

Addendum

(Complete Seabee History)

"UNBELIEVABLE CONTRIBUTION"

We of the Marine Corps know firsthand, perhaps better than anyone else, the almost unbelievable contribution that the Seabees have made to victory.

Many times we have fought side by side in the early stages of battle, before there was room for you to proceed with your assigned construction projects. While we pressed farther inland, you laid aside your arms--but not too far away--to pick up your working tools and build highways, airports, supply depots and innumerable other projects.

It was a comforting thought to know as we pushed the enemy back that you were right behind us with your bulldozers and your tractors, your graders and your power shovels--guaranteeing us roads to bring up our supplies and ammunition and to return our wounded, and airports for our planes to use in supporting our troops and in pushing the attack.

During the interludes between operations, fortunate indeed was the Marine unit that was located near a Construction Battalion. Then, the more peaceful pursuits of erecting a flagpole, repairing a watch, were child's play at the hands of the Seabees.

The Marines who have fought together with you against the Jap will never forget the support you have given us unflinching from Guadalcanal to Tokyo. The bond of fellowship between Marines and Seabees, forged by the heat of battle, is one which I am sure will last as long as there are veterans of these organizations left to recount firsthand experiences of the many hard-won battles of the war.


On behalf of all Marines in the Pacific, I want to say thank you, and well done.

Roy S. Geiger

Lt. Gen. USMC

Commanding General Fleet Marine Force,
Pacific

150
7
1050

Return to [Frequently Asked Questions page](#).  Return to [Seabee History index](#)



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY – NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER
805 KIDDER BREESE SE – WASHINGTON NAVY YARD
WASHINGTON DC 20374-5060

Seabee History: Formation of the Seabees and World War II

After the 7 December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States entry into the war, the use of civilian labor in war zones became impractical. Under international law civilians were not permitted to resist enemy military attack. Resistance meant summary execution as guerrillas.

The need for a militarized Naval Construction Force to build advance bases in the war zone was self-evident. Therefore, Rear Admiral Ben Moreell determined to activate, organize, and man Navy construction units. On 28 December 1941, he requested specific authority to carry out this decision, and on 5 January 1942, he gained authority from the Bureau of Navigation to recruit men from the construction trades for assignment to a Naval Construction Regiment composed of three Naval Construction Battalions. This is the actual beginning of the renowned Seabees, who obtained their designation from the initial letters of *Construction Battalion*. Admiral Moreell personally furnished them with their official motto: *Construimus, Batuimus* -- "We Build, We Fight."



An urgent problem confronting the Bureau of Yards and Docks was who should command the construction battalions. By Navy regulations, military command of naval personnel was limited to line officers. Yet it was deemed essential that the newly established construction battalions should be commanded by officers of the Civil Engineer Corps who were trained in the skills required for the performance of construction work. The bureau proposed that the necessary command authority should be bestowed on its Civil Engineer Corps officers. However, the Bureau of Naval Personnel (successor to the Bureau of Navigation) strongly objected to this proposal.

Despite this opposition, Admiral Moreell personally presented the question to the Secretary of the Navy. On 19 March 1942, after due deliberation, the Secretary gave authority for officers of the Civil Engineer Corps to exercise military authority over all officers and enlisted men assigned to construction units. The Secretary's decision, which was incorporated in Navy regulations, removed a major roadblock in the conduct of Seabee operations. Of equal importance, it constituted a very significant morale booster for Civil Engineer Corps officers because it provided a lawful command authority status that tied them intimately into combat operations, the primary reason for the existence of any military force. From all points of view, Admiral Moreell's success in achieving this end contributed ultimately to the great success and fame of the Seabees.

With authorization to establish construction battalions at hand and the question of who was to

command the Seabees settled, the Bureau of Yards and Docks was confronted with the problem of recruiting, enlisting, and training Seabees, and then organizing the battalions and logistically supporting them in their operations. Plans for accomplishing these tasks were not available. Workable Plans were quickly developed, however, and because of the exigencies of the war much improvising was done.

The first Seabees were not raw recruits when they voluntarily enlisted. Emphasis in recruiting them was placed on experience and skill, so all they had to do was adapt their civilian construction skills to military needs. To obtain men with the necessary qualifications, physical standards were less rigid than in other branches of the armed forces. The age range for enlistment was 18-50, but after the formation of the initial battalions, it was discovered that several men past 60 had managed to join up, clearly an early manifestation of Seabee ingenuity. During the early days of the war, the average age of Seabees was 37. After December 1942 voluntary enlistments were halted by orders of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and men for the construction battalions had to be obtained through the Selective Service System. Henceforward, Seabees were on average much younger and came into the service with only rudimentary skills.

The first recruits were the men who had helped to build Boulder Dam, the national highways, and New York's skyscrapers; who had worked in the mines and quarries and dug the subway tunnels; who had worked in shipyards and built docks and wharfs and even ocean liners and aircraft carriers. By the end of the war, 325,000 such men had enlisted in the Seabees. They knew more than 60 skilled trades, not to mention the unofficial ones of souvenir making and "moonlight procurement." Nearly 11,400 officers joined the Civil Engineer Corps during the war, and 7,960 of them served with the Seabees.

