ROOSTER TAILS

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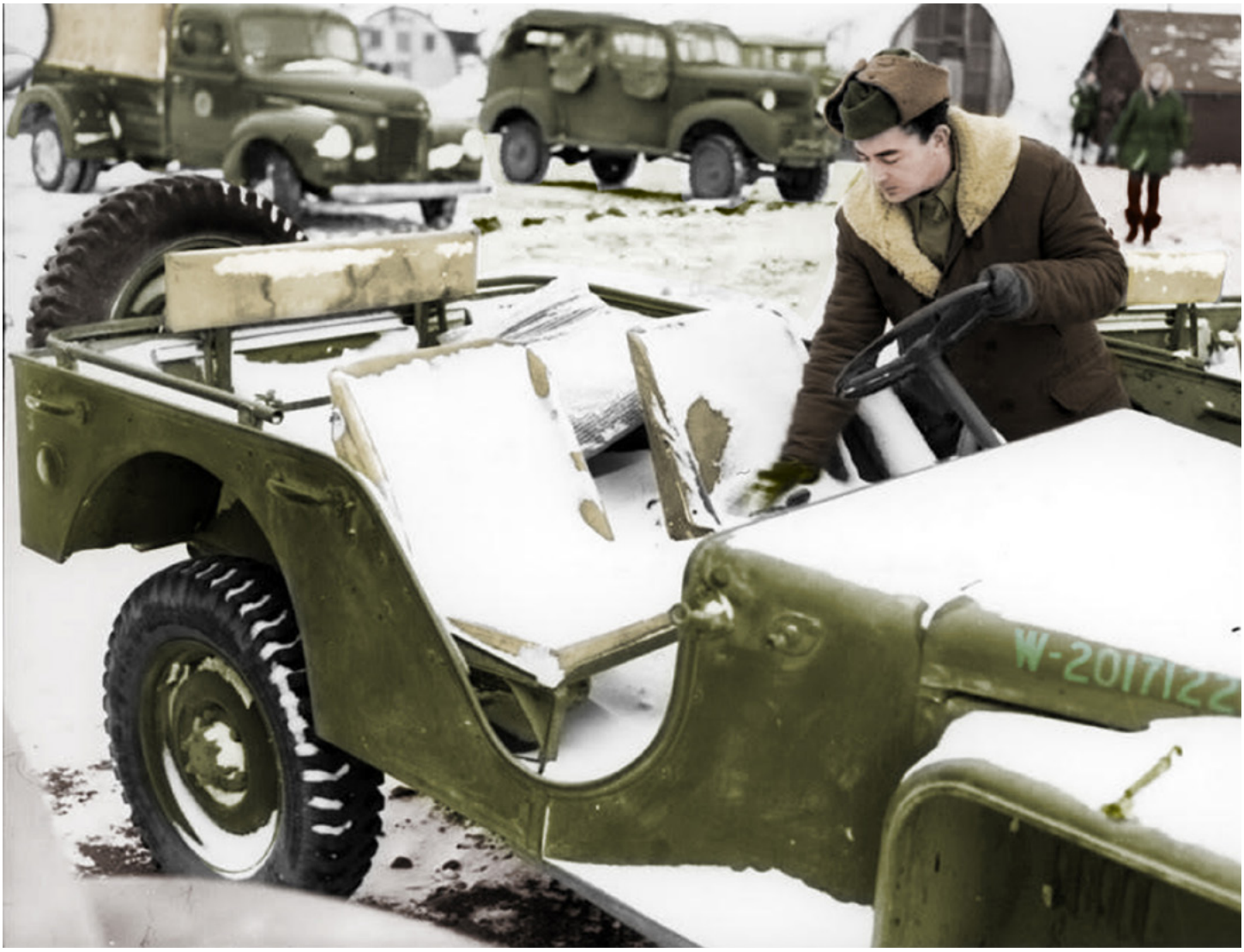

Bantam Reconnaissance Cars and U.S. Marines in Iceland in 1941, Why?

