

WE BUILD, WE FIGHT

Presented by Kenneth Cayce, Jr.

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Formally organized in March 1942, the naval construction battalions, later known as Seabees, arose from the military's growing need for base construction, primarily in the Pacific theater, although they were present in all wartime theaters around the globe.

Rear Admiral Ben Morell, chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, realized that when war came civilian construction workers, who comprised the bulk of the Navy's overseas building ^{forces}, had no place in a combat zone. By international law, these workers could not be armed, had no way to defend themselves, and had to rely on the navy for protection.

Morell's vision of civilian construction workers trapped in a combat zone tragically came true at Wake Island. The workers caught there when war broke across the Pacific could not be evacuated. They remained on the island to the end. Those who were not killed were taken prisoner. Physically able workers were forced to complete their projects and then maintain them. Later, these civilian constructions worker were executed by firing squads, even though they were never armed, clearly were not spies, and posed no threat to the Japanese garrison on the island.

In light of these events, Admiral Morell was

finally given the go ahead to form a military unit composed of construction specialists, who would also be able to defend themselves against attack and hold and defend their construction sites.

The first Seabees were not raw recruits when they voluntarily enlisted. Emphasis in recruiting these men was placed on skill and experience, 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 construction battalions, it was discovered that several men over the age of 60 had managed to join up, clearly an early manifestation of the Seabees ingenuity. During the early days of the war, the average age of the Seabees was 37. After December 1942, voluntary enlistment was halted by presidential order and men for the construction battalions had to be obtained through the Selective Service System. Thereafter, Seabees were on the average much younger and came into the service with only rudimentary skills.

The first recruits were the men who had helped build Boulder Dam, the national highways, and New York's skyscrapers, men who had worked in mines and quarries and dug the subway tunnels, men 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 men had enlisted in the Seabees. They knew more than 60 skilled trades. Nearly 11,400 officers joined the Civilian Engineering Corps during the war, and 7960 served with the Seabees.

At naval construction training centers and advanced base depots, established on both 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 Camp Peary, at Williamsburg, Virginia, the Seabees were formed into construction battalions or other types of specialized units. Usually, then the newly formed battalion was shipped to an advanced based depot at either Davisville, Rhode Island, or Port Hueneme, California. There they underwent staging and outfitting, and received six weeks of advanced military and technical training.

The construction battalion was composed of four companies that included the necessary construction skills for doing any job, plus a headquarters company

consisting of medical and dental professionals, administrative personnel, storekeepers, cooks, et cetera. The compliment of a standard battalion was 32 officers and 1073 enlisted men.

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

During this period of history, the Seabees performed now legendary deeds in both the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters of Operation at a cost of \$11 billion and many casualties. They constructed over 400 advanced bases along five figurative roads to victory, which had their beginning 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, Marshalls, Gilbert, Marianna and Ryukyu Islands. The South Pacific road went through the South Sea Islands to Samoa, The Solomons, New Guinea, and the

Philippines. All of the Pacific roads converged on Japan and The Asiatic Mainlands.

In 1942, while in my senior year at Vanderbilt, 21 years old and single, I was just what the draft board was looking for. I applied for a commission in the Navy Supply Corps and in April received by notification of acceptance. Called up in August and after a brief duty assignment in Memphis. In November I was sent to the Navy Supply Corps School at Harvard for a three-month crash course in supply corps procedures. All of us in this crash course had visions of being assigned to a destroyer or cruiser upon the completion of our training. No one wanted to be assigned to the Seabees, who were being turned out by the trainload at Camp Peary, Virginia. But when my orders arrived, guess what? I was sent to Camp Peary and assigned to the officer pool to be further assigned to a battalion when it was formed from the recruits then in training. My assignment was supply and commissary officer of the 94th Naval Construction Battalion.

My responsibilities were supply, commissary (running the galleys and mess halls), ships store, commissary stores, assisting the disbursing officers on payday, and any other duties of supply that might occur. We left Camp Peary May 22, 1943, and at dawn the next day, the 23rd, we arrived at Camp Endicott, Rhode

Island, where you spent your days in the classroom or on the drill fields. During this time, as the supply officer, I took custody of enough cold weather gear to outfit the entire battalion for arctic duty. This was stored in one of our large Quonset storage buildings against the day we would get our orders for cold-weather duty. During this same period the battalion got its first big assignment. Week after week, working three shifts a day, the men bolted pontoons together. A navy pontoon was a 5 by 7 by 5 foot cube of steel which, multiplied and handled like toy building blocks, could become a landing barge, a pier, a causeway, or a floating drydock. This magic box was developed by the Navy Civil Engineer Corps, and the Seabees used it in making possible our victories in the Mediterranean - but this is another story.