At Naval Construction Training Centers and Advanced Base Depots established on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, Seabees were taught military discipline and the use of light arms. Although technically support troops, Seabees at work, particularly during the early days of base development in the Pacific, frequently found themselves in conflict with the enemy.

After completing three weeks of boot training at Camp Allen, and later at its successor, Camp Peary, both in Virginia, the Seabees were formed into construction battalions or other types of construction units. Some of the very first battalions were sent overseas immediately upon completion of boot training because of the urgent need for naval construction. The usual procedure, however, was to ship the newly-formed battalion to an Advanced Base Depot at either Davisville, Rhode Island, or Port Hueneme, California. There the battalions, and later other units, underwent staging and outfitting. The Seabees received about six weeks of advanced military and technical training, underwent considerable unit training, and then were shipped to an overseas assignment. About 175,000 Seabees were staged directly through Port Hueneme during the war.

As the war proceeded, battle-weary construction battalions and other units in the Pacific were returned to the United States to the Construction Battalion Recuperation and Replacement Center at Camp Parks, Shoemaker, California. At Camp Parks, battalions were reformed and reorganized, or as was the case in several instances, the battalions were simply disestablished and the men assigned to other battalions. Seabees were given 30-day leaves and also plenty of time for rest and recuperation. Eligible men were frequently discharged at Camp Parks. On a much smaller scale, the Advance Base Receiving Barracks at Davisville, Rhode Island, performed similar functions for Atlantic battalions.

The construction battalion, the fundamental unit of the Seabee organization, comprised four companies that included the necessary construction skills for doing any job, plus a headquarters company consisting of medical and dental professionals and technicians, administrative personnel, storekeepers, cooks, and similar specialists. The complement of a standard battalion originally was set at

32 officers and 1,073 men, but from time to time the complement varied in number.

As the war progressed and construction projects became larger and more complex, more than one battalion frequently had to be assigned to a base. For efficient administrative control, these battalions were organized into a regiment, and when necessary, two or more regiments were organized into a brigade, and as required, two or more brigades were organized into a naval construction force. For example, 55,000 Seabees were assigned to Okinawa and the battalions were organized into 11 regiments and 4 brigades, which, in turn, were all under the command of the Commander, Construction Troops, who was a Navy Civil Engineer Corps officer, Commodore Andrew G. Bisset. Moreover, his command also included 45,000 United States Army engineers, aviation engineers, and a few British engineers. He therefore commanded 100,000 construction troops in all, the largest concentration of construction troops during the entire war.

Although the Seabees began with the formation of regular construction battalions only, the Bureau of Yards and Docks soon realized the need for special-purpose units. While the battalion itself was versatile enough to handle almost any project, it would have been a wasteful use of men to assign a full battalion to a project that could be done equally well by a smaller group of specialists.

The first departure from the standard battalion was the special construction battalion, or as it was commonly known, the Seabee Special. These special battalions were composed of stevedores and longshoremen who were badly needed to break a bottleneck in the unloading of ships in combat zones. Their officers, drawn largely from the Merchant Marine and personnel of stevedoring companies, were commissioned in the Civil Engineer Corps. The enlisted men were trained practically from scratch, and the efficiency of their training was demonstrated by the fact that cargo handling in combat zones compared favorably to that in the most efficient ports in the United States.

Another smaller, specialized unit within the Seabee organization was the construction battalion maintenance unit, which was about one-quarter the size of a regular construction battalion. It was organized to take over the maintenance of a base after a regular battalion had completed construction and moved on to its next assignment.

Still another specialized Seabee unit was the construction battalion detachment, ranging in size from 6 to 600 men, depending on the specialized nature of its function. These detachments did everything from operating tire-repair shops to dredges. A principal use for them, however, was the handling, assembling, launching, and placing of pontoon causeways.

Additional specialized units were the motor trucking battalions, the pontoon assembly detachments that manufactured pontoons in forward areas, and petroleum detachments comprised of experts in the installation of pipelines and petroleum facilities.

In the Second World War, the Seabees were organized into 151 regular construction battalions, 39 special construction battalions, 164 construction battalion detachments, 136 construction battalion maintenance units, 5 pontoon assembly detachments, 54 regiments, 12 brigades, and under various designations, 5 naval construction forces.

SEABEE ROADS TO VICTORY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

During the Second World War, the Seabees performed now legendary deeds in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters of Operation. At a cost of nearly \$11 billion and many casualties, they constructed over 400 advanced bases along five figurative roads to victory which all had their beginnings in the continental United States. The South Atlantic road wound through the Caribbean Sea to Africa, Sicily,

and up the Italian peninsula. The North Atlantic road passed through Newfoundland to Iceland, Great Britain, France, and Germany. The North Pacific road passed through Alaska and along the Aleutian island chain. The Central Pacific road passed through the Hawaiian, Marshall, Gilbert, Mariana, and Ryukyu Islands. The South Pacific road went through the South Sea islands to Samoa, the Solomons, New Guinea, and the Philippine's. All the Pacific roads converged on Japan and the Asiatic mainland.

SEABEES IN THE ATLANTIC THEATER OF OPERATIONS

Along the Atlantic front, the Seabees helped forge two roads to victory. From tropical Caribbean climes to the ultimate destination of Germany, they played a crucial role in initially opening and later maintaining bases of critical importance to the war effort.

