



# **OLE LEIGH OLSEN**

**CAPTAIN  
CIVIL ENGINEER CORPS  
UNITED STATES NAVY  
JUNE 1, 1941 – JULY 8, 2021**

## **The Naval Service of Ole Leigh Olsen**

Ole Leigh Olsen began his naval service when he was appointed in the summer of 1960 to be a Midshipman in the U. S. Naval Academy. He distinguished himself in football, Glee Club, Choir and Midshipman leadership positions – culminating in serving as Company Commander for the Ninth Company in the Fall set of his First Class (senior) year - and graduated with the Class of 1964.

During his academy service Ole took advantage of the opportunity to attend the Army Airborne’s “Jump School” and qualified as a basic parachutist. His portrait as a brand-new Ensign shows him wearing the basic parachutist insignia, or “jump wings,” which he would wear proudly throughout his career.



### **Seabee in Vietnam**

Upon graduation he was appointed as Ensign, Civil Engineer Corps, U. S. Navy and was assigned as his first duty assignment to Mobile Construction Battalion FIVE (MCB-5), homeported in Port Hueneme, California, joining the battalion on deployment in Okinawa. His first job would be as embarkation officer – the officer responsible for figuring out how to load all the battalion’s people and stuff into airplanes and ships when they had to live up to the word “mobile” in their title.

In August of 1964 the Tonkin Gulf Incident had occurred, leading to a major build-up of U. S. forces in Vietnam. In March of 1965 the first Construction Battalions deployed to Vietnam, and NMCB-5 deployed to Vietnam in September 1965, one of four battalions in country at the time. NMCB-5 was based at Camp Hoover, one of three Seabee camps in Danang, the major logistics base in the northern part of South Vietnam known as “I Corps.”

Their primary mission was construction in support of the III Marine Amphibious Force, the principal U. S. ground combat force in I Corps. The major work was construction of roads, water supply systems, logistics and personnel support facilities. The rainy season, October to December, made roadbuilding impossible, but one of the Seabees' mottos is "The difficult will be done immediately. The impossible will take a little longer." They built the roads anyway, even though they had to rebuild some portions later.

By May 1966 when NMCB-5's deployment ended there were six construction battalions in-country, a number that would eventually climb to a peak of twelve battalions, more than existed in 1964.

### **Graduate School at Stanford**

The curriculum at the Naval Academy included engineering, but not civil engineering, so it was the custom to send Naval Academy graduates who were commissioned in the Civil Engineer Corps to graduate school in civil engineering. Lieutenant (junior grade) Olsen went to Stanford in June 1966, right after returning from Vietnam, and received bachelor's and master's degrees in civil engineering on 1 June 1967, his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It would have been an interesting time to be at Stanford, with such countercultural happenings as antiwar demonstrations, unauthorized co-ed dormitories, LSD experimentation and an activist student union president dominating campus life leading up to the "Summer of Love." It might have been a bit of a culture shock to one who had spent the last six years in the regimentation of the Naval Academy, in a Construction Battalion, and in combat in Vietnam. An officer who is given only one year to complete bachelor's and master's degrees in civil engineering and had the additional distractions of a sports car and motorcycle and a novel degree of freedom, may have been too busy to devote much attention to this cultural phenomenon.

### **Back to Vietnam**

After receiving his master's degree at Stanford, Lieutenant Olsen was ordered back to Vietnam to a year-long assignment on the staff of one of the Naval Construction Regiments. Unlike the battalions, which deployed as units for eight months or so, the NCR staffs were

permanently stationed in Vietnam and their personnel rotated in for 12- or 13-month tours. Ole was ordered to the 30<sup>th</sup> NCR at Danang in the summer of 1967.

As the size of the Seabee effort in Vietnam grew to five and then ten battalions, additional echelons of command and control were required. In 1965 the 30<sup>th</sup> NCR had been activated at Danang to exercise command over the four battalions deployed to Danang. By 1967 the number of battalions in Vietnam had increased to ten, and on August 1 the 32<sup>nd</sup> NCR was established using personnel from the 30<sup>th</sup> NCR, including Lieutenant Olsen. The 32<sup>nd</sup> NCR was based at Phu Bai, near Hue, and commanded the Seabee units in the northernmost part of I Corps, near the border with North Vietnam and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). (The name Demilitarized Zone was not intentionally ironic, but it was at best aspirational. The North Vietnamese Army placed artillery units in the DMZ, from which they could bombard several of the 32<sup>nd</sup> NCR Seabee project sites at will.)

