

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

- CAPT JUD PEARSON, CEC, USN (RETIRED) • USNA CLASS OF 1963

I just found our web page with the many entries of our classmates' involvement in the Vietnam War. I was encouraged to also write a summary for inclusion in the record, very much aware that I did not go "in harms' way" nearly to the extent that others did, in stark contrast to the marines, aviators, SEALs, and many others who were constantly exposed to unfriendly fire. I was fortunate that the better part of two years in-country with "boots on the ground" came rather late in the war when the U.S. was in the process of disengaging. Like all of us who survived the war, not a day passes that I do not give thanks to the Lord that my family and I were spared the personal tragedy that others suffered. "The Wall" is a great reminder to us all.

My story actually begins back at Annapolis during Second Class year. Some of you may recall that CAPT Charles J. Merdinger, CEC, USN, an Academy graduate and Rhodes Scholar, was assigned to the Naval Academy during our time there as Head of the English, History and Government Department. It was because of him that I, along with several others in our class, became interested in the Civil Engineer Corps and the legendary Seabees of WWII. I even wrote an article that was published in Trident Magazine, entitled, "The Seabees as a Military Peace Corps."

The term, "Seabees" refers to those enlisted personnel in the Construction Ratings, Builders (BU's), Steelworkers (SW's), Utilitiesmen (UT's), Construction Electricians (CE's), Equipment Operators (EO's), Construction Mechanics (CM's), and Engineering Aids (EA's). Additionally, the term is also used to refer to those officers and enlisted in other ratings serving with units commanded by Civil Engineer Corps Officers in the Naval Construction Force (NCF), including Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (NMCB's), Amphibious Construction Battalions (PHIBCB's), Naval Construction Regiments (NCR's), Naval Construction Brigades (NCB's), Construction Battalion Maintenance Units (CBMU's), Underwater Construction Teams (UCT's), Seabee Teams, and Construction Battalion Units (CBU's).

As it turns out, many of us who had been interested in the CEC, were found physically qualified for unrestricted line, and Walt Pierce garnered the only CEC slot reserved for those in our class who were otherwise physically qualified for unrestricted line. So, on service selection, I selected a DLG out of Mayport for my first assignment.

My two years aboard USS FARRAGUT (DLG-6) following graduation, set the stage for my later involvement in Vietnam, and more importantly, gave me an enduring appreciation and high regard for Surface Warfare Officers and the extremely difficult and arduous challenges with which they are so often confronted. While aboard FARRAGUT, I was selected for transfer to the Civil Engineer Corps and subsequently received an MSCE from Stanford University. My first CEC assignment was in contracts at NAS Lemoore during some of the most difficult years of the air war over North Vietnam. The many CACO (Casualty Assistance Calls Officer) calls to the wives and families of deployed carrier pilots gave us all a heightened awareness of the dangers they faced while on the line.

After the inauguration on 20 January 1969, the Nixon administration "gradually developed a two-track policy of negotiation and what came to be called "Vietnamization"—that is, unilateral withdrawal of American combat troops combined with a major effort to strengthen Saigon's

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

armed forces.” Naval assets were concentrated principally in the “Brown Water Navy” engaged in riverine operations in canals, rivers and tributaries of the Mekong Delta. With the President’s call for Vietnamization, COMNAVFORV developed the ACTOV program for accelerated turnover of naval assets to the Vietnamese. Previously, the Seabees were engaged primarily in I-Corps in support of U. S. Marine units in III MAF, with project sites in the local vicinity of the headquartered battalion. With the gradual withdrawal of 1st Mar Div, coupled with the need to construct bases for Vietnamese riverine operations, the Seabees were soon tasked with construction of temporary Advanced Tactical Support Bases (ATSB’s) and more permanent Intermediate Support Bases (ISB’s) in the Mekong Delta at great distances from the headquartered battalions in I-Corps. With that as the backdrop, my time in Vietnam was characterized by both force withdrawals and accelerated turnover of tactical missions and facilities to the South Vietnamese.

The following is a summary of my Seabee involvement in Vietnam written for posterity at the request of my family:

“From Jan 1970 to Jan 1972, as a young Lieutenant and Lieutenant Commander, I served in Naval Mobile Construction Battalion FIVE (NMCB FIVE), homeported at CBC Port Hueneme, CA. Shortly after I reported, we learned that we were going to relieve NMCB ONE at Camp Haskins North in Danang RVN, but with detachments in the Mekong Delta at Nam Can, Rach Soi, and Ha Tien, and also move on to new construction sites at Long Phu and Kien An. This represented a significant departure from the manner in which mobile construction battalion assets had been previously utilized, and presented a unique and almost unprecedented challenge. Battalions were not staffed, configured, nor equipped for the distinctly different effort required to support dispersed operations of this magnitude.

