

DMS - FCJ

# "WE BUILD, WE FIGHT" THE SEABEES



**EVER WONDER  
WHERE THE  
PHRASE  
"CAN DO"  
CAME FROM?  
READ ON**

In October of 1941, tensions between the United States and Japan had reached a feverish pitch, unbeknownst to most Americans. With a seaman's eye to this approaching storm, naval civil engineer corps officer Rear Adm. Ben Moreell took action to establish a naval construction force.

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Bureau of Navigation granted Moreell the authority to establish the naval construction battalions. On January 5, 1942, a new branch of the United States Navy was born. The construction battalions were quickly christened "Seabees," adapted from the letters "C" and "B" and reflecting their naval heritage.

### A CALL TO ARMS

The call went out to experienced construction workers to come to the aid of their country. Thousands answered this call—primarily mature men with businesses to run and families to raise. The average age of these men was 37, much older than the average enlistee.

These recruits were placed under the command of the civil engineer corps, where they gave their energy to the war effort. They built airstrips, warehouses, bridges and roads, and completed any other construction work necessary in support of the troops.



The 70th Naval Construction Battalion unloads tanks from a pontoon barge during the invasion of Okinawa, April 1945. The construction battalions, better known as "Seabees," comprise a famous and colorful component of naval history. Many AGC contractors and employees are Seabee veterans.

### "THE DIFFICULT WE DO AT ONCE, THE IMPOSSIBLE TAKES A BIT LONGER"

During World War II the Seabees racked up an impressive list of accomplishments. In the Pacific alone they built 111 major airstrips, 700 square blocks of warehouses, 441 piers, hospitals for 70,000 patients, storage tanks for 100 million gallons of gasoline, and housing for 1.5 million soldiers. A single battalion hacked a 3,500-foot airstrip out of dense South Pacific jungle in less than 13 days. Another battalion built a camp for 6,000 men complete with housing, mess hall, recreation, water, sewer, electricity, drainage, and roads in just 17 days.

The Seabees landed with the Marines at nearly every major invasion in the Pacific, forming a close bond between the two groups that still endures. Gen. Thomas Holcome said, "Wherever Marines have gone, they have seen their Seabee comrades performing miracles of construction and repair, often under heavy fire."

The Seabees were there at Iwo Jima and Bora-Bora and Okinawa. On D-Day, the largest amphibious operation in history, the

Seabees assembled more than 22,000 pontoons, which were used as invasion units in rough seas under enemy fire. The 25th Naval Construction Regiment alone suffered 92 casualties.

### SEABEES IN KOREA

At the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's planning staff devised a landing at Inchon, a plan opposed by the Navy because of a treacherous tide, strong current, and miles of mud flats. But MacArthur's officers were insistent, and the Seabees landed the assignment. Battling both enemy fire and the elements, the 'Bees constructed a floating causeway, 25 feet wide, that stretched from the beach to deep water 400 feet away, and a steel highway spanning the mud flats, all in under 72 hours. Gen. MacArthur once remarked, "The only trouble with Seabees is that we don't have enough of them."

### HUMANITARIAN TRADITION

In the peacetime following the Korean war, the Seabees began serving as a disaster relief force and in Civic Action Teams. The disaster relief teams were first called into



Seabees lay steel matting for airfield, Phu Bai, Vietnam, January 1968.

in underdeveloped countries. Seabee teams typically consist of a Civil Engineer Corps officer, a hospital corpsman, and 11 specially trained Seabees. Team members have constructed roads, schools, orphanages and public utilities, and have passed on their skills to local residents, making their presence felt long after their departure.

### SEABEES AND VIETNAM

With the escalation of the Vietnam conflict, the construction battalions again proved their worth. They built airstrips, roads, housing, hospitals, warehouses, storage tanks, towers, and fences, usually in record time with scarce materials.

Historically Seabees have been known as prodigious workers and ingenious problem-solvers. In war, materiel shortages were common, and Seabee ingenuity was often called into play. During the Vietnam conflict, they used artillery shell canisters to build bunkers, tore down bunkers to build housing, and used, re-used, scrounged, and traded materials.