The newest and most dangerous construction work in Vietnam was at the northern border, from Khe Sanh near the border of Laos to Cua Viet on the South China Sea, and including Dong Ha, the advanced command post of the Third Marine Division, 12 miles from the border. Noteworthy projects of the 32<sup>nd</sup> NCB during this period included construction of a new 3,500-foot airfield at Quang Tri, completed in 38 days, in spite of sniper and mortar fire, by a "Ghost Battalion" consisting of detachments from nine battalions under the command of the 32<sup>nd</sup> NCR.

In late January 1968 the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive, a combination of infiltration and frontal attack intended to collapse the South Vietnamese Army and depose the South Vietnamese government and replace it with communists. Simultaneously they besieged the combat base at Khe Sanh with two fully equipped divisions against a regiment of Marines supported by a small number of Seabees to repair battle damage and keep the runway open. Seabee camps and forces were among the targets attacked over the two months of fighting. 14 Seabees were killed and 57 wounded, many of these in the Hue-Phu Bai area where the 32<sup>nd</sup> NCR was headquartered, in the siege of Khe Sanh and at the Phu Loc quarry. But the Seabees kept building.

1968 would be the peak of Seabee activity in Vietnam with 12 battalions deployed. In 1969 Seabee strength would be reduced from 10 battalions to 5, and in 1971 the last battalion would leave.

Lieutenant Olsen received the Navy Achievement Medal with Combat V at the completion of this assignment and shared in the Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment and supporting units, including Seabee units, for extraordinary heroism in the defense of Khe Sanh in January through March 1968.

### **NAF Atsugi Public Works Department**

In 1968 after two tours in Vietnam, Lt. Olsen was sent to a permanent assignment in WestPac – Assistant Public Works Officer at Naval Air Station Atsugi, Japan. NAS Atsugi was one of the major naval air installations in the Western Pacific and was located near the naval base at Yokosuka. When carriers called at Yokosuka for upkeep at the Ship Repair Facility, their air wings would fly ashore to Atsugi. Although the Seabee effort in Vietnam would wind down during this period along with the withdrawal of major combat units, naval aviation would be very active in WestPac. When he arrived in Atsugi in 1968 the Navy had eight carrier battle groups deployed to WestPac, keeping Atsugi very busy supporting both the Vietnam war and the not-quite cold Cold War with such adversaries as the Soviet Union, China and North Korea. 1968 was the year that the North Korean captured USS Pueblo, and 1969 was when they shot down an EC-121 based at Atsugi.

During this tour he was selected for promotion to Lt. Commander.

### **Seabee Operations After Vietnam**

In 1971 newly selected Lt. Commander Olsen returned to the Seabees, this time as Operations Officer of NMCB-3, homeported in Port Hueneme. Battalion employment in Vietnam had wound down, and NMCB-3's deployments were to Guam, in 1971-72, where they built new permanent facilities for Seabee Camp Covington and deployed a large detachment to the Philippines; and to Okinawa in 1972-73 where they served as the Pacific Fleet Alert Battalion and operated three large detachments in Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. Ole was responsible for supervising the battalion's construction activity

and traveled extensively to the detachments. Lt. Commander Olsen was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal at completion of this assignment.

### **Construction Contracting**

Until now Lt. Olsen's construction work had been with the Seabees. But the vast majority of military construction work was accomplished by contractors under the supervision of Navy Officers in Charge of Construction (OICC), who plan the work, manage the design and engage the contractors, and Resident Officers in Charge of Construction (ROICC), who supervise the construction contractor's performance. Ole would now experience duty as a ROICC.

In 1973 Lt. Commander Olsen returned to California to be ROICC at Travis Air Force Base near Fairfield, California. (The Naval Facilities Engineering Command was the Construction Agent for military construction projects at a number of Air Force installations, including Travis.)

