein, a tropical island and atoll 2,100 miles southwest of Honolulu, 7,100 miles from Washington, DC and at the forefront of the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense capabilities. The total land area of the atoll is 6.2 square miles and the atoll is 78 miles in length.

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Kwajalein Island is the largest of the nearly 100 islands situated on Kwajalein Atoll, a coral reef formation shaped like a crescent loop enclosing the world's largest lagoon with a surface area of 1,100 square miles. Kwajalein Atoll is part of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

In recent years roughly eight of the U.S. government civil service personnel who lived and worked on Kwajalein were Honolulu District employees - working as part of the Corps of Engineers' Kwajalein Resident Office (KRO).

The KRO was officially established in 1959 when Kwajalein was selected to be the testing site in the Nike-Zeus Anti-Missile Program of the (then) U.S. Army Rocket and Guided Missile Agency. At about the same time, the island of Roi-Namur was chosen for development as a center for missile re-entry characteristics studies, sponsored by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) of the Department of Defense. This program, designated Project PRESS (Pacific Range Electromagnetics Signature Studies), had related facilities in California, Hawaii, and Wake Island. The Corps resident office was established to administer contracts and construction on Kwajalein.

The Corps mission in Kwajalein is to administer military construction (MILCON) and Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) construction contracts in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

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During the last few decades, the primary Corps employees have been Resident Engineer Lou Askew, Civil Engineer Technician Darlene Duarte, Quality Assurance Representative George Lum, Mechanical Engineer John Mihlbauer, Civil Engineer Darrin Berrends, Quality Assurance Representative George Olson, Civil Engineer and Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) Jesse Duarte and Secretaries Linda Hardy and Beverly Vencill. Other notable Corps employees include Terry Brown and Ron Wynne. There were many Corps employees who preceded this group – those who left an indelible Corps legacy on Kwajalein and other isles in the atoll that continues today.

Although the office and core staff were small, the legacy of Corps projects and function remains unparalleled in the central Pacific. That legacy, however - 50 years of ingenuity, expertise and presence - came to a close in June with the closure of the resident office. With the slow down of military related construction on Kwajalein the need to have the KRO has lessened. The U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) installation has also been downsizing, in part because of budget constraints and technological improvements such as a new trans-oceanic fiber-optic cable that will allow the testing range to be operated extensively from sites in the United States, thus minimizing operation costs, new construction and the need for on-site workers or residents.

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Recently, the American population of the Kwajalein installation has dropped dramatically and the aluminum-sided trailers that once housed the bulk of the contractor population are systematically being removed from the main island. Nevertheless, the enormous investment in these new technologies and recent statements by Army leadership indicate that the United States is deeply committed to remaining in the Marshall Islands at Kwajalein Atoll for the foreseeable future.

For some Corps employees their first impression of Kwajalein was that it is a very hot, tropical, muggy remote place – described by some as paradise. But they also say the positive aspects of living and working on this 1.2-square-mile island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean far outweighed the difficulties sometimes encountered.

In a 2002 Pacific Connection story, former KRO secretary Beverly Vencill called Kwajalein a home away from home.

Vencill retired in 2007 from her job as secretary of the U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll/Reagan Test Site legal department after spending 18 years on Kwajalein.

“It’s a very stimulating place,” she said. “I feel we (USAKA/RTS) are the wall that keeps the bogeyman away from the things I love on the mainland. We stand between what could be our worst enemy and disaster for our country.”

According to Lou Askew former Kwajalein Office Resident Engineer, administering the construction contracts for USAKA presented many unique challenges.

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“The environment is very corrosive and the location is so remote. Construction considerations that are taken for granted on the mainland and even in Hawaii, can present major logistical challenges. Because the islands are so small, we (the Corps) are limited in the number of contractors who can work here at any one time. As such, costs of construction are significantly affected.”

“The work we do here is very interesting,” said George “Marty” Olson in the 2002 *Pacific Connection* story. “We’re building things that have never been built before. The work is exciting, never repetitious.”

Olson was the construction representative on the one-of-a-kind Launch Test Facilities project built on Meck Island in 2000, for which he was awarded a Superior Civilian Service Award.

Olson said in a recent email interview that he considered the Corps biggest accomplishments during his Kwajalein tenure to be “establishing a quality installation and a greatly improved quality of life for the residents.” During his tenure on Kwajalein Olson said he felt the Corps had many seemingly impossible construction challenges.

“Our biggest challenge was building two missile silos on an isolated island 26 miles from Kwajalein. The silos were 80 feet deep in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and they had to be dry.”

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Travelling to some project sites at islands within the atoll other than Kwajalein - such as Roi-Namur which is 50 miles away - or Meck Island require transportation by small, propeller planes or by motorized catamarans and require extensive prior planning on all levels. Because of the decrease in funding and construction on the remote atoll islands, fixed-wing and UH-1 aircraft are being replaced this year with U.S. Army light utility helicopters.

Jesse Duarte, who lived and worked on Kwajalein for eight and half years, agrees with Olson that the silos were a big challenge.

“I also think that our construction of the Roi-Namur Island Power Plant – it provides all energy needs for the island residents and the ALTAIR (ARPA Long-Range Tracking and Instrumentation) on Roi-Namur and TRADEX (Target Resolution and Discrimination Experiment) radars and relevant facilities, the Vehicle Paint & Preparation Shop and Cold Storage Facility on Kwajalein, plus the Power Plant on Kwajalein and the Meck Missile Silos were our biggest challenges - and our biggest success stories as well,” said Duarte.

He also said in a recent email while preparing to leave Kwajalein that “construction through the Corps, although seemingly more expensive, has been viable and in many cases the better choice for quality, safe and on-time construction.”

