

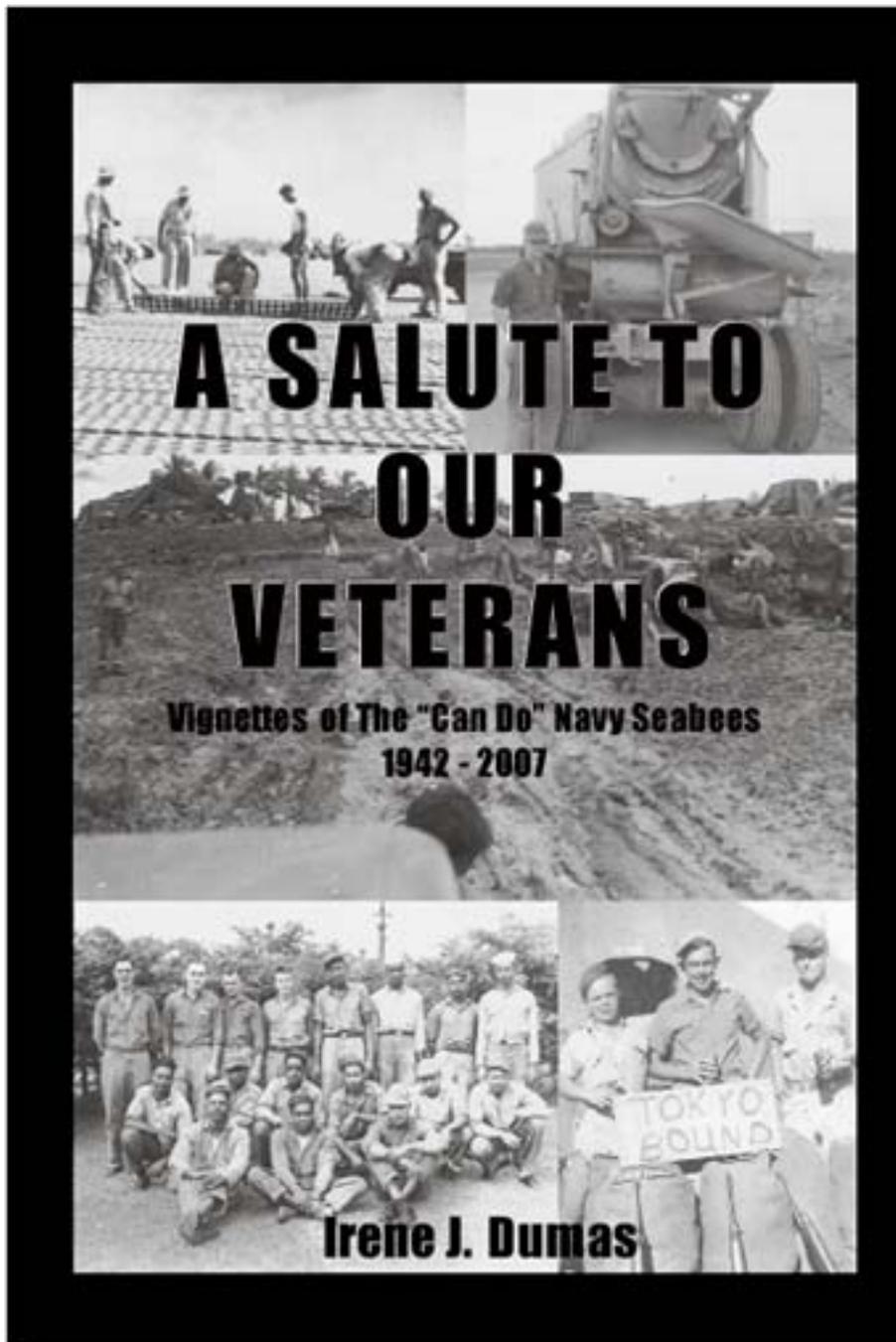
# A Salute To Our Veterans: Vignettes Of The "Can Do" Navy Seabees 1942 - 2007

by Irene J. Dumas

180 pages; quality trade paperback (soft cover); catalogue #07-1410; ISBN 1-4251-3610-9; **US\$16.95**, C\$19.49, EUR13.22, £8.76

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## About the Book

**A Salute to Our Veterans - Vignettes of the "CAN DO" Seabees** takes the reader into the immensely intriguing world of the U.S. Navy's Construction Battalions.

