

This article was submitted to the U.S. Naval Academy for their "Lest we Forget..." series, by LCDR Dave Balk, CEC, USN

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SEABEE DIVERS

SEABEEs of the Naval Construction Force (NCF) became involved in construction diving during World War II, in conjunction with the building of numerous advanced bases throughout the Pacific theater. Most of the work was performed by specially trained SEABEEs and Civil Engineer Corps Officers qualified as divers attached to one of several small, semi-independent units being formed to perform combat underwater demolition, limited salvage and underwater construction. These units were the predecessors of the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs).

The mid-1960's saw renewed interest in Ocean Engineering and Ocean Facilities. Ocean facility projects undertaken in the late 1960's served to establish the capabilities of the UCTs. In February 1969, a team of approximately 20 SEABEE divers was assembled to provide underwater construction support for the TEKTITE I undersea habitat, launched in 52 feet of sea water (fsw), in the Caribbean Sea near St. John, US Virgin Island. Due to the ingenuity of the SEABEEs, installation of the 160-ton TEKTITE I undersea habitat was accomplished without the use of a floating crane. Instead, the SEABEEs configured an "underwater elevator" lifting system assembled from locally available Ammi pontoon sections.

The second large scale project was the construction operations on the test array installation of the Azores Fixed Acoustic Range (AFAR) which commenced in March 1970 at the Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center, Andros, Bahamas, in 1300 fsw. The AFAR project required underwater explosive demolition producing a trench through the precipitous basalt submarine island shelf, and installation of 1,500 feet of split pipe to each of the four large, double-armed power and signal cable. The SEABEE divers devised an innovative procedures which set the standards for many future cable projects. Other projects accomplished by the UCT's included pier reconstruction at McMurdo Station, Antarctica, and cable installation and stabilization in Iceland.

During the Vietnam war, diving SEABEEs served with the NMCBs deployed to Southeast Asia. Their primary task included repair of war damaged waterfront facilities, and construction of new bridges, piers and POL (petroleum, oil and lubricants) facilities. Often the only diving personnel available, they also performed small boat salvage operations and security inspection swims on bridges, piers and underwater fuel lines.

Commencing in 1971, underwater construction divers were assisting with the building of the naval installation at Diego Garcia, British Indian Ocean Territory. SEABEE diver, performed a variety of harbor maintenance and construction services including performing all subsurface maintenance on the desalination barge which required blasting a new trench for barge mooring at the industrial "I" site.

Later, recognizing the need for a permanent capability for harbor, waterfront and ocean construction, the CNO formally established UCT ONE and UCT TWO and on 15 February 1974,

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both units were commissioned with an Officer in Charge.

Diving statistics reflected the increasing workload during the early years. In 1979, according to the Naval Safety Center statistics, the two small UCT's were performing 3 percent of all Navy working dives. The trend continued to where in the mid 1980's, although the UCT's comprised less than 10% of all Navy divers, they were performing over 60% of all Navy working dives.

On October 1, 1985, the command status of the UCT's was upgraded to Commanding Officer, consistent with expanded mission requirements assumed during the brief history of the teams.

Today, UCTs consist of three officers and 52 enlisted, 45 of which are SEABEE Divers, who operate on an Air Detachment basis. Each Air Detachment is similar in capability and composition, and is fully capable to carry out each of the Teams mission areas. This includes such varied task as pier and cable inspection; repairs to piers, pilings and cable, maintenance and construction of underwater discharge out-falls, and playing a critical part in every amphibious evolution and exercise. In short, if it has to deal with facilities, and is anywhere on or seaward of the beach, the UCTs are probably involved.

Throughout their history, the UCTs have proven to be highly mobile units, staffed by exceptionally professional construction divers, capable of executing highly complex ocean construction projects, under the most adverse conditions. With project planning, research and development support from Naval Facilities Engineering Service Center (Ocean System Department), and training of the Underwater Construction Technicians from NCTC Port Hueneme, the Underwater Construction Teams are ready to meet the challenge of ocean construction supporting the U.S. Navy and Fleet Marine Force.