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 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Sailors find gratifying mission and bemusing ways with Army Engineers

By John Connor
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Senior Chief Petty Officer Christopher Benavides throws down the gauntlet at Tallil, Iraq, a predominately Army post. (Courtesy photo by Navy Cmdr. Michael Lang)

TALLIL, Iraq – Sometimes learning the folkways of the local people isn't the only cultural challenge facing members of the U.S. Armed Forces serving in Iraq.

"Serving with an Army unit is a very interesting change for a Navy man," said Lt. Cmdr. Chad Lorenzana, one of the Navy Seabees serving in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "For one thing, I could never seem to get any help when looking for the 'galley' or the 'head.'"

"I also found it very interesting that the Army has a special word that essentially means EVERYTHING, with their 'Hooah!'" Lorenzana continued. "Must have something to do with limited vocabulary..."

Navy Cmdr. Mike Lang, another Seabee serving with the Corps, also commented on the language difference. "I

learned that at my first briefing when I referred to the CO as "skipper, which gave everyone quite a laugh." He said his commander had to correct him several times when he'd report on meetings "with the Army," with his commander telling him "you are in the Army now."

Elaborating on the linguistic challenges facing a Navy man serving with the Army, Lang said: "The deck is called the floor, the bulkheads are called walls, the overhead is called a ceiling, the ladders are called stairs, the restrooms are not heads—they are latrines, they do not have seabags but rather refer to them as duffel bags—and don't get me started on helos—sorry—helicopters."

Navy Cmdr. Gerald Rinehart, a Provincial Reconstruction Team Engineer who covers a number of Iraqi provinces

from the Regional Embassy Office (REO) at Hillah, said he had a choice between serving with his Marine Brethren or his Army Brethren. Having served a tour before with the Marines on Okinawa as a Navy corpsman, he decided to try the Army. "I must say the living quarters and chow (notice I said chow, Navy always eat in the chow hall, not the DFAC) are greatly improved," he said.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Christopher Benavides, an Engineer aboard ships, currently is serving with the Corps of Engineers as the operations Non-Commissioned Officer at a Corps' district headquarters at Tallil. He had a cultural head-start. "I have served with the Army once before, when I was a Soldier in the Army Reserve," he said. "I was given an IQ test while serving with the Army and was informed I was too smart to continue serving. I joined the Navy."

Perhaps to underscore his point, Benavides asked, "Why would anyone wear reflective belts during daylight hours?" And he commented that socks above the ankles "went out in the 70's." Cmdr. Lang said the senior chief "disowned me" when he showed up wearing an Army uniform, albeit one with a Navy patch.

Army slang, according to the senior chief, includes such words and phrases as high speed and tracking, while Navy terminology features the likes of full speed ahead, and Aye, Aye.

The good-natured jibes are accompanied by serious comments as well.

Lang said the Army has accepted him as one of its own and has included him as "one of the crew." Serving as the Officer in Charge of the Adder Area Office of the Corps' Gulf Region South district "has been an outstanding assignment and one that I will cherish for the rest of my life," he said. "It has made me appreciate my Army brethren even more."

On the reserve side, Reservist Lang said, the Seabee community has been sending about 10 people a year to Iraq to work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in addition to Seabees working with the Marine Corps in Iraq.

"In all seriousness," said Lorenzana, "it has been an honor to go through 'Army Training, Sir!' and be able to set the military branches aside and work together as a unified team." Saying the Corps of Engineers has a very important mission in Iraq, he said that "I feel that they are doing a great job making things happen in

an expedient manner.

"They have taken me into their organization with a warm reception and have treated me and my Navy uniform with utmost respect," continued Lorenzana, who serves as a Resident Engineer in the Basrah Area Office of GRS. He said there is an agreement between the Army and Navy on the billets the Navy Civil Engineer Corps will fill to augment Army staffing, and added that "much of the reconstruction effort that the Army Corps of Engineers is taking on is in line with the training and experience of a Navy Civil Engineer Corps officer, with construction, engineering and acquisition, and a combat environment."

Mitch Peterson is a retired Navy Chief Petty Officer serving in Iraq on TDY (temporary duty) from the Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southwest where he is a contract specialist. He said the Army and Navy cultures clearly are different, but that "both organizations have proud traditions--as they should." He said NAVFAC functions much like the Army Corps of Engineers, although it is quite a bit smaller and does not do civil works in the U.S. like USACE.

"If you ask officers in the Navy, they will tell you that Chiefs run the Navy," said Peterson, who was hired to serve as a project management specialist in Iraq. "It makes sense because they are the link between senior leadership and the Deckplate Sailors. They are the technical experts and critical link between strategy and getting things done. Those who serve in the Navy can tell you that the traditional 'can do' Navy attitude isn't just a saying, it is a tradition."

Rinehart said he works with "a great bunch of Army personnel here at the REO and now has a different perspective on the Army and their mission." In the end, he said, "It really doesn't matter which service we are in; we are all here to serve our country with honor, courage, and commitment." Those sentiments notwithstanding, he also said that "I have yet to learn or even try to learn how the Army names its units. That just blows my mind away but to an Army person it probably makes sense."

Lang, who together with Army Sgt. 1st Class Chris Golden recently visited six different project sites during a single eight-hour mission and who has over 35 trips "outside the wire," said learning about Army life "will make me a better sailor as I will now have a better understanding of the Army units and how they operate." He said joint duty is the

way of the future and that his experience "will only make me better prepared for the next deployment."

Talking about the rewards of seeing how the Corps' construction projects impact Iraqi lives, Lang said that if people back in the U.S. could experience what he experiences for a single day, it would make them more thankful than ever for what they have at home and "make them more receptive to seeing this through until the end, until we make life more bearable and sustainable for these people who have

been brutalized, taken advantage of, and made to suffer in substandard living conditions for too long."

With the annual Army-Navy football game just around the corner on Dec. 1, the Navy contingent is getting its game face on (see accompanying photograph). In the spirit of friendly rivalry, Cmdr. Lang and Army Capt. Bill DeLucchi have a bet: If Navy wins, Delucchi will wear Lang's Navy patch for a day; if Army wins, Lang will wear Delucchi's Army patch for a day.

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