

## **PREFACE**

We were regulars at the beach. It was not uncommon for my Dad and a buddy to swim a couple of miles, while the rest of us played. On Armed Forces Day, 1958, a Rochester beach was the target of a simulated Normandy assault, complete with the famous names. We could not see everything well, but the deafening blasts left an indelible impression.

Walking the pier, years later, we happened upon a minesweeper that had come down the St. Lawrence, stopping overnight on the way to the Great Lakes. Dad eyed the ship, and disappeared for a moment. Before we knew it, we were on board for a magical ride on the lake, appearing as an infinite expanse that day.

There is one memory that remains my private “Kodak moment.” As a child, I regularly peeked into Dad’s chest of drawers, repository of his papers and photos from the war. Transfixed for hours, I carefully unfolded the papers and examined every print. Brilliant yellow canisters held brittle but otherwise intact rolls of 35-mm film. In a smaller box was a stack of negatives and photos that Dad had printed on his developing box, another Kodak gem, purchased in 1944. Most likely, he knew about my viewing sessions, though he never mentioned it.

For most of his life, my Dad never spoke of the war. In November 1993, I joined him in Florida on the occasion of his first return to Ft. Pierce since 1945. That Veterans Day weekend at the UDT-SEAL Museum, so many men connected with long lost buddies. I witnessed a seeming transformation in my Dad and the others, grateful to see one another alive and well, for the most part. There were some tears, and plenty of stories, recalling the loss of friends and the fun times, adventures on liberty, and the challenges of training for combat demolition at the amphibious base, where more than a few had not survived the trial of “Hell Week.”

No mention of the dark side of war. At least, I heard nothing, then. It was years before hints of the horror surfaced. And, I learned that I was not the only adult child having no idea of what our fathers and their friends had experienced. Indeed, rare was the man who shared even a portion of that with his family. In that regard, they had left the war behind to build their lives. It seemed that those who had witnessed the worst said the least, with the pain a constant companion.

It was at that annual UDT-SEAL Muster in 1993 that a few veterans of Naval Combat Demolition Units (NCDU) asked for my help in locating their unit mates. How difficult could that be, I thought. I began the search. Over time, the project took on a life of its own, growing far beyond what I had expected. A stream of requests funneled through my Dad and his friends.

Some requests came from veterans who wanted to confirm membership in Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT), looking toward seeing bronze plaques installed at what is now called the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum. Smitten with an intense curiosity about

who these men were and what they did, and a desire to honor them, I began to wonder if I could possibly account for all of the veterans of NCDU and UDT in World War II. The database was born. Still in process, the list of men presented in this book is complete as possible to date, including administration and training staff of the programs, adjunct groups including the Demolition Research Unit, and the Joint Army Navy Experimental Testing Board, as well as NCDU and UDT membership.

Camp Peary, Virginia, where Seabees “languished” awaiting assignment elsewhere, has been confused with its homonym, Camp Perry, Maryland. Four bases were built adjacent to the Naval Operating Base, Norfolk: the Amphibious Training Base, Little Creek; Camp Bradford, where Seabees were trained until closure in 1943; Camp Shelton, the Armed Guard training facility; and the U.S. Naval Frontier Base, forwarding center for Amphibious Force personnel and equipment bound for Europe. Today, ATB, Little Creek, includes property where these facilities stood. Similarly, the Naval Training Center, Bainbridge, Maryland, adjacent to the Susquehanna River, was comprised of five facilities: Camp Barney, Camp James, Camp Perry, Camp Rogers, and Camp Semmes.

Much to my disappointment, I have yet to find records that substantiate the statement of Lt. William Flynn Sr. that NCDU 9 and NCDU 10 participated in landings at Salerno and Anzio. Nor all of the circumstances surrounding the March 1945 deaths of Edmund Eckert and Louis Netz been discovered. Such tantalizing tidbits have taken the search for data far and wide. Fieldwork by researchers has enabled me to account for men who disappeared while on a mission in the Palau Islands, a mystery that stood unsolved for decades.

Many of the men encouraged me to complement the list of names with an account of their operations. The search broadened with a commitment to a scholarly pursuit. The scope of this book is limited. It would require multiple volumes to cover every operation on record. This chronological narrative certainly is not representative of how everything unfolded. In reality nothing develops in a linear format. Yet a sequential presentation however artificial, often assists in understanding the process. This is the case in the chapter, Coral Sand, and Sea Walls that crisscrosses the operational theatres.

Rather than duplicate the work of other authors, not every operation in which demolition men were engaged is included. Excellent coverage of action in the Pacific including the Mariana Islands and Iwo Jima appears in many publications, including *The Water Is Never Cold*. Lesser-known activities in the Okinawa Gunto, China and Korea are left to further discussion. For purposes of maintaining the focus on the demolition men themselves, and because space in print media is always at a premium, the last chapter is dedicated to the administrative staff, instructors, and the database of demolition personnel. Where previous publications have included a modest portfolio by way of illustrating the text, I wanted to broaden access to the archival photos that relatively few have seen, along with the images contributed by veterans and their family members.