Deriving their name from the abbreviation of the term "Construction Battalion," the Seabees have a proud tradition of building roads, airfields, bases and other military facilities under combat conditions, often on real estate that was being hotly contested by U.S. and enemy troops. Often, the Seabees have causeways and serviceable roads in place within hours of an amphibious landing, necessitating construction in areas that had not been entirely cleared of enemy troops.

This highly readable trade paperback presents the first hand accounts of 36 men from different backgrounds and eras that are joined by the common thread of service with the Seabees.

Author Irene Dumas provides a glimpse of ordinary men who served in a most extraordinary organization in times of war and peace. In her personable style, she tells a story that all members of the family can enjoy. Her stories richly portray many major military and world events from the perspectives of those who actually lived through them.

Although the exploits of the Seabees in the South Pacific in World War Two are well known, some of their missions in Europe, Korea, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean are less well known. Told by the men who carried the carbines and ran the bulldozers, this book plunges deeply into human experience that is all too quickly passing into history.

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## About the Author

Born and raised in Trenton, NJ, she lived in Moorestown, NJ before moving to Florida when she retired from the Department of Environmental Protection, where she worked as an Administrative Assistant. Now retired, she is a resident of Waverly, Florida, moving to Florida in the summer of 2004. She had written an unpublished book called "Veterans and Still Rollin" stories from veterans that were mostly WWII and still roller skating in 2003, and a Published book [A Salute to Our Veterans Vignettes of those who made a difference 1939 - 2000](#)". That book has 45 Veterans stories from all branches of the military service.

The reason she writes is so put in place is a permeate history documented for future generations, and that the men who fought for our Freedom will never be forgotten.

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## Excerpts

Joseph John Garofalo  
121<sup>st</sup>. CB (Seabees)  
4<sup>th</sup>. Mar. Div. (3<sup>rd</sup>. Bat.)  
20<sup>th</sup>.Mar. Regiment  
10/1942 – 11/23/1945

United States Navy  
World War Two  
Roi-Namur  
Marshall Islands  
Saipan - Tenian

Joe was born 15 November 1920 in the Bronx, New York, the son of Mary and Frank Garofalo. Frank Garofalo was born in Italy, immigrated to this country in 1917, and joined the U.S. Army a few months thereafter. The elder Garofalo served with distinction in France with the 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry during World War One. His discharge papers stated he was an excellent soldier, and he became a lifetime member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Joe grew up in the Bronx and attended local schools with his sister. Prior to his service, Joe worked for the Electric Boat Company (ELCO) in Bayonne, New Jersey. Along with Higgins, ELCO was a primary supplier of Patrol Torpedo (PT) boats to the U.S. Navy. Although his work was essential to the war effort, Joe did not want a strategic deferral, and decided to enlist.



**Joe tells about his World War Two military experiences:**

In October 1942, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy Seabees and began basic training at Camp Bradford, Virginia in November. For a 22 year old city boy, it was culture shock. The conditions were primitive, cold and muddy. We lived in tents with no walkways, just mud. We piled snow against our tents for insulation, and although coal was scarce, we tried to keep warm around one small pot belly stove in the middle of the tent. Our uniforms did not fit, as every garment was very large. Later, I had mine privately altered.

We trained daily in close order drill, ran the obstacle course, honed our marksmanship on the rifle range, and practiced the basics of demolition and amphibious landings. The Marine drill instructors (D.I.) were on top of us all the time, as they wanted us to be hardened for combat. Some D.I.s were veterans of Guadalcanal and they relayed their experiences to us. They explained the way the Japanese fight at night, as well as the various booby traps that were planted on roads, fields, vehicles and even bodies. All this information ultimately helped us a great deal. At Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton, the training at times was about 10 hours a day. That didn't include guard duty. K.P. was not very pleasant, and depended on whoever was in charge.

Always I was thinking about the war. Am I tough enough to survive? Will I ever become a slacker? How would I react seeing the enemy face to face? All these things went through my mind.

After five weeks, we left Camp Bradford and went on to Camp Endicott in Davisville, R.I. There, we received additional training on the rifle range, and practiced close order drill, hikes, and calisthenics. During this time, I had one "liberty" and quickly found a good Italian restaurant in Providence. After enjoying the Italian food, my spirits were lifted, feeling more fit and seasoned than when I started. Afterwards, our battalion was then divided in half.