On the South Atlantic road to victory, Seabee contributions in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America were the first of many milestones. When the United States found itself enmeshed in a two ocean war, the Panama Canal suddenly became the most strategic point on the globe. The convergence of naval and merchant fleet traffic at this point offered German U-boats a vital and tempting target. As a result, it became necessary to ring the canal's ocean approaches with protective bases.

Agreements with the governments of Caribbean, Central American, and South American countries made it possible to secure sites for new bases throughout the area. The Lend Lease Agreement, consummated with Great Britain in September of 1940, yielded still other possible bases in this crucial locale.

Not only were new base sites rapidly acquired, but United States bases already in existence were enlarged. Under the Greenslade Program of 1940, the three pre-1939 naval installations located in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Panama Canal Zone were all expanded. The construction program undertaken in Puerto Rico was perhaps the most ambitious. The Naval Station at Roosevelt Roads, seat of the Tenth Naval District, was developed into an installation of major proportions. It was so enlarged that it became known as the "Pearl Harbor of the Caribbean."

Most of the construction on existing, as well as on the newly established Caribbean, Central American, and South American bases, was carried out by civilian contractors. By late 1943, however, the Seabees had arrived in these southern reaches to complete unfinished construction jobs and keep this vast, naval network in smooth, technical operation. Along the Atlantic coastal regions, these bases formed a barrier from Bermuda to beyond the Brazilian bulge. On the Pacific side of the Americas, United States bases stretched from Honduras to Ecuador. Seaplanes, patrol bombers, blimps, and surface craft operating out of the new and enlarged harbors and airfields hunted down and destroyed roving enemy submarines.

At the big Carlsen airfield on Trinidad, Naval Construction Battalion 80 paved runways and built a giant blimp hangar. Naval Construction Battalion 83 helped cut an eight-mile, S-curved highway up Trinidad's jungled mountain slopes. Beginning at the sea level town of Port of Spain and climbing to a height of 1,300 feet, the construction of this road required that the Seabees move one million cubic yards of earth and rock.

On the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador, Naval Construction Battalion Detachment 1012 outfitted a seaplane base with tank farms, pontoon piers, and a water system. Once this mission had been successfully accomplished, the detachment moved to Salinas on the Ecuadorian main-land. There they completed the southernmost seaplane base of the crucial Pacific sea patrol arc.

More often than not, however, the construction battalions, detachments, and maintenance units that served in these areas manned bases already completed. Although far from the receding fronts of war, their tours of duty were, nonetheless, exacting and important.

From the Caribbean and the Americas, the South Atlantic victory road led to North Africa where the Seabees faced combat for the first time in the Atlantic Theater of Operations. After landing with American assault forces on 7 November 1942, they proceeded to rapidly construct military facilities at Oran, Casablanca, Safi and Fedala. Later, while the Allied armies moved toward Tunisia and their final showdown with the *Afrika Korps*, the Seabees built a string of staging and training areas along the northern coast. Also active on the west coast of Africa, they constructed a huge naval air station at Port Lyautey, Morocco.

After the Allies had driven the Axis forces out of Tunisia, the Seabees began a large scale buildup at their new base in Bizerte. There they prepared a new weapon of war, the steel pontoon, that was to be used for the first time on the invasion beaches of Sicily. Actually, pontoons were not new to naval warfare. Xerxes had used such devices to cross the Hellespont when he invaded Greece in the 5th Century B.C. The Seabees, however, had added some new innovations and cleverly adapted them to the requirements of modern amphibious warfare. The classic pontoons were standardized in size and fitted with special tackle so that they could be quickly assembled to form causeways, piers, and other structures. As a result, these versatile "magic boxes" could be used to meet the exigencies of any number of situations.

The beaches of Sicily had previously been considered by both the Allies and Axis as an impossible site for a major amphibious landing. Nevertheless, with help of the Seabees and their new pontoons, the Allies were able to carry off a surprise attack on the weakly defended Sicilian beaches. The enemy was quickly outflanked and overpowered as large numbers of men and huge amounts of equipment poured ashore over pontoon causeways with a minimum of casualties and delay. Thus, the Seabees were instrumental in spelling the beginning of the end for the southern stronghold of the Axis.

These same landing techniques were later used at Salerno and Anzio on the Italian mainland. Unfortunately, the Germans had learned their lesson from the Sicilian debacle, and this time they were lying in wait. It was in the face of fierce resistance and heavy bombardment that the Allies suffered heavy casualties as they stormed ashore at both Salerno and Anzio, and the Seabees absorbed their share of the casualties. At Anzio the situation was particularly desperate. Anzio had been a diversionary landing behind enemy lines and, when the Germans staged a massive counterattack, the defenders were in critical danger of being pushed back into the sea. It was the Seabees' task to keep essential supplies and ammunition moving across their pontoon causeways to the struggling forces on their precarious beachhead. Only with their vital assistance were the Allies able to turn the tide of battle and push inland in the wake of the slowly retreating Germans. For many months, however, the Seabees remained at Anzio and, under continuous German bombardment, built cargo handling facilities, unloaded tank landing ships, and kept supplies moving to the front. German resistance in Southern Italy finally collapsed and Rome was taken on 4 June 1943. Even so, the Seabees had one more task in the Mediterranean, the invasion of Southern France through Toulon. While this was a relatively important job, it was eclipsed by the much bigger assignment they were handed on the North Atlantic road to victory, the Normandy invasion.

