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Seabee History: Southeast Asia

Beginning in 1964 the United States military buildup in South Vietnam interrupted the normal peacetime deployment pattern of the Naval Construction Force. The Seabees were slated to play an important and historic role in the growing Southeast Asian conflict. By autumn of 1968, when Vietnamese requirements reached their peak, world-wide Seabee strength had grown to more than 26,000 men, serving in 21 full-strength Naval Mobile Construction Battalions, 2 Construction Battalion Maintenance Units, and 2 Amphibious Construction Battalions.



U.S. Navy and Seabee activity in Southeast Asia, however, long predated the Vietnam War. In fact, the first U.S. Navy involvement in Vietnam took place as early as May 1846. In that year, the USS *Constitution*, while on a world cruise, anchored in Danang Bay to take on water and foodstuffs. While there, Captain John Percival, USN, the *Constitution's* skipper, received a request for assistance from Bishop Dominique Lefevre who had been imprisoned and condemned to death by Thieu Tri, Emperor of Cochin China.

In response to the bishop's plea for help, Captain Percival led a rescue party of 80 sailors and marines ashore. After seizing three Mandarins as hostages, he quickly dispatched a letter to the Emperor demanding the release of Lefevre. The message either went unheeded or undelivered, because a reply was never received. Deciding on an alternative course of action, Percival released the three Mandarins when they steadfastly promised that they would personally seek Lefevre's release. Still later, after hearing no more from the Mandarins and fearing that he had been tricked, Captain Percival set sail for Macao, where, nine days later, he apprised the French authorities of Lefevre's plight. A warship was promptly dispatched and, as a result, Bishop Lefevre was finally rescued. Thus, the story of the first United States intervention in Vietnam ended happily.

The second instance of significant of U.S. Naval activity in Vietnam took place 108 years later and, this time, the Seabees were prominent participants. The 1954 Geneva agreements, which recognized the North Vietnamese communist government of Ho Chi Minh, also contained a provision which gave the Vietnamese populace an opportunity to choose whether they would live in the north or the south of a country newly divided roughly at the 17th parallel. Prior to 18 May 1955, the expiration date of this provision, nearly 800,000 Vietnamese emigrated from north to south. Their exodus, in which four nations participated, has since come to be known as the "Passage to Freedom." During the mass migration, the South Vietnamese government built reception centers and provided basic amenities, the French supplied ships and planes, and the British provided an aircraft carrier. For its part, the United

States organized Navy Task Force 90, comprising more than 50 ships. Through the concerted effort of these four governments, 310,000 refugees were evacuated from North Vietnam. In addition, 68,857 tons of military equipment and 8,135 military vehicles which, furnished to France under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program, were kept from North Vietnamese hands.

As members of Task Force 90, Amphibious Construction Battalions One and Two took part in the "Passage to Freedom." In Danang, where the USS *Constitution* had stopped more than a century before, a detachment from Amphibious Construction Battalion One built and operated a recreation facility for U.S. personnel involved in the ferrying operation. Another detachment from the same battalion constructed a refugee tent camp and accompanying water and power supply facilities at the mouth of the Saigon River. This Seabee-built camp served as a reserve living area for the overflow of refugees from Saigon. Since the Geneva accord specifically prohibited the landing of foreign military units or the establishment of foreign military installations in French Indo-China, the Seabees of this detachment were required to wear civilian clothes and to remove all U.S. markings from their equipment. Nevertheless, as a result of their humanitarian efforts, the Seabees of Amphibious Construction Battalion One were awarded the Vietnamese Presidential Unit Citation. Detachments from Amphibious Construction Battalion Two were originally scheduled to build a causeway across the beaches adjacent to the North Vietnamese city of Haiphong. Over this causeway military equipment and refugees were to be transferred to the many ships lying offshore. The plan, however, was soon abandoned because of French opposition and the later discovery that the previously selected beaches were unsuitable for such a causeway. Instead, all loading operations were carried out from the Haiphong waterfront, and the Seabees were diverted to the south to help their comrades with the construction of the massive refugee camp. The Seabees labored for about one month in Vietnam and, before being relieved, made an important contribution to the success of this historic "Passage to Freedom."