Following military training at Camp Pendleton, I deployed to the Republic of Vietnam as Officer-in-Charge of the Advance Party, arriving in DaNang, RVN on 27 Feb 1970. I served first as Equipment Officer and Alpha Company Commander (A6), in charge of 270 men, primarily involved with resurfacing QL-1, the national highway, over the difficult and dangerous Hai Van Pass, but with Equipment Operators (EOs) and Construction Mechanics (CMs) involved in equipment operation and maintenance of more than 450 pieces of equipment. Our battalion was headquartered at Camp Haskins North, located at Red Beach, just north of Da Nang on the China Sea, across from 1st MarDiv at FLC, but the majority of our 750 men were scattered all over the Mekong Delta, constructing Advanced Tactical Support Bases (ATSBs) and Intermediate Support Bases (ISBs) for the Vietnamese Navy. As the Battalion Equipment Officer, I made several trips to construction sites throughout the Delta, catching rides whenever I could from one site to the next on UH-1 Huey’s, OH-6 Loach’s and OH-58 Kiowa Super Loach’s.

In July of 1970, I became the Battalion Operations Officer (S3), in charge of all construction operations at Nam Can, Cho Moi, Rach Soi, Kien An, Long Phu, Tuyen Nhon, Ha Tien, Chau Doc, Phuoc Xuyen, Vinh Gia and other sites throughout the Mekong Delta, including the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ), with support operations in Saigon, Bien Hoa, Vung Tau and Binh Thuy. Logistics support of these detachments was a major challenge. At the time, we were only the second battalion to have detached unit operations of this magnitude. We profited from

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

NMCB ONE's experience, having been suddenly required to deploy their assets to the Delta, and had great difficulty communicating with, and tracking battalion assets (personnel, equipment, tools, material, etc.) to and from these extremely remote sites. Our battalion acquired and utilized Motorola single side band (SSB) radios designed for long distance land communications, and developed effective systems to partially overcome these challenges. Supplies and materials were transported by any means available, often by tractor-trailer convoys over un-improved roads through hostile territory, and sometimes by LCM's. Nevertheless, transportation to these remote sites was often a "hit or miss" proposition. We were able to finally obtain improved tasking of helicopter assets after we provided some construction assistance to the Navy's Helicopter Attack Squadron (HA(L)-3) headquartered in Binh Thuy, but with nine detachments scattered throughout III and IV Corps, at Nha Be, Rach Gia, Chau Doc, all very near our construction sites, and other detachments next to our sites at Ha Tien and Nam Can ("Seafloat").

My Ops office was located at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and I lived at "the Five Oceans" BOQ in Cho Lon, the Chinese district of Saigon. Late in the deployment, I remember returning from a two-week tour of our sites in the Delta and remarking to my Ops Chief next to me as we neared Saigon, "Master Chief, it's going to be great to get home, isn't it?" I knew as soon as I said it that I had been in-country too long, after I referred to Saigon as "home!"

The most important tasking was at Nam Can where we were tasked with construction of an ATSB that would accommodate the task group operating from "Seafloat" and a more permanent ISB to be turned over to the Vietnamese, also accompanied by construction of a 3000 ft runway. Numerous challenges and obstacles were overcome, and on 2 Sep 1970, our site at Nam Can officially was renamed "Solid Anchor" and (HA(L)-3) Det 1 moved ashore from "Seafloat," along with the rest of the task group. In October, we turned over our unfinished projects (those with insufficient time remaining to allow for completion) to NMCB 74. The main body re-deployed back to homeport, but I stayed on as OIC of the Delayed Party, focusing our total attention on the one remaining site at Kien Nan in order to turn that ATSB over to the Vietnamese Navy. We successfully completed work at Kien An, and departed Bien Hoa, RVN on 10 Nov 1970, returning to CONUS and CBC Port Hueneme, CA.

During our four-month homeport period, we made pre-deployment visits to Guam, Adak, and the Philippines. Our 75 man detachment to Adak was tasked with building a new "Acey-Ducey" EM Club, and a 75 man detachment at NAS Cubi Point would be involved with the relocation of operational units and facilities, along with some housing, from NAS Sangley Point to NAVSTA Subic Bay and Cubi Point.

