

## **One of those Little-Known Cold War Adventures (And what happened after that)**

*By Bill Hill*

When I reported to Fort Story, Virginia in the fall of 1954, I had no idea that I was about to stumble into one of those strange but little known adventures of the Cold War. I was a young, green second lieutenant with an ROTC commission. I was also clueless about what was going on at Fort Story and elsewhere in the world. That was about to change. I was going to get acquainted with the world's largest amphibious vehicle and, later, the role we would play in the largest construction project ever undertaken in the Arctic up to that time.

Fort Story is a small post on Cape Henry, which juts out on the east coast, with the Atlantic Ocean on the south side of the cape, and the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay on the north side. At the time, it was the Army's east coast amphibious vehicle training center. It is also at the north end of Virginia Beach, a very popular east coast resort. Not a bad place to spend your two-year active duty tour.

I was under the impression that the mission of Fort Story was to teach troops how to operate and maintain the DUKW, a 2 ½ ton truck converted to an amphibious vehicle very successfully during World War II. DUKW is the official army description of the vehicle and when it was built, but GI's quickly dubbed it the Duck. Anyway, I expected to spend my active duty tour rather pleasantly at Virginia Beach learning about Ducks.

And I would have if my curiosity hadn't gotten the best of me. The post personnel officer informed me that there were several openings for second lieutenants in Duck companies. I thought that was it, but he continued. There was this huge amphibious vehicle called the

BARC, which in military jargon stood for Barge, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo. There were four of them – all experimental. The unit working with them needed a second lieutenant to be the executive officer. It was new. It was different, and I thought it might even be exciting.

The four BARCs operated as an independent platoon which was always attached to some other unit. When I reported to platoon headquarters, the first sergeant welcomed me to the unit and informed me that the first lieutenant who was platoon commander was on leave until the next day. He handed me a fact sheet about the BARC. “I hope you’re a quick study,” he said, “because some foreign brass will be here to look at the BARC in about an hour.”

I looked at the sheet. The BARC, it said, was designed to carry a 60-ton tank or fully equipped infantry company from ship to shore or back where there was no fixed port. Its empty weight was 97 <sup>1/2</sup> tons. Its four tires were nine-and-a-half feet in diameter. It was 17-and-one-half feet high and powered by four 265 horsepower GMC marine diesel engines. Each engine drove one wheel on land. The two engines on each side of the BARC coupled to drive one of the twin propellers in the water. Top speed was 20 miles an hour on land and seven-and-a-half miles an hour in the water. The four experimental BARCs were built by LeTourneau, Inc., which makes equipment much larger than the BARC, including off-shore oil drilling platforms.

I made my way to the BARC garage and parking area, which were right on the beach. I told the visitors all about the BARC and was able to answer a few questions. Fortunately, none of them asked how long I had been working with the BARCs.

After the visitors left, I realized there were a bunch of men wondering who I was and where I had come from. I decided my best bet was to be informal and walk around to introduce myself. The reception was polite, but I got the impression the men weren’t thrilled about having

another officer around. One of the sergeants said, "Sir, I've got to tell you, if we had fewer visitors we could get more work done." I wondered if he was talking about those who had just left or me. I found out soon enough that it was all our small group could do to keep the BARCs running, test their capabilities and take part in training that became increasingly intense.

The next day I met our CO, an ROTC first lieutenant who obviously started his tour earlier than I did. He had been a geology major in college, and I had been a journalism major. As we discussed our situation, I asked, "How did we happen to wind up in with the world's biggest amphibious vehicle?" He reminded me that the BARC was experimental, so everybody in the small group working with it was learning and very few people knew any more about it than we did.

Our days, and sometimes nights, were filled with training, testing and maintenance. Since the BARCs were experimental, there were no training, maintenance or supply manuals. Part of our job was to compile information for the manual-writers. Since there wasn't much we could requisition through normal channels, we became expert scroungers, sometimes even engaging in "inter-service transfers" with the Navy in nearby Norfolk, VA.