Two years later, Seabees were to visit Vietnam one more time before the conflagration of the 1960s. During the summer of 1956, a team from a Seabee construction battalion was sent to the newly-established Republic of Vietnam to conduct a survey of some 1,800 miles of existing and proposed roads. Two solid months of seven-day-a-week labor in extremely rough territory yielded valuable results.

When the Seabees returned almost ten years later, these results helped them build many of the roads that were then crucial to the conduct of the war.

As tension continued to mount in Southeast Asia during the 1960s, the Seabees first returned in the form of thirteen-man Seabee Teams, capable of performing a great variety of tasks. Although small in size, these units possessed unique capabilities never before assembled in such compact but highly effective and versatile packages.

In 1963 Seabee Teams were sent to Thailand to assist in the Royal Thai Government's Accelerated Rural Development Program. In the northern provinces these diversified units taught and advised local Thais in an effort to help them form the cadre of essential rural public works organizations. Three years of diligent work in this region was finally concluded in May 1966.

In early November 1966, the Seabee Team program in Thailand shifted from rural development to the Thai Border Patrol Police Program for the development of remote area security. The program's underlying aim was to win village support for the government in regions continually plagued by communist insurgency. Before the termination of all Seabee Team efforts in Thailand in 1969, these skilled units had made significant progress toward the attainment of this national aim.

Also in 1963, two years before the first full Seabee battalion arrived, Seabee Teams were laboring

in South Vietnam. They constructed small support points throughout the interior of South Vietnam to counter Viet Cong political influence in the villages. The teams built U.S. Army Special Forces camps, performed civic action tasks, and conducted military engineering projects under the Civil Irregular Defense Group Program.

Seabee Team activity in South Vietnam continued to grow. Generally working in remote rural areas, away from large population centers, the Seabees served throughout twenty-two provinces scattered from the Mekong Delta, along the Cambodian border and the Central highlands, to the North Vietnamese border.

In the early years, only two teams at a time were employed in these regions, but by 1969 the number of teams in-country had grown to 17.

Seabee Team accomplishments were many and varied. The U.S. Army Special Forces, who were engaged in training and advising Vietnamese Strike Forces and the Civilian Irregular Defense Group in anti-guerilla fighting and defense tactics, required fortified camps in advance areas able to withstand recurring ground and mortar attacks. Besides constructing these special camps, Seabee Teams were called upon to build access roads and nearby tactical airstrips. Further, in South Vietnamese hamlets and villages, teams carried out numerous civic action projects. From training local inhabitants in basic construction skills to providing desperately needed medical assistance, the Seabees made a significant impact on the Vietnamese populace.

While they were primarily builders and instructors, Seabee Team members were sometimes directly involved in battle. Perhaps the most famous such battle occurred in June 1965 at Dong Xoai, 55 miles northeast of Saigon. When Viet Cong troops overran a Special Forces Camp containing 400 South Vietnamese and allied Asian troops, 11 men of a U.S. Army Special Forces team and nine men of Seabee Team 1104, seven of the Seabees were wounded and two killed. One of the dead was Construction Mechanic 3rd Class Marvin G. Shields, USN, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry in carrying a critically wounded man to safety and in destroying a Viet Cong machine gun emplacement at the cost of his life. Not only was Marvin Shields the first Seabee to win the nation's highest award, but he was also the first Navy man to be so decorated for action in Vietnam.

Beginning in 1970 Seabee Teams departed from South Vietnam without relief. This initiated a phase-down program which corresponded to United States troop withdrawals. Finally, on 18 April 1972, the last Seabee Team site located in Ham Tan, Binh Tuy Province, was closed. Although these unique units were physically gone, the common people of Vietnam continued to reap the benefits of their many civic action projects.

