



CIVIL ENGINEER CORPS
100TH ANNIVERSARY
MARCH 2, 1967

UNITED STATES NAVY CONSTRUCTION BATTALIONS



SEABEES
25TH ANNIVERSARY
MARCH 5, 1967

SEABEES IN ACTION

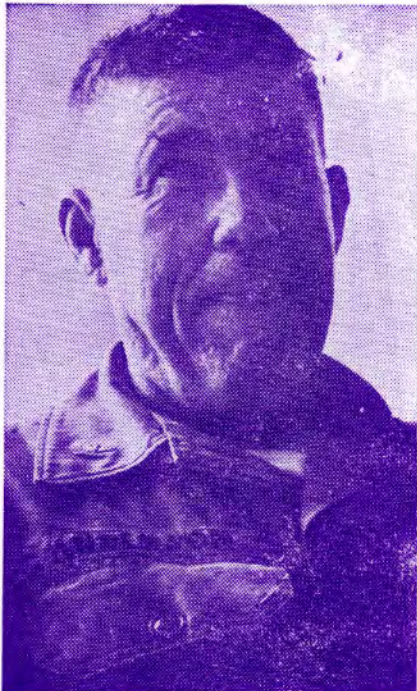
**"No problem, sir,
The Seabees are smoking cigars!"**

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DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
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U. S. NAVY CONSTRUCTION BATTALIONS
"CONSTRUIMUS, BATUIMUS - WE BUILD, WE FIGHT"

"CAN DO!"



Seabee skipper: 'Andy' Anderson.

The general looked around him: Every Seabee in sight was smoking a cigar. The general smiled, climbed into his Huey and was gone.

'Rough, Tough, Loyal'

The young man's insouciance was in the best Seabee tradition. During the second World War, Rear Adm. O. O. "Scrappy" Kessing said of the Seabees: "They're a rough, tough, loyal, efficient bunch of men who don't give a damn for anything but doing the job and getting the war over."

The same can be said of the 5,000 Seabees here in South Vietnam who have been quietly building a reputation as hard workers and hard fighters (one Seabee has been nominated for the Medal of Honor); for being, like their forerunners, masters of improvisation and "scroungers" of materials and equipment to get the job done.

Seabee enlisted men are members of the U.S. Navy's Mobile Construction Battalions or "MCBs," of which there are seven in South Vietnam: Four here in Da Nang, two in Chu Lai, and one in Phu Bai. There are also a number of Seabee technical assistance teams—"the Navy's Peace Corps"—composed of one officer and 12 enlisted men, working in isolated hamlets, building bridges, digging wells, training the villagers in construction techniques, and carrying out other civic-action programs.

These Mobile Construction Battalions are self-sufficient units geared to move at a moment's notice; They contain their own medics, paymasters, chaplains, and the like; they carry their own light construction equipment and weaponry.

The Primary Job

Once the battalion reaches a job site, they dig and man their own bunkers, they patrol, and fight beside other U.S. troops when the occasion calls. Their primary mission, however, is to *build*: Air strips, piers, cantonments, roads, field hospitals, covered storage areas.

Each Seabee—be he steamfitter, steel worker, "construction stiff," plumber—must undergo Marine combat training so that he can, if he must, fight to protect what he builds. Partly because of this, the Seabee enlisted man more closely resembles the U.S. Marine than he does his counterpart in the fleet Navy. Then again, the Seabees' comradeship with the Marines has deep roots, stemming back to the violent island battles of the South Pacific during the last World War. Theirs is an enthusiastic mutual admiration society.

Early in May of 1965, Seabees landed with the Marines on the blinding hot sands south of here, at a spot the Marines were to name Chu Lai. Working night and day, the Seabees laid down a tactical airstrip of aluminum planking. Within three weeks, Marine fighter planes were whistling down the metal runway, screaming into the air just above the heads of Seabees toiling at the far end.

Because dysentery is such a serious problem, the Marines try to establish, whenever possible, temporary, cement-floored mess facilities, even in the midst of search-and-clear operations. Consequently, the Seabees often find themselves building these pedestrian structures while fire fights rage all around them.

A few weeks ago, a group of Seabees volunteered for such an assignment in the foothills north of Chu Lai where the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, was heavily engaged with the enemy.

'Everything Was Going Off'

"Our second morning on the job, the Marines trapped 200 Viet Cong on the far side of the hill where we were building the galley," recalls Bill Haven, a Seabee builder first class. "From 8:30 till noon, everything was going off: Mortars, recoilless rifles, howitzers. I had trouble with the men—they kept wanting to lay down their hammers and get in the action."