A major part of training was to practice loading and unloading all kinds of cargo on land and tied up to cargo ships in the ocean off Fort Story. We learned early on that the BARC could carry far more than 60 tons on land and in relatively calm water. We also learned that the flat-bottomed craft did not fare well at all in even mildly rough water and that a stiff breeze pushed it around like a small toy. We learned, like all good sailors, to watch the weather, compensate for it when we could and stay out of it when we couldn't.

Training and experimenting continued through the fall and winter and into the spring of 1955. I was enjoying springtime at the beach when we learned the BARC was going on an

actual mission. The destination was Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island, Northwest Territory, Canada. The typical reaction in our unit was, “where?” The next questions were, “why and why us?”

We could look at a map like anybody else and tell where we were going. The southern part of Baffin Island is directly north of Quebec Province in Canada. Frobisher Bay cuts deeply into southern Baffin Island. It is about 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle.

The answer to “why us” and the untried BARCs was that Frobisher Bay has one of the world’s largest tidal ranges, averaging 37 feet and sometimes reaching 40 feet.<sup>(1)</sup> That means the bay rises and falls 37 to 40 feet vertically when the tide changes. It also means that a fixed port was not feasible. At Frobisher Bay, about a mile of land that is under water at high tide is not at low tide. Conventional landing craft had great difficulty getting much cargo over the shore. Cranes and trucks couldn’t work in the water when the tide was in. Landing craft were stranded when the tide went out and sat on the beach until the tide came back in enough to float them.

The BARCs, on the other hand, ignored the tide, unloaded directly into trucks on the beach above the high tide line or simply drove to an inland cargo dump. They hauled more cargo the first day a ship was in the bay than landing craft had in any entire previous summer season.<sup>(2)</sup>

Our mission (why we were going) was to unload ships in the bay and bring all kinds of cargo ashore to supply the military base at Frobisher Bay and construction of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line.<sup>(3)</sup> Equipment and supplies were airlifted from Frobisher Bay to DEW Line sites further north. We were to arrive at Frobisher Bay in early July and leave in October – before the bay froze.

Getting there required a joint Army-Navy operation. The Navy had (and still has) a unique ship called an LSD (Landing Ship Dock), which can submerge its well deck, let in

smaller vessels through stern doors and then pump the water out, if necessary. We practiced getting the BARCs into an LSD at Fort Story, and I was in awe of our drivers' ability to get the BARCs through the stern door in open ocean with little room to spare on either side. When it was time to go, we loaded at Fort Story and unloaded at Frobisher Bay without incident.

We weren't told much about the DEW line, except that a string of radar stations was under construction above the Arctic Circle to warn of a Soviet attack over the polar region. Back in the days of extreme Cold War paranoia, the system was supposed to provide up to 30 minutes advance warning of an attack. I wondered then and I wonder now if that 30 minutes was supposed to give school children a chance to get under their desks while we launched a counter strike that would end civilization.

The DEW Line was the largest Arctic construction and manning project ever undertaken up to that time. The official cost was announced as \$500 million. The initial construction contract was awarded to the Western Electric Company, and the DEW Line became operational in 1957. More than 78 sites stretched from Alaska across Canada and into Greenland.<sup>(3)</sup> The cost has since been dwarfed by that of the Alaska Pipeline, estimated at \$8 billion.

When we reached Frobisher Bay, the LSD anchored about a mile from shore. We were greeted by dozens of Eskimos in motor boats. They offered to trade a wide variety of items for gasoline, but we had been instructed not to fraternize. Their temporary summer village was a few hundred yards down the beach from our operating site. We never went near it, and they watched what we were doing from afar.

Our non-relationship with the Eskimos seemed odd to me. Here we were in the land they had inhabited for thousands of years, and we knew absolutely nothing about them.