In 1965 the steadily increasing insurgency of the National Liberation Army (Viet Cong), made the large scale commitment of U.S. troops a necessity. Although Seabee Teams had been active in the Republic of Vietnam since 1963, it was not until 1965 that larger Seabee units were deployed to aid in the Vietnamese struggle. Not since the Second World War had the need for the Seabees been so great and not since Korea had Seabees worked under enemy fire. The first full Seabee battalion arrived in Vietnam on 7 May 1965 to build an expeditionary airfield for the Marines at Chu Lai. Others soon followed. From 1965 until 1969 the Seabee commitment in Southeast Asia rapidly increased, necessitating first the transfer of Atlantic Fleet battalions to the Pacific through a change of home port, then the deployment to Vietnam of Atlantic Fleet battalions, and later, the reestablishment of nine additional battalions. This effort culminated in the recall to active duty of two reserve battalions in May 1968, bringing to 21 the number of battalions rotating to Vietnam at one time or another. In addition, there were two Amphibious Construction Battalions lending support to the Vietnam effort. During the

same time period, to meet a requirement for Seabees to support such installations as the Naval Support Activities at Danang and Saigon, the two Construction Battalion Maintenance Units, the two deployed Naval Construction Regiments, and the deployed Third Naval Construction Brigade rapidly increased their size.

During the war the total Seabee community grew from 9,400 in mid-1965 to 14,000 in mid-1966, to 20,000 in mid-1967 and, finally, to more than 26,000 in 1968 and 1969. To help meet the great need for personnel, the Navy recruited skilled construction workers at advanced pay grades. The Direct Procurement Petty Officer Program, reminiscent of early World War II recruiting efforts, proved highly effective both in terms of total numbers recruited (more than 13,000) and quality of input.

Seabee accomplishments in Vietnam were impressive. They built roads, airfields, cantonments, warehouses, hospitals, storage facilities, bunkers and other facilities which were critically needed to support the combatant forces. The mobile "search and destroy" strategy adopted by the United States during the first years of the war shaped the two-fold mission of the Seabees in Vietnam. In addition to the many Seabee Team activities in remote locations, construction battalions built large coastal strongholds in the I Corps Tactical Zone which embraced the northernmost provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang In, and Quang Ngai.

In 1965 the Seabee portion of the Vietnam Construction Program was concentrated at three northern coastal points, the ports of Danang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai. The first six construction battalions sent to Vietnam were deployed to these three points and, by 1966, as the construction program gathered momentum, eight battalions were at work simultaneously in the I Corps Area.

At Danang the Seabees built three badly needed cantonments. Temporary facilities which included strongback tents, mess halls, shops, sheds, bathroom facilities, and a water distribution system were the first to be completed. In addition, Seabees repaired the important Danang River Bridge, rendered technical aid to South Vietnamese troops who were building ramps for tank landing ships and small boats, and constructed warehouses and petroleum storage tanks. Fortification of the cantonments was also essential because of frequent enemy attacks. Despite Seabee-built machine gun positions and bunkers for perimeter defense, one such attack succeeded in destroying the newly built advance base hospital, killing two Seabees and wounding over ninety. In true Seabee tradition, the men rapidly rebuilt the entire hospital complex.

At Phu Bai, near the ancient imperial capital of Hue, the Seabees developed yet another coastal point into an advance base. There, the construction men built a fleet logistic support unit cantonment. Besides camp construction, the project entailed raising, widening, and surfacing a low peninsula which jutted 1,500 feet out into the South China Sea. The causeway served as an unloading ramp for cargo-laden landing ships. In addition, the Seabees built a large antenna field which substantially modernized communication systems in the war-torn northern provinces. Two smaller cantonments, one for a medical battalion, were also constructed.

As U.S. Marines based at Danang pushed search and destroy operations into the interior of the I Corps Area, the need arose for increased air cover and, thus, an additional air strike facility. It was decided that the Seabees would build a 3,500-foot expeditionary airfield at Chu Lai, 50 miles south of Danang. Since the Viet Cong controlled the surrounding mountains and there were no nearby port facilities, the Seabees landed on the beaches of Chu Lai in the first major U.S. Navy amphibious operation since the Lebanon crisis of 1958. Matching the feats of their fabled Second World War predecessors, the Vietnam-era Seabees laid the last aluminum plank on the airfield only 23 days after coming ashore. The very next day planes began operations against the Viet Cong from the newly-built airstrip. The Seabees continued their work at Chu Lai by adding a parallel taxiway, four cross taxiways,

and parking aprons. Before their task was completed, the Seabees had rapidly erected two cantonments, warehouses, hangars, and a host of other vital facilities.