Back to the 94th's adventures with pontoons. Our part in this bit of history lasted better than two months. Trainload after trainload of pontoons were unloaded, bolted together, towed in sections out into Narayanget Bay. The 94th's skills were used in the efficient methods which they developed in the assembly of these floating monsters.

We did not know what we were building. We heard many stories about what we were working on. The one I chose of all was that it was as a result of the

wartime north Atlantic meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill. We were losing so many planes as they were being ferried to England on the decks of the liberty ships that Churchill had the idea that a pontoon landing strip in the north Atlantic, halfway between Iceland and the British bases, would allow the planes to be flown rather than endure the uncertainties of being sent aboard the cargo ships. To this day, we do not know for sure the true story, but we were told by some of the units who worked on it later that when the large units were moved to the north Atlantic it was impossible to keep them together, since the ocean swells would be an uncompromising enemy and would break them apart. However, it was an exciting part of the 94th's history that we were a part of a major endeavor ordered from the top - if our information was correct. We do know that pontoon structures played an important role in the invasion of Normandy, allowing quick deployment of allied forces in areas where no docking facilities were in place.

In October 1943, the 94th was ordered to the advanced base amphibious training camp at Lido Beach, Long Island. Prior to our move, since Lido Beach had no storage facilities for our cold weather gear, I had to go to Bayonne, New Jersey, to the navy supply depot, to see if I could arrange for the temporary storage of this

infamous cold weather equipment. This done, we settled into six weeks of listening to the scuttlebutt of where we were going - the Azores? Iceland? the south Pacific? - until, the first week in December, I was ordered back to Bayonne to supervise the reloading of our gear, and then to Norfolk to see it safely stored in the cargo hold of the U.S.S. Custer, anchored at Norfolk. It was from the deck of the Custer that I watched as the battalion arrived early on the morning of December 10th. On the afternoon of December 11th the Custer moved from its dock into Hampton Roads to join a convoy already moving out to sea. Hatteras was not too kind to 1100 landlubbers that first night out, but that was nothing compared with what happened next.

Thirty-six hours out of Norfolk something went wrong either with the steering or the signals. The Custer failed to make one of its regular seven minute direction changes. Another transport, a converted banana boat loaded with marines, crossed our path and the Custer smashed into her amidships. Both ships came to a shuddering halt and we raced to our positions in a real abandon ship drill. A hasty examination revealed that neither ship was in sinking condition, but both were sitting ducks for a German U-boat attack. With a destroyer escort, the two transports began a two-day limping voyage to the Charleston navy yard. Five days

later, we boarded ship again and set out for the Panama Canal - leaving the last ice and snow in Charleston that most of the men were to see for over two years. The temperature climbed and the ship, now part of a smaller convoy, made better time, and we spent Christmas day 1943 in the Caribbean. Early on the morning of December 26th a German sub slammed a torpedo into a tanker in our convoy. Although it was not fatal to the tanker, it was a reminder that the constant abandon ship drills were not a game.

At noon on December 26th we reached the Canal, went through in the afternoon, docked to take on supplies at Balboa, the western terminus, and on December 29th we sailed into the Pacific Ocean, and thirteen days later, unescorted, we docked at Pearl Harbor, which was to be our home until October.

The 94th, upon arrival at Pearl Harbor, found their new home, a former civilian construction camp, badly in need of a thorough refurbishing. Within a week they had turned a rundown bunch of buildings into a most habitable military-type housing complex, complete with barracks, galley and mess halls, laundry, post office, machine shops, warehouses, administrative offices, and all other necessary accommodations. While shaking down in Hawaii for an eventual move, the 94th completed ten projects for the fleet school, four projects for fleet

landing, two for the naval yard, three for the submarine base, eleven at Aeia (included as one project), and the erection of twenty-two barracks, eight for Manolau Hospital and fourteen at Red Hill. They developed into an efficient resource - a group of men and officers who, with their experience, resourcefulness and ingenuity as a collective body, could and did accomplish whatever tasks they were assigned.

Hawaii was a happy time for the battalion, but one day in early September 1994 at the end of the day's work the battalion assembled in the outdoor theater to hear the commander outline our next move and assignment. This was no scuttlebutt - this was for real - we were moving up on our road through the central Pacific. The first trip was scheduled for 30 days. We had a lot of stuff to move and everyone had a part in crating and packing the gear to make an 1100 man outfit work in a forward area. New personnel arrived and equipment was issued - bolo knives, machetes, hunting knives, et cetera. Needless to say, we did not anticipate needing cold weather gear where we were going, so we turned all of it in to the naval supply depot at Pearl Harbor -from Davisville, to Bayone, to Norfolk to Pearl. I was glad to finally be rid of this.

