

DerrickDale-AUDIO

Good morning, everybody. I'm Dr. Chris Magra. I'm the Director of the Center for the Study of Tennesseans and More.

It's our mission to research, preserve, and share the stories of Tennessee veterans. And we're privileged today to have a Seabee with us. Derek, you might be the first Seabee to be at the Center, so welcome.

Thank you. Looking forward to hearing your story. I looked friends for some histories of the Seabee before Derek came in.

And this is one of my favorite naval histories of World War II when the Seabees were formed. And Samuel Elliott Morrison is one of the finest American naval historians. He's the only book that I could find that even mentioned the Seabees in World War II.

And just fleeting passages to building airstrips, building bridges, and that sort of thing. And, Derek, you've got another distinction today, too. You're the first veteran that I'll be using AI for.

I asked AI about the Seabees, and you can correct AI if it makes any mistakes here. It says, the U.S. Navy Seabees are members of the Naval Construction Force, build and repair vital military infrastructure on land during both combat operations and humanitarian missