

# ACI Certification in Pago Pago

My journey to improve concrete practice in American Samoa

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BY MARK A. CHEEK

**W**hile at the ACI Fall 2007 Convention in Puerto Rico, I received an e-mail in response to a certification exam/training listing on the ACI Web site that asked, “We understand you will carry out training in different locations. Would you be willing to travel to American Samoa in the South Pacific?” I was in the convention hotel lobby reading that e-mail when John Nehasil, ACI Managing Director of Certification, happened to pass by. So I called out to him, “Hey John, do we have a local sponsoring group in the American Samoa Islands?” With a surprised look, he replied “No, we do not.” I then asked, “Is it OK if I give exams to employees of a construction company working there?” His reply was “Have fun,” and so the adventure began.

McConnell Dowell, a multinational construction company based in Australia, needed several of their employees working in the American Samoa Islands certified in the ACI Concrete Field Testing Technician-Grade I and Concrete Strength Testing Technician programs. They were working on a project under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that required ACI-certified personnel. McConnell Dowell requested that I train and certify five employees in both the Field Grade I and Strength Testing programs.

## THE JOURNEY

After numerous e-mail exchanges, the training and exam dates were scheduled for December 2007. Scheduling the training and exams was easy compared to reserving a room in one of the island’s two hotels and arranging

flights to and from the island on Sunday and Thursday—the only days flights provide service to the island. I proposed to start training on Monday morning and finish testing by Thursday evening in time to catch the flight off the island.

The journey began when I kissed my wife goodbye at 4:30 a.m. Saturday morning and drove to the New Orleans International Airport. The first leg of the journey was to Dallas. After a layover of 4 hours, I took off to Honolulu, a flight that lasted 8-1/2 hours. I arrived in Honolulu at 5:30 p.m. Once I retrieved my luggage, which included testing equipment, I checked into my hotel room and settled in for the evening.

Because my flight did not leave until Sunday evening at 5:00 p.m., I decided to visit the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor. Needless to say, visiting the memorial was an emotional experience and brought out feelings of patriotism. The next feeling, however, was one of surprise. I was surprised at how much of a concrete geek I was (how I didn’t realize that before, after years of working with student teams on designing concrete mixtures for concrete canoes, is amazing to me). I noticed that the entire memorial was built out of concrete in shapes that if cast in place, the formwork must have been a nightmare.

## THE TRAINING

Finally, after a 5-1/2 hour flight, I arrived at my destination, the Pago Pago (pronounced “Pango Pango”) International Airport, under rainy skies.

On Monday morning, as planned, an employee of McConnell Dowell picked me up at my hotel and brought me to their construction group's yard. Once I arrived, I was introduced to the group I was to train and test. The group consisted of men from the UK, the Philippines, American Samoa, and New Zealand. After the introductions, we started training for the Concrete Field Testing Technician-Grade I program.

By 2:00 p.m., everyone was saturated with information and needed time for self-study. Luckily for me, I arrived back at my hotel room at 2:30 p.m., which just happened

to be kickoff time for a Monday Night Football game in which my New Orleans Saints were playing. Yes, I did say Monday Night Football at 2:30 in the afternoon.

Tuesday morning began with a review and question-and-answer session, followed by the Field Grade I written exam. After lunch, we began the performance portion of the exam. I acted as the examiner and supplemental examiner. After the completion of the performance portion of the Field Grade I exam, I directed the group to go home and start reviewing for the Strength Testing program that would be starting Wednesday morning.

Prior to departing for this trip, the ACI certification department agreed that I could scan the completed written exams and e-mail them to ACI for grading prior to me leaving the island. The plan was to let examinees know on Wednesday if they failed the written exam. If they did, they would have a second chance to pass it on Thursday morning.

We began training for the Strength Testing exam on Wednesday morning and by early afternoon we ended the day with a question-and-answer session. And once again, I sent them home for self-study.



Mark Cheek (second from right) with some of the certification examinees of McConnell Dowell



Concrete at the USS Arizona Memorial



Preparing to run a compression test

On Thursday morning, I administered the written exam for the Strength Testing program and the retest for the Field Grade I program. After the written exams and a short review break, I conducted the performance exam and again acted as examiner and supplemental examiner. That evening, I started my long journey home.

It was quite an experience and I was happy to provide certification services in a remote location. My client was very thankful for my efforts and pleased to have five new ACI Concrete Field Testing–Grade I Technicians and three new ACI Concrete Strength Testing Technicians.

## AN UPDATE

In April 2010, I found myself on another a flight to Honolulu en route to Pago Pago. It had been 3 years since my last visit and McConnell Dowell was in need of additional certified personnel. This time, I administered exams for Concrete Field Testing Technician–Grade I, Strength Testing Technician, and Concrete Construction Special Inspector.

Selected for reader interest by the editors.



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Committee, the Certification Programs Committee, the Convention Committee, the Honors and Awards Committee, and ACI Committees 214, Evaluation of Results of Tests Used to Determine the Strength of Concrete; 228, Nondestructive Testing of Concrete; C610, Field Technician Certification; C620, Laboratory Technician Certification; and E702, Designing Concrete Structures. He has been a supplemental examiner for the ACI Louisiana Chapter for 21 years and an examiner for 11 years. Cheek received his BS in civil engineering from the University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

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