Brief History of the U.S. Navy Seabees

“We Build, We Fight”

Prior to World War II civilian construction firms were awarded contracts by the Navy to build overseas bases such as Guam and Midway. These civilian firms hired U.S citizens as well as local native trade which were supervised by naval officers in charge of the construction project. These civilians under international law could not resist enemy military attacks; should they resist they could be executed as was the case on Wake Island. Thus, the need for a military construction force was recognized after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

World War II

The Naval Construction Force, known as the Seabees, were formally established on March 5th, 1942, to meet the needs of military construction during World War II as civilian contractors were at risk in combat zones. The Seabees met the need of military builders who could fight and build advanced bases, airfields, roads, bridges, and other much needed infrastructure in the Pacific and Atlantic theaters of war.

Rear Admiral Ben Moreell, CEC, USN, Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, considered the father of the Seabees, was authorized on December 28, 1941, to recruit civilian construction workers for assignment to the newly created Naval Construction Regiment which consisted of three Naval Construction Battalions (NCB). This was the beginning of the Seabees of which Rear Admiral Moreell personally came up with the official motto Construimus, Batuimus; “We Build, We Fight” and their designation of the initials “CB” from Construction Battalion.

The first Naval Construction Battalion (NCB) was comprised mostly of civilian construction workers who were on average between the age of 18 to 50 years old, with a few 60 years old, and in the early days of the war the average age was 37. They were recruited to adapt their civilian construction skills to meet the military needs in theaters of war. The first recruits were construction men that built dams, New York skyscrapers, national highways, mines, tunnels, quarries, worked in shipyards, and more which comprised of more than sixty different construction skills. After December 1942, voluntary enlistments were stopped by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and future Seabee enlistments through the Selective Service System were younger men with rudimentary construction skills.

Seabees received recruit training at Camp Allen, VA, and later Camp Peary, VA, which comprised of 3 weeks of military training and use of light weapons. Upon graduation they were formed into battalions and with the urgent need of war time naval construction some were shipped immediately to the theaters of war

following staging, outfitting, and six weeks of advanced training at Advanced Base Depots at Port Hueneme, CA or Davisville, RI. About 175,000 Seabees were staged through Port Hueneme during the war. The typical Seabee battalion was composed of four companies based on their construction skills, and a headquarters company consisting of medical, dental, storekeepers, administration, and cooks. In total, the average Seabee battalion complement was 32 officers and 1,073 men.

As the war progressed, war torn Seabee battalions would return to the Construction Battalion Recuperation and Replacement Center at Camp Parks, Shoemaker, CA, or the Advance Base Receiving Barracks at Davisville, RI. There the Seabees would be given 30 days of leave followed by reassignment to new battalions through the reorganization of old and new battalions. Seabees who were eligible were given discharges.

As the war progressed it became apparent that several Seabee Battalions could be assigned to the same base. With the need for efficient administrative control of the Seabee battalions they were further organized into regiments, and when more than two regiments were present they were organized into brigades. Should there be more than two brigades they were organized into a naval construction force. As the war progressed there were 55,000 Seabees assigned to Okinawa where the battalions were organized within 11 regiments, and 4 brigades which were under the command of Commodore Andrew G. Bisset, CEC, USN, Commander, Construction Troops. By August 1945, these Seabees had built sufficient facilities to supply the manpower for invasion of the Japanese home islands.

Seabees created smaller units as needs arose away from battalion strength. Such examples were Seabee Special battalions consisting of stevedores and longshoremen needed in the unloading of ships in combat zones, base maintenance units after the Seabee battalion have moved on, or units building causeways. These units could consist between 6-600 men. During World War II, Seabees were organized into 151 construction battalions, 344 Special battalions or units, 54 regiments, 12 brigades, and 5 naval construction forces.

During World War II the Seabees performed legendary accomplishments in both theaters of operation, the Pacific and Atlantic. They constructed more than 400 advanced bases costing nearly $11 billon.