Since the time of the Vikings, Iceland has been a strategic stepping stone in the north Atlantic between Scandinavia and North America. In the early years of WWII, Britain maintained defense forces there knowing that the enemy could use Iceland to its advantage. The British built barracks, stationed troops, and deployed vehicles like this Series-1 BRC, acquired in the Lend-Lease Program, to Iceland. But as the war escalated in other theaters in Africa and Europe in the spirng and summer of 1941, it was clear that Britain would need to deploy its Iceland-based troops to these fronts. To maintain a strong Allied presence on the island, Britain appealed to the United States, whcih was not yet in the war, to backfill their troops with U.S. Marines. Here, as we know by his Mackinaw coat and winter cap, is a U.S. Marine brushing the early winter snow from the seat of the BRC. He's not heading into combat here, but is he going to give the girls in the background a ride? If you have a copy of Bill Spear's book, WARBABY, check page 278. Read more right here in Rooster Tails on pages 6-9. (Photo courtesy of George Hollins, color added).

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US Marines and BRCs in Iceland in 1941 -- WHY?

by David Kanally, Bill Spear and George Hollins

By now, most well-rounded Austin Bantam Society members know that the Bantam Reconnaissance Car was the original jeep, known now as the Pilot, with its rounded hood and rounded front fenders, delivered to Camp Holabird, MD on September 23, 1940, and that 70 BRCs, with rounded hoods and flat fenders, were delivered to various Army bases around the US by the end of that year. Also well-known is the fact that Bantam also provided the Army with about 1500 additional BRCs, all with flat hoods and fenders, by July of 1941. Many also know that more than half the total BRC production wound up in the armies of Great Britain and Russia as part of the Lend-Lease program, where they saw action in Africa and Europe.

On page 278 of Bill Spear's book, **WARBABY the True Story of the Original Jeep**, readers find a glimpse into an interesting piece of pre-Pearl Harbor war history…the presence of Bantam Reconnaissance Cars and United States Marines in Iceland in the fall and winter of 1941 (winter starts in September in Iceland!). The investigative reporters here at ***Rooster Tails*** have done a bit of additional research on the topic, which reveals details of the agreements and events that led to this ramp-up in U.S. support of British troops in the months leading up to America's formal entry into the war.

BRC in Iceland with barbed wire in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Jacco Van Snippenberg)

A detailed account of this sequence of events, published by the U.S. Center of Military History and written by historian Byron Fairchild (d. 1996), a Princeton Ph.D and military history author, is found online at https://history.army.mil/books/70-7_03.htm. *[Much of this Rooster Tails article is based on, and excerpted from, this work by Dr. Fairchild. Full footnotes appear in the online version. Excerpted passages are indicated by quotation marks.]*

Fairchild characterizes the decision to move U.S. troops into Iceland as follows. "In July 1941, five months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the first American task force of World War II departed for Iceland. Until then, the interest and attention of the War Department had for the most part been focused in the direction of South America. As War Department planners saw it, sending troops to Iceland was not an element of the hemisphere defense policy and current military strategy. The decision to undertake the operation

Four Bantam Reconnaissance Cars pose with their drivers and passengers in Iceland in 1941. (Photo courtesy of George Hollins)

was made by President Roosevelt in early June, not as a new course of policy but because the circumstances attendant upon the particular step made the taking of it at that time seem desirable. After the President made the basic decision to send troops to Iceland, the War Department faced the task of appraising the feasibility of the operation in the light of what was being done elsewhere at the same time. The decisions that the War Department was then called upon to make were difficult and crucial."

At a time when public opinion in America did not support American involvement in the war, any proposal for escalation of the United States' defensive, non belligerent policy was debated strongly and often diluted. The Iceland discussion was no exception.

To further set the stage, Fairchild offers this narrative. "Hitler several times toyed with the idea of a descent upon the island and laid preliminary plans for it; but to forestall such a move British troops, soon joined by a Canadian force, had landed in Iceland on 10 May 1940. Icelandic annoyance with the British and Canadian garrison, and British losses in the war, which made a withdrawal of the Iceland garrison seem desirable, plus American concern for the Atlantic sea lanes, combined to bring Iceland within the American defense orbit."