Although Seabee accomplishments on the North Atlantic road eventually culminated in the Normandy invasion, operations in that area had begun as early as March of 1942.

The Seabees were first used on construction projects in Iceland, Newfoundland, and Greenland at bases previously acquired by treaty from Great Britain. Seabees in Newfoundland helped construct a

huge naval air station and naval base at Argentia. From these installations, aircraft and surface ships set forth to protect the many Allied convoys sailing the western sector of the North Atlantic.

To complete the huge arc of bases stretching across the North Atlantic, even more Seabees were sent to the British Isles. At Londonderry, Northern Ireland, they constructed a huge, deep water facility for naval craft and a naval air station that was capable of handling the largest aircraft. Lough Erne, Loch Ryan, and Rosneath in Scotland were transformed into huge storage depots, tank farms, industrial areas, and seaplane bases.

Only with the firm establishment of the Navy's control of the seas, and the logistic battle of the North Atlantic under control, did the Seabees move to the southwest coast of England to prepare for the great invasion. From Milford Haven on the northwest coast of Wales down to Plymouth and over to Exeter, the Seabees built invasion bases which teemed with activity. There they prepared for their most critical and multifaceted role in the Atlantic Theater of Operations.

During D-Day of the Normandy invasion, 6 June 1944, the Seabees were among the first to go ashore as members of naval combat demolition units. Working with U.S. Army Engineers, their crucial task was to destroy the steel and concrete barriers that the Germans had built in the water and on the beaches to forestall any amphibious landings. When dawn betrayed their presence, they came under murderous German fire. Whole teams were wiped out when shells prematurely detonated their explosives. Heedless of the danger, the survivors continued to work until all their explosive charges were planted. As a result of their heroic actions, the charges went off on schedule and huge holes were blown in the enemy's defenses.

The arduous assignment of the combat demolition units was only the beginning of the Seabees' work on Normandy's beaches. After the invasion fleet had arrived off the coast, The approximately 10,000 Seabees of Naval Construction Regiment 25 began manhandling their pontoon causeways onto the beach. It was over these causeways that the infantry charged ashore. Under constant German fire, directed at slowing or stopping the landings, the Seabees succeeded in placing large numbers of these pontoon causeways. Allied troops and tanks subsequently swept ashore in ever greater numbers and pushed the German defenders inland.

The Seabee contribution to the success of the invasion was not restricted to assembling and placing pontoon causeways. They also manned the large ferries known as Rhinos that carried men and supplies from the larger ships to the beaches. These ferries were actually little more than floating pontoon structures powered by giant outboard motors. Huge amounts of much needed equipment were hauled ashore on Rhinos during the first few days of the invasion.

The Seabees also built offshore cargo and docking facilities, piers, and breakwaters. These were constructed out of old cargo ships, special prefabricated concrete structures that were floated over from England, and the ubiquitous steel pontoons. The huge port area that was formed out of this odd combination of materials became known as Mulberry A. Even after the artificial harbor was partially destroyed in a severe storm, the Seabees landed hundreds of thousands of tons of war material daily. In addition to these massive amounts of supplies, by July 4, only 28 days after D-day, they had helped land more than a million Allied fighting men.

The liberation of Cherbourg and Le Havre led to the next big Seabee project. Mulberry A, for all its impressiveness, was only a temporary facility, and the established harbors of these two cities were desperately needed by the Allies. Knowing of this need, the Germans had cleverly devastated the harbors of Cherbourg and Le Havre before retreating. It thus fell to the Seabees to put these harbors quickly back into service. On the heels of the liberating armies, the Seabees entered Cherbourg and Le

Havre. At Cherbourg the first cargoes were landed within 11 days and within a month the harbor was capable of handling 14 ships simultaneously. Seabee accomplishments at Le Havre were equally impressive.

As the front continued to move inland, other ports along the northern and western coasts of France were restored. At Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire, the Seabees rapidly cleared and rebuilt harbors to handle additional vital shipments of cargo.

The final great Seabee effort in the European Theater took place during the crossing of the Rhine River in March 1945. Many times during the Second World War the Seabees had been called upon to do odd jobs of an urgent nature, but this particular odd job was of special significance. The U.S. Army, concerned about the Rhine River's swift and tricky currents, called upon the Seabees to operate many of the landing craft that were to be used in breaking Germany's Rhine River barrier. The Seabees' first successful probe across the treacherous river was at Bad Neuenahr near Remagen. Further crossings followed in rapid succession as the Seabees made their task appear to be little more difficult than a sightseeing cruise.

On 22 March 1945, General George S. Patton, with Seabee assistance, put his armored forces across the Rhine at Oppenheim in a frontal assault which swept away the German defenders. To support Patton's advancing army, the Seabees built pontoon ferries similar to the Rhinos of D-day fame and used them to transport Patton's tanks across the river.

In all, the Seabees operated more than 300 craft which shuttled thousands of troops into the heart of Germany. One Seabee crew even had the honor of ferrying Prime Minister Winston Churchill across the Rhine on an inspection tour.