Seabees in the **Atlantic Theater** made the impossible possible with a major amphibious landing in Sicily. The Seabees use of the new pontoon causeways helped the surprise attack by the Allies as large numbers of men and equipment came ashore, which quickly outflanked the enemy by establishing a beachhead which ultimately began the end of the Axis southern stronghold. These pontoon causeways were also used during the Italian landings at Salerno and Anzio, however the Allies this time suffered heavy losses by fierce enemy resistance who prepared for this Seabee tactic. For months, the Seabees remained at Anzio under constant enemy bombardment and were tasked to keep the supplies flowing by unloading tank cargo landing ships across the pontoon causeways and building cargo handling facilities.

Seabees as members of naval combat demolition units were among the first to go ashore during D-Day at Normandy, 6 June 1944. Their task was to destroy steel and concrete barriers along the beaches. As dawn approached, making their presence known, whole teams were wiped out as they came under heavy fire by the enemy causing premature detonation of their explosives. The survivors in constant danger continued placing their charges which went off as scheduled creating huge holes in the enemy defenses. The Seabees work did not stop that day. They were tasked with building pontoon causeways, offshore

cargo and docking facilities, piers, and breakwaters creating an artificial harbor. By 4 July, 28 days after D-Day, they helped bring ashore more than a million Allied troops.

The Seabees unparalleled deeds of historic wartime construction in the **Pacific Theater** utilized eighty percent of the Naval Construction Force concentrating on the North, Central, South, and Southwest Pacific areas. They built 111 major airstrips, 441 piers, hospitals to provide care to 70,000 patients, 700 warehouses, 2,558 ammunition magazines, storage tanks for 100,000,000 gallons of gasoline, and housing for 1,500,000 men. The Pacific Theater Seabees suffered more than 200 combat deaths, awarded more than 2,000 purple hearts, and served on more than 300 islands.

With the Marines amphibious landing at Guadalcanal, the Seabees 6th Naval Construction Battalion followed them ashore becoming the first Seabees to build under combat conditions. They quickly began repairing Henderson Field which they had helped destroy previously. While under constant bombardment by enemy bombers it became a never-ending job of repairing craters, leveling the airstrip, and laying down Marston matting as runways. The Seabees kept this key airstrip in almost continuous operation for Allied pilots.

Towards the decisive event of World War II, Seabees of the 6th Naval Construction Brigade helped unload components of a new weapon on the island of Tinian. These components were stored and guarded in sheds built by a detachment of Seabees. Seabees assisted scientists with assembly of this new weapon in these sheds prior to loading into the B-29 bomber, *Enola Gay*. On August 6, 1945, the *Enola Gay* took off from the North Field of Tinian, which the Seabees had built, on its way to Hiroshima.

During World War II, Seabees were awarded 33 silver stars and 5 Navy Crosses. Seabees killed in action included 272 enlisted men and 18 officers, while more than 500 Seabees died in construction accidents. The Seabees ingenuity and “Can Do!’” attitude created a legacy of completed arduous construction projects in combat conditions in such a brief period that would set the standard for future Seabees to follow in their footsteps.

Post World War II

Following World War II, the Seabees demobilized from 250,000 to 20,000 men. The multitude of training bases and depots dissolved into the concentrated base at Naval Construction Battalion Center, Port Hueneme, CA. There were few construction battalions along with scattered detachments across other naval bases or stations. Peacetime Seabees took on unique assignments such as building a fleet weather station on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula with the invitation of the Russians. China also requested Seabees to build projects on mainland China, and as part of the occupation forces in Japan, Seabee battalions rebuilt all types of facilities such as airstrips, bridges, roads, hospitals, and more.

During World War II the Seabees were a Naval Reserve organization, however during the war they proved their metal and in 1947 they became part of the regular Navy. After the war, the Seabees organized reserve units to augment active-duty Seabees during national emergencies. Most of these reserve units were manned by 5 officers and 40 men. Eventually by 1949, the active-duty Seabees would dwindle down to 3,300 which created the need for reserve Seabees for the upcoming Korean war.

Korean War

Following the invasion of South Korea by communist forces of North Korea in 1950, the Seabees found themselves back at war and grew to a force of more than 14,00 by calling up reservists.

