

# ALL HANDS

THE BUREAU OF NAVAL PERSONNEL INFORMATION BULLETIN

DECEMBER 1945

## SAGA OF 'CAN DO' MEN

Construction Battalions, Born to Build,  
DID—and in a Most Fabulous Fashion



QUONSET HUTS by the thousands built from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.

**"CAN DO!"** muttered the Marine derisively. "You'd think you Seabees are the only ones who 'can do.'"

The Seabee across the table from him in the Seabee-built recreation center continued to gulp his beer.

The Marine tried again.

"Hell, I'll bet I can do anything you can do, Seabee."

The Seabee, Joseph Carr, SF3c, of Lancaster, Pa., shrugged passively, emptied the bottle and leaned back to size up his challenger.

Calmly Carr, who had kicked around a bit with carnival performers in Russia before the war, picked up the beer bottle, bit off a chunk and munched away. The challenger watched goggle-eyed. Recovering somewhat, the Marine took a trial bite at his own bottle, then admitted:

"No can do."

It's a typical Seabee story, just one of many told—often with a little exaggeration—about the men of World War II's biggest new fighting outfit, which is four years old this month. And like most of the stories it reflects the admiration—and awe—with which Seabees are viewed by the nation, other branches of service—and other Seabees.

From the start the naval Construction Battalions were unusual outfits, mostly because of the men in them and because theirs was a new kind of warfare.

When the construction outfit was organized on 28 Dec 1941, the Navy turned for volunteers to men who had fought and won many battles against natural obstacles—men who harnessed rivers with dams, pushed hills aside for roads, blasted and gouged out tunnels.



## Born to Build

Set up under the direction of the Bureau of Yards and Docks and its Civil Engineer Corps officers, the Seabee organization at first was strictly a volunteer group. Into the ranks of the new fighting unit poured the Nation's artisans—carpenters, machinists, plumbers, electricians, welders, bricklayers and millwrights—men who didn't have to get into uniform to fight the enemy. They could have remained in draft-proof civilian jobs, doing essential war work and getting good, even fabulous wages.

## Many Were Older

Too, many were for the most part further exempt from Selective Service because of age. Until termination of volunteer enlistments late in the summer of 1943 when inductees first were assigned to the construction battalions, the average age of the Seabees was a little over 32 years. Some Seabees were in their 50s.

Thrown into war to meet an urgent and immediate need for bases, the early Seabees had little time for formal military training. They were given the barest minimum of boot training; the rest of the art of warfare had to be picked up in action overseas.

Once overseas they faced additional difficulties because the requirements of their task had not been fully foreseen. Their units were small, thrown together from whatever skills were available. Every Seabee found himself doubling in various trades. It was thus the construction men developed their most important tools—improvisation, ingenuity and guts. Often parts, materials and equipment had to be manufactured on the spot in shops hastily thrown together from salvaged enemy materials and tools.

But as the Seabee organization grew (from an original force of 3,300 to a peak of 247,155, of which 83 per cent were overseas) and its activities increased, the battalions picked up plenty of know-how, enabling them to smooth out and speed up operations.

## Invasion Handy Men

By the time the big offensives were under way, Seabees had organized their operations to the point where they were able to land fully equipped to handle any situation.. No longer solely construction outfits, the Seabees represented more than 60 trades and their organization included units set up to specialize in maintenance, stevedoring, fog generation, auto repair, tire repair and retreading, operation of supply depots, fueling, generation of electricity, operation of pontoon causeways, and even soil testing.

It is out of the early triumphs, when their watchwords were as often "Have To" as "Can Do," that the colorful stories and legends of the Seabees grew—triumphs like those of the Sixth Seabee Battalion at Guadalcanal where the Seabees got their first test under fire.

