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Swarming in Stillwater: U.S. Navy Seabees begin holding reunions

"It's hard for a Seabee to find another Seabee to visit with," Tom Yant

By Michelle Charles mcharles@stwnewspress.com Dec 6, 2017



Michelle Charles/Stillwater News Press A group of veterans who served in the U.S. Navy Seabees construction battalions held a reunion Saturday in Stillwater. The group plans to hold more gatherings and can be found on Facebook as the "Seabees of North Central Oklahoma." By Michelle Charles/Stillwater News Press

Serving with the U.S. Navy construction battalions known as the Seabees was a life-changing experience for the men who gathered in Stillwater on Saturday. They say it taught them to get the job done, no matter what.

"Nothing stands in your way," John Tanner, a Seabee veteran from Perkins, said.

The Seabee emblem, a bee holding a machine gun, a wrench and a hammer epitomizes their slogan "We build, We fight, Can do."

"And we did, sometimes with nothing," said Pete Peters, a Seabee veteran from Edmond. "For the rest of our lives we could do anything anyone wanted. You give Seabees some beer and we'll build it for you."

Getting the job done sometimes required them to be resourceful at locating supplies.

Tanner says they never stole anything, because the materials were still on base, but they sometimes had to “borrow” materials from other areas to accomplish their objectives.

“It still belonged to the military,” Peters joked.

They make jokes, but their jobs were dangerous.

The Seabees were trained in combat, as well as construction, because they were tasked with creating vital infrastructure, often while taking fire.

Peters remembers some of the hazards his unit faced in Vietnam.

“You never knew when it was coming,” he said. “They would shoot mortars, but couldn’t aim the damn things to save their lives.

“I was more afraid of this little orange snake, a kind of viper, we called the ‘Two Step’ because that was about as far as you’d get. You have to remember, when you’re 21, you’re young, dumb and bullet-proof.”

Harold Evans served in an Amphibious Seabees unit that he says could land on a beach and have a complete Navy base set up within 24 hours.

The men who hadn’t already met before Saturday got to know each other over lunch and soon they were all sharing memories and swapping stories.

Several of them had fond memories of arriving at a station in Japan that had vending machines stocked with Olympia beer.

Forrest Barrett of Cushing said he was a welder when he joined the Seabees at age 32 and it wasn’t quite what he expected from joining the Navy.

“I thought I would get two weeks off every year and do some fishing,” he said. “I didn’t realize as Seabees, you’re not on the ocean.”

Several of the men served during the Vietnam era, signing up to beat the draft as student and other deferments were ending.

Harold Evans said he was only eight hours away from completing an engineering degree when he enlisted. His number came up for the draft around the same time.

“I didn’t know for three days whether I was in the Army or the Navy,” he said.

Tom Yant had been out of his electrician training program for six weeks when he enlisted. He got his draft notice a week later.

“They didn’t mess around,” Yant said.

No matter how they wound up there, all the men seem to look back on their time with the Seabees fondly.

“It’s a brotherhood, a bond that can’t be broken,” Rich Ashbury, of Ponca City, said. “Whether we know each other or not, we know what we did.”

The Seabees plan to continue getting together in the Stillwater area as long as there is enough interest.

People who want to join the group can follow “Seabees of North Central Oklahoma” on Facebook.

Twitter: @mcharlesNP