SECTION V

Military Construction Overseas

World War II forced Army engineers to begin planning construction on a worldwide basis. Projects awaiting both military engineers and construction firms they hired included depots and camps, roads and railroads, as well as ports and harbors. Engineers would work on these projects in weather that varied from arctic to tropical, and in terrain that included jungles, deserts, and mountains.

Engineer construction overseas began early in the war in the cold, damp climate of England. An invasion of the continent from England required a massive buildup of troops and that required depots, camps, and training sites. But the first priority was airfield construction to support the air offensive against Germany.

In the Middle East, the air war also required the support of the construction engineers. Air Transport Command service to that area and beyond required an expansion of the existing British and French facilities. The 38th Engineer Combat Regiment built an airfield on Ascension Island in early 1942 as part of the South Atlantic route. Construction engineers eventually built new fields or improved existing sites from Accra across central Africa to Khartoum and north to the Persian Gulf. There engineers had been hard at work since 1941 constructing a supply line to Russia through Iran.

As the war moved into Europe, construction engineers rehabilitated ports in the Mediterranean as well as along the French and Belgian coasts. To get supplies from the ports to the front, Army engineers rehabilitated the railroads as well as the roads and bridges of Europe.

In support of the war in the Pacific, Army engineers began work on a highway through British Columbia and the Yukon Territory to Alaska in March 1942. Despite problems with permafrost, mud, ice, and snow, the engineers took only eight months to complete the 1,450-mile pioneer road,

finishing on 20 November 1942. In Hawaii, Army engineers strengthened the defenses and increased the base facilities as troops and equipment were moved through to the western Pacific battlefields.

In the China–Burma–India theater, organized to provide material assistance to China, Army engineers built airfields, improved railroads, and increased the existing road system. As the Allies pushed into Burma, the engineers built a road through the Himalayas from India to China.

In both the Southwest and Central Pacific campaigns, the airplane played a vital role. Existing facilities were few, so the engineers had to carve the fields out of the jungle and coral. The B-29s that carried the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki came from such a field on Tinian.

In World War II, a war of rapid movement over large areas, the construction engineers accomplished their mission under the greatest of difficulties. The following essays represent a few of the widely divergent overseas construction missions of the Army engineers. The first describes construction activities in the Persian Gulf Command that allowed lend–lease material to transit Iran on its way to Russia. One of the more difficult jobs, putting ports back in working order, is shown in the rehabilitation of the port of Le Havre. The final setting is the mountainous jungles of India and Burma where engineers constructed the Ledo Road into China.