Haven is a tough 21-year Seabee veteran from Bluefield, Va., with a chiseled face turned black-tan by the sun. Yet even for the likes of Haven, the heat was almost unbearable on top of the tin-roofed structure at high noon.

"We took dozens of salt tablets all day long and every night our backs were white with salt crust."

Ensign John Wilkinson tells of leading a Seabee work gang to repair an eroding air strip at Kham Duc, a U.S. Army Special Forces camp 60 miles west of Chu Lai, near the Laotian border.

"I had read every word of *The Green Berets*," said the spirited young officer,

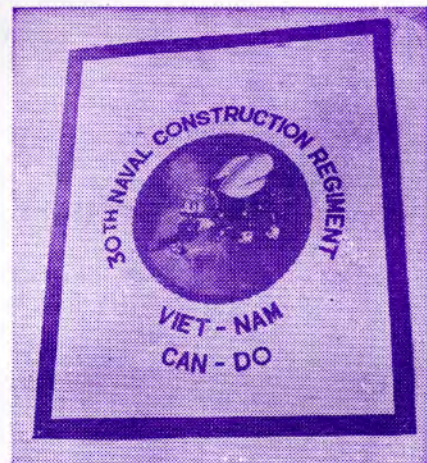


Tanned from a working vacation.



—National Observer photographs by Peter T. Chew

Eyes on the Viet Cong.



The motto is only the truth.

"and Kham Duc was it in every detail: A triangular-shaped fort with sandbagged walls nestled in a little valley high up in the mountains with peaks sticking up on all sides.

"We dug in with some Nung guards outside the main camp. It was foggy for the first few hours every morning and it was rather hairy out there when there was firing. In order to get sand for the runway, we had to drive down the mountainside to a stream bed. First we put out guards in the bushes all the way down. Then we'd race down, load the sand as fast as we could, and come flying back up."

Ensign Wilkinson and his men completed the job in three weeks, digging mortar pits and extra-deep bunkers for the Special Forces' men in what little spare time they had.

In March of last year, there were 500 U.S. Marines in South Vietnam, controlling an eight-square-mile region around the airstrip here. Today the more than 50,000 Marines of Gen. Lewis Walt's 3rd Amphibious Force control hundreds of square miles, including the mass of the population that lives along the coast. To support these men, four Seabee battalions of Capt. Nelson R. "Andy" Anderson's 30th Naval Construction Regi-



A Seabee flag floats over Vietnam.

ment (plus private contractors) are fast transforming the port of Da Nang.

The U.S. Naval Support Activity, a logistical unit, will spend nearly \$100,000,000 in Da Nang this year, dredging three deep-water piers, constructing LST ramps in the Tourane River, building acre upon acre of Butler building covered storage areas.

You find Seabees everywhere you look, involved in an infinite variety of jobs. At the base of a high, bunker-laced hill, which gets constant Viet Cong attention on the far side, Seabees are building a 6,000-man amphitheater, a 1,000-man motion picture theater, an enormous swimming pool, Post Exchange, and other recreational facilities for the Marines fighting nearby. The Seabees have built a 400-bed air-conditioned field hospital, Butler buildings, mess halls, "hard-back" tents by the hundreds, LST piers.

The Nightly Forays

Chief Petty Officer Claire Hazen, Jr., of Mobile Construction Battalion 10, was working last week with a group of men in one of the hottest spots hereabouts, headquarters of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, which sits in a patch of woods 13 miles south of Da Nang.

Every night the Viet Cong slip in and mine the dusty dirt road that winds from Route 1 to the headquarters. And every morning, the Marines sweep the road and dig out the mines. Even so, mines have blown up two trucks and a generator, and partially disabled a tank in recent weeks.

The headquarters area is a nasty-looking place, pocked with holes leading to underground tunnels that were once used by the Viet Cong. When the Marines took possession, they removed six booby traps, and the men still move cautiously down the center of the paths.

Two huge Marine tanks stand a quarter-mile away along another woodline, their barrels facing a sweep of open fields where most of the Viet Cong harassment has been coming from. Yet there they were the other afternoon: Hazen and his men, hammering and sawing away in the bright sunshine, constructing tropical huts, shower facilities, and a mess hall, creating a little enclave of sanity and permanence for the Marines.

"As soon as we get the floors down," Hazen noted with satisfaction, "the Marines move in off the ground; they don't wait for us to get the roofs on."

'Subject to Sniper Fire'

Chief Hazen and his men live in tents, with slit trenches nearby, into which they dive when sniper fire gets intense. "We are subject to sniper fire all the time," he says. "The Marines are making a big sweep."

Lieut. Col. William F. Donahue, the Virginian who commands the Marine unit, relaxed on a makeshift chair in the old stone house that serves as his HQ. He was wearing a T-shirt and fatigue trousers. In one corner, a creaky old fan stirred up the muggy air.