Memory has played a major role in the research. Like others before me, I have tapped into oral data. Sharing stories at reunion dinners or in the comfort of their homes, writing

letters, and communicating by telephone, generous and self-effacing veterans admitted to having selective memories ranging from clear to cloudy to foggy or painfully nonexistent. Decades after the fact, they shared recollections with the indomitable spirit that saw them through a bittersweet time. Absent the shipboard freshwater kegs of antiquity along with the Lister Bags of the war, “scuttlebutt” pervaded conversation providing inspiration for the title of this book.

There was the emergent possibility that the deeper purpose of my research was to create a network for the veterans, highlighting a chapter of their lives in a way that allowed them to share it, to honor it, and finally to complete it. Sadly for some, recollecting did not bring closure. Instead, memories, even nightmares were revived. For that, I apologize.

Looking past the downside, I rejoice at having learned fascinating, unexpected things, such as the fact that many were multilingual. French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Czechoslovakian, Syrian, and several Native American tongues fill out the list. Regrettably, there is little data on the Native Americans, men like Glenn C. Adair, Cherokee Nation, and Sam Padopony, Comanche Nation, both from Oklahoma, and Nelson P. Shenandoah, Onondaga Nation, New York.

Little is known about the African Americans who served, the most famous being Fred “Tiz” Morrison, who had a long and distinguished career in UDT. Records show that African Americans served in UDTs 15 through 30. Steward’s Mates Bernard Calvin, James Gilmore, Wesley Fuller and Emmet Lomax and others completed rigorous training as members of Headquarters Platoons.

Civilians, too, figure in the history of the bases at Ft. Pierce and Maui, passing through designated gates to work in the machine shops and at other jobs. James E. King made regular stops at the Florida base as an employee of the Railway Express Company. It is altogether fitting that the civilian experience rates exploration.

Sue Ann Dunford  
Rochester, New York

## **FOREWORD**

Preceding amphibious landings during World War II, the men of the Navy's Combat Demolition Units were the Navy's secret warriors dispatched to clear the beaches of natural and man-made obstacles in advance of the first assault waves. They called themselves "Demos" for demolitionaires and their mantra was "bite the bullet and do the work."

This book is an accolade to these men. It is a well-documented historical story about the origins of naval combat demolition. Most importantly, it is a book that provides lasting honor to very brave and largely unheralded men. It's a story reflective of exceptional men, all volunteers, who made up some of the most daring and furtive naval commando organizations established during WW II. The book is both fascinating and unique because the authors made it their mission to create it as tribute to well over four thousand individuals whose collective and individual exploits might otherwise have been lost to the historical record.

The men of the Naval Combat Demolition and the Pacific Underwater Demolition Teams are the true forefathers of today's U.S. Navy SEALs, and this is their story. During WWII there was need for daring sailors to volunteer for "hazardous, prolonged, distant duty," which meant operating on or near the enemy's shoreline to wage a war dangerously close to the enemy. This legacy continues with today's SEALs.

In Europe, at the beaches of Africa, Italy and France, NCDU personnel went ashore under intense gunfire before all others. They roamed the beach and surf zone relatively unarmed except for their demolition packs to clear a safe path for others. At Normandy's Omaha beach, they suffered a significant casualty rate in what remains the bloodiest single day in what we now know today as Naval Special Warfare.

Throughout the Pacific, UDT men were dropped from inflatable rubber boats and preformed dangerous reconnaissance and demolition tasks in shallow water with little more than a pair of swimming trunks, a facemask, K-Bar knife, and a set of rubber fins. With their skin camouflaged with grease for operations at or near the shore, these "men with painted faces" operated in relative obscurity throughout the war. Their story has been chronicled before, but not quite like it is in this wonderful accounting.

This book started out as a small project and labor of love by Sue Ann Dunford to gather information for her aging father—one of the men of our greatest generation. The “small” project eventually consumed her; and, fortunately for all of us, and with the collaboration of her colleague, Jim O’Dell, blossomed in to the definitive accounting that you see before you.

Unknown to the public (and usually the enemy), the stealthy exploits of the Navy’s demolition men became known immediately upon war’s end, but many, if not most, of the men never talked much about what they did. Their brave actions happened so long ago that they are now largely unknown by the current generation and forgotten by many others. The authors have created a lasting record of these men and their contribution to their nation. And, equally important, she has accomplished a near impossible feat of compiling the largest and most definitive listing of men that served in the naval combat demolition community during WWII. It is a crowning achievement, and we must all be sincerely grateful that this book was written.

*Commander (SEAL) Thomas L. Hawkins, USN (Ret.)  
Director, History and Heritage  
Naval Special Warfare Foundation*