Our first meal at Frobisher Bay gave us some personal experience about why we were there. Food supplies were running out following the long winter, and the ships carrying food and other supplies for the base hadn't arrived. What was left consisted of canned hamburger, some powdered eggs and a few cans of vegetables. Fortunately we had an inventive cook who was able to prepare edible meals with what was on hand. The cold, crisp air in that part of the world, coupled with the work we were doing, created formidable appetites, so we were inclined to eat about anything that was put on the table. Hamburger with hamburger gravy and somewhat green scrambled eggs for breakfast seemed like a delicacy – for a while.

Fortunately, ships started to arrive in a few days. We wasted no time getting the cargo ashore. Our diet became more varied, but fresh food was still scarce. Some of us set out for the nearby river to see if could at least catch some fish. I was thinking trout or bass, fun to catch and fish I could handle. What we found was one of the world's fiercest fighting fish, the Arctic Char. Even the smaller fish were big, at least to me. I came home with a fish story about "the one that got away" by breaking my rod and line and leaping back into the river after I got it up on the rocky shore. To this day, I try to avoid spreading my arms to show how big it was.

Our cook didn't think much of the Arctic Char as an eating fish. I remember him saying, "Tastes like a mixture of carp and salmon, but I can make it edible." And he did.

When we arrived in early July, daylight lasted almost around the clock. When the light began to fade as the Arctic winter drew closer, it was still light enough for us to work 24 hours a day when ships were in the Bay. We had radios and lights, and the ships had lights, so we just kept working as long as there was a ship to unload.

We were not on duty all the time, and life at Frobisher Bay was not without its diversions. Some of the supplies that came our way included alcoholic beverages for our small

NCO and officers' clubs. Crates marked "BARC Parts" that were flown in from Goose Bay, Labrador occasionally included some of Canada's finest just for our unit. Somehow, this always occurred when our maintenance chief went to Goose Bay to get parts that had been flown to that point, or to get parts repaired that couldn't be fixed on site. Fishing continued, and poker was a popular pastime. We continued to unload ships as they came into the bay. Nearly 50 years later, I don't remember the exact numbers, but we hauled thousands of tons of cargo. Much of it was aviation gasoline in drums to fuel planes flying from the airfield at Frobisher Bay to DEW Line construction sites. I do remember vividly that one BARC came ashore carrying 101 tons of aviation fuel. The water was very calm. We were still experimenting. I took a few pictures and checked the numbers (known weight of a barrel of aviation fuel x number of barrels = weight of load. So simple even a journalism major could do it, and it checked out.

In early October, ice started to form on the bay. We loaded up and headed for home in the LSD's.

Before we left, our unit commander gave me all the operation and maintenance logs and instructed me to write the operations report, since I was the resident journalist. I wrote the report about tonnages, maintenance and unit performance, turned it in to our post commander at Fort Story and promptly forgot about it. My active duty tour ended a few months later.

After I returned to civilian life, I thought about my trip to Frobisher Bay occasionally. I don't believe I ever thought about the report I had written until I went on vacation to Virginia Beach with my wife and son 20 years later. We visited a hobby shop across Atlantic Avenue from our motel. To my astonishment, it was owned and operated by Capt. George Hendrickson, who worked with the BARCs when I was on active duty. He had retired from active duty but was still a consultant on the BARCs.

I couldn't resist asking him what happened to the report I wrote. "Oh, it made its way to the Department of Defense, and they decided to build some more," he said. He made it sound like a casual, every day occurrence, I guess to see how I would react. I was surprised, pleased and stunned by the news.

He laughed and asked, "Want to see some of them?" Of course I couldn't resist, so we all got into his car and drive the short distance to the "BARC Park" at Fort Story. And there they were – several BARCs that looked new to me . Except they were no longer called BARCs. The name had been changed to LARC (Lighter, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo) in 1960. The definitions I looked at didn't make much of a distinction between the two words, but I always thought a barge was something that is towed or pushed, and a lighter is a small vessel used for loading and unloading ships. I also thought acronyms were confusing enough without getting picky.