During the September 1950 Inchon amphibious assault, the Seabees battling thirty-foot tides built pontoon causeways within hours of the assault. With supplies bottlenecking, the Seabees pulled off a great train robbery. A group of Seabees covertly worked themselves behind enemy lines, and captured abandoned locomotives bringing them back and turning them over to the Army Transportation Corps.

During the Korean War, Seabees built numerous pontoon causeways, cleared mined tunnels, and repaired ships. Seabees continued their famed airfield construction, repairing, and servicing airfields using detachments assigned to various Marine Air Groups. One of the most remarkable Seabee feats was the critical need for an airstrip on the island of Yo, in the bay of Wonsan. In 1952, a Seabee detachment was put ashore on the island of Yo and was given 35 days to build a runway much needed by carrier-based aircraft as an emergency airfield. Seabees under constant enemy artillery bombardment completed the 2,400-foot airstrip in 16 days. The same day the airstrip was finished, nine damaged aircraft landed safely.

The Korean War rapid demobilization was not repeated as it was with World War II. It was recognized that a reserve mobilization of Seabees helped meet the needs for war time construction. The need to maintain military strength and preparedness led to the reorganization of Seabee capabilities and increased Seabee numbers. Between 1949 and 1953, the Seabees created 13 battalions meeting the need for more mobile and specialized battalions with two distinct capabilities. The first type was the Amphibious Construction Battalions used for landing and docking of amphibian forces. The second type were Naval Construction Battalions responsible for land construction of camps, roads, airfields, and other structures.

Post-War Korea

The Seabees were found everywhere building construction projects on six continents. They built underground storage facilities, snow-compacted roads, laboratories, living facilities, and a 6,000-foot runway in Operation Deep Freeze at the South pole. The construction of Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Philippines involved cutting a mountain in half to build a 2-mile runway and filling a section of Subic Bay with blasted coral to build an adjacent pier to dock the largest aircraft carriers. Seabees also contributed to constructing missile range facilities in the Atlantic and Pacific. Seabees built a huge floating dry dock at Holy Lock, Scotland, to service and repair Polaris submarines.

It was during this time that the Seabees were introduced to a new operational mission, disaster relief. In 1962 Seabees rebuilt many structures following the destruction of much of Guam from Typhoon Karen. The need for vital aid led to the creation of Seabee Teams usually consisting of 11 experienced Seabees, 1 hospital corpsman, and 1 junior Civil Engineer Corps officer. These teams were established to help with community projects, impart construction skills, and empower the community to both maintain existing projects and initiate new ones once the Seabees departed. During this peacetime, Seabees underwent ongoing battalion training and worked on global project deployments.

Vietnam War

Before the Vietnam War, Seabees gained extensive in-country experience with construction projects in Vietnam. In 1954, the Geneva agreements divided Vietnam into North and South. As part of Navy Task Force 90, Amphibious Construction Battalions 1 and 2 helped build refugee camps for 310,000 refugees from North Vietnam during the humanitarian mission “Passage to Freedom”. Due to the Geneva accord banning foreign military units operating in-country, Seabees wore civilian clothes and removed U.S. equipment markings.

In the early 1960s, as tensions in Southeast Asia grew, Seabee teams assisted local Thais in establishing public works and remote security for the Thai Border Patrol Police. They also operated in South Vietnam, constructing U.S. Army Special Forces camps and performing civic action projects to counter Viet Cong influence. Seabee Team’s usually worked in remote rural areas and served throughout 22 provinces from the Mekong Delta to the border of North Vietnam. Initially, only 2 Seabee Teams were deployed in these regions, however by 1969 the number had grown to 17 teams.

