

Jim Mennucci joined the Navy out of high school in 1965. He made the first 2 Viet Nam deployments with the re-commissioned MCB62, at the end of his second deployment he received orders to Project Tektite in the Virgin Islands. Next came advanced diver and underwater explosives training which he used on Project AFAR in the Azores. He completed his naval service in October 1970 and pursued a degree in Mechanical and Ocean Engineering at the University of Rhode Island which he completed in 1974. He went on to work for Westinghouse Undersea which was subsequently bought by Northrop Grumman. He retired in 2010 after a 35 year career designing undersea systems. His memories covering his SeaBee experiences, recollected after more than 40 years follow.

I was class of 1965 out of high school, the draft board gave me till that October to join and avoid being drafted; I joined the Navy on October 28, 1965. Great Lakes boot camp was only 6 weeks and I was home in time for Christmas. Next came Steel Workers A School. With that finished, received orders to report to MCB62 and did so in the May 1966 time-frame, just before battalion re-commissioning. Camp Lejeune military training and Navy Second Class Divers School were completed before deploying to RVN.

Deployed to Hue/Phu Bai December 1966, in Delta Company. Amazingly, we flew all the way there on a C130...somewhat of analogous to traveling on the Mayflower I think as it took 5 days to get there and I was a month in the hole pay-wise from trying to learn how to play poker along the way. First task when we got there was to build Quonset huts for the field hospital next to the air port. I had the misfortune of being able to enjoy some of those accommodations when I caught several pieces of shrapnel during that first mortar attack. I remember a steady succession of steel strand or Butler building constructions; the steel being so hot you couldn't sit on it but, you know, as a 19 year old kid it was pretty exciting shimmying up the main beams to connect cross members. I took a turn working in the A company weld shop where I learned a lot working with a couple guys that had been around heavy equipment for a long time. I also took a turn working at the batch plant (nonvoluntary). I remember my teeth were literally caked with cement by the end of the day. That was hard dirty work but everyone I worked with was undaunted and ready to do it again the next day and ready for a beer or two that night.

The DaNang deployment began with me working in the A-company weld shop. Shortly after arriving, I went on TDY orders to the small craft repair facility to work on underwater problems which I needed to do to maintain my dive qualifications. The work there comprised a steady diet of changing mike boat propellers and shafts with an occasional trip to the dry dock to check keel block clearances. The Tet Offensive started and I found myself with the OIC of the dive barge taking a PBR ride up the coast to Hue to perform an underwater inspection of an LCU that had been holed and was listing badly. The LCU had a 100 ft long slit in its bottom—I asked for, and quite miraculously received several sheets of ¼ inch steel plate, a cutting torch and some all-thread rod. The all-thread was used to make toggle bolts to hang from the slit; the plate was cut into 12 inch wide strips; mattress material from the crews' quarters was tied to the plate and used as a sealing gasket. After 3 days of hanging toggle bolts and attaching the gasketed plates the P250 pump, which we brought with us, was started and the boat

was righted for its trip to the dry dock back in DaNang. I got to ride back and watch the patch—everything held so I didn't have to swim home. I've always looked back on this event as being something special that can only happen in a war zone. Conditions were surprisingly idyllic: water temperature quite comfortable, visibility probably around 20 ft, sun comfortably warming between dives while charging tanks and working on patch pieces. I remember sitting back after diving and watching the F4s strafe the city—had a front row seat for the show; also prayed that they wouldn't drop any bombs in the river while we were under the LCU. When the job was done, me and the Ensign (school teacher not an engineer and a very willing and capable worker) shook hands and said "hey, nice working with you" and we then went our separate ways. This was not a trivial job under normal circumstances, we were lucky on the one hand in that everything worked the first time, but it was that right combination of SeaBee skill coupled with the diving capability that really pulled it off—we never talked about it but I'm sure the Line Officer Ensign knew this.