The 69th Naval Construction Battalion had the distinction of being the only complete battalion to serve in Germany. Arriving at Bremen on 27 April 1945, the Seabees of this battalion set up camp just outside the city. They immediately began the re-roofing of damaged buildings, installing plumbing and lighting, setting up shops and offices, and installing power lines. A detachment also repaired facilities at the nearby port of Bremerhaven.

Later, a large detachment from the 69th battalion was sent to Frankfurt-am-Main, which had been designated as the headquarters of the U.S. Navy for the occupation of Germany. There the detachment refurbished several buildings and performed considerable maintenance work. In August 1945 the men of this detachment completed their work and withdrew to Great Britain.

For the Seabees, the completion of this task marked the end of the North Atlantic road to victory. They had reached their goal. Their building and fighting exploits along the road had been noteworthy and valorous.

SEABEES IN THE PACIFIC THEATER OF OPERATIONS

Seabees in the Pacific Theater of Operations earned the gratitude of all Allied fighting men who served with them or followed in their wake. Their deeds were unparalleled in the history of wartime construction. With eighty percent of the Naval Construction Force concentrated on the three Pacific roads, they literally built and fought their way to victory.

In the North, Central, South and Southwest Pacific areas, the Seabees built 111 major airstrips, 441 piers, 2,558 ammunition magazines, 700 square blocks of warehouses, hospitals to serve 70,000 patients, tanks for the storage of 100,000,000 gallons of gasoline, and housing for 1,500,000 men. In

construction and fighting operations, the Pacific Seabees suffered more than 200 combat deaths and earned more than 2,000 Purple Hearts. They served on four continents and on more than 300 islands.

Of the three Pacific roads to victory, perhaps the least significant was the one which wound through the North Pacific. At the outset of hostilities, however, this region, which included Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, had been a Japanese target. The Japanese campaign of 1942 that succeeded in seizing the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska was partly a feint, partly a serious probe of American defenses, and partly a move to prevent the United States from invading the Japanese homeland through the Aleutian and Kurile Islands. Many of the first Seabees were sent to the North Pacific to help forestall what appeared at the time to be a major Japanese offensive.

By late June 1942 Seabees had landed in Alaska and had begun building advanced bases on Adak, Amchitka, and other key islands in the Aleutian chain. In 1943 these new bases were used to stage the joint Army-Navy task force that recaptured Attu and Kiska. While subsequent activity in the North Pacific was minimal, the long, flanking arm of Seabee-built bases pointing toward the Japanese home islands served as a substantial threat to the Japanese throughout the remainder of the war. Even as action in the Central, South, and Southwest Pacific areas became the major focus of attention, the Japanese continued to look northward in fear.

Of the remaining two Pacific roads, the one through the steaming jungles of the South and Southwest Pacific had the Philippines as one of its principal destinations. The Seabees' first stop along this road was in the Society Islands.

The First Naval Construction Battalion (later redesignated the 1st Construction Battalion Detachment because of its small size) left the United States in January of 1942 and, one month later, landed on Bora Bora in the Society Islands. The men of this battalion called themselves the "Bobcats" after the code name BOBCAT, given to the island of Bora Bora. The Bobcats were actually the advance party of the more than 325,000 men who were to serve in the Naval Construction Force during the Second World War. The Bobcats' mission was to construct a fueling station that would service the many ships and planes necessary to defend and keep open the sea lanes to Australia. Shortly after landing on their tropical paradise, the Bobcats discovered that the island had many climatic and hygienic disadvantages. Continual rainfall, 50 varieties of dysentery, skin disease, and the dreaded elephantiasis all combined to make life miserable for the construction men. To make their task even more difficult, the island, far from the regular trade routes, had no piers from which to unload the supply-laden ships. Despite these almost overwhelming problems, the Bobcats immediately set about accomplishing their crucial objective. After devising a method of bringing supplies ashore aboard pontoon barges, they swiftly constructed the necessary fueling facilities. Their strenuous efforts were later rewarded when the island's tank farms supplied the ships and planes that fought the historic Battle of the Coral Sea.

While the Bobcats labored on Bora Bora, two additional groups of Navy construction men were organized into the 2nd and 3rd Construction Battalion Detachments. Less than five months after the Bobcats arrived on Bora Bora, the Second Detachment was sent to Tongatabu in the Tonga Islands and the Third Detachment to Efate in the New Hebrides.

These two islands were also on the supply route to Australia and were being used as a staging area for a counterthrust by the Allies against Japanese forces in the Southwest Pacific. On these islands the Seabees constructed fuel tank farms, airfields, supply depots, and other facilities to support military action in the Coral Sea and Solomon Islands.

The island of Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides was closest in proximity to Japanese-held Guadalcanal and, thus, rapidly assumed major importance. Guadalcanal was the very tip of the Japanese

thrust down the Solomon chain toward the Allied southern communications route. The need to destroy the big Japanese airfields nearing completion on Guadalcanal was imperative. The Seabees of the 3rd Construction Battalion Detachment were rushed from Efate to Espiritu Santo and instructed to build a countermanding Allied bomber strip as rapidly as possible. Within an incredible 20 days the detachment had carved a 6,000 foot airstrip from virgin jungle. As a result of this tremendous feat, the Allies were able to mount large scale air attacks against Guadalcanal and destroy the dangerous Japanese air base under construction there.