Seabee Teams primarily served as builders and instructors; however, they occasionally engaged in combat. In June 1965, a Special Forces Camp at Dong Xoai, comprised of 400 South Vietnamese and allied troops, an 11 man U.S. Special Forces Team, and a 9 man Seabee Team, was overrun by Viet Cong forces. During the battle, seven Seabees were wounded and two were killed. Among the fallen was Construction Mechanic 3rd Class (CM3) Marvin G. Shields, USN, who posthumously received the Medal of Honor. The Viet Cong launched a massive close-range assault using flamethrowers, hand grenades, and small arms fire. Despite being wounded twice, CM3 Shields assisted in carrying a critically injured man to safety before resuming combat for an additional four hours. When the commander sought volunteers to disable an enemy machine gun emplacement, CM3 Shields stepped forward. His actions undoubtedly saved many lives, culminating in the destruction of the enemy emplacement at the cost of his own life. CM3 Shields was the first Seabee to be awarded the Medal of Honor and the first Navy serviceman to receive this honor for actions in Vietnam.

Following the deployment of U.S. combat troops in March 1965, there were ten Naval Mobile Construction Battalions comprising approximately 9,400 active-duty Seabees. The first Seabee battalion arrived in Vietnam on 7 May 1965 to build an expeditionary airfield for the Marines at Chu Lai. More battalions soon followed. This Seabee rapid personnel escalation led to the Atlantic Fleet battalions transferring to Pacific homeports and deploying to Vietnam. By the autumn of 1968, personnel had increased to 26,000 across 21 Naval Mobile Construction Battalions, 2 Amphibious Construction Battalions, and 2 Construction Battalion Maintenance Units rotating to Vietnam. As during World War II, the Navy recruited skilled construction workers at advanced pay grades through the Direct Procurement Petty Officer Program which proved highly effective in meeting end strength goals.

Seabee achievements in Vietnam were significant. They constructed essential infrastructure like roads, airfields, cantonments, hospitals, and bunkers to support combat forces. Their dual mission involved both remote Seabee Team activities and building large coastal strongholds in the northern provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang In, and Quang Ngai.

In 1967, notable construction projects included an alternate airfield at Dong Ha and Liberty Bridge near Danang. The airstrip was completed in 38 days despite the northeast monsoon season. Liberty Bridge,

spanning the Thu Bon River, was built to withstand monsoon floods, measuring 2,040 feet long and 32 feet high. Despite working in a remote area with enemy forces, the Seabees finished the bridge in five months.

After transferring war responsibilities to the South Vietnamese, the Seabees helped prepare for the withdrawal of American troops. In the Mekong Delta, they built coastal bases and radar sites for the Vietnamese Navy to manage coastal surveillance. As American troops returned home, the Seabees focused on building hospitals in Danang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Quang Tri, and many other towns and villages.

Cold War Seabees

As the United States began de-escalation in Southeast Asia, Seabee strength was reduced. By September 1970, naval mobile construction battalions had decreased to ten full-sized battalions.

After the Vietnam War, Seabees engaged in construction projects across various regions including the Indian Ocean, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Europe, and many oceans worldwide. Despite being younger and fewer in number compared to their World War II counterparts, Seabees maintained their commitment to their “Can Do!” spirit.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Naval Facilities Engineering Command and the Seabees focused on a major project of constructing a naval complex on Diego Garcia, an atoll within the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Diego Garcia base was planned as a communication station with essential facilities, including an airstrip. In 1975 and 1976, Congress allocated $28.6 million to expand Diego Garcia's facilities for supporting U.S. task groups in the Indian Ocean. The expansion included building a fuel pier, enlarging the airfield, increasing storage for petroleum products, and improving personnel support. Additional projects began in 1978, with construction managed by Seabees and private contractors. It was expected to be completed by 1980. In response to world events in 1979 and 1980, the U.S. reevaluated its defense strategy in the Indian Ocean and recognized the need for pre-positioned materials and an increased presence. Consequently, facilities at Diego Garcia were expanded to support pre-positioned ships with essential supplies. The Naval Facilities Engineering Command issued a $100 million contract for initial dredging to enhance ships berthing facilities by the end of 1980. The Seabees' work on Diego Garcia since 1971 was their largest peacetime construction effort. Despite challenging conditions, they transformed tent camps into a modern military facility that supported thousands of U.S. personnel.

In the early 1970s, Seabees engaged in other projects such as the enhancement of recreational and living facilities at the Naval Communication Station in Makri, Greece. In Spain, Seabees completed several projects at Rota Naval Station, including remodeling barracks and the enlisted men's club, expanding the base telephone exchange and warehouse, installing a new fender system on Pier #2, and building a causeway connection. They also reconstructed the deteriorated Rota Seabees Camp, which had been vacant from 1965 to 1971.