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“Logistics was and still is a giant issue. Contractors can’t make a daily or weekly run to the hardware store or equipment supply house. Kwajalein’s harsh, salt-laden environment wreaks havoc on most things metal – which means a continuing vigilance that all contracts state and utilize stainless steel, aluminum or specialty coatings to control corrosion.”

Duarte added that he thinks USAKA will miss the luxury having a Corps office in Kwajalein.

“USAKA has said numerous times that they would prefer to keep the Corps presence on Kwaj. I also believe they will miss the presence of our construction contractor, San Juan Construction (from Montrose, Colo.), who has performed superbly over the years and supported USAKA and the Kwajalein base contractor Kwajalein Range Services (KRS).

“We (the Corps) will continue to support USAKA from Honolulu until the USAKA program supports a District resident professional,” said Honolulu District Commander Lt. Col. Jon J. Chyka. “We’re looking at possibly reopening the resident office in FY11 or beyond.”

Duarte added that San Juan is also expected to leave Kwajalein in December after assisting Verizon with the installation of a fiber-optic cable to Hawaii. With installation, Duarte said that the long-held feeling of remoteness by Kwajalein residents from the rest of the world will diminish.

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“Internet connections are very slow and sometimes non-existent - so completion of the fiber optic project next year should upgrade communications to the current century.”

“Fiber optics will open a huge array of possibilities for the community,” said Corinne Brown, USAKA information management director and information assurance manager. The fiber-optic cable — which will be approximately the circumference of a tennis ball — will reach Kwajalein from Guam, nearly 1,900 miles. The fiber will be a dedicated strand, which will ensure access security.

The U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll/ Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site (USAKA/RTS) is a government-owned, contractor-operated installation consisting of a small number of government military and civilian personnel and a large population of contractors. U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll and the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site in the Marshall Islands have been an integral part of ballistic-missile testing and space operations since 1966.

“The mission here has world implications in that missile defense is critical to the nation and the Marshall Islands, said Jesse Duarte.”

In a 2007 *SOLDIERS* magazine news story then USAKA Commander Col. Stevenson Reed said “USAKA and the Reagan Test Site are vital parts of ballistic-missile defense and space programs. Kwajalein Atoll is located relatively close to the equator, which makes it an ideal space-launch location,” Reed said in the story.

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“We can launch larger payloads into near-earth or geosynchronous orbits using less energy. In respect to tracking launches from other geographical areas, our location is ideally suited for coverage, because these launches must cross the equator at some point.”

USAKA has approximately 20 Soldiers assigned to the Army installation, along with about 50 Department of the Army civilians, and some 1,800 American and Marshallese contract employees.

Under a U.S.-Republic of the Marshall Islands agreement, USAKA/RTS uses 11 islands. Although the Army manages the overall installation, it's operated by prime contractor Kwajalein Range Services (KRS), which provides integrated range engineering, logistics and community services support to the Army.

Not all of USAKA's human and mechanical assets are located on the island of Kwajalein. The island of Roi-Namur, at the north end of the atoll, is the home of Space Surveillance Operations. Because the island is not open to the general public, visitors must either have official business or be the guest of a resident. In either case, in-processing is required upon arrival and a security badge is issued. USAKA leases eight of the islands in the Atoll from the RMI with primary operations on the islands of Kwajalein, Roi-Namur and Meck.

The working conditions on Kwajalein also appealed to Jesse's Duarte's wife Darlene, who also worked in the KRO as a procurement technician.

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“We got to work independently, but be part of a team also.”

She cites having the opportunity to work closely with her husband as another positive aspect of living on a small island. Jesse also said he enjoyed living on an island steeped in military and world history.

“Kwajalein, and especially Roi-Namur, still has WWII-era structures standing. Working and living here, on the same turf that was hard-fought by our military forces, gives me a sense of awe and inspiration.”

The islands Jesse refers to were under Japanese control until they were occupied by the U.S. toward the close of World War II. The islands of Kwajalein (largest) and Roi-Namur (second largest) were the first of the Marshall Islands captured by U.S. troops in WWII, during Operation Flintlock in January 1944.

Although military history has deeply influenced the lives of the Marshall Islanders who have lived in the atoll through the war to the present, the environment is in relatively pristine condition. American civilians and their families who reside here are able to enjoy a Kwajalein lagoon which offers excellent wreck diving of mostly Japanese ships, a few planes and the former German heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. Spear fishing and deep-sea fishing are also exceptional.

A common thread for the KRO staff was the importance of the family atmosphere.

“It’s an excellent place to raise children,” said Olson. “The schools here are top-notch and it’s a good family environment.”

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Despite the ultra high-tech nature of the work done on Kwajalein, the island's atmosphere is laid-back and informal. There are no privately owned vehicles on the island so residents travel via bicycle.

Jesse Duarte cited "the small town atmosphere, where there is little vehicle traffic, plenty of clean air and the ocean view from the living room window" as a definite plus to living on Kwajalein.

Jesse Duarte said during his off-duty time he enjoyed scuba diving, snorkeling, watching movies at the outdoor movie theater and taking walks while watching the sun set over the water. He also said watching night-time incoming missions (missiles) originating in CONUS (New Mexico or California) and riding into the Kwajalein Atoll lagoon (world's largest) were great experiences as well.

Even with the downsizing for USAKA/RTS, the United States will continue to provide direct benefits for the citizens of the RMI, U.S. government personnel and defense contractors. Kwajalein will still provide strategic U.S. missile defense in the Pacific region.

The 50-year on-island expertise, presence and support from the Honolulu District personnel and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will be no doubt be missed, but hardly forgotten, as the legacy of engineering marvels is forever inscribed upon the landscape of Kwajalein Atoll.

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