One half went to Port Hueneme, California, and my half was shipped to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for advanced training. We then became the 121<sup>st</sup>. Seabees as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. We were re-designated as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 20<sup>th</sup> Marine Engineers, and 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division on 10 May 1943. After a few months at Lejeune, we departed to Camp Pendleton, California. Once there we were given more advanced training in amphibious maneuvers, bridge building, marksmanship, demolition and the obstacle course.

In January 1944, we left San Diego, California, sailing on the USS Wayne for 10-11 days. Our Battalion landed on 1 February 1944

continuously. The bullets just missed my back by inches. I could see the bullets hitting a wall. I told the Marine below me to exhale. I thought that was the end. However, it was not, as the Japanese machine gunner was killed moments later.

Afterwards, I saw a marine staggering in the area. He was hit in the face and could not see. I ran to him and he put his arms around me. He was about six feet tall and I was only about 5 feet, five inches tall. I gave him some lime hard candy to suck on and took him to a corpsman. I never knew his name, or what happened to him. It all happened too fast. Occasionally I still think of him.

Once on patrol, I discovered a group of Japanese soldiers. I heard their voices and actually smelled their pungent odor. Upon my return from patrol, I reported this to Lt. Robert Fiske, and the 121<sup>st</sup> Seabees and units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division were alerted, and when 200 Japanese attacked an hour later, they were all killed. For my role in this action in filling the gap between two front line companies, I was recommended for the Bronze Star.

Saipan – D – Plus 2 the beaches on Saipan were still under attack from Japanese artillery. Many fallen Marines that had died since D-Day were still on the beaches due to the conditions that existed. The battalion chaplain was begging for volunteers to help remove the bodies from the beaches for sea burial. Many men were asked to perform this task, but they couldn't handle it. I and two other men volunteered. I climbed into a LVT (track vehicle), which had built-in shelves to hold bodies that would be transported to a ship for this purpose. The two men would pick up a body and hand it to me, which I would slide on a shelf. Prior to sliding the body in place, it had to lean on me in order to be put on a shelf. Blood from wounds were all over my jacket. I was saturated throughout. I was attacked by green and yellow flies. They were all over my jacket. It was a terrible sight for anyone to see. Seabees and Marines were pouring water all over my jacket and used knives to cut the jacket off me. To this day I still get recurrences of that day. This happened 62 years ago. It is still vivid in my mind.

Navy corpsmen served with Marine line units and were often exposed in the open. On Saipan, over 400 doctors and corpsmen were killed. The medical personnel stood their ground and faced charging Japanese in many counter attacks. They carried wounded men out of harm's way. Another detail I was assigned was to recover wounded Marines under fire. It was very difficult to carry a stretcher over soft sand, around bomb craters, fallen trees, and all kinds of debris while getting shot at.

On Saipan three days after 'D' day, I entered a cave searching for souvenirs. I found a box that contained a stack of approximately 25 maps. Each map was approximately 4'X4' in size, in full color, and represented a city on the mainland of Japan. These maps listed the types of buildings, and the name of the manufacturer housed in the essential structures. I turned the maps over to intelligence, and they were very useful in target identification for the heavy bombardment campaign against the main Japanese islands. I consider this find of great strategic importance.

It has been many years since that incident took place. In the January 1993 issue of V.F.W. magazine there appeared a story titled, 'Nisei Achieved Intelligence Coup,' that detailed the discovery of the Imperial Japanese Army's ordinance inventory. It listed amounts, types, and manufacturers names and locations of the home islands, providing new targets for our B-29s. I found this inventory and have many witnesses to corroborate my story. I feel the 121<sup>st</sup> NCB and the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division deserves the recognition for this find. I entered the cave alone and risked my life to find these maps and the Nisei got the credit! The Nisei, however, contributed a great service to the termination of the war in the Pacific.

I was onsite immediately after the banzai charge on Saipan. We must have seen two thousand bodies, mostly Japanese, but also quite a few Americans. The Japanese found time to booby-trap some of the dead officers. The body of one officer I was preparing to turn over was wired to a grenade, as revealed by the sun glimmering on the black thread which led to a hidden hand

The Seabees quietly watched, knowing in time, they too would wade ashore into the hellish battle. Ernie's landing party from the 62<sup>nd</sup> Battalion went ashore on the second day with the Marines, with the remainder of the outfit coming ashore over the next few days.