### **OICC Trident ROICC Waterfront**

Having been successful as an independent-duty ROICC, Lt. Commander Olsen was next assigned to the staff of the OICC Trident, who was converting a large but sleepy ammunition depot in rural Washington state to a fully functioning submarine base for the submarine force that would deploy the new Trident fleet ballistic missiles and their new, enormous *Ohio*-class submarines.

Facilities to be constructed included a waterfront complex consisting of a "Delta pier" - a triangular pier that included a drydock and two berthing wharfs that could accommodate three Ohio-class submarines undergoing refit, an Explosive Handling Wharf where the Trident missiles would be loaded into the submarines, a marginal wharf for additional submarine mooring, a magnetic silencing facility, and a small craft pier. All of these facilities were built offshore to protect the sensitive inshore environment of Hood Canal.

Ole would serve as ROICC Waterfront, responsible for the execution of the contracts for all of these facilities. He was awarded the Moreell Medal by the Society of American Military Engineers as the

outstanding Civil Engineer Corps Officer for 1977, as well as the Navy Commendation Medal at the completion of this assignment in 1978 and was selected for promotion to Commander.

### **Chesapeake Division of NACFAC**

From the Trident job newly-selected Commander Olsen was transferred to Washington DC where he would serve as the director of facilities acquisition for the Chesapeake Division of the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, responsible for the execution of the Military Construction program for facilities in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Northern Virginia.

### **Seabee Command**

Commander Olsen then returned to the Seabees in the summer of 1980 as Commanding Officer, NMCB-62, homeported in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Under his command the battalion would first deploy in September 1980 to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico as the Atlantic Fleet alert battalion, with details on Diego Garcia, Argentia, Newfoundland, Andros Island, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Yap, and Bridgeport, California. In Puerto Rico the deployment started with an exigent requirement to build a tent camp to accommodate 5,000 people in 30 days and continued with the usual array of construction projects at the main body camp and detachment sites. They returned to Gulfport in May 1981 to begin their six-month homeport training in preparation for the next deployment.

The battalion's next deployment was to Diego Garcia. This was the biggest Seabee project since Vietnam. Although the scale of the work was an order of magnitude smaller than Vietnam, and did not involve being shot at, Diego Garcia was a classic Seabee project. It was a coral atoll located as far as it was possible to be from the United States, and a thousand miles from the nearest continent. The first Seabees had to make an amphibious landing in 1971 and a succession of construction battalions would spend the next eleven years building a base from nothing into a fully functioning operational, logistics and communications installation that had for the past two years, even

though not yet complete, been supporting fleet operations in the Gulf of Oman, over 2,000 miles away.

Diego Garcia was the only deployment site of its time that would utilize an entire construction battalion at full strength and would require the self-sufficiency for which the Seabees were designed. The Seabee base development program was coming to an end, and NMCB-62 would be the last full Construction Battalion to make this deployment. That meant that they would have to complete every remaining project, a feat that none of their predecessors had been required to achieve. Most of these projects were not the minor construction projects undertaken at most peacetime deployment sites, but military construction projects for construction of significant aviation support facilities, personnel facilities, communication facilities, utility systems and roads.

Commander Olsen and NMCB-62 deployed from Gulfport to Diego Garcia in October 1981 with a strength of over 750 Seabees and took over 50 major construction projects and an additional 33 projects that had remaining punch list items to be completed. In addition to performing its own construction workload, the battalion supported over 200 additional Seabees in detachments provided by other deployed battalions. They worked through this workload diligently, completing many projects ahead of schedule, while the logistics challenges of being on the far side of the world kept some projects hanging on until the last day.



Commander Olsen was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (second award) at the completion of this assignment.



## **Staff Duty with Seabee Reserves**

Commander Olsen's next assignment after NMCB-62 was back to California as Executive Assistant to Rear Admiral Thomas Maddock, the Commander of the Reserve Division of the Naval Facilities Engineering Command and of the Reserve Seabees. The Civil Engineer Corps and Seabees had a very effective reserve program that had the rare opportunity to call up two reserve battalions, NMCB-12 and NMCB-22, to serve in Vietnam. The program was led by a Selected Reserve flag officer who had a Regular Navy Commander who served as his Executive Assistant and was stationed in or near the Admiral's hometown. Because many senior Reserve CEC officers have senior responsibilities in the engineering and construction field this provided Commander Olsen with a broader exposure to the industry. And it was in 1983, on his last day in this assignment, that he met Phyllis, who would marry him two years later, just in time to be spirited away to – Guam.