We were informed in late January that in addition to our previously assigned tasking in Guam, Adak and the Philippines, our battalion was going to be also tasked with sending a major detachment to RVN two months early and relieve NMCB THREE's detachment at Ca Mau, and NMCB 74's detachments at Mui Dinh and Ta Kou, along with completion of punch-list items at Tan Chau, Chau Doc, and Cho Moi. Because of the politics of force withdrawals, the total number of Seabees in-country were limited to just 350. So, it was pretty much a "no-brainer" that the CO and XO would deploy with the main body to Guam, and I would be tasked with taking 350 men back to RVN. After our two weeks of military readiness training with the

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

Marines at Camp Pendleton, my staff and I were totally immersed in staffing and equipping each detachment to successfully accomplish construction tasking.

Just before we were scheduled to deploy, NMCB THREE's detachment at Ca Mau was attacked by a VC squad, armed with B-40 rocket launchers, in the early morning hours, inflicting a number of casualties.

I deployed to Vietnam shortly thereafter, serving as Officer-in-Charge of the advanced arriving at Bien Hoa, RVN on 2 Mar 1971. We were to relieve NMCB 74 headquartered at the Army Base at Bien Hoa, and their detachments at Ta Kou and Mui Dinh on the coast, and NMCB THREE's detachment at Ca Mau with support operations at Binh Thuy.

Soon after arriving in-country, I visited the NMCB THREE construction site at Ca Mau in an attempt to assess the threat to NMCB FIVE's future detachment. Discussions with numerous sources revealed that the VC attack might have been an outright assassination attempt on NMCB THREE's USMC advisor, an aggressive master sergeant who had perhaps unwittingly harassed locals by leading nightly patrols in the area, accompanied by nightly mortar fire support. We maintained a strict defensive posture after we relieved NMCB THREE later on that month, and fortunately for us, Ca Mau was never attacked again.

On my initial visit to our future site at Ta Kou, a U.S. Army district advisor was ambushed in a jeep on the same coastal road on which we were travelling, just moments after we passed each other going in opposite directions. This obviously got my attention and was definitely a concern, because the only road leading to the site was this dangerous coastal road with numerous potential ambush sites, not easily defended. After we relieved NMCB 74, we decided to construct an airstrip next to our base camp to support tactical aircraft. This proved to be a tremendous asset over the course of our deployment, in transporting personnel, tools, light supplies and equipment.

I was a little uncomfortable on our previous deployment when traveling to remote sites by jeep, helicopter, LCM, etc., armed with only a 1911 .45 Cal pistol and twenty-one rounds. On the 2nd deployment, I augmented my .45 sidearm with a newly acquired CAR-15 Carbine with a retractable buttstock and shortened barrel, along with 100 rounds of 5.26 ammo. My Ops Chief accompanied me with an M-79 Grenade Launcher and an ammo vest of HE, Flare, and Smoke grenades. Fortunately, we never had to engage.

Because the mission of the Naval Advisory Group (NAG) was winding down, my Seabee detachment was augmented with an additional 70 former Naval Advisors (1st, 2nd, and chief petty officers). These were a tremendous asset, freeing up that many more Seabees for construction operations and also provided us with the means and capability to operate an LCM to transport materials and supplies from Binh Thuy through the U Minh Forest to our site in Ca Mau .

Essential to our success in pioneering the access road to the mountaintop ACTOV radar sites at Ta Kou and Mui Dinh, was the Army's approval of my request for augmentation equipment, providing two new Caterpillar D-8 Bulldozers, four new Caterpillar Scrapers, and two new huge

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

Allis-Chalmers Front-end Loaders. Effective logistics support was also key to our success. The approval of air-tasking by CG, Third Regional Assistance Command, led to 1st Air Cav rotary and fixed-wing assets being placed at our disposal. Although the division redeployed to CONUS shortly thereafter, a brigade remained behind in support.

The Army Helicopter Detachment at H-3 in Saigon also agreed to make their air-assets available to us when they were not in use by COMMACV. Additionally, Air America agreed to provide air assets to remote sites using the legendary Fairchild Porter. (I landed on the air-strip next to our site at Ta Kou in a fully loaded Air-America Fairchild Porter. We came to a complete stop in 87 feet. We measured it with a tape measure! Years later, a Fairchild representative told me one of their pilots had landed on the Pentagon Helo Pad, and on another occasion had landed and come to a complete stop in less than one length of the aircraft—27 ft!) We no longer had to just “catch” helicopter rides by chance on a “hit or miss” basis.