By the end of 1965, Seabees had pioneered and laid the ground-work for three major advance bases in the northern provinces of the Republic of Vietnam. From these bases, combatant forces received the critical support necessary for increasing attacks into the interior. In the words of Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze, the Seabees had "contributed mightily to constructing the vast infrastructure necessary for a major war in a primitive, remote area." The bastions built on the upper coast of South Vietnam demonstrated their worth in 1966 and 1967 when Allied forces, supplied from these points, crushed major North Vietnamese offensives through the Demilitarized Zone and Laos.

During 1966 the Seabees continued to build at Danang, Phu Bai and Chu Lai, expanding these bases and erecting more permanent structures for the men and equipment assigned to them. At the same time, Seabees entered the troubled, northern-most province of Quang Tri to build a hill-top fort of concrete bunkers at Lang Vei. This vital outpost overlooked a feeder line of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They also built facilities at the Marine base at Dong Ha and the Army artillery post at Comm To.

Among the numerous construction projects completed in 1967 was an alternate airfield at Dong Ha and the famed Liberty Bridge, 80 miles southwest of Danang. Even though the northeast monsoon season had already begun, the airstrip was completed in only 38 days. The Liberty Bridge, which spanned the Thu Bon River, was one of the most impressive undertakings of the war. Built to withstand the incredible expansion of the river during the monsoon season, the completed bridge was 2,040 feet long and towered 32 feet above the low water level. While construction of such a bridge would have been difficult under normal circumstances, the Seabees were required to work in a remote area of Vietnam known to contain large concentrations of enemy forces. Despite tremendous difficulties, the bridge was finished in only five months.

During the bitter struggle of the Tet offensive in February of 1968, Seabees built and fought in direct support of the Marine Corps and Army. While the battle for Hue raged at fever pitch, Seabees from Phu Bai were summoned to rebuild and repair two vitally needed concrete bridges. When enemy snipers drove the Seabees from their work, they organized their own combat teams which silenced the snipers and let them complete their important task. In the spring, the Seabees went to work on the Danang to Hue railroad and put it quickly back into service. Constant enemy harassment had suspended service on this line since 1965.

Naval Construction Force strength reached its peak shortly after the beginning of the 1968 Tet Offensive. During that and the following year there were more than 11,000 Seabees serving in South Vietnam. Although the Navy's construction men continued to labor in the northern provinces, building city-like cantonments and upgrading previously constructed facilities, the priorities of the war also began to demand more and more of their skills in the south.

After responsibility for conducting the war was turned over to the South Vietnamese and American military operations in the north were significantly reduced, the Seabees labored to prepare the Vietnamese for the ultimate withdrawal of all American combatant troops. In the Mekong Delta they built a string of coastal bases and radar sites which would allow the Vietnamese Navy to completely take over coastal surveillance in this area of "brown water" warfare. As thousands of American troops were returning home, Seabees continued to build. Only now, however, they built hospitals at Danang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Quang Tri and many other towns and villages throughout the country.

When in 1970, Seabee activity drew to a close and the withdrawal of the last units commenced, the Navy's builder-fighters had made a lasting contribution to the people of South Vietnam. In a war

where winning the hearts of the people was an important part of the total effort, Seabee construction skills and medical assistance proved powerful weapons in the Vietnam "civic action" war. The recitation of events and the quoting of statistics fail to reveal the true nature of the Seabees' involvement during the Vietnam years. True, they supported the Marines at Chu Lai and Khe Sanh, reopened the railroad line between Hue and Danang, struggled with the logistics problems of the Mekong Delta, constructed a new naval base on a sand pad floating on paddy mud, and built staggering quantities of warehouses, aircraft support facilities, roads, and bridges. But they also hauled and dumped numerous tons of rock and paving on roads that provided access to farms and markets, supplied fresh water to countless numbers of Vietnamese through hundreds of Seabee-dug wells, provided medical treatment to thousands of villagers, and opened up new opportunities and hope for generations to come through Seabee-built schools, hospitals, utilities systems, roads and other community facilities. Seabees also worked with, and taught construction skills to the Vietnamese people, helping them to help themselves and proving that the Seabees really are "builders for peace."

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