The Sixth Battalion arrived 24 days after the initial landings on Guadalcanal together with 1 carryall, 2 bulldozers, 6 dump trucks and a motor patrol grader. To this they added 25 Jap trucks, 1 Jap tractor and a Jap sheep-foot roller, plus 10,000 barrels



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of Jap cement, 18,000 ft. of Jap soil pipe, plenty of Jap creosoted poles and a supply of Jap lumber. With this equipment and material, they completed famed Henderson Field, an emergency airstrip and other all-important facilities.

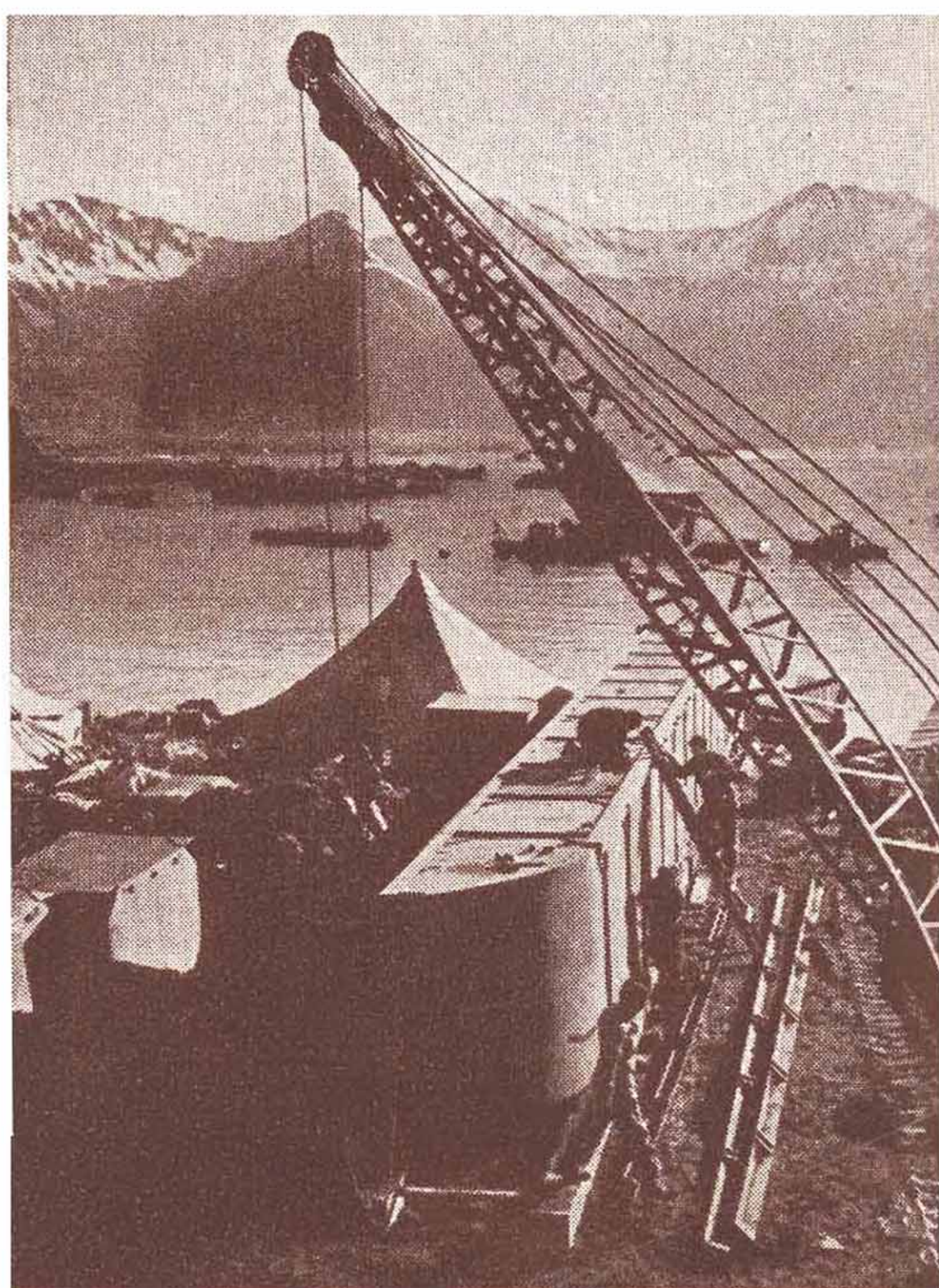
From Guadalcanal, Seabees moved up "the plot" finally landing on Bougainville. Here the construction men had to fight to build, then defend what they had built. On one major airstrip, which was the target of repeated Jap shell fire and bomber attacks, Seabees—using a defense technique inaugurated at Guadalcanal—planted themselves in foxholes along the runway. In the wake of each attack and almost before the debris had settled, the construction men dashed from the foxholes, repaired the damage and thus kept the field in continuous operation.