Vietnam-era Seabees were usually younger than the forces scrambled together at the beginning of World War II. Typically they were young men learning the construction trade in the Navy, in contrast to skilled construction workers

lending their talents to a nation at war. Young civil engineer officers often began their construction careers serving with the construction battalions in Vietnam.

### FROM THE SEABEES TO AGC

Sam Hunter, president of T.A. Loving Co. (AGC), Goldsboro, N.C., served as officer-in-charge of Detail Golf of Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit-302 at the Naval Air Facility in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. At one point, CBMU-302 had more than 1,400 men assigned, making it the largest Seabee unit since World War II.

Hunter and his Seabees worked to maintain the naval air facility and renovate the barracks. His group also built a chapel at the facility and was in charge of the motor pool. "I had guys skilled in electricity, in construction, and as mechanics," he said. "The Seabee motto is 'Can Do' and there is nothing they wouldn't tackle." CBMU-302 was also heavily involved in civic action projects.

Hunter's Seabees worked to improve a Vietnamese orphanage near their base, completing construction on a building, and also worked on various goodwill projects with the citizens in the area. The Seabee humanitarian effort was contagious, apparently. "Not only Seabees, but a lot of the GIs who were not even involved with construction would help out," he said.

This cooperation between services included some informal bartering. According to Hunter, "The Seabees were notorious for being able to trade things. We had plenty of plywood and two-by-fours. The Army was always short on that, but the Army had plenty of food, so we used to trade plywood and two-by-fours for steaks."

Hunter's experience in Vietnam shaped his later life and career choices. Today he heads T.A. Loving Co., which performs commercial construction, water and wastewater treatment, and heavy marine construction. "Being in the Seabees, and being around construction, I determined that construction was what I really wanted to do," he explained.

Gordon Lacy, vice president of marketing at Martin K. Eby Construction Co., Inc. (AGC), served with Naval Mobile Construction Battalion-10, the only Seabee battalion that had seen continuous service since World War II. His workplace in Wichita, Kan., has seen continuous service since 1937, pre-dating the Seabees by five years. As vice president of marketing for this general contracting firm, his duties are quite different from those he had in Vietnam.

NMCB-10 built the airstrip at Quang Tri, Vietnam. "What we did was break up

bags of cement and mix those using a discing machine with the soil that was in place. Apply water to that, and that makes a 'soil-cement' base. And on top of that we laid interlocking aluminum panels. This was a classic military airfield construction—they could land C-130s on it."

In conjunction with the airstrip, Lacy's company built revetments—protective walls for helicopters based at the airfield. These were heavy-duty corrugated metal frames, backfilled with earth. "The theory is that if a shell hits the ground someplace, it causes minimum damage, because you have a whole bunch of these walls between it and the helicopters," said Lacy.

NMCB-10 also came to the aid of Marines under fire. "We went to a place very near the DMZ—really right in the middle of the war. There was a Marine battalion or two, dug into bunkers. These guys were under fire—not just rifle fire, but artillery fire," he said. The Marines needed these bunkers and were attempting to build more, but they were equipped only with band saws. The bunkers were built out of very thick timbers, and cutting through them with band saws was a cumbersome process. Lacy explained, "One of the things the Seabees had in their bag of equipment was chain saws. The Marines didn't have any chain saws. We could cut those eight-by-eight timbers in a matter of 30 seconds, whereas it might take them a half an hour to cut through one. So we were able to do something which I'm sure saved lives."

Such a commitment to safety and to the value of teamwork are today hallmarks of Lacy's firm. Martin K. Eby boasts a meticulous safety policy, and in 1994 and 1995, was awarded AGC's Marvin M. Black Excellence in Partnering Award. In 1995 the company received two AGC Build America Awards.

### "CAN DO"

Jack Kelley, AGC Building Division chairman and president of Nickerson & O'Day Inc. (AGC), Bangor, Maine, was assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion-10, Charlie Company. Lieutenant Kelley's assignment in Vietnam: Make Camp Carroll habitable. Before the 'Bees arrived, the Third Marine Division was living in tents in the mud, about four miles from the DMZ. Once the Seabees arrived, this changed. They built living quarters, a mess hall, and a chapel. Of course this is easier said than done.