When the Marines finally invaded nearby Guadalcanal, the men of the 6th Naval Construction Battalion followed them ashore and thus became the first Seabees to build under combat conditions. They immediately began the arduous task of repairing the airfield, now named Henderson Field that they had earlier helped to destroy. This became a never-ending job, because as fast as the builders leveled the strip and put down Marston matting, the Japanese would send bombers overhead to drop high explosives on their work. Nevertheless, in the midst of battle, the Seabees were able to repair shell and bomb holes faster than the Japanese could make them. The Allied pilots desperately needed the use of Henderson Field, so the Seabees kept this precious airstrip in almost continuous operation.

The first decorated Seabee hero of the war, Seaman 2nd Class Lawrence C. "Bucky" Meyer, USNR, was among the Seabees of the 6th battalion who worked on Henderson Field. In his off-time, he salvaged and repaired an abandoned machine gun, which, on 3 October 1942, he used to shoot down a Japanese Zero fighter making a strafing run. For this exploit, he was awarded the Silver Star. It was, however, a posthumous award, for 13 days after shooting down the plane, "Bucky" Myer was killed in action when the gasoline barge on which he was working was struck by Japanese naval gunfire.

On the same day Guadalcanal was invaded, Marines landed on Tulagi Island, a short distance across the Sealark Channel. Once again the Seabees also came ashore, but this time to construct an important torpedo patrol boat and repair base for the U.S. Fleet. The base played a strategic role during the savage sea battles in the "slot," the narrow channel between the islands of Tulagi, Savo, and Guadalcanal. Patrol boats darted from the Seabee-built advanced base to scout Japanese offensive moves, and crippled American ships limped in to receive temporary Seabee repairs.

As the Allies continued to island hop up the Solomon chain, the Russells, Rendova, New Georgia, and Bougainville also became centers of a frenzied construction effort by Seabee units. At the same time, Seabees in the Southwest Pacific were driving northward from Australia to New Guinea and the Philippines.

It was during the landing on Treasury Island in the Solomons, on 28 November 1943, that Fireman 1st Class Aurelio Tassone, USNR, of the 87th Naval Construction Battalion created that legendary figure of the Seabee astride his bulldozer rolling over enemy positions. Tassone was driving his bulldozer ashore during the landing when Lieutenant Charles E. Turnbull, CEC, USNR, told him a Japanese pillbox was holding up the advance from the beach. Tassone drove his dozer toward the pillbox, using the blade as a shield, while Lieutenant Turnbull provided covering fire with his carbine. Under continuous heavy fire, Tassone crushed the pillbox with the dozer blade, killing all 12 of its occupants. For this act Tassone was awarded the Silver Star.

Although Seabees were only supposed to fight to defend what they built, such acts of heroism were numerous. In all, Seabees earned 33 Silver Stars and 5 Navy Crosses during World War II. But they also paid a price: 272 enlisted men and 18 officers killed in action. In addition to deaths sustained as a result of enemy action, more than 500 Seabees died in accidents, for construction is essentially a hazardous business.

Another milestone in Seabee history was in the making in 1943 -- but the location was Hollywood rather than the South Pacific. Made in 1943 and released in early 1944, the motion picture *The Fighting Seabees*, starring John Wayne and Susan Hayward, made "Seabee" a household word during the latter part of the war. This picture also began a relationship between John Wayne and the Seabees which was to last more than three decades. In fact, John Wayne's last motion picture was *Home for the Seabees*, a Navy documentary filmed in 1977 at the Naval Construction Battalion Center, Port Hueneme, California. This was most appropriate, since the exteriors of *The Fighting Seabees*, had been filmed in and around the same base during World War II.

While Hollywood made films, however, the grim reality of the war continued. Initially, the Seabees in the Southwest Pacific busied themselves enlarging and constructing new, vital staging and supply ports at several Australian coastal points. By mid-1943, however, Merauke, on the underbelly of New Guinea, resounded with the roar of battle and the clatter of Seabee hammers and bulldozers. After building an important bomber strip that helped fend off Japanese air attacks, they constructed a communications station at Port Moresby.

Finally, on 26 December 1943, the Seabees joined the First Marine Division in an assault on Japanese-held Cape Gloucester, New Britain. During the battle, Seabees bulldozed paths to the Japanese lines so that American tanks could attack the hostile positions. By New Year's Day, the Japanese airstrips were captured and the American flag flew over the entire Cape.

The Admiralty Islands atop the Bismark Sea became the key to the isolation of Rabaul and the final neutralization of enemy forces on New Britain. When the Allies seized Manus Island and the adjacent smaller Los Negros Island, enemy supply and communication lines from all points north and east were cut. In the busy months following the capture of the Admiralties, the Seabees transformed Manus and Los Negros into the largest U.S. naval and air base in the Southwest Pacific. By 1944 the new base had become the primary location for service, supply, and repair of the Seventh U.S. Fleet. During the same month, the capture of Emirau Island in the Saint Matthias group completed the encirclement of Rabaul. There the Seabees built a strategic, two-field air base, huge storage and fuel dumps, a floating dry dock, miles of roads, and a base for torpedo patrol boats.