"By the early spring of 1941 the British position in the Mediterranean had become extremely precarious. Weakened by the withdrawal of some 50,000 troops to Greece and surprised by greatly reinforced German and Italian forces, Brit-

Most BRCs sent to the UK were re-painted with British "M" hood numbers. This one still has its U.S. "W" number. Did it arrive in Iceland straight from the States? (Photo courtesy of George Hollins)

ain's Army of the Nile was driven back, with serious losses, across the African deserts to the Egyptian border. Disaster in Greece, following hard upon the rout in North Africa, added 11,000 dead and missing to the casualties of the African campaign. There was thus a pressing need for the 20,000 or so British troops tied down in Iceland. Meanwhile the Battle of the Atlantic had taken a critical turn when, in March, German U-boats moved westward into the unprotected gap between the Canadian and British escort areas. Shipping losses mounted steeply. Although the Royal Navy immediately established a patrol and escort staging base in Iceland, a dangerous gap in the ocean defenses remained."

"American concern in the protection of the North Atlantic sea lanes, and in the defense of Iceland as well, had been acknowledged in the recently concluded Anglo-American (ABC) staff conversations. Although Britain, in her own interest and on her own initiative, had already committed herself to both tasks, they were recognized as matters of mutual responsibility in the final staff report, the so-called ABC-1 agreement. Britain, it was decided, would provide a garrison for Iceland as long as the United States remained a nonbelligerent; should the United States be forced into the war against the Axis Powers, American troops would then relieve the British garrison."

It is important to note here that although British occupation of Iceland and control of its export trade was characterized in Britain and America as a "peaceful invasion", the Icelandic people and government were, to say the least, uneasy with the arrangement, which made Iceland a potential direct target of the Axis powers because of its occupation by British forces.

America's position on Iceland evolved quickly in the first six months of 1941. In February, the War Department was clearly non-committal. But by summer, the situation had materially evolved. As Fairchild writes, "When staff conversations with the British concerning America's future course got under way early in 1941, both the War Plans Division and G-2 recommended that no action be taken at that time relative to any possible request by Iceland for American protection. Accordingly, on 11 February 1941 Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson informed the Secretary of State that the War Department shared the latter's views that the United States should "neither discourage nor encourage an approach to this Government by the Government of Iceland."

Then came the British reverses in the Mediterranean and increasing German success in the North Atlantic.

After the conclusion of the ABC conversations in March, Washington's interest in Iceland had quickened as an outgrowth of the problem of placing American planes and supplies in the hands of the British and as part of the task of making the United States Navy's "neutrality patrol" more effective. On 10 April, while picking up survivors from a Dutch vessel torpedoed off the coast of Iceland, the American destroyer Niblack, which earlier in the month had been given the job of reconnoitering the waters about the island, went into action against a U-boat whose approach was taken as an intention to attack. This was the first of a number of "incidents" that were to take place in the waters south of Iceland, where from this time on the safety zone of the Western Hemisphere and Germany's blockade area overlapped. For on the very same day President Roosevelt decided to extend the neutrality patrol to the middle of the Atlantic, roughly to the 26th meridian. Also on 10 April, Mr. Harry Hopkins and his legal aide, Mr. Oscar Cox, were considering the possibility of convoys being escorted by the U.S. Navy within the Western Hemisphere, a step which the President was not yet prepared to take, and the feasibility of transshipping goods to Britain from ports within some defined boundary of the Western Hemisphere. This led to the further thought, expressed in a memorandum from Cox to Hopkins on 12 April, that public vessels of the United States could be used to transport men and materials to the American bases recently acquired in the Atlantic and that, in fact, nothing in the Neutrality Act of 1939 prohibited public vessels from going anywhere with anything. [4] Then on 13 April President Roosevelt received assurances from Prime Minister Winston Churchill that Britain was determined to fight through to a decision in North Africa. American goods and munitions would perhaps be the deciding factor in the campaign. On the following day, Mr. Hopkins and Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles met with the Icelandic Consul-General and reopened the question of American protection for Iceland."

British and American posts in and around Reykjavik, 1941 (ibiblio.org image)

During this time, the movements and intentions of the German forces were difficult to follow and predict.

"On 22 May President Roosevelt directed the Army and Navy to be ready within thirty days to forestall a German attack on the Azores by getting there first. The naval balance in the Atlantic, which an Azores landing might easily swing in Britain's favor, was thrown into uncertainty just at this time by the daring foray of the powerful German battleship Bismarck and her consort Prinz Eugen. On the same day that President Roosevelt ordered the Azores preparations started, Bismarck and Prinz Eugen were slipping past the British Home Fleet into the North Atlantic. Two days later, after a sharp five-minute engagement, the two ships sank the British battle cruiser Hood, severely damaged the newly commissioned Prince of Wales, then disappeared into the fog and mist of the Denmark Strait. The threat to the Azores, indeed to the entire Atlantic area, lasted until British air and naval units ran down and sank the Bismarck off the coast of France on 27 May and forced Prinz Eugen into refuge in Brest."