A general alarm was sounded 2 days after D-Day, as a flight of Japanese "Betty" medium bombers came in a few feet above the water to conduct kamikaze attacks. Fortunately, most of them were knocked down by the accurate antiaircraft fire from the ships.

During the first hour, Ernie and the Seabees dug foxholes, and almost concluded the Japanese were afraid of Seabees, when the first volley of mortar rounds exploded on the beach a few hundreds yards above them.

The Seabees of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Battalion hugged the ground for most of the next hour as they withstood a ferocious Japanese artillery attack that completely wiped out a large Marine fuel and ammunition dump. As the first light of dawn, Ernie and his comrades got out of their our shallow foxholes to get a good look at this island of Hell, and silently thanked God for watching over them. Ernie said it was an experience he wouldn't want his kids to go through, but they had to do it.

Ernie said the island was bombed so much that you wouldn't think humans could possibly live on it. The Japanese lived in the caves. They were still pulling live Japanese soldiers out of those caves when the war was over.

detached from the Marines to join the Fifth Naval Construction Brigade on Guam.

The Battalion, once it left the United States, became so closely identified with the Devil Dogs that it was called Naval Construction Battalion, First MAC, almost invariably. The only exception appears in official correspondence between the Battalion and the Bureau of Docks and Yards, where the designation became (Naval Construction Battalion, First MAC (Formerly 53<sup>rd</sup> NCB). Even before going overseas, the Battalion lived, worked and trained with Gyrenes.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had arrived at Camp Elliott, California on 2 March 1943, and nine days later boarded a ship bound for New Caledonia. At the time the sailors boarded the ship they had not been told its destination, and the big question was, Where to? This question was followed the related chilling questions, for how long and what are we getting into? The doubts were unknown quantities, but the regrets were well-known realities.

John's ship arrived at New Caledonia on 25 March 1943, and they



were soon to know labor that made their previous efforts seem like child's play. To the great majority of the new Seabees, the island presented new sights, smells, and sounds, just as the solemn traditional mysteries of the deep had been. The Seabees of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion built a base with the materials their sister ship carried from the United States. The men completed a base depot, engineer warehouse, Quonset huts, and numerous roads before they left the island on 7

October 1943.

The next destination for the Seabees was Bougainville, landing with the Marines at Empress Augusta Bay on 1 November. The men of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion earned their reputation as fighters, and

While at Netley, the 97<sup>th</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup>. Section was transferred into the 108<sup>th</sup> on 26 April 1944 to participate in the invasion of Normandy, France. We were doing the finishing touches to the Queen Victoria Hospital, when I was sent to the Isle of Wight to help set up lodging and stores for the rest of the battalion from Roseneath, Scotland.

Captain Adolphus Dayton Clark, USN was in charge of the secret mulberry floating harbor and the 108<sup>th</sup> NCB would operate this giant puzzle. Company "C" was given the pier heads. Company "A" was given the breakwater (phoenixes). Company "D" was given the bridge spans called 'whales.' Headquarters Company was placed where needed. Training areas were Selsey, England, Southampton, England and the Isle of Wight.

On 5 June a tug came as usual and towed us out. However, it kept going and we asked our skipper, Ensign Ben Siegelman what gives and he said we are going to do the job we have been training for. It was an eerie feeling. And then to make matters worse, our chief Boatswain, Charles Smith, had a heart attack and died during the night. We arrived prior to the bombardment, and at "H" hour the battleships and cruisers of the US Navy blasted the Omaha Beach where we were being held by the tug, 'Superman.' I remember the shrapnel hitting our steel deck from the German's 88's. Then we saw an LST get a direct hit and lots of land mines were exploding. That first day was frustrating as bodies floated by our pier head, and then we were subjected to the Luftwaffe air raids.

The 200 foot long phoenix started their sinking on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day. By the third day there were enough breakwaters set that we could pull into shallow water. The Seabees worked day and night and on ninth day after the initial landing, the first LST docked and unloaded its cargo, three days ahead of schedule. The 108<sup>th</sup> Seabees also sank the block ships that were used as breakwaters. Four days later, a storm brewed, we had to abandon our pier head the next day as we lost three of our four 60 ft. spuds, and one corner of the pier head was sunk. The storm was terrible.