Leapfrogging ahead with General Douglas MacArthur's forces, the Seabees reached Hollandia and turned it into a major forward base that was later instrumental in the liberation of the Philippines. In fact, the Seabees of the Third Naval Construction Brigade were still with General MacArthur when the South and Southwest Pacific roads to victory converged on the Philippine Island of Leyte in October 1944. Naval Construction Battalions operated the pontoon barges and causeway units that brought the Allied Forces ashore and fulfilled General MacArthur's famous promise to one day return.

These Seabees were soon joined by those of the Second and Seventh Naval Construction Brigades, units that had been organized and staged in the Hawaiian Islands. This vast Naval Construction Force of 37,000 men spread out into the adjoining major islands and began building the facilities that were needed to make the Philippines a great forward base in the Pacific, indeed one of the last steps on the way to the invasion of the Japanese home islands.

The Seabees of this force built U.S. Navy and Army airfields, supply depots, staging areas for men and materials, training areas and camp-sites. Seventh Fleet headquarters was moved to the Philippines and Seabees built the facilities that this enormous fleet required: fleet anchorages, submarine bases, ships repair facilities, fast torpedo boat bases. By the summer of 1945, U.S. military forces were prepared and poised for that last step on the South Pacific road to victory.

While the Seabees in the South and Southwest Pacific were hacking their way through vermin-

infested jungles toward the Philippines, their comrades to the north were striking across the Central Pacific island chains straight at the heart of the Japanese Empire. It was on this extremely hazardous road to victory that the Seabees perhaps made their greatest contributions toward winning the war. They continually played a major role in the savage fighting which characterized the island-hopping campaign in the Central Pacific. One after the other, the Gilberts, Marshalls, Carolines, and Marianas were seized. After landing in the initial Marine assaults, Seabee battalions built on these islands the advanced bases from which the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the Marines, and the Army moved inexorably toward the Japanese homeland.

Tarawa Atoll in the Gilberts was one of the toughest of them all. Only after savage fighting at a cost of nearly 1,000 American dead were the Japanese defenders overwhelmed. On Tarawa, the Seabees landed with the Marines and in a mere fifteen hours put a shell-pocked airfield back into operation.

On the atolls of Kwajalein, Eniwetok, and Majuro in the Marshalls, the Seabees rendered further assistance in the destruction of Japan's eastern defense perimeter. Seabees converted the idyllic atoll of Majuro into one of the major fleet anchorages in the Pacific, and similarly transformed Kwajalein Atoll into a major aviation facility. The Carolines were the third stepping-stone on the Central Pacific road to Tokyo. Combat and construction in this island chain served yet another purpose. When the fleet and air facilities in the western Carolines were made operable by the Seabees, the islands were used as bases to support the coming liberation of the Philippines.

The seizure of the Marianas spelled the beginning of the end for the Japanese. The loss of the islands cut the Japanese line of defense and, even more important, gave the United States an airbase from which bombers could strike at the very heart of the Japanese Empire, the homeland. It was during Operation "Forager," as the Marianas Campaign was named, that the Seabees made one of their most significant contributions in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

Seabees and Marines landed together on the beaches of first Saipan, then Guam, and finally Tinian. The very same day the Marines captured Aslito, the main Japanese airfield on Saipan, the Seabees went to work repairing its bomb-damaged runways. Stopping only to fend off Japanese counterattacks, they succeeded in making the airstrip operational within four days. During the three week battle for Guam, the Seabees participated by unloading ships and performing vital construction jobs directed at eventually turning the island into the advanced headquarters for the United States Pacific Fleet, an airbase for Japan-bound B-29s, and a huge center of war supply. The invasion of Tinian called for yet another exhibition of Seabee ingenuity. Because its narrow beaches were covered with low coral cliffs, Seabees devised and operated special movable ramps which made the landings possible. Once ashore, and even as the battle raged, their bulldozers accomplished prodigious feats of construction on the damaged and unfinished Japanese airfield.

What was needed after the successful Marianas campaign was an emergency landing field much closer to the Japanese homeland that would service crippled bombers returning from raids and enable shorter-ranged fighter planes to accompany the giant bombers to their targets. The island chosen for this purpose was Iwo Jima, scene of some of the most savage fighting of the war. On 19 February 1945, the Fifth Amphibious Corps, which included the 133rd Naval Construction Battalion and elements of the 31st Naval Construction Battalion, hit the beaches. During the assault, the 133rd Naval Construction Battalion had the dubious honor of suffering more men killed or wounded than any other Seabee battalion in any previous or subsequent engagement. Although only minor construction was accomplished during the first ten days of the operation, the Seabees later built one crucial emergency landing field and fighter airstrips so desperately needed by the Allies.

The Seabees also played a key role in the last big operation of the island war, the seizure of

Okinawa. The main invasion forces landed on Okinawa's west coast Hagushi beaches on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945. Off the amphibious landing craft and over pontoons placed by the 130th Naval Construction Battalion went the 24th Army Corps and Third Amphibious Corps. Right beside them were the 58th, 71st and 145th Naval Construction Battalions. A few days later, two additional Naval Construction Battalions, the 44th and 130th, landed. The fighting was heavy and prolonged, and organized resistance did not cease until 21 June 1945.

