

TWELFTH REGIMENT (PUBLIC WORKS)

Skilled Navy craftsmen were not again employed in large numbers for naval shore construction activities until the period of the First World War. In 1917 the Twelfth Regiment (Public Works) was organized at the Naval Training Station, Great Lakes, Illinois. The development of the regiment was an evolutionary process under the direction of three successive Public Works Officers.

With the entry of the United States into the First World War in April 1917, an immediate requirement was established at Great Lakes for facilities to house, process, and train 20,000 naval recruits. By the end of 1917, the expansion of the war had increased the requirement, and facilities were needed to handle 50,000 recruits.

The naval officer responsible administrative and training operations at Great Lakes was the commandant of the station, Captain William Moffett, USN. When the initial requirement was levied, Captain Moffett did not have sufficient funds at hand to construct the facilities. He therefore went to Washington, D.C., and conferred with the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, and with the Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, Rear Admiral Frederic Harris, CEC, USN. These two officials, controllers of the immediate purse strings for naval construction activity, quickly agreed to release sufficient funds for the initial increment of construction. Admiral Harris, however, pointed out to Captain Moffett that a young officer of the line was in charge of the Public Works Department, and he suggested that a Navy Civil Engineer Corps officer should be appointed to manage the department. Captain Moffett readily agreed to this proposal. Accordingly, Lieutenant Norman M. Smith, CEC, USN, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy and a one-time officer of the line who had transferred to the Civil Engineer Corps, was appointed Public Works Officer at Great Lakes. He assumed the post on 18 June 1917. At this time, about 100 enlisted men already were assigned to the Public Works Department.

Although most of the major construction work was to be accomplished by civilian contractors, Lieutenant Smith foresaw that the department would have to be expanded. Skilled craftsmen, architects, draftsmen, designers, and other professional and technical people were needed. Because civilians with the requisite skills were difficult to find, he decided to screen incoming recruits to obtain skilled craftsmen. He found many, but not enough.

Lieutenant Smith then began recruiting among civilians outside of the installation, but because of commuting problems, qualified local craftsmen were unwilling to become civilian employees. As a patriotic duty, however, many were willing to join the Navy as petty officers with the understanding that qualified men could apply later for commissions. Captain Moffett approved this proviso, and it greatly facilitated recruiting.

As a result of recruit screening and civilian recruiting, nearly 600 men were obtained for the Public Works Department by July 1917. These men were organized into the Twelfth Regiment (Public Works). Essentially, the Public Works Regiment was the Public Works Department. Because in those days staff officers could not exercise military command, a young officer of the line, Lieutenant William C. Davis, USN, was appointed commanding officer of the regiment, and he served in that capacity throughout its existence. He exercised military control, but the Public Works Officers exercised technical control. Since Lieutenant Davis was, in fact, a subordinate of the respective Public Works Officers, there was never any real conflict between military and technical control.

The regiment was a training as well as a working organization. The purpose of the training was not necessarily to teach the artificer trades to "green" men. Rather it was to assemble artificers, discover the abilities of each, select the natural leaders, and teach them military drill and discipline. The intent was to have these men ready at all times for transfer to other naval stations or naval bases in the United States and abroad, and to fighting ships. The average time the men were retained at Great Lakes was from three to four months, during which period they were used effectively to perform public works functions.

Briefly, the Twelfth Regiment (Public Works) drew the plans for the Great Lakes wartime expansion, down to the minutest detail; and supervised all construction, whether done by civilian contractors or by enlisted men. It saw to the maintenance of buildings, grounds, roads, and railway; and operated the power house, heating systems, water supply, and sewage disposal. It also operated carpenter, machine, and paint shops. To accomplish the maintenance and minor construction, detachments from the regiment were assigned to all the camps at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station.

The construction of the numerous recruit training camps at Great Lakes was mainly done by contractors and their employees. Camp Paul Jones was, however, assigned to the Public Works Regiment, and the men of the regiment turned a temporary tent camp into a semi-permanent facility. The major work at this regimental camp began in October 1917, and it was substantially completed by the end of the year.

On 30 December 1917 the regiment became "fully operational" at Camp Paul Jones with 1,500 men, organized into three battalions.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1917, Commander George A. McKay, CEC, USN, became Public Works Officer at Great Lakes. Lieutenant Smith remained as his deputy for a few months, and upon being promoted to lieutenant commander, departed for an assignment as Public Works Officer at the Charleston Navy Yard in South Carolina.

On 30 January 1918 Commander McKay, in turn, was succeeded by Commander Walter Allen, CEC, USN. The new Public Works Officer surveyed and analyzed his department and decided that the organization was too cumbersome. He, therefore, reorganized both the department and the Public Works Regiment, which by April 1918 consisted of 2,400 men in five battalions.

Throughout the latter part of 1917 and all of 1918, men were withdrawn from the regiment for assignment in the United States and abroad. In the spring of 1918, 100 men were given special training in mechanics and ordnance, and then sent to St. Nazaire in France to assemble the famous Naval Railway Batteries. They joined the operational gun-crews and performed combat duties along the railway lines in proximity to the German lines.

Another 350 skilled men from the Public Works Regiment were selected and sent to France. Landing at the ports of Le Havre and Cherbourg, they were retained in those areas to build and rehabilitate docks and wharves, lay railroad tracks, and build communication facilities. On one occasion, a team of men from this group went into Paris and converted the Eiffel Tower into an antenna for a "Marconi wireless transmitting station."

In the summer of 1918, Captain Allen selected another complement of 200 men, who went to France and constructed air bases along the coast.

During the autumn of 1918, training operations at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station reached a peak to satisfy the requirements of ships and bases in the United States and abroad. By the end of October more than 125,000 recruits had undergone training since the U.S. Navy build up began in March and April of 1917. This expansion of training and facilities, in turn, required a similar expansion in the strength of the Public Works Department and the Twelfth Regiment. The peak strength of the regiment was reached on 5 November 1918. It comprised 55 officers and 6,211 enlisted men, formed into 11 battalions.

When the First World War ended on 11 November 1918, training and construction operations at Great Lakes ceased. The regiment gradually faded away by the end of 1918. The war was over but not the memories.

An important aspect of the Twelfth Regiment (Public Works) was its unofficial status. At no time was it considered an official U.S. Navy unit. It was merely the creature of the commandant of the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. It was organized and developed by three successive Public Works Officers, and owed its existence solely to the administrative, operational, and training needs of the Public Works Department. Efficiency was the keynote of its existence.