At bloody Tarawa Seabees put the first airfield in operation within four days after going ashore. Here, too, they filled a rush order for a causeway over which unloading operations could be carried out at all tide stages, by constructing a three-lane, 2,400-foot pier, largely out of a scrap heap of Jap materials.

### Hurry-Up Building

As the main offensives in the Pacific continued to grow, burst forth and advance, the Seabees were called upon to build—in a hurry—bases, airstrips, warehouses, barracks, harbors, hospitals and other installations. Maybe the gag that Seabees built roads so fast that the Japs used them in their retreat is just a little far-fetched, but the construction men left a trail of record jobs completed in the Gilberts, the Marshalls, the Russells, the Marianas, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

At Tinian Seabees effected one of their biggest earth-moving jobs in order to complete four huge bomber strips and facilities for 200 B-29s. To build the 8,500-foot long runways, the construction units—working night and day—moved 10,000,000 cubic yards of coral, and, in addition, constructed all the other necessary installations.



FOG, COLD, AND MUD were principal obstacles to Attu construction.



## **Born to Build**

In the advance in the Pacific Seabees set many speed records, not the least of which was that set in the building of an airstrip in the Palau group. Here they readied a fighter strip within 72 hours after the first equipment was brought ashore.

The short history of the Seabees is rich with stories of individual heroism but instances of concerted combat action by entire naval Construction Battalions are no less colorful. At Guam, within an hour after the initial assault, one Seabee outfit went ashore to fight alongside the Marines. By day the construction men fought and carried ammunition and supplies in the face of withering Jap fire. By night they went into Marine guard posts and on security patrols. At Peleliu, where they landed on D-Day to serve as ammunition carriers and litter bearers, Seabees soon were battling alongside Marine forces in an effort to turn back violent Jap counterattacks which threatened to force the Americans back into the sea. Seabees also landed with the first waves of assault troops at Iwo Jima.

The liberation of the Philippines presented Seabees with many major tasks. The statistical reports of the Philippine jobs are impressive but none more so than that of the construction of a landing strip at a waterlogged site ruled out as impossible by a reconnaissance unit. Yet 10 days after construction began the first airplane—a small observation craft—landed on the field and three weeks after the Seabees started the job the field was open for all business. Another example is the Philippine base at Samar, which was finished in less than two months despite repeated Jap attacks and included every needed facility.

## **Against the Germans**

The Seabees' role in the assault on Nazi Germany stretches from England and North Africa to Germany itself and took in such tough assignments as Normandy, Palermo, Salerno, Anzio and the Rhine River. It also includes extensive construction jobs at Ascension Island, Bermuda and Iceland.

By far the biggest Seabee operation in the European theater was the construction and much of the maintenance of all the naval bases and depots for the greatest amphibious assault in history—the landing in Normandy. The Seabees started the task immediately upon arriving in England in the fall of 1942. Within the next 18 months they put together a vast maze of bases, docks, warehouses, shops and other needed units.