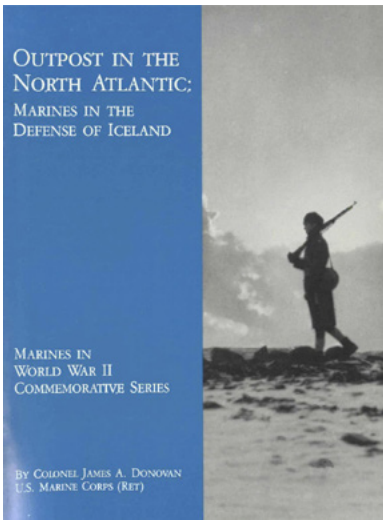
Almost simultaneously, Germany invaded Crete. "In the early morning of 20 May a swarm of Nazi paratroopers had descended on the island of Crete. The British garrison, soon without adequate air protection and naval support, was unable to beat off the invaders and ten days later Crete fell victim to the Nazi war machine. In defense of the island some 13,000 British troops and ten ships of the Royal Navy were lost. The ensuing possibilities were ominous. Using Crete as a springboard, the Germans might jump either southward to meet up with Rommel's North African army in Egypt, or eastward into Vichy-controlled Syria, thence through riot-torn Iraq and north to the Caucasus. A move in the latter

direction would be in keeping with Prime Minister Churchill's strong conviction and reports received by the State Department to the same effect: that German armies were poised in Central Europe for an imminent attack on Russia. Everything pointed to a spread of war to the eastward."

These various battles increased pressure on the British to draw down their force in Iceland.

"The shifting tides of war and strategy had not only thrust into the background the prospect of an American landing in the Azores and created a more urgent need elsewhere for the British troops that were in Iceland, they had also strengthened President Roosevelt's determination to ensure the safety of Britain's North Atlantic supply line. Declaring an unlimited national emergency, the President in a speech on 27 May promised all possible assistance in getting supplies to Britain. The American neutrality patrol was helping to ensure delivery, Roosevelt declared, and "other measures" were being devised, he told his radio audience. Two days later, in response to an inquiry made by the President not long before, Prime Minister Churchill informed Roosevelt that he would welcome the immediate relief of the British garrison, and during the following weekend the American Ambassador to Great Britain, John G. Winant, arrived in Washington with a further message from Churchill regarding the situation in the North Atlantic. Secretary Stimson and the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, were heartily in favor of sending American forces to relieve the British in Iceland. After a discussion of this and other steps that might be taken to aid Britain, which the two Secretaries had with Mr. Harry Hopkins, Secretary Stimson at a meeting of the War Council on 3 June asked the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, to investigate "our possibilities in case we take vigorous action in the Northeast." General Marshall cautiously endorsed an Iceland expedition in preference, at least, to making a landing in the Azores."

During the month of June, 1941, both the U.S. Army and the Navy developed logistics plans to relieve British forces in Iceland. These plans required on-the-ground reconnaissance, and the findings were troubling. Reykjavik harbor was only 16 feet deep at low tide, while most troop and cargo ships available for the operation drew 20 feet or more. There were no large cranes in the harbor to unload cargo. The sheer number of troops required would have monopolized the entire Marine Corps for the duration of the transition period. In addition to the existing British housing for. 22,000 troops already on the island, housing for 10,000 more during the transition period would need to be built. In addition, legislative restrictions on the use of drafted troops while the US was not formally in the war, and competing priorities for transport and cargo ships threatened the viability of the plans. A more detailed account of these obstacles and the ultimate discarding of the plans is found in the Fairchild article online.



Cover of Col. James Donovan's book. (ibiblio.org photo)

Perhaps anticipating these problems, President Roosevelt had already put into motion a plan to reinforce, rather than replace, the British forces in Iceland. A number of Marine units, primarity the 6th and 1st Divisions training in San Diego, were selected for the mission, and plans were quickly drawn to move them first to the port of Charleston, then on to Iceland.