"One of our real big problems was getting materials from Da Nang, several hundreds of miles away," said Kelley. "Trucks would break down on the way and they'd have to leave them behind." Coping with

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## THE SEABEES (continued)

these shortages in typical Seabee fashion, Kelley scrounged for what was needed. His unit tore down bunkers and used those materials to build living quarters, but that supply eventually ran out. "We finally sent our chief petty officer down to Da Nang and he traded for nails and lumber and building materials," he said.

Kelley's experiences with the Seabees prepared him for business stateside. He was later to head a general building contracting firm that specializes in multi-unit residential projects, hospitals, dormitories, and nursing homes—similar in use to those living quarters back in Vietnam, but no longer built out of the remnants of bunkers. Fortunately for Kelley, materials shortages are no longer a problem, as Nickerson & O'Day recently completed a \$10 million school project.

Kelley was also officer-in-charge of Seabee Team 10-12, in the northeast part of Thailand. "We built a runway for medical evacuation and went on several trips to help the natives with medical problems. We went out into the jungle where there was nothing and built our own camp, set up our own electrical power, dug our well, and set up the medical facilities that were used to treat people. Seabees can do anything," said the former OIC.

## COMRADES IN ARMS

Many men who met during their service became lifelong friends. Greg Howell, AGC's 1994 outstanding educator award winner, met Jack Kelley in officer candidate school. The two served on Seabee technical assistance teams in Thailand at the same time. "We each had to check in every night on the radio to the base in Bangkok. After they shut down in Bangkok, we could have a talk," he remembered.

Lieutenant Howell's assignment was to build a connecting road to Ban Hin Taek, in Thailand, near the Burmese border. "I was asked by a senior officer in the border patrol if I could build a road to Hin Taek, and I said, 'Sure.' And then I went out with his aide and asked him what I had just agreed to do, because I had no idea where this thing was."

The assignment took six months—three months to find a place to build and set up a base camp, three months to build the



Seabee Team 10-12, 1967. Lt. J.G. Kelley is front row, center.



Seabee teams typically consist of a Civil Engineer Corps officer, a hospital corpsman, and 11 specially trained Seabees. Here members of Seabee Team 10-12 work on a medical assignment in Thailand.

road. "It was a very rough road, just something you could get a four-wheel-drive jeep over," he said.

## A ROAD BECOMES MEMORY LANE

Twenty years later, Howell visited the same spot with his family and found a paved road with center lines and a guardrail. Not everything had changed, though. He met people there he had known 20 years before, and borrowed a truck from one of them to survey the area. He also was able to find a woman whom he had known as a little girl.

Seabees have a soft spot for children—many of the civic action teams' projects

involve schools and orphanages. Even if their projects aren't directly involved with children, Seabees seem to connect with them anyway, and Howell was no exception. "I loved taking pictures of the kids there," said Howell. "I carried back a picture of a young girl being held by her mother. Her mother had since died and this girl could no longer remember her. Of course I gave her that picture," he said.

Today he maintains his contact with young people as a professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of New Mexico. Howell is active on AGC committees in New Mexico and works for the Arizona Chapter as an instructor in its leadership development program.

## POST-VIETNAM ERA

"I was the public works officer at a communications facility in Greece near the end of the Vietnam war," said Jim Ward, president of Sausal Corp., San Leandro, Calif. (AGC). "We maintained the buildings there, generated our own electricity, treated our own water and sewage, and maintained the transportation for the base."

Now the head of a general building contracting firm, Ward credits his involvement with the Seabees with influencing the direction of his career. "I graduated with a degree in electrical engineering, and I didn't know anything about construction," he said. "The Seabees taught me what construction was, and guided me to where I am today."

David Fritchen, assistant faculty advisor to the Kansas State University student chapter of AGC, served as A-Company commander for Naval Mobile Construction Battalion-74 in 1979. NMCB-74 deployed with more than 750 men from Gulfport, Miss. to Guam, Spain, and Puerto Rico, with detachments performing construction at various locations around the world. A-Company had more than 180 men assigned to support construction projects undertaken by NMCB-74. "We acted in subcontractor capacity to the other companies in the battalions. Primarily as equipment operators, steel workers, and builders. We also operated the asphalt plant," said Fritchen.

