



Photo by Captain Scott Uptlike

Joint Engineer Culture Clash

Lessons Learned From a Marine Expeditionary Force

By Major R. Daren Payne and Lieutenant Colonel Carol L. Anderson

The 46th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (under the administrative control of the 130th Engineer Brigade) recently served in one of the most unique command structures and diverse task organizations an engineer unit has encountered—joint and multicomponent—representing almost every facet of our nation’s military. During this time, the Soldiers and leaders of the 46th learned many hard, valuable lessons and had many “outside the box” construction and combat engineering experiences. Such diverse units and organizational structures, with joint and multicomponent characteristics, are likely to be the rule rather than the exception in the future. This article shares some of the lessons learned and experiences from the unit’s year in-theater.

In October 2005, the 46th deployed to Multinational Force–West (MNF–W) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The MNF–W area of operations was under the command of a Marine expeditionary force (MEF), rather than an Army division or corps headquarters, so all Army units fell under a Marine Corps general officer. Since the 46th is combat heavy, the MEF further assigned the unit to the 30th Naval Construction Regiment (NCR)—an Active Navy headquarters commanded and staffed by United States Navy Reserve and a few Active Navy officers. The regiment changed several times during its deployment and sometimes included naval mobile construction battalions (NMCBs) (commonly known as *Seabees*), Marine Corps engineer support battalions, and Army combat engineer battalions.

Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines engaged in the full spectrum of construction, combat engineering, and assured mobility missions—which included wood frame construction, route

repair, bridge repair, route clearance, security escort patrols, direct support to maneuver units in kinetic operations, and most important of all, support to Iraqi military and security forces. There was clearly a lot of learning, synergy, and cultural sensitivity that took place to keep the engineer missions moving forward on a daily basis. The 46th learned a great deal during its deployment to share with fellow engineer units.

Language Barrier

When venturing to a new place, the first thing Soldiers need to learn is how to speak the local dialect—something a person traveling to a different area in the United States might also need to do. Similarly, fellow military professionals are often separated by a common language. Marines are part of the naval service and the naval traditions. Therefore, even in the middle of the desert, nautical references abound. This became apparent during the construction of an Iraqi security forces (ISF) base camp. The mission to build infrastructure for ISF troops was a joint operation with Alpha Company, 46th Engineer Battalion, attached to NMCB 22, a Reserve Component unit from the 30th NCR. Adapting to nautical dialect was a challenge. Shower and latrine trailers are “ablution units,” a kitchen is a “galley,” a “scullery” is a dish-washing facility, and living areas are “berthing spaces.” Left and right are “port and starboard” and a wall is a “bulkhead.” “Hooah” is “oorah” and “roger” becomes “aye-aye.” Of course, this was reversed when Bravo Company—charged with erecting Southwest Asia (SWA) huts with climate control, central power grid, and force protection—was reinforced with a platoon from NMCB 40, an Active Navy

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unit from the 9th NCR. This time Sailors learned a “head” was a “latrine” and “cover” was “head gear.” As a result, our Soldiers and Sailors not only learned new acronyms and nomenclatures but also how to immerse themselves in a different culture and succeed—a lesson that will help in many other situations where adapting to new things and new ideas is paramount to success.

Organizational Identity Crisis

As Army engineers, our organization identity is one of “fight-and-build” units, while all Marines take pride in the credo “every man a rifleman.” The Navy sees things a bit differently. The NMCBs are organized as construction and construction management organizations. Both Active and Reserve Army Soldiers and Active and Reserve Marines within the NCR spend the majority of their training time honing combat skills (physical training, live-fire exercises, demolitions, and mine training), but less time on practicing core competencies (vertical and horizontal construction). Navy engineers, on the other hand, obtain “graduate level” skills (military occupational specialty for the Army). Among both the Active Navy and the Reserve Component of the naval engineer community, all personnel E-6 and above must have a professional license or certification. There are many licensed electricians, plumbers, master carpenters, and steel workers or welders. Every officer must earn a professional engineer certification and maintain a current license.

This gap in knowledge, skills, and craftsmanship between Army and Navy engineers is too big to ignore. So don’t ignore it; use it to your advantage! The major reason for this gap is that Navy units are *construction organizations*, as opposed to Army or Marine engineer units that are *combat units*. The NCRs and NMCBs are more organizationally akin to the United States Army Corps of Engineers® (USACE) than they are to the Army’s deployable engineer battalions and brigades or groups. There are two positives to this. First, it offers a unique opportunity for both combat and combat heavy engineers to learn while working with a Seabee unit. Many of our young carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and combat engineers will find that Seabees are more than willing to share their knowledge. Army officers can also learn a great deal from their Navy counterparts. Nowhere outside of USACE can a young officer learn more about planning, programming, and construction management than working with NMCB or NCR staff. Secondly, Seabees operating in a combat zone have a unique opportunity to learn about weapons employment, small-unit tactics, immediate action and reaction drills, vehicle identification, and many other tasks that will help them stay alive on the battlefield. Thus, there are many opportunities to share knowledge and help bridge the gap in organizational identity between the services.

Cultural and Institutional Differences

There are long-standing cultural and institutional differences between the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps team that Soldiers of all ranks need to consider in a



Seabees and Soldiers combine skills to erect formwork during a project.