"Each of these hamlets around here. I'd say, has 2 or 3 or maybe 10 or 12 Viet Cong," said the colonel. "We just killed seven of them today. How do we know they are Viet Cong? The only way we can tell they're VC is if they commit a hostile act. When they shoot at us, we consider that a hostile act. In the daytime, we give them the first shot."

The colonel, an unsmiling, serious man, turned toward Chief Hazen. "The Seabees are doing a fabulous job for us. No other way to describe it."

Chief Hazen, mightily pleased, went back to work.

Another Seabee unit, Mobile Construction Battalion 1, which occupies a beautiful white sand beach on Da Nang Bay, has had some interesting times lately. By day they work, by night they man the bunkers and watch towers that ring their compound. Today's Seabees are far younger than their forerunners in the last war—they average about 23 years of age—and some of the Seabees in these bunkers must still be in their teens.

Ready for an Attack

Just about every night, the Marines' "Whisky" and "Kilo" artillery batteries nearby shell the ridgeline of an adjoining mountain. Flares arc through the air. On the crest of one of the hills last week camped a gang of Seabees from MCB 1, there to build a Hawk missile site for the Marines. The two Marine batteries have them bracketed so that they can have immediate fire support in event of a Viet Cong attack.

The other day, the men of MCB 1 witnessed a characteristically ghastly little incident of Viet Cong terrorism. Seabee Lieut. Frank Adkins describes it this way:

"About 3:30 a.m., we heard explosions in the trash dump outside the gates where there are one or two pieces of equipment. Three ARVN soldiers were living out there in a tent with a 17-year-old mentally retarded boy.

"The Cong slipped out of the hills, caught the four guys sleeping, and threw grenades under their cots. The blast killed them all, throwing one through the air, his undersides torn out.

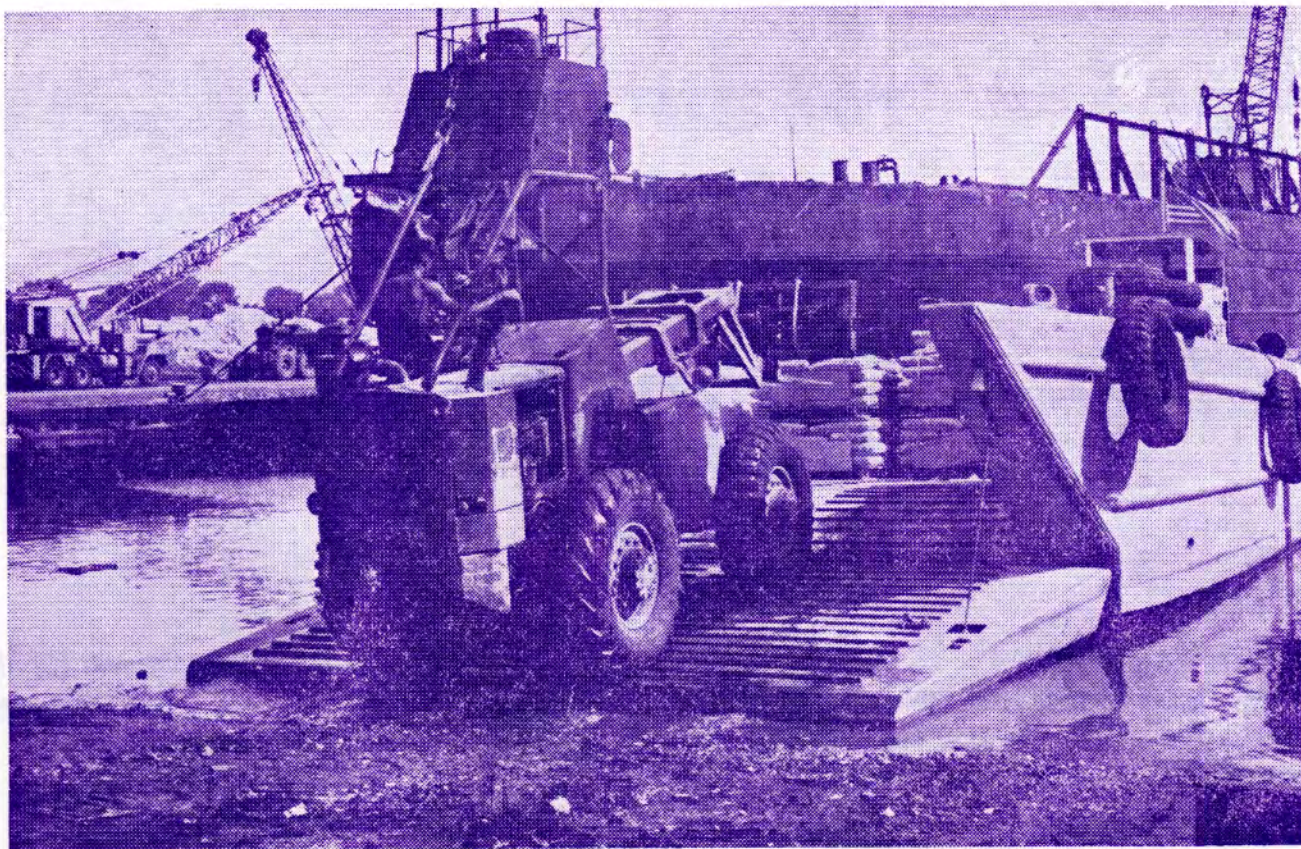
"We found the 17-year-old about eight paces outside the tent, lying face down in the mud. His elbow looked as though a meat cleaver had carved it off.