In addition to their normal construction duties, Seabees were also involved in humanitarian missions and disaster recovery operations following numerous natural calamities and political disturbances. On 23 April 1975, Seabees on Guam were tasked with preparing facilities for about 50,000 South Vietnamese refugees. They first renovated the Naval Hospital Annex at Asan Point, receiving the first 10,000 refugees by 25 April. The following day, 24 April, they began clearing over 50 acres of jungle at Orote Point to build a tent camp for 50,000 people. Construction was a continuous effort involving all personnel, including support staff. By

26 April, the camp started receiving refugees, and within a week, 2,000 tents and essential utilities such as kitchens, water mains, and sanitary facilities were constructed.

In the 1980s, Seabees supported the Navy Fleet Hospital program by assembling deployable shelters pre-positioned globally. Active-duty Seabees were responsible for 8 hospitals, Reserve Seabees for another 8 hospitals, with plans for the remaining hospitals.

Desert Shield / Desert Storm

On 2 August 1990, Iraq's armed forces invaded and conquered Kuwait. Operation "Desert Shield" was the initial allied mission to protect Saudi Arabia, aiming to prevent further Iraqi aggression and eventually force Iraq to leave Kuwait.

The First Marine Expeditionary Force was deployed to the region, supported by the Seabees for construction. On 7 August, preparations began to deploy four battalions: Naval Mobile Construction Battalions 4, 5, 7, and 40. By 13 August, the first Seabees arrived in Saudi Arabia with Amphibious Construction Battalion 1, consisting of 210 personnel. They immediately started unloading Marine Corps equipment and supplies from ships. A second wave of Seabees from Construction Battalion Units 411 and 415 built and managed Fleet Hospital Five, a 500-bed facility in Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia.

During Operation "**Desert Shield**," significant projects included the construction of a headquarters complex for the First Marine Expeditionary Force and a camp accommodating 15,000 personnel for the Second Marine Expeditionary Force. Notably, the latter was the largest wartime multi-battalion Seabee project since the Vietnam War.

Operation "**Desert Storm**," the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait began in early 1991. At this time planning went forward for the 3rd Naval Construction Regiment to move into Kuwait in the wake of advancing Allied forces to open roads, airfields, and provide immediate battle-damage repair.

The Seabees' challenging task was to build a road network for General Schwarzkopf's "End Run" strategy, spanning 30 miles from Al-Mishab to Al-Kabrit, and requiring over 200 miles of roads near the Kuwaiti border. Construction had to be done quickly to mislead the Iraqis and was completed in two weeks despite heavy rain. The Seabees maintained about 200 miles of roads, including a crucial east-west route through Ras Al Mishab to Al Qaraah, a six-lane road used daily by over 500 heavy haulers and numerous tactical vehicles.

On 25 February 1991, the Allies started a large ground assault against Iraq. The next day, Naval Mobile Construction Battalions 5 and 24 entered Kuwait to prepare positions for the First Marine Expeditionary Force command element, repair airfields, maintain roads, and build POW camps. Smoke from burning oil wells darkened the sky as they worked. On 28 February, Iraq accepted a ceasefire, ending the conflict. Construction stopped, and the Seabees returned south of the Kuwaiti border. This was their largest military action since the Vietnam War.

Global War on Terrorism

In response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 individuals, **Operation Enduring Freedom** commenced on October 7, 2001, with coordinated American and British bombing operations against al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

Seabees were deployed during the initial invasions of the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War. Both active and reserve Naval Mobile Construction Battalions and Naval Construction Regiments engaged in construction work on civil infrastructure. One notable task assigned to the Naval Construction Force was the removal of statues of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

In **Afghanistan**, the Seabees' primary responsibility was constructing multiple forward operating bases. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133 was deployed to Forward Operating Base Camp Rhino and contributed to building Kandahar Airfield, which included the construction of a detention facility. They built semi-permanent steel bridges over rivers and canals and constructed over a hundred kilometers of highway for the Marines force. They worked on projects like Camp Leatherneck, supplied clean water at Bagram airfield, and constructed roads with the Afghan National Army. The Seabees lived up to their motto "We Build, We Fight" by providing security while working on construction projects. Insurgency only temporarily delayed these efforts.