"My most memorable experience with

## AGC MEMBERS RECALL THEIR SEABEE DAYS WITH PRIDE



Lt. J.G. Kelley



Bernard Bailey



Sam Hunter

"When I tell people, particularly veterans, about the Seabees we smile and I remember my Seabee days." Builder 2nd Class Bernard Bailey, Bailey Construction, Inc., Mandan, N.D.

"Seabees can do anything." Lieutenant Jack Kelley, Seabee Team 10-12, Nickerson & O'Day, Bangor, Maine

"It was about as un-military as you could be and still get a paycheck." AGC member

"I think I discovered in the Seabees that I probably always was a Seabee." Lieutenant Greg Howell, NMCB-11, AGC 1994 outstanding educator award winner

"There were a lot of good guys over there, doing a job." Lieutenant Sam Hunter, CBMU-302, T.A. Loving Co., Goldsboro, N.C.

"The most challenging and rewarding management experience I've ever had." Lieutenant Gordon Lacy, NMCB-10, Martin K. Eby Construction Co. Inc., Wichita, Kan.

"Seabees are the 'can do' outfit." Lieutenant Jim Ward, NMCB-10, Sausal Corp., San Leandro, Calif.

"Seabees are known for our can-do attitude—no job is too hard." Petty Officer Charles A.

Gaetano, president Charles A. Gaetano Construction Corp., Utica, N.Y.

"The Seabees provided me with unmatched personal and professional life experiences. The worldwide travel, the challenging work, the free-spirited play, and the unique mix of people were a formative influence on me. The Seabee reputation and history added a heightened sense of pride in my service, both then and now." Engineering Aid Second Class Petty Officer Geoff Eastburn, NMCB-40, project management and development, Rinderknecht Associates Inc., Cedar Rapids, Iowa

the Seabees was the work performed on the island of Guam following Typhoon Pamela," he added. "It wiped the island slick. We did primarily road work, a lot of power line work, debris removal. A year or two after Pamela hit the island, we were still doing recovery efforts."

## THE SEABEES TODAY

Today a new generation of Seabees works around the world, constructing and maintaining military bases and assisting in disaster relief efforts. They helped mend the damage caused by Hurricane Hugo, aided Kurdish refugees following Operation Desert Storm, and took part in recovery efforts following the devastating earthquake in Los Angeles.

In 1994, the Seabees played a role in the peaceful transition of power in Haiti. Seabee units continue to be assigned to the Middle East in support of Operation Southern Watch, and as recently as March of 1996, nearly 200 members of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133 were deployed to Bosnia to support Operation Joint Endeavor.

Not many people outside the construction

industry or the military know what a Seabee is, although Americans who have been through a natural disaster recall them with appreciation. Similarly, not many people recognize the names Marvin Shields or Robert Stethem.

## THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

Petty Officer 3rd Class Shields was a Seabee. He was the first and only Seabee ever to be awarded the Medal of Honor, America's highest decoration for valor in combat. When his special forces camp was attacked by the Viet Cong at 11:45 p.m. on June 9, 1965, Shields fought with his comrades throughout the night, and though wounded himself, helped the more seriously injured. In the morning he volunteered to help destroy an enemy machine gun emplacement. He was successful in his mission, but was mortally wounded. President Johnson presented the medal to Mrs. Marvin Shields on September 13, 1966.

Petty Officer Stethem was a Seabee. Following the completion of a project at a base in Greece in 1985, Stethem was returning to the United States when the

commercial plane he was aboard was hijacked by terrorists. Singled out as a member of the U.S. military, Stethem was beaten and eventually killed by his captors. Afterward, they threw his body out of the airplane onto the runway below. Petty Officer Stethem was awarded the Bronze Star posthumously, and in October of 1995 the Navy commissioned the *Stethem*, a guided missile destroyer.

In Arlington National Cemetery there is another monument to Shields and Stethem and to all the Seabees who lost their lives in the service of their country. The tour bus does not stop there, and it's a long walk down the Avenue of Heroes from the main gate to the memorial. Those who do make the effort will see the statue of a Seabee, holding the hand of a small child, and read this inscription at its base:

*With Compassion For Others  
We Build—We Fight  
For Peace With Freedom.*

—By Barbara Sieg, associate editor