I must admit that I take some pride in the fact that what we did at Frobisher Bay and what I wrote about the mission helped turn an experiment into a generation of new amphibious vehicles.

### **What Happened After That**

The LARCs didn't take part in actual operations again until they went to Vietnam to support the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in 1967 and later the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in 1968.

And now they are gone. Rich Killblane, U.S. Army Transportation Corps historian, reported that "The 309<sup>th</sup> Transportation (LARC LX) Company, 11<sup>th</sup> Transportation Battalion, was inactivated on 15 October 2001. It was the last amphibious Company in the U.S. Army." <sup>(4)</sup> He added that the army now depends entirely on conventional landing craft.



It saddened me to learn that the army no longer needs the old work horse. On the other hand, a life span of more than 40 years for any piece of military equipment is not bad.

Fifty years ago, Frobisher Bay was a joint U.S.-Canadian military base with an airfield. Tents and a few tarpapered-covered buildings dotted the landscape. The Inuit Eskimo population was less than 500.

What used to be Frobisher Bay is now the city of Iqaluit with a population of more than 5,000. Iqaluit is the capital of Nunavut Territory, formed in 1999 from a large part of the Northwest Territory following granting of a land claim of the Inuit Eskimos by the Canadian government. <sup>(5)</sup>

Iqaluit, meaning “place of many fish” in the Inuit language, started to grow largely because of the major U.S. airbase completed there in 1943. The base was an ideal center for DEW Line construction operations, and it continues today to make Iqaluit the most accessible location in the region. It is now an international airport with flights to several Canadian cities. In addition to the government buildings befitting the capital of a huge territory, the city now includes a hospital, hotel, secondary schools, college, shopping center and amenities such as an ice skating and curling rink. Well known fried chicken and pizza franchises are located there.

Nunavut means “our land” in the Inuit language. It is the largest political subdivision in Canada, with an area of more than 800,000 square miles. The population of the entire area is about 29,000, 85 percent of whom are Inuit.<sup>(1)</sup> My research led me to several websites promoting tourism in Nunavut, confirming that adventure tourism is indeed a growing industry!

Although the feared attack over the North Pole has never come, some of the old DEW Line sites still stand guard. In fact, newer sites with more advanced technology have been built as part of a “North Warning System.” <sup>(3)</sup>

When I decided to write this article, I thought it would be a straightforward account of an unusual piece of equipment doing what it was made to do in a unique environment, and I thought this might be of interest to at least a few people.

All these years later, what the BARCs did at Frobisher Bay hasn't changed, but a lot of other things have.

I assumed that the Inuit Eskimos would always summer in their village on the beach. Instead, they built a city and created a new territory to be their homeland. <sup>(5)</sup>

I assumed that the end of the Cold War meant the end of the DEW Line. Instead, some of the old DEW Line sites are still operational and a newer North Warning System has been built. <sup>(3)</sup>

I assumed that the BARC as I knew it would always be around as the workhorse of the U.S. Army Transportation Corp's amphibious vehicle force. Instead, it was renamed LARC, is out of service, and the Army now has no amphibious vehicle component. <sup>(4)</sup>

Just as what the BARCs did nearly 50 years ago has not changed, neither has the Arctic. Equipment may come and go, man's names and artificial boundaries may change, but we're still standing guard, and the vast expanse of the Arctic remains one of the world's largest, most challenging and sensitive regions, not only environmentally but militarily.

(1) The Atlas of Canada

(2) Mission Log (from memory)

(3) The DEW LINE Sites in Canada, Alaska & Greenland – Internet

(4) The History of Logistics Over-The-Shore (LOTS) Operations, Richard Killblane, Historian, U.S. Army Transportation Corps

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