The source for the remainder of this article was "Outpost in the North Atlantic" written by Col. James A. Donovan, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret), and appears here: https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-Iceland.html Excerpted passages are indicated by quotation marks.

U.S. Marines outside a row of Nissen huts, 1941 (ibiblio.org photo)

"The Marines were deployed to Iceland because they were all volunteers, and unlike the draftee-encumbered Army, could be ordered overseas. Moreover, the 6th Marines was already at sea prepared for expeditionary duty. On 5 June, Roosevelt directed the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Harold R. Stark, to have a Marine brigade ready to sail in 15 day's time.

The brigade was formed on 16 June, the day following the arrival of the 6th Marines (Reinforced) in Charleston. The 1st


Churchill inspecting US Marines in Iceland, 1941. (Wikipedia photo)

Marine Brigade (Provisional) was formally organized under Brigadier General John Marston. His new command consisted of: Brigade Headquarters Platoon; Brigade Band; 6th Marines (Reinforced); 2d Battalion, 10th Marines; 5th Defense Battalion (less its 5-inch Artillery Group, which remianed in the States); Company A, 2d Tank Battalion (less 3d Platoon); Company A, 2d Medical Battalion; Company C, 1st Engineer Battalion; 1st Platoon, Company A, 2d Service Battalion; 3d Platoon, 1st Scout Company; and Chemical Platoon. The parachute platoon was detached and reassigned to the

British Nissen huts served as home for both the British troop and the U.S. Marines who arrived in the summer of 1941 as reinforcements. (ibiblio.org photo)

1st Marine Division, which happened also to be in Charleston when the 6th Marines arrived.

General Marston arrived in Charleston on 18 June with a small brigade headquarters staff. Admiral Stark's mission statement for the brigade was simple and direct: In cooperation with the British garrison, defend Iceland against hostile attack."

In all, 4095 Marines set sail from Charleston, bound for Iceland, on June 22, 1941. The 25 vessels in the convoy were not yet equipped with surface radar, so they navigated the foggy seas by slowing their speed and periodically sounding their fog horns to keep a safe distance. Their first stop was Newfoundland, Canada, where they arrived on June 27, and waited for clearance from the government of Iceland, and final orders to proceed.

"Early in the morning of 7 July, the brigade's convoy approached Iceland and the capital city of Reykjavik. The sea was glassy calm, the sun was well up and bright as it did not set in July in northern lands. The strong odor of fish floated out over the troop ships from the port. A couple of the transports were able to tie up at the small stone quays and Marines lined the rails to examine the people and sights of their new station."

On life in Iceland, Donovan says, "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 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."

By the spring of 1942, the US Army relieved the Marines and the remaining contingent of British troops. The US was fully in the war by then, and famous and heroic battles in Europe and the Pacific would rage for years. Most of our common knowledge of WWII covers the months and years following Pearl Harbor, but this Iceland story, along with many other less-told stories of the time before illuminate the path to war, and deserve further study. No less deserving of study is the Bantam Reconnaissance Car, which was there with our Marines in Iceland and in Africa and in Russia even before the US entered the war. Our own George Hollins offers this account of the Lend-Lease shipments of BRCs:

"Up until May of 1941, we had shipped 150 BRC to the British in April 1941. In June or July of 1941, we shipped 56 BRC to the British, my BRC2271 was among this shipment. We know the quantity of 56 based on a British receipt document, and a British report documenting that a total of 206 (150 + 56) BRC had been delivered to the British in total.

The Federal Trade Commission document of BRC shipments that Bill Spear acquired, ends on June 5, with a total of 1,332 BRC shipped. The remaining 156 BRC shipped in June 1941 would presumably have shown 56 to the British and the remainder of 100 to US bases.

Shipping routes for BRCs sent to the UK and Russia during the Lend-Lease Program (map courtesy of Oliver Missing).

Therefore, the BRC in the Iceland photos could have been from the first 150 shipment in April 1941 or from the 56 shipment in June 1941. Another possibility is when the US loaded equipment to ship to Iceland, the BRC could have been requisitioned from BRC in stock at US bases. All the known BRC photos in Iceland are Series-1 (March-June 1941 production)."