

# Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 53

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*Historical  
Information*



*“Construimus, Batuimus”  
“We Build, We Fight”*



# It All Started Back In '42

The sprawling nature of the Pacific Theater in WWII created a vast logistics problem for the American forces. Airfields, roads, unloading docks, semi-permanent camps — all were needed to successfully follow the strategy of island hopping. A special type of fighting man was needed that could bulldoze roads and build bridges on the heels of a Marine assault. To fill this need the Navy created that gutsy hybrid — the Seabee.

On December 22, 1942 — slightly more than a year after the raid on Pearl Harbor — U.S. Naval Construction Battalion 53 received its commission at Naval Training Center, Norfolk, Virginia. To prepare for its role in the Pacific, the Battalion immediately moved to the Advance Base Depot at Davisville, Rhode Island, for advanced technical training. A month later, half of the Battalion was detached to Casablanca, Morocco, to form U.S. Naval Construction Battalion 120.

The remaining section of 53 picked up new companies in North Carolina and then moved to San Diego where it added nearly 300 more men. Now at full strength the Battalion was assigned to the First Marine Amphibious Corps and prepared for deployment to Noumea, New Caledonia, in the Pacific.

After landing at Noumea on March 25, 1943, the 53rd Battalion, as it was then called, immediately set to work building three Marine camps housing 2,200



men each. The camps were completed in record time. The Battalion then turned to constructing 180,000 square feet of parking area and supporting facilities for an airfield. They leveled the field, surfaced it with nickel ore slag, the only available material, and covered it with Irvine mesh.

Between these construction assignments, the Battalion underwent "certain special Marine training" to prepare for combat operations, and in October the whole battalion embarked for Guadalcanal where it received thorough training in jungle warfare.

The test came on D-Day, November 1, 1943, when the 53rd Construction Battalion hit the beach at Bougainville in the Solomons along with the First Marine Amphibious Corps. Under constant small arms fire they worked the entire afternoon at unloading the USS George Clymer. Almost immediately a small detachment started construction of bridges and a pioneer road from Beach Blue 1.

By the close of the assault stage of the invasion, the Battalion had built three air fields, a bomber strip 6,000 feet long and 250 feet wide, and two fighter strips each 4,000 feet long and 200 feet wide. It also built almost four miles of road through the thickest jungle swamp to be encountered. Meanwhile, a detachment sent to Vella Lavella set up two sawmills and operated them for over two months. In that time it produced 1.5 million board feet of native lumber



D-Day Officers

urgently needed for bridge timbers.

In mid-January 1944 echelons from both operations returned to Guadalcanal for more combat training. On the side they built a camp for themselves, a 1,500 man Marine camp, five miles of coral surfaced road, three timber bridges and a timber pile dock.

Then came the assault on Guam. In June, 1944, the 53rd Construction Battalion was reassigned to the First Marine Provisional Brigade of the Third Amphibious Corps. Two 53rd beach parties were given the job of landing with the Marines and helping them unload equipment. Three tanks sank into bomb craters on the ocean bottom during the operation but one of the parties managed to salvage two of the tanks while under constant small arms and mortar fire. The second party was assigned to operate a crane unloading ammunition and gasoline. For five days the men unloaded critical supplies, never once flinching under the steady artillery barrage. Three days later the rest of the Battalion went ashore near Agat Village.

The Battalion remained on Guam for 15 months and during that time it was attached to the Fifth Naval Construction Brigade. Besides rebuilding facilities destroyed by the Japanese, the "old Bees" built 24 miles of asphalt roadway that required hill cuts up to 92 feet deep and resulted in moving 800,000 cubic yards of earth. During that time they also built an asphaltic concrete plant, a rock crusher, a 10,000

foot bomber strip, a 450,000 barrel fuel oil tank, a concrete and sheet metal dam, a two story cargo operations building, four 10,000 barrel aviation gasoline tanks, and an eight mile road project connecting the villages of Agat and Umatac. As if that were not enough, the 53rd also laid 1.5 million square feet of asphalt paving for taxiways, parking areas and airstrips.

By the end of 1945, the Battalion's work on Guam was nearly completed and it was scheduled for deactivation on March 1, 1946. But because of its exceptional war record the 53rd was assigned to participate in Operation Crossroads at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. To prepare for the atomic testing the "Bees" unloaded a mountain of supplies arriving on LST's — after they had first blasted channels through the coral reefs. They also constructed several 90 foot towers and protected steel huts as well as recreational facilities for the 35,000 men engaged in the testing program.

With the tests completed the 53rd Battalion was finally deactivated on Bikini Atoll on August 3, 1946, after 38 months of continuous overseas duty.

On June 30, 1967, with action boiling up in the Republic of Vietnam, the Marines again called on the "Action Battalion" for support. Recommissioned and trained at CBC, Davisville, Rhode Island, and at Marine Corps Base, Camp LeJeune, North Carolina, the Battalion deployed on January 18, 1968, under

CDR R. A. Bowers, CEC, USN, to Camp Adenir, Da Nang, for duty in support of the Third Marine Amphibious Force.