It was in the landings and subsequent action in Europe that the Seabees developed the technique which speeded amphibious warfare. As the invasion forces moved in, the Seabees rode strings of pontoons into shore, anchored them to serve as bridges between the supply ships and the beaches, and then proceeded to unload equipment, supplies and munitions. During the critical 10-day period immediately following D-Day in France one Seabee battalion (Special) alone unloaded 16,000 vehicles, 25,000 tons of ammunition and supplies in addition to 32,000 troops. Later, Seabees



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helped to restore damaged French ports.

Once an advanced base was complete enough for immediate military operations the Seabees didn't halt work. They continued building, expanding and improving the installations. For instance, a year after they moved onto Saipan, it was estimated that Seabees working in conjunction with Army Engineers had accomplished 20 times as much as the Japanese had in the two decades they held the island. In that year American construction forces built a vast network of airfields, 230 miles of hard-surfaced roads, water-producing facilities capable of providing 1,000,000 gallons daily, and laid enough cable to reach from New York to San Francisco 335 times. But that's not all. Saipan construction included the building of 65 chapels, 78 basketball courts, 81 theaters, 5 recreational centers and a well-lighted baseball field.

## Seabee Ingenuity

As the war continued the Seabees picked up a reputation for being the Navy's handy-man outfit, able to supply special equipment to fit the needs of the locale. Thus Seabee ingenuity and improvisation brought forth many novel gadgets, weapons and tools; such as:

- The "Doodlebug"—an LVT with a jointed landing ramp, enabling Marines to scale quickly the coral cliffs at Tinian and other islands.

- A mine detonator, made of scrap material and M-4 Sherman tank.

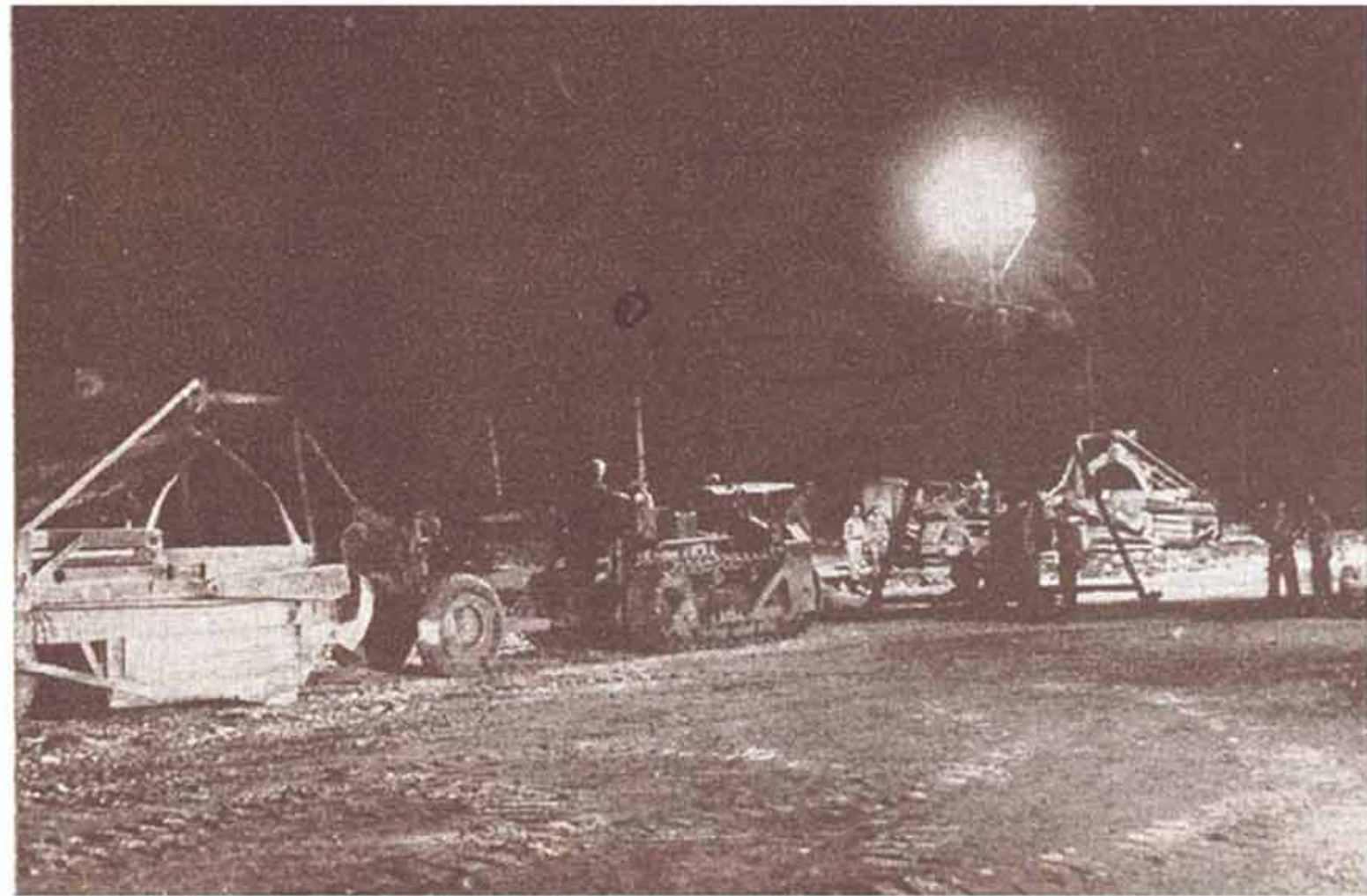
- A complete fracture table for a naval hospital, built of pipe and bolts.

