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THE
US NAVY
Seabees

“We build, we fight”



150 YEARS OF ELKDOM
LOUD AND PROUD IN THE COMMUNITY

THE KENTUCKY DERBY
DUST, DREAMS, AND SPEED

DENVER
THE CITY IN THE SKY

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WATER...
WATER...
WATER...

The US Navy Seabees work alongside all branches of the US armed forces to provide construction support and maintenance where needed. Here, Seabees are shown smoothing and maintaining a runway at a US military base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2001.

PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION HISTORICAL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



THE US NAVY SEABEES

"WE BUILD, WE FIGHT!"

LINDA MCMAKEN

RECRUITED FROM THE HEIGHTS of the Hoover Dam, from the construction sites of New York City's subway tunnels, and from off of bridges being built over rivers across America, the first US Navy Seabees heeded their nation's call at the outset of World War II. They were, and remain today, men of skill who could carve roads through granite mountains, walk high steel beams, and construct airfields out of snow and ice. For three-quarters of a century, the skilled tradesmen of the US Naval Construction Battalions have paved the roads to battle during wartime and spearheaded humanitarian relief efforts throughout the world in times of peace.

The Birth of the Seabees

Construction battalions for the US Navy were first conceived during World War I, when the navy recruited skilled craftsmen and organized them into the Twelfth Regiment (Public Works). Developed by public works officers of the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, the regiment was not an official US Navy unit but rather a mechanism to handle the administrative, operational, and training needs of the

US Navy's Public Works Department. It was dissolved following the end of World War I, but the idea for an official group of military tradesmen continued to be discussed by navy civil engineers throughout the 1930s.

As international tensions grew throughout the late 1930s, the US Congress authorized the expansion of naval shore activities, and the navy followed usual peacetime protocols by contracting private construction firms to man projects in the Caribbean and Central Pacific using civilian personnel. Then came the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Suddenly, the need to establish militarized construction battalions was urgent.

When the United States entered World War II, the US Navy could no longer rely on civilian labor in areas that were now war zones because under international law, civilian contractors who resisted an enemy military attack would be considered guerilla fighters and would be liable to summary execution if captured. This was made very clear when more than one thousand civilian contractors were captured on Wake Island immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor; ninety-eight of them were executed before the war's end.

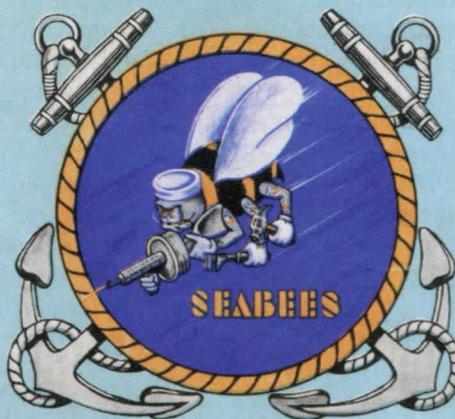
The Seabees' Name and Insignia

With the urgent need for a military-trained naval construction force made clear, US Navy Rear Admiral Ben Moreell, chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks (now called the Naval Facilities Engineering Command), requested authority on December 28, 1941, to carry out the long-discussed plan to reinstate a construction force to be a part of the US Navy Reserve. On January 5, 1942, approval was granted by the US Navy Bureau of Navigation (renamed the Bureau of Naval Personnel in May 1942, to more



US Navy Rear Admiral Ben Moreell requested permission from the US Navy Bureau of Navigation to activate a navy construction force and was granted approval on January 5, 1942. He is known as the father of the Seabees, or "the King Bee." PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM

WE BUILD AND FIGHT WITH ALL OUR MIGHT!



UNITED STATES NAVAL CONSTRUCTION BATTALIONS

A bee was chosen for the Seabees' insignia because it is a creature that is both industrious and fierce, traits that reflect the "We build, we fight" motto of the Seabees.