## **Public Works Center San Diego**

In 1983 Commander Olsen reported for duty as the Executive Officer of the Public Works Center San Diego, one of the largest public works operations in the Navy. This assignment would refamiliarize him with the business of Public Works, in which he had last served in 1975, and orient him to the unique business model of the Navy Public Works Center.

Captain Olsen was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (third award) at the completion of this assignment.

## **Public Works Center Command in Guam**

In 1985 the newlywed and newly promoted Captain Olsen was again given command, this time as Commanding Officer, Public Works Center Guam. Guam is fairly remote – 1,500 miles east of the Philippines and almost 4,000 miles west of Hawaii – and is an important logistics location with major port and airfield facilities. Because of Guam's remoteness and the relatively small island population and economy, the Public Works Center needs to be unusually self-sufficient. Phyllis received her rather sudden

introduction to Navy life as the wife of a Commanding Officer living on Flag Circle at Nimitz Hill in the literally insular community of Guam.

Captain Olsen was awarded the Legion of Merit at the completion of this assignment in 1987.

### **The Ultimate Seabee Command**

In 1987 Captain Olsen was assigned to the ultimate Seabee command as Commander, Construction Battalions, U. S. Atlantic Fleet, where he served as the Seabee Type Commander for the Atlantic Fleet, exercising command over the five battalions homeported in Gulfport, the three main body deployment sites in Puerto Rico, Spain and Sicily and numerous detail sites in the Atlantic and European theaters. He traveled extensively both to his own deployment sites in the Atlantic and European theaters, and to his battalions deployed in the Pacific.

One of his sadder duties in 1989 was to preside over the decommissioning of NMCB-62 on 28 July 1989, which occurred in spite of the fact that former NMCB-62 Commanding Officers were then serving as both COMCBLANT and Chief of Civil Engineers (RADM John Paul Jones, Jr.).

Captain Olsen was awarded the Legion of Merit (second award) at the completion of this assignment in 1989.

### **Retirement**

After the conclusion of his tour as COMCBLANT in 1989, Captain Ole L. Olsen was transferred to the retired list on February 1, 1990, after 25 years of active commissioned service.

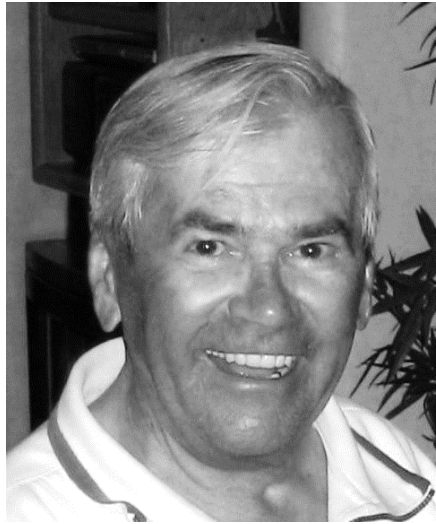


## Second Career

After retirement from the Navy Ole had a very rewarding twenty-one-year career with the Intel Corporation in which he continued to lead and mentor as he had in the Navy.

Ole and Phyllis made their home in New Mexico.

Ole died at home of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease on July 8, 2021.



## Interment

On December 8, 2021, Captain Ole L. Olsen was interred at Arlington National Cemetery, Section 81, Grave 1105, with military honors with funeral escort that included body bearers, marching element, and firing team from the Navy Ceremonial Guard, and Ceremonial Band from the U. S. Navy Band. He was borne on his last ride by a century-old caisson drawn by a team of six black horses of the U. S Army's Third Infantry Regiment. The ceremony was attended by dozens of his family members, classmates, shipmates and friends, including ten of the thirty officers who served with him forty years earlier when he commanded NMCB-62.