I was on the team that went to all the Special Forces A-teams sites in I-core where we built Quonset huts to support some sort of outreach program. This was a great opportunity to see the Vietnamese countryside and a nice break from normal battalion routine. A couple of the guys on the team also got to go on patrol with the Green Berets which was exciting since no one got killed although they said they got shot at (of course we didn't have permission to go on patrol but no one was really in charge and the Green Berets were very accommodating).

I was doing another stint at the A-company weld shop when I got tasked with a particularly interesting welding challenge. One of the 20 yard belly-dumps had sheared off the fifth-wheel pin which was really quite amazing since one would expect a very high margin of safety on such a critical item. I seem to remember the driver saying he was trying to avoid running over some locals with those 10 ft high tires they had on the back end and he hit the breaks hard. The machinist mate made a new pin which we hardened after machining, I cut out what remained of the old pin, cranes were used to roll the dump over so that I didn't have to work overhead, overall there was a full week of welding to complete the job. What's amazing in hindsight is the absence of any engineering over site, and it's not that there weren't any engineers around. I guess that's just the way it works in a war zone. I was always kind of proud of my resourcefulness for that job until I became an engineer and realized that, while the intensions were good, we really took a chance of hurting someone on a piece of non critical equipment that should have been pulled off the road until the failure mechanism was rooted out and our proposed fix verified.

In August 1968, myself and Charlie Dunn (B-company) got orders to report to Project Tektite in the Virgin Islands. After 2 tours in Viet Nam the Virgin Islands sounded real good—I mean...is this really happening good? Tektite was a multi-agency government sponsored effort wherein NAVFAC contributed onshore support (we built Viet Nam-like hooch's and a complete village with chow hall and showers) and did the offshore ocean engineering and job execution associated with habitat emplantment and support. For me and the 15 or so SeaBee support divers it was lots of diving in one of the most

brehtaking places in the world; we ran the life support systems when the habitat was manned; collected engineering data on jetted anchors for NCEL; participated in an R&D effort to develop “controlled sinking” of AMMI barges--they wanted but didn’t get an underwater elevator for placing and recovering the habitat. It was truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience with National Geographic and Life magazine coverage. After the job, Commander Eager (OIC) said “Mennucci...I can’t begin to paint the picture...” and I extended my tenure in the Navy to see if he was telling the truth. Being between jobs, myself and Charlie Dunn (who also extended...and swallowed the bait whole), were sent to 1st Class Navy Divers School. The next job involved explosives work which we knew nothing about, so off we went to Navy Quarry Blasters School and some additional civilian training to get us ready. The new endeavor was called Project AFAR (Azores Fixed Acoustic Range) and was performed off Santa Maria Island, Azores where we provided the engineering and job execution for the inshore cable route preparation (literally blasted a 1500 ft underwater trench thru the surf zone) to allow bringing 4 submarine cables ashore. My capacity on this job was diving and blasting supervisor running a crew of 25. I attended daily engineering meetings and got valuable insight into the engineering process. AFAR had a preliminary phase that was done on Andros Island, Bahamas where one of the Sonar Array’s was tested. After finishing quarry blasting school I was sent to Andros where they needed my steel working skills—how about seven days a week and 12-15 hour days for about 6 weeks. I remember getting one weekend in Nassau for 6 weeks on the rock. Since the AMMI barge “controlled sinking” experiment was not successful I had to cut the bottom of the Sonar array off using an underwater cutting torch to reduce the draft which then allowed towing the array into the harbor for recovery. By the time that the Array was recovered in the harbor I had spent 40 out of 48 hours in the water—tired but satisfied that the job was successfully accomplished. These 2 jobs were the principal justifications that led to the formation of the Navy’s Under Water Construction Teams (the UCT’s) in the mid 70’s.

With the Azores job complete so was my commitment to the Navy; I got out and pursued interests germinated by the many experiences realized during my Navy time. As someone I worked with in civilian life put it “...working here after what I did in the Navy...is like working at a 7-11” and I have to agree looking back at my own Navy days. They really were the good old days.