FRANK J. IAFRATE, a clerk at Naval Air Station Quonset Point, the original home of the Seabees, was asked in 1942 to create an insignia for the newly formed Naval Construction Battalions. The request was for a Disney-like image that would represent the character of the force and perhaps lend it a name that was less cumbersome than "Construction Battalion men." Iafrate worked on different designs, including one featuring a "busy beaver," until he hit on the idea of a bee at work. A bee is a creature that is both industrious and fierce when needed. It was determined to be an excellent fit once it was noticed that the *c* and *b* in Construction Battalions could be drawn on to give this new force the official moniker of "Seabees."

The angry bee carrying a machine gun, a wrench, and a hammer fully conveys the "We build, we fight" motto of the Seabees. The original design featured a capital *Q* surrounding the outer edges of the circular insignia, which stood for Quonset Point, but US Navy Rear Admiral Ben Moreell requested that the capital *Q* be changed to a hawser, a rope used to moor a ship, and this design is still in use today. —LINDA MCMAKEN

accurately reflect its primary function) to begin recruiting men from construction trades for assignment to a naval construction regiment composed of three naval construction battalions. The new force was given official permission to assume the name of "Seabees," on March 5, 1942. The name was derived from the initial letters of the words "Construction Battalions." Admiral Moreell also furnished the Seabees with their official motto: *Construimus, batuimus*, a Latin phrase meaning, "we build, we fight."

The mission to form the much-needed Seabees was finally achieved, but one key aspect of the new force's command structure needed to be resolved. The Bureau of Naval Personnel determined that the construction units would be commanded by a US Navy line officer who would oversee

the military discipline of the units, and under him would be an officer of the US Navy Civil Engineer Corps, who would oversee the unit's construction assignments.

Admiral Moreell was strongly opposed to this split command structure, and he went directly to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to request that Civil Engineer Corps officers be given sole command of the new construction units. On March 19, 1942, Secretary Knox granted that authority, providing a morale booster to the Civil Engineer Corps, which now had a direct link to combat operations. Admiral Moreell's success in achieving this outcome enabled the Seabees to operate effectively and is one of the reasons that he is known as the father of the Seabees, or, more affectionately, as "the King Bee."

CREDIT: CHRONICLE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

SEABEES

World War II

While the final decisions were being made regarding the structure of the newly formed Seabees, enlisted men were already being assigned to the battalions. Selected for their construction experience rather than their abilities as soldiers, the average age of the first Seabees was thirty-seven years old. The need to recruit skilled construction workers, both for the Seabees and for the US Army Corps of Engineers, was so great that the navy and the army launched a joint recruitment campaign and approached just one organization to help them in their efforts: The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. The Elks War Commission proudly answered the call and instructed all lodges to initiate a drive for recruits. Their efforts were so successful that the required number of enlistees was obtained three months ahead of the established deadline.

These first recruits underwent three weeks of boot camp, during which they were taught military discipline and received weapons instruction. From there, Seabees typically received an additional six weeks of advanced military and technical training before being shipped to an overseas assignment.

In early January 1942, however, the war was rapidly escalating, and the navy urgently needed a fueling station on Bora Bora, which was given the code-name Bobcat. Thus, on January 9, the Bureau of Yards and Docks approved the immediate organization of Construction Battalion Bobcat. By January 27, recruits had been assigned to the battalion and briefly trained and were then shipped out for Bora Bora. The battalion was formed so quickly that the term "Seabees" had not even been coined yet.

The men of the unit called themselves "Bobcats," until new enlistees arrived on Bora Bora in June 1942 and informed them that they were Seabees.

During World War II, the newly formed construction battalions were deployed to both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of operations to build and maintain advance bases, airfields, repair facilities, barracks, roads, and causeways, and all the other pieces of infrastructure that were required for Allied troops to advance. Seabees were often required to perform difficult tasks under tight deadlines and without the needed supplies. When the Seabees landed in Bora Bora in 1942, for example, they were instructed to install electric lines across the island, despite the fact that no glass insulators were on hand. To get the job done, they made their own insulators using glass cola bottles. It was this sort of ingenuity and resolve that earned the Seabees their "can-do" reputation.

PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVES (PHOTO NO. 80-G-K-13307)



Top: Seabees lay down perforated steel planking, called Marston Mat, as they work to build Torokina Airfield on Bougainville Island in Papua New Guinea in 1943. This was one of many construction projects the Seabees undertook during World War II to ensure the mobility of Allied troops. **Above:** This sign, put up by Seabees in early 1944 at the Bougainville Navy Yard in Papua New Guinea, bears a phrase that has become an unofficial motto for the Seabees.

PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM

But the Seabees did much more than pave the way for Allied troops; the men of the construction battalions were on hand during the most crucial confrontations of the war, and suffered many casualties as a result. On D Day, the Seabees were one of the first battalions to land on the shores of Normandy as members of naval combat demolition units. Their objective was to demolish German-built steel and concrete barriers so that Allied amphibious assault forces could land.

The Seabees came under brutal fire in their attempts to plant explosives around the barriers, but they boldly carried out their mission, blowing apart the German defenses. Once the way was cleared, the Seabees returned to the water to position pontoon causeways that would get Allied troops from ship to shore.

The steel pontoons, called "magic boxes," were five feet wide, seven feet long, and five feet tall and were specially

Through the Hollywood Lens

"SEABEES" became a household name with the release of the 1944 motion picture, *The Fighting Seabees*, starring John Wayne, Dennis O'Keefe, and Susan Hayward. The film tells the story of the early days of the Naval Construction Battalions (though, of course, liberties are taken and deviations made from the true history). Wayne plays a hard-nosed construction company owner working in the South Pacific at the beginning of World War II. His mission is to get the navy to allow him to arm his men. O'Keefe plays the US Navy commander who compels him to undergo the military training required to make that happen. Susan Hayward plays a newspaper correspondent who arrives in the Pacific Islands to cover the unfolding events of the war.

Hayward captured the hearts of Seabees everywhere with her starring role, and she became the first woman to be crowned "Seabee Queen." This position was held by the woman chosen to preside over the Seabee Ball, a celebration to mark the Naval Construction Battalions' birthday on March 5. Hayward wore the crown of the Seabee Queen throughout World War II, and she made visits to the Seabees at Port Hueneme, California, several times during the war. —LINDA MCKAKEN



PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM

This photo, taken in November 1943 at Port Hueneme, California, the West Coast home of the Seabees, shows actress Susan Hayward surrounded by Seabees of Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit 515. Hayward costarred with John Wayne in the 1944 film *The Fighting Seabees* and was the first woman to be named "Seabee Queen."



PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM

This photo taken in June 1944 shows Allied troops using pontoon causeways positioned by Seabees to come ashore on the beaches of Normandy during the D Day landings.

designed by the navy to be a versatile transporting tool. The pontoons could be strung together to create a causeway to off-load troops, trucks, and equipment, and they were also assembled into self-propelled barges called rhino ferries. The pontoons were used in both of those capacities during the D Day landings, and were also amassed into a huge, offshore port area, which became known as "Mulberry A." Within a month of the D Day landings, the

Seabees had helped put more than one million Allied men ashore on Normandy's beaches.

On the Pacific front, the Seabees played a significant role in the island-hopping campaign, building and maintaining the infrastructure needed to continue the Allied advance. By 1943, the Naval Construction Battalions had built three hundred advance bases; 111 airstrips; 441 piers, bridges, and roads; and constructed enough storage tanks to hold more than one hundred million gallons of fuel—and this was just in the Pacific theater of operations.

These construction missions allowed the Allies to close

SEABEES

in on Japan, and when the assault on Okinawa began in April 1945, the Seabees were there. They endured the heavy fighting that took place through the end of June and then took on the immense task of building ports, roads, a seaplane base, ship repair facilities, and hospitals on the heavily battered island.

By early August 1945, the fifty-five thousand Seabees on Okinawa had constructed the facilities that would be required for an Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands. Then, on August 6, 1945, a US Army Air Forces B-29 bomber called *Enola Gay* took off from a Seabees-built airfield on Tinian, carrying the atomic bomb that was soon to be dropped on Hiroshima. In the four and a half years since their inception, the Seabees had contributed significantly to the war effort, offering up their experience, ingenuity, and tenacity and seeing America through one of its most trying periods.

The Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars

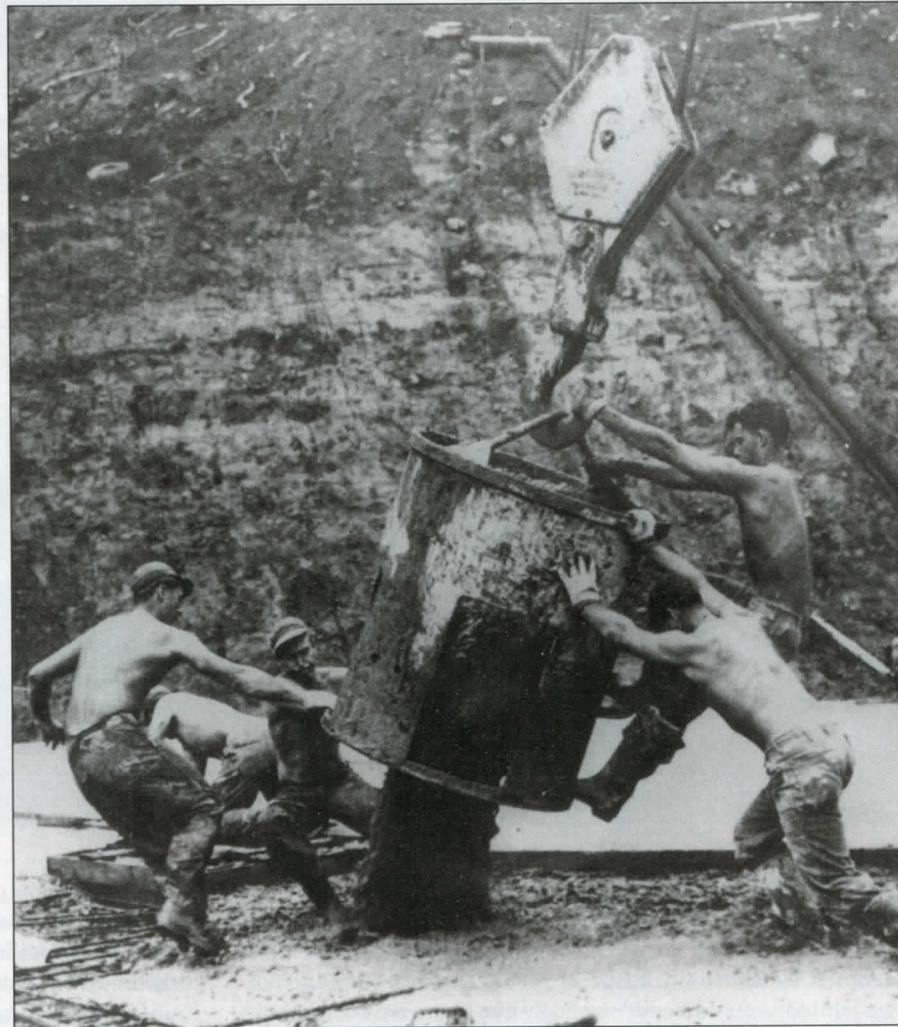
Following World War II, the Naval Construction Battalions, along with much of the rest of the US armed forces, demobilized, and all remaining Seabee activity was based out of the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Port Hueneme, California. However, Seabee peacetime activity continued around the globe and included reconstruction efforts in Japan.

In 1947, it was determined that the Seabees should no longer be just a reserve organization, as they were during World War II, but should become a part of the regular US Navy, with its own Seabee Reserve units to supplement active-duty Seabees during war-time. Less than three years later, the Seabees did, indeed, find themselves at war again.

When the Korean War began on June 25, 1950, the Seabees called on their reservists and expanded their active-duty force to more than fourteen thousand men. One of their first missions of the war began on September 15, when US troops landed at Inchon.

The landing was treacherous, and the Seabees were met by enormous waves, dangerous undercurrents, and heavy enemy fire. Heedless of the danger, within hours they built pontoon causeways to facilitate the landing of additional troops. Still, off-loaded equipment was piling up at the harbor, with no easy means to transport it

PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVES (PHOTO NO. 80-G-K-2978)



Top: This photo, taken on Tinian in 1944, shows members of the 107th Naval Construction Battalion standing in front of a B-29 Superfortress bomber, which bears the fierce visage of the Seabee's mascot. Above: Depicted in this photo are several Seabees unloading a concrete bucket at Cubi Point in the Philippines in the early 1950s. It was here, during the Korean War, that they built a naval air station—a job that required the Seabees to dig and dynamite a two-mile runway through a 1,500-foot mountain.

farther inland—that is until a group of Seabees daringly went behind enemy lines, captured some abandoned locomotives, and brought them back to the US Army Transportation Corps. It was an exploit that came to be known as the “Great Seabee Train Robbery.”