During **Operation Iraqi Freedom** (OIF), Seabees introduced new Seabee Engineer Reconnaissance Teams (SERTs) in combat. Comprising of 10 skilled Seabees, SERTs were designed to enhance engineering support for the Marine Corps. They would conduct combat evaluations and gather intelligence on crucial infrastructure like roads and bridges. The Serts relayed this intelligence through radio and digital communication to rear-area engineers, assisting commanders in navigating the battlespace swiftly.

During OIF, a main supply bridge damaged by insurgents using explosives was assessed by SERT which relayed their intelligence to Marine Expeditionary Group (MEG), which further relayed the intelligence to Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Norfolk, VA. NAVFAC Norfolk was able to transmit back detailed repairs to the Seabees. Within 48 hours of the insurgents attack on the bridge, it was repaired by the Seabees during ongoing sniper attacks. One of the Keys to winning the war in Iraq according to the MEG Commander, Rear Admiral Chuck Kubic, would be engineer speed. Seabee tasking was bridge construction and repairs to cross the many rivers between Kuwait and Baghdad. These bridges were necessary for logistical support to the frontline troops.

Seabees had many other taskings as well. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 28 deployed to Iraq in 2007 with most of the battalion building forward operating bases in the vast desert for the Marines, it also was tasked with convoy duty. In a brief time, a small group of these Seabees could be found on the roads of Anbar province. Along the many miles of hostile roads, these Seabees guarded both civilian and military convoys. In no time, the Seabees had provided security for over 130 convoys with many operational challenges such as when the convoy would slow down the civilians would hop out of their trucks, sometimes to bathe, eat or just out of curiosity.

“**The Desert Battalion**” homeported at Fort Carson, CO, since 1995, Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 17, saw its last wartime deployment in 2008 to Al Anbar province and then to Afghanistan to meet changing mission requirements. NMCB 17 was commissioned August 9, 1942, and after seven decades of

service was decommissioned September 28, 2014. NMCB 17 had a history of joint training airlift exercises with the Army and Air Force at Peterson Air Force Base known as Patriot Express.

Seabees supported the mission of Global War on Terrorism with numerous deployments over the years. After the major combat phase, the Seabees also participated in humanitarian and civic military operations, completing 158 construction projects, including 72 schools in under four months.

Today's Seabees

Seabees play a vital role in sustaining global relationships through humanitarian deployments. Seabees are forward deployed around the world to provide crucial military engineering support while promoting regional stability and improving lives through engineering civic action projects in many countries. Seabees can also be found providing construction support in disaster relief, supporting the State Department embassies and consulates, and ongoing maintenance at Camp David and much more. Seabees today are deployed as force multipliers, and ambassadors of peace while maintaining combat construction readiness with a strong focus on force protection.

The nation can be assured, no matter the state of international affairs when the roughest, dirtiest, meanest, most insufferable construction jobs in the world come up, the U.S. Navy Seabees will be sent because of their steadfast "Can Do!"

About the author:
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CDR Boles served the nation for 37 years. Enlisting in the USN in 1974, he worked as an Operations Specialist with service aboard ship specializing as a combat air controller. He later became an Equipment Operator Petty Officer First Class (EO1) in the Seabees, serving 10 years between NMCB 22, NMCB 28, and CBHU 11, and did a tour of duty as a Navy recruiter. Following the Gulf War, he earned his professional degree as a physical therapist, commissioning with the USAF in 1997 with service at three Air Force bases. In 2002, then USAF Capt. Boles completed an inter-service transfer into the USPHS with his initial assignment to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) bioterrorist teams and certifying as the Pacific Region Radiological Health expert. After his FDA tour, he provided healthcare to Native Americans. CDR Boles retired in 2017 having deployed many times during his career from enlisted sailor, to commanding officer of 175 personnel medical teams.