In all the preparations for embarking for points unknown, our commandeer could find more

unscheduled duties for me. First, we were to board a troop transport manned by the merchant marine. Their only cooking equipment were two big steam kettles. The old man ordered me to find an oil burning cook stove capable of providing food for the officers and men. Finding the stove was easy, but the only fuel aboard was the bunker oil. Again, Seabees' ingenuity and can do came to the rescue, and soon the stove was operating with the bunker oil, which proved to be a waste, since our diet ended up being a steady one - three meals a day - of Spam. To this day, Spam is a dirty word to me. And I told my wife early on that if she ever wanted to get rid of me, just put Spam on the table, and I would leave quietly.

The Cushman K. Davis, our home for a 30 day central Pacific cruise, including 13 days at anchor in Eniwetok Lagoon in the Marshall Islands. This was caused by a storm which damaged the harbor facilities at Guam (our destination). We waved a not too fond farewell to the Davis as we climbed down the rope landing net to the deck of an LCT, which deposited us on the beach at Guam, the 94th's final assignment.

In the first seven and a half months on Guam, the 94th built Admiral Nimnitz's headquarters, from which he directed the military operation which finally resulted in the surrender of Japan. In addition, and as

part of this, the 94th built an all-inclusive public information center. The radio station was complete with soundproof, air conditioned studios. From it four channels transmitted news to the states. Also constructed was an auditorium where news briefings were held and a gigantic photographic laboratory for processing the fleet's still photographs. It is impossible to list all the projects with which this unit was involved while stationed in the Marianna's. Suffice it to say that during the first seven and a half months, they constructed 350 Quonset huts, and 35 of the 40' x 100' variety. In the same period they constructed 503 frame buildings, ranging from 12' x 12' to one two-story structure that measured 54' x 272', the radio station, the photographic laboratory, and a fleet laundry to take care of 20,000 men. Then there was the 12 miles of waterlines, three storage tanks, ten pontoon bridges, two miles of sewer line, 16 miles of roads, 15 miles of power lines, and 600 pieces of furniture.

The crowning project had to be the airfield, built to accommodate the B-29s used in the final assault on Iwo Jima and Japan. The B-29s took off to blast the heart out of ~~the~~ Japanese industry, thus leading to the final surrender.

The 94th's journey was a long, tough grind. The monotony of a routine job performed day after day,

month after month, put a man's fiber to a real test. Not everyone could be a bulldozer operator, the glamour boys of the Seabees. Many more had to cook and bake, and wash and serve chow, and perform the thousand and one housekeeping and administrative chores. Every man had his job, big or little, but all necessary. And every man did his job, and did it well. That was why the 94th was a smooth working team.

The satisfaction of that knowledge, of a job well done, was the main reward. Because of the scarcity of rerate openings, many good men went through two years or more of faithful service without that well-deserved promotion, and few, if any, returned home with a chestful of medals. Still, the 94th did build a few monuments, which give evidence of the amazing activities of the amazing Seabees. And the battalion did receive a few commendations, one of them signed by none other than C. W. Nimitz.

Humor in uniform is not necessarily confined to the pages of the Reader's Digest. I will quote a poem written by an unknown Seabee, which proves that not only could they accomplish any task assigned them on time, but they could always place each chore in its proper sequence and do "First things first."

The B.O.Q. Blues

We hit the island at half past two,
And started work on the BOQ;
The project grew by leaps and bounds
To the din of saw and hammer sounds;
Into the jungles the Seabees drove,
In search of a stately coconut grove,
And there by the light of the morning star,
Logs were cut for the BOQ bar.

The floors were laid, the joints were raised,
And even the "gold braids" were amazed;
In the wee small hours of morning light
The natives gazed on the awesome sight;
Said one in amazement, "What is that"?
And a wise one said, "Take off your hat.
It's the Seabees, whose fame is known far;
Who else could build such a beautiful bar?"

A "gold braid" eyed the native son,
And barked, "Don't you know there's a war to be won?
We've come to this island to liberate you,
And this, my friend, is our BOQ."

Late next day the Seabees; spent,
Crept to their rations and little put tent,
They turned and took a moment's pause,
And renewed again their pledge to the "Cause";
"Success is our," said the tired 'Can Do,'
"For we have completed the BOQ!"