Another project during the Korean War that came to define the spirit of the Seabees was the construction of Naval Air Station Cubi Point. In need of an air base in the Philippines, the US Navy selected a location in the Zambales Mountains, overlooking Subic Bay, and approached civilian contractors about taking on the job. Each of the companies declined, declaring the project impossible to complete on the jungle-covered, mountainous terrain. For the Seabees, however, it was a different story.

A phrase coined during the World War II that is associated with the Seabees is: “The difficult we do now; the impossible takes a little longer.” True to that saying, the Seabees dug and dynamited a two-mile runway through the 1,500-foot mountain, constructed an air station, and built a pier in Subic Bay that could accommodate the navy’s largest carriers, all in the space of five years.

The job of building Naval Air Station Cubi Point is recognized as one of the largest earthmoving projects ever undertaken. Key phases of the project were completed during the Korean War, but by the time the air base was fully completed, the war had ended. Just as the Seabees were looking toward new peacetime, pioneering expeditions, conflict arose again, this time in Vietnam.

The 1954 Geneva Accords temporarily divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel and included a provision that gave the people of Vietnam the opportunity to choose to live in communist North Vietnam or the southern Republic of Vietnam. This led to the movement of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese from north to south prior to the May 1955 deadline of the provision. During this time, the Seabees were on hand to build refugee camps and water and power supply facilities to support what the US Navy officially designated Operation Passage to Freedom.

As the conflict in Vietnam escalated, the Seabees resumed their wartime role as builders of roads, airstrips, and fortified camps. One of their most impressive undertakings during the Vietnam War was the construction of the Liberty Bridge in 1967. The bridge, which spanned the Thu Bon River, was 2,040 feet long and rose thirty-two feet above the low water level so it could accommodate the rising river during monsoon season. Despite its location in an area heavily occupied by enemy forces, the Seabees completed the bridge in five months.

Still, many of the Seabees’ efforts continued to be focused on helping the residents of rural Vietnamese villages. The Seabees provided the Vietnamese with medical

In this photograph, taken in Chu Lai, Vietnam in 1966, several Seabees are shown building a Quonset Hut, a prefabricated structure that was named for the Seabees’ original home base at Quonset Point in Rhode Island. These structures were used for a wide variety of functions, including as barracks, offices, or entertainment spaces.



PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM

SEABEES

assistance and built hospitals, improved the infrastructure of their communities, and taught them basic construction skills, from which they continued to benefit after the Seabees withdrew in 1970. The Seabees would not see military action on this scale for another twenty years.

In the summer of 1990, at the outset of Operation Desert Shield, US Marines were deployed to Saudi Arabia, and Seabees went with them to provide the needed construction support. They built base camps to house the marines, parking aprons for aircraft, and ammunition supply points. The Seabees were also tasked with building two hundred miles of road near the Kuwaiti border to literally pave the way for the "End Run" attack strategy, in which two US Marine divisions were to launch an assault against the Iraqis. To maintain the element of surprise, the Seabees completed the road in about two weeks. The marines began their attack on February 25, 1991; Iraq accepted a cease-fire three days later.