The Seabees' task on Okinawa was truly immense. On this agrarian island, whose physical facilities a fierce bombardment had all but destroyed, they built ocean ports, a grid of roads, bomber and fighter fields, a seaplane base, quonset villages, tank farms, storage dumps, hospitals, and ship repair facilities.

Nearly 55,000 Seabees, organized into four brigades, participated in Okinawa construction operations. By the beginning of August 1945, sufficient facilities, supplies, and manpower were at hand to mount an invasion of the Japanese home islands.

While the Allied forces in the Philippines and on Okinawa were readying themselves for the final battles that would get them to Tokyo and complete the roads to victory, decisive events were taking place elsewhere, on the island of Tinian in the Marianas. During the summer of 1945, the USS INDIANAPOLIS arrived at Tinian from the Naval Weapons Center at Port Chicago, California. Seabees of the Sixth Naval Construction Brigade helped with the unloading of the components of a newly-developed weapon. The Seabees then stored the elements in a shed built by themselves, and organized a detachment to guard the shed and its mysterious contents. Scientists assembled the weapon in the shed with several Seabees assisting as handymen.

On 6 August 1945 the new weapon was loaded into a U.S. Army Air Force B-29 bomber, named the *Enola Gay*. A short time later, the *Enola Gay* took off with its secret load from Tinian's North Field, which the Seabees had built, and started on her mission to Japan. Later in the day, the mission ended with the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

This historic event sealed the fate of Japan. Realizing that the war was lost, the Japanese government negotiated a cease fire that went into effect on 16 August. On 2 September 1945 Japan formally surrendered, and Allied forces occupied the Japanese home islands in a peaceful manner. Thus, the Pacific roads to victory reached their final destination.

13 November 1997

The United States Navy

SEABEES

"We Build, We Fight"



The Song of the Seabees
by the U.S. Navy Band (.wav file - 386.7 kB)

Music by Peter DeRose
Words by Sam M. Lee

Seabees — their simple motto tells the story: "We build, we fight". From the island hopping of World War II and the cold of Korea, to the jungles of Vietnam and the mountains of Bosnia, the Seabees have built entire bases, bulldozed and paved thousands of miles of roadway and airstrips, and accomplished a myriad of construction projects.

In December 1941, with an eye on the developing storm clouds across both oceans, Rear Admiral Ben Moreell, Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks, recommended establishing Naval Construction Battalions. With the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entrance into the war, he was given the go-ahead.

The earliest Seabees were recruited from the civilian construction trades and were placed under the leadership of the Navy's Civil Engineer Corps. Because of the emphasis on experience and skill rather than on physical standards, the average age of Seabees during the early days of the war was 37.

More than 325,000 men served with the Seabees in World War II, fighting and building on six continents and more than 300 islands. In the Pacific, where most of the construction work was needed, the Seabees landed soon after the Marines and built major airstrips, bridges, roads, warehouses, hospitals, gasoline storage tanks and housing.



With the general demobilization following the war, the Construction Battalions were reduced to 3,300 men on active duty by 1950. Between 1949 and 1953, Naval Construction Battalions were organized into two types of units: Amphibious Construction Battalions (PHIBCBs) and Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (NMCBs).

The Korean Conflict saw a call-up of more than 10,000 men. The Seabees landed at Inchon with the assault troops. They fought enormous tides as well as enemy fire and provided causeways within hours of the initial landings. Their action here and at other landings emphasized the role of the Seabees and there was no Seabee demobilization when the truce was declared.

Following Korea, the Seabees embarked on a new mission. From providing much needed assistance in the wake of a devastating earthquake in Greece in 1953 to providing construction work and training to

underdeveloped countries, the Seabees became "The Navy's Goodwill Ambassadors". Seabees built or improved many roads, orphanages and public utilities in many remote parts of the world.



These "Civic Action teams" continued into the Vietnam War where Seabees, often fending off enemy forces alongside their Marine and Army counterparts, also built schools and infrastructure and provided health care service. After Vietnam, the Seabees built and repaired Navy bases in Puerto Rico, Japan, Guam, Greece, Sicily, and Spain. Their civic action projects focused on the Trust Territories of the Pacific.

In 1971, the Seabees began their largest peacetime construction on Diego Garcia, a small atoll in the Indian Ocean. This project took 11 years and cost \$200 million. The complex accommodates the Navy's largest ships and the biggest military cargo jets. This base proved invaluable when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and *Operations Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* were launched.

During the Gulf War, more than 5,000 Seabees (4,000 active and 1,000 reservists) served in the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia, Seabees built 10 camps for more than 42,000 personnel; 14 galleys capable of feeding 75,000 people; and 6 million square feet of aircraft parking apron.

Over the past 50 years the Seabees have repeatedly demonstrated their skills as fighters and builders. From the islands of the Pacific to the jungles of Vietnam to the sands of Saudi Arabia and to the mountains of Bosnia, they have built and fought for freedom. In peacetime, they have been goodwill ambassadors. In peace and in war, they have lived their motto: "Can Do!"



Naval Construction Forces — The gateway site for Naval Construction Battalion commands



Return to the Fact File table of contents.