"One of the ARVN had taken grenade fragments in the head and chest. He had four separate holes in his forehead—as though someone had driven them with a ballpoint pen.

"It had been raining, and when we reached them, the blood had collected in a concave section of tin; it was dripping like a pink waterfall. The first of our guys to reach the scene got sick. There were four dud Chinese grenades lying about. It all happened so quickly. The VC got away."

Help for the Villagers

The Seabees cannot figure out the Viet Cong's reasoning: Except that the Sea-



—National Observer photographs by Peter T. Chew

Seabee equipment rolls ashore from landing craft at the big U.S. Marine base at Da Nang.

Seabees and the Marines have grown close to the people in the local villages through their civic-action programs. The Marines are treating the villagers for bubonic plague, which is nearing epidemic proportions. The Seabee doctor and dentist of MCB 1 also take care of the local people, and the South Vietnamese appear to appreciate it. Perhaps the Viet Cong were trying to tell the villagers something.

Every morning a little South Vietnamese boy and his sister join a bunch of other children by the camp wire fence to ask for candy and food, and to joke with the Seabees. "Their left hands were cut off by the Viet Cong," says Lieutenant Adkins, "because their parents refused to pay their 'taxes.'"

For all their hard work, the occasional grisly little vignettes of terror and suffering they witness, and their moments under fire, the Seabees' spirit is high. Which is even more remarkable when you consider that, as yet, they have no recreational facilities: Da Nang has been off-limits for months.

One night last week, a group of MCB 1 chief petty officers got together in a tent

beside the beach and broke out a few cases of beer.

Most of them were in their late 40s or mid-50s. (MCB 1 boasts one enlisted man, Ray C. "Pappy" Crittendon, a Negro from Richmond, Va., who is 66 years old, and a great-grandfather. He was 42 years old when he first joined the Seabees in 1942.) There was Elbert "Boom Boom" Schloesser, a bearded, wise-cracking man whose nickname derives from the fact that he, like Captain Anderson, was an underwater demolition man during the last war, and explosives are the love of his life. There was Bob Teel and his monkey "Sam," who is quite a character in his own right. Sam bares his teeth angrily at everyone but Teel; he smokes cigarets and laps up warm beer.

Time to Sing

There was Joe "Doc" Cassidy, a medical corpsman, and half a dozen others. And they sang songs with verses like: "Oh mother dear, won't you write our congressman and get me out of this. . .," and other songs whose words don't bear repeating.

On a recent Sunday morning, Captain Anderson drove me up Monkey Mountain in his Jeep. The captain is wise and he has seen a lot of war. I asked him how this particular war was going. His answer surprised me.

"If you want my personal opinion, which is all I can give you—I'm not sure we haven't already won it. You know the British had it won in Malaya two years before they realized it. Nobody comes out of the bushes to tell you they're licked, you know. Now the situation could change overnight, like it did in Korea. But I'm not convinced that we can't starve 'em out of the woods."

Then his sharp eye caught something of more immediate moment—a rock crusher by the side of the road that had broken down. Like his Seabees, that rock crusher is supposed to be operating seven days a week. Some one would doubtless get a rocket from the captain in the morning for not having it repaired.

It's to be hoped that the Viet Cong, peering through their binoculars at Captain Anderson's men hard at work, sometimes get discouraged. If they don't, they should.

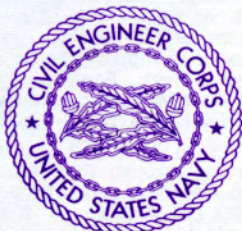
—PETER T. CHEW

The United States Navy Seabees warmly thank THE NATIONAL OBSERVER for permission to reprint this exclusive story!

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