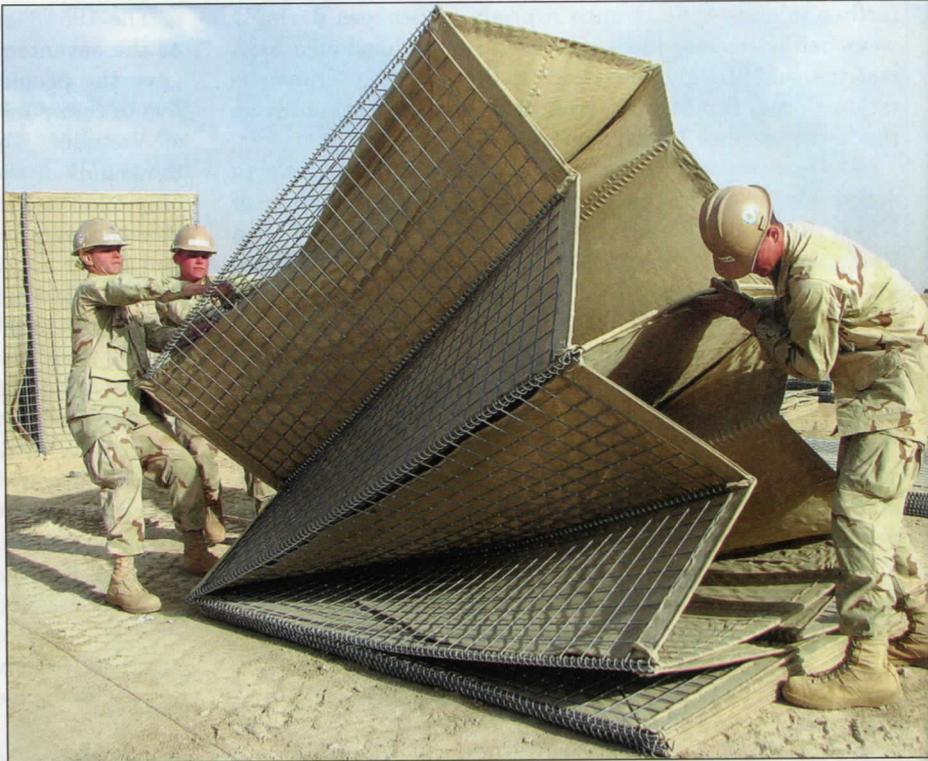
Builders for Peace

Amid the wars of the twentieth century, the Seabees seized opportunities to pioneer peacetime missions. In 1946, they were sent to Antarctica to help establish an American presence there. Known as Operation Highjump, it was the first US Navy mission to the South Pole since 1842. In 1955, the Seabees took on Operation Deep Freeze, a project to build a base at the South Pole for researchers. Despite numbering only two hundred, the Seabees constructed a 6,000-foot ice airstrip on McMurdo Sound. When a blizzard destroyed the work they had already done, they carried on, completing the runway before the first research team arrived. Through the end of the 1950s and into the early 1970s, the Seabees continued to work in Antarctica, building snow roads, living quarters, a nuclear power plant, and a geodesic dome that housed a research station.

The Seabees' other peacetime work throughout the past fifty years has often focused on humanitarian relief efforts and has earned them the unofficial title of America's goodwill ambassadors. Using their construction expertise globally, they have been on hand during countless natural disasters and humanitarian crises to provide support and assistance with reconstruction.

When famine struck Somalia in 1992, for example, the Seabees were there to repair supply routes and build relief base camps. They also provided

PHOTO: THE US NAVY SEABEE MUSEUM



Seabees of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 5 are shown here in Afghanistan in 2009, constructing a HESCO barrier, which can be used for military fortification or for flood control. This battalion was deployed to Afghanistan to provide construction support to members of the NATO International Security Assistance Force.

reconstruction support after many large-scale hurricanes, including Hurricanes Camille, Ivan, and Katrina. Following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of Japan, Underwater Seabee Construction Teams were deployed to the region to rebuild piers, ports, and roads. Through projects like these, the Seabees have helped communities rebuild in the wake of disaster and have forged valuable relationships between the United States and other nations.

In 2017, the Naval Construction Battalions celebrated their seventy-fifth anniversary and recognized the sacrifices made, jobs undertaken, and the goodwill shared globally by their fellow Seabees throughout the past three-quarters of a century. The Seabees were originally made up of the carpenters, mechanics, draftsmen, engineers, and masons who built the foundations of America, and today, they continue to take their skills and ingenuity abroad to defend their country in times of war and to extend the hand of brotherhood in times of peace. ■

ONLINE

The US Navy organizes Seabees with unique skill sets into specialized units, such as underwater construction teams, that are prepared to take on technical projects. Subscribe to *The Elks Magazine* online edition to learn more about specialized Seabee units and to view bonus video content.