The first test came when Viet Cong mortars smashed into the Seabee area on January 30, wounding eighteen men. During this attack and subsequent rocket attacks on the Da Nang East area, the Seabees of 53 never wavered in the performance of their duties. They built by day and stood watch all night when necessary.

A detachment to Hoi An also aided greatly in the defense of that area during the TET Offensive and completed a renovation project on the MACV hospital compound.

Professionally, the "Action Battalion" was immediately charged with several major construction projects in the Da Nang area. A urology building, a blood storage bank, an animal test facility, several surgical suites, covered storage buildings, an officers club, an officers mess and even an exchange facility were built for the NSA hospital complex near Camp Adenir. At III MAF headquarters in Camp Horn MCB-53 builders constructed a Command Operations Center, four barracks, a two-story administration building, general officers quarters, a direct air support facility, and a telephone exchange among other projects. Battalion steel workers erected 86 prefabricated metal structures covering an area of 352,000 square feet for NSA Covered Storage, Da



Nang East. At NSA Camp Tien Sha an enlisted mens club was constructed.

MCB-55 was called upon to build an Ammi Pontoon bridge on Route 1C, south of Da Nang. This bridge was the first of its type to be constructed in Vietnam and was assigned to MCB-53 because of its experience with the prototype back in homeport. The bridge was so successful that Detail Delta 1 built another and larger Ammi bridge over the Perfume River west of Hue.

After proving itself with eight months of continuous construction work, FIFTY-THREE returned to Davisville, Rhode Island, for six months of training and then redeployed to Camp Haskins North, Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam in March, 1969. To aid in controlling military logistics in the I Corps area MCB-53 constructed a 60' x 120', two-story building that required 81 tons of air conditioning capacity. Forty-four tons of this was needed to maintain temperature and humidity in the computer room. In addition, a dust barrier was installed in each room, and a large pedestal supported raised deck was installed in the computer room, the first such deck ever installed by Seabees.

The Liberty Bridge, 23 miles south of Da Nang, was taken over from MCB-3 when that battalion returned to homeport. The MCB-53 crew assisted in placing the last bridge spans and then drove 400 lineal feet of sheet piling as well as pouring 270



cubic yards of concrete for the approachways. They also laid an asphalt deck, installed heavy curbs and rails and installed a bridge lighting system.

At the same time crews of builders put up a headquarters building, a dispensary and a vehicle maintenance facility for the 58th Transportation Company at Red Beach. And at the First Force Service Regiment, MCB-53 crews constructed 1,300 lineal feet of sewer lines, ten Butler buildings and four smaller buildings.

When a brush fire set off an ammo dump explosion at Ammo Supply Point One near Da Nang, MCB-53 suspended other projects and joined other battalions in reconstructing the area. The Action Battalion tackled Camp Monahan, leveled Marine cantonment, as its first project. Every available man went to work and in twenty-three days nearly one hundred new buildings were completed. From Camp Monahan a crew of about 65 men went to the Freedom Hill Recreation Complex which had also been destroyed by the blasts. The crew completely rebuilt two Red Cross buildings and a 20 lane bowling alley.

Returning to their previous jobsites, other crews built 17 SEA huts, a water distribution system, and shower and head facilities for the 1st AMTRAC at Red Beach. They also built a 500 man galley, 36 SEA huts, and three showers for the Marines in the Northern Artillery Cantonment.

At Vinh Dai a 200 man detachment with 150 pieces of equipment, including two 200 ton/hour crushers and a 150 ton/hour asphalt plant, supported the critical road upgrading program in the northern I Corps Tactical Zone throughout the entire deployment. Located six miles from the DMZ, they built an asphalt plant and then paved the nearly 20 miles from Dong Ha to Vandergrift, a huge Marine installation. They also paved a three mile stretch south of Dong Ha and a three mile stretch inside the Dong Ha combat base itself. Throughout the deployment, the detachment produced over 370,000 tons of crushed rock.

Seabee Team 5301 was sent to Soc Trang to teach their construction skills to the Vietnamese in that area, as well as increase their standard of living. This "people to people" program aided greatly in building a stronger understanding between the Seabees and their allies.

Civic Action was again prominent during the deployment. Several times a week hospital corpsmen made MEDCAP visits to four hamlets in the village of Hoa Khanh. The Civic Action team also provided building materials for the Hoa Khanh church and the Hoa Khanh vocational school as well as for a school in the Lang Co village. Two trips were also made to the Montagnard village of Mai Loc, located just west of Vinh Dai, bringing the tribespeople over 10,000 pounds of clothing, construction materials, candy and toys. On the last trip the team vaccinated over













"CROSSROADS"  
53<sup>rd</sup> M.C.B.  
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Constructing Truck Shop - BIKINI ISLAND