But all their work was not so serious. In North Africa, Seabees turned out 2,300 Christmas toys for the Yule parties of Navy units. And at one outpost, the construction men assembled sewer pipe, elbows, tees, unions, nipples and couplings into a Christmas tree replete with ornaments made of shower heads, faucets and wax paper.

## Peacetime Projects

And now that the war is over, the Seabees aren't merely marking time. Improvement and maintenance of all the bases which the Navy seeks to retain permanently keeps many Seabees occupied. And already several important projects affecting the national defense are under way—with Seabees doing a big share of the work.

One of these projects has taken a group of carefully selected Seabees to the far reaches of Alaska where they



**NIGHT WORK** was routine during critical campaigns. These Seabees built by night and fought Japs by day in battle for Los Negros Island.



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are engaged in test-drilling on oil reserves which authoritative sources believe may be of immense value to the United States.

With such jobs still to be done—and being done—and with a record of getting almost incredible jobs done during the war, the Seabees apparently have assured their future. And so this month, the fourth anniversary of the Seabees, the Naval Construction Battalions apparently are entering a new phase of "military usefulness" to the Navy, which Vice Admiral Ben Moreell, Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, says may be three-fold:

"First, the Seabees will train with the Marines and the general service of the Navy in the tactics of amphibious warfare. . . . The second part (of their role in the peacetime Navy) will be to work with their Civil Engineer Corps officers in the development of new types of equipment and materials which may be needed for invasion operations in the event of another war. . . . The third part will be to maintain and operate advanced bases where it would be impracticable to use civilians."

PLEASE POST

# CONSTRUCTION WORKERS BUILD FOR VICTORY

JOIN THE  
NAVY

# SEABEES



Rapid  
Advancement

Excellent Food . . .  
Quarters . . . Clothing

Two-fisted Action for  
Two-fisted Americans

Higher Ratings  
. . . Higher Pay

Expert Medical  
and Dental Care

Generous Allowances  
for Dependents

## THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE IF YOU WANT TO CHOOSE

SKILLED WORKERS—SERVE WHERE YOU ARE  
NEEDED MOST—IN YOUR OWN TRADE

*Don't Wait—Investigate NOW—There's No Obligation*

SEE YOUR NEAREST NAVY RECRUITING STATION FOR FULL DETAILS

Similar opportunities are offered in the Army Engineer Corps. See your Army Recruiting Station.