Soon after we relieved NMCB 74 at Mui Dinh, I received a message from the OIC on site that was troublesome. The U.S. Army Senior Province Advisor informed him that intelligence indicated an NVA Sapper Platoon, armed with mortars and B-40 rocket launchers, was headed in their direction. There was a known VC supply trail passing near their coastal lighthouse site, long a target of VC activity, since it was located in President Thieu’s home province. I caught the next flight from Tan Son Nhut to Phan Rang, taking my USMC Gunnery Sergeant and Ops Chief with me. On the flight, I sat next to a U.S. Army helicopter pilot, a Warrant Officer, who offered to fly us down to the site at Mui Dinh. (It turns out, he was the son of VADM Joe Moorer, and nephew of JCS Chairman, ADM Thomas Moorer.) We met with the Province Advisor in Phan Rang who committed additional assets to oversee our defensive posture there. We spent a few days on site at Mui Dinh, and after things had calmed down a little, we left our “Gunny” behind for a few weeks to further bolster our defensive position there.

We had to re-supply Ta Kou via just one access road off of QL-1, over five miles in length. The VC made it difficult by mining the road almost daily. Our OIC, a LTJG, was wounded after his vehicle encountered a mine. Fortunately, he recovered quickly and returned within weeks, but we then engaged mine dogs on loan from the U.S. Army to successfully reduce the threat, logging more than 54 “dog-days” of effort during the deployment. That same road crossed an obvious low drainage point and we were concerned about access during the monsoons, so we “upgraded the crossing, using two 72” culverts in our design. After they were washed out during a prolonged outburst, we replaced them with a hundred-foot long timber bridge. During the height of the monsoons, one of our Seabees waded out to the middle of the bridge, demonstrating that the bridge deck was under five feet of water! Our “engineering” solution significantly underestimated the potential flood threat.

As it often seems, time “flew by,” challenges were met, obstacles were overcome, and we successfully completed work at all of our sites. Over the course of the deployment, almost nine million pounds (4500 tons) of materials and supplies were shipped to our construction sites at Ca Mau, Ta Kou and Mui Dinh from our support detachments at Bien Hoa and Binh Thuy, over half by surface craft, 43% by convoy, and the rest by air.

The ACTOVRAD site at Mui Dinh was turned over to the Vietnamese on 25 Sep 1971, the ISB at

MY SEABEE TOUR IN VIETNAM

Ca Mau was turned over on 27 Sep 1971, and the ACTOVRAD site at Ta Kou was turned over on 20 Oct 1971. Accordingly, with all work completed, on 6 Nov 1971, the THIRD Naval Construction Brigade was decommissioned during a ceremony at Bien Hoa, in which I served as Commander of Troops, closing the last chapter of Seabee involvement in country. I departed Tan Son Nhut, RVN, as Officer-in-Charge of the Delayed Party on 7 Nov 1971, returning to CONUS and CBC Port Hueneme, CA.

My time in Vietnam was characterized by the hardship of almost two years of family separation, but was otherwise both challenging and rewarding. The memories, however, are not so much about that, but mostly about the extraordinary men with whom I served, so many of whom I thankfully “tip my hat” and applaud their dedication and perseverance under the most arduous and stressful conditions. I was not sure that I would ever be called on again to serve with the Seabees. In retrospect, that tour laid the groundwork for my CEC career, having been given the opportunity to deploy to Vietnam with the Seabees in a responsible position, in spite of the fact that I was relatively junior, and also a Line-to-Staff transfer to the Civil Engineer Corps.”

Following my detachment from NMCB FIVE in January 1972, I attended the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, where I underwent five months of joint service training. I was thrilled when I received orders to report that summer to the Bureau of Naval Personnel as the Seabee Rating Assignment Officer, and later on as Branch Head for Seabees, Divers, EODs and SEALs.

Fast forward to 1989 when I was called on to serve again with the Seabees for my third and final command as Commanding Officer of CBC Port Hueneme and Commander, 31st Naval Construction Regiment. (Three of my battalions, along with my Chief Staff Officer and other staff officers, deployed to Saudi during “Desert Shield/Desert Storm” in support of the Marine Expeditionary Force.) It is pure irony that I ended my career as a Seabee, in light of my enduring interest in them dating back to my days in Annapolis.