Photo by Captain Scott Updike



A Seabee and a Soldier work side by side hanging trim on a SWA hut.

joint environment. The Navy rank structure is unique and the rights and privileges of each rank are very different. Marine rank structure is similar in insignia and nomenclature, but different roles and responsibilities are expected of each rank. Several examples are as follows:

- The Navy is more conscious about separating officers, chiefs (E-7 and above), and enlisted (E-6 and below). Each group has separate heads, berthing areas, recreation areas, and galleys, if possible. The Marines operate in a similar manner.
- The chief petty officer or gunnery sergeant (E-7 or above) is equivalent to a command sergeant major or first sergeant in the Army. If you need to make things happen, make one of these guys your first stop.
- A Marine corporal or sergeant (E-5) is expected to be a squad leader capable of leading patrols outside the wire. In the Army, such responsibility normally rests at the sergeant first class or lieutenant level. In the Navy, it is nothing to see a chief petty officer in charge of 50 personnel and 10 pieces of equipment on a \$10 million high-visibility project. A chief is expected to be professionally licensed in at least one trade, have a degree, and know project management at a higher level than an Army captain or major.
- Saluting and uniformity is not emphasized. Sailors and Marines don't salute, and they have different uniform policies when not on duty. They work in hard hats and remove blouses or unblouse boots, while Soldiers work in helmets and full uniform. Also, Sailors and Marines don't have a standard physical training uniform.

These and many other differences exist between the services. Learning to work with these differences is a challenge that noncommissioned officers in particular must practice daily so Army standards and traditions are upheld, yet offenses to our hosts are avoided.

Additionally, there are many institutional differences that units should prepare for:

- The Navy is more meticulous on accounting and its Class IV supply and construction management; cost and schedule accountability procedures are more detailed. The Navy tracks projects by man-hours and uses the number of man-hours available or expended to determine how much work can be done. Physical training, meals, training, and maintenance do not count as man-hours expended toward a project according to the Navy. This created some problems in the beginning, because in the Army, it's part of our routine. In contrast, many Marine Corps systems are in some ways less time consuming than Army systems.
- Marine and Navy deployments are shorter than Army deployments. This led to some friction, especially when a new MEF or NCR arrived on its first deployment. Often this forced units task-organized to Navy organizations to reinvent standing operating procedures and tactics, techniques, and procedures every few months. Patience and cooperative attitudes by leaders go a long way toward establishing relationships that help accomplish the mission.
- Marines, like the Army, fight in small-unit teams that train, live, play, eat, and fight together as one functioning unit. Seabees are pooled into companies and pulled out and sent to detachments to complete a project under a chief or junior officer. When the project is over, the detachment separates.

Learning from Reserve Components

Many of the lessons learned from working with Reserve Component Seabees and a United States Army Reserve combat support equipment (CSE) company simply reinforced prior experiences with Reserve units. Among the new lessons learned, however, was that Reserve Soldiers and Seabees possess skills and abilities that

far exceed their job descriptions due to civilian life experiences. An example is the vertical construction completed by a CSE company; they built SWA huts and completed other projects normally assigned to a general construction platoon. The Reserve Seabees also displayed a similar diversity of skills. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was the different administrative systems.

Working in an environment with so many Reserve Soldiers and Sailors provided a great opportunity to appreciate the skills brought to the fight and to learn the logistics and administrative Reserve systems—knowledge that will benefit engineers as they deploy more often as multicomponent teams.

Conclusion

The 46th Engineer Battalion learned many lessons, improved its understanding of joint operations, honed many skills, and executed many missions. Alpha and Bravo Companies worked as task force engineers, providing close combat engineer support to kinetic operations conducted by maneuver task forces. Simultaneously, the CSE company built a bottled water plant for the Marine Logistics Group, while Sailors and Soldiers worked side by side establishing ISF strongpoints, outposts, and base camp facilities. No matter what the counterinsurgency fight demands, the 46th is now better prepared to support any campaign plan. Its experiences provide a road map for fellow units by demonstrating the language barriers, cultural and institutional differences, and other challenges that can be expected working in a joint, multi-component environment during combat operations. They forged a legacy of cooperation across cultural and operational lines of services that provide a better understanding of capabilities across the entire joint engineer team.



Major Payne is the S-3 for the 46th Engineer Battalion, 130th Engineer Brigade. Previous assignments include platoon leader for the 44th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Mechanized); platoon leader and executive officer for Bravo Company, 46th Engineer Battalion; assistant S-3 and commander for the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 11th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Mechanized); company commander and staff officer for the 1-395th Engineer Training Support Battalion; and Deputy Area Engineer, Tikrit Area Office, USACE Gulf Region Division–North District at Forward Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. He holds a bachelor's from Virginia Military Institute.

Lieutenant Colonel Anderson is the commander of the 46th Engineer Battalion, 130th Engineer Brigade. Previous assignments include platoon leader and executive officer, 52d Engineer Battalion (Combat); staff officer and bridge company commander, 36th Engineer Group (Combat); battalion S-3 and executive officer, 84th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy); and staff officer, Office of the Chief of Engineers, Headquarters, USACE. She holds a bachelor's from the University of Southern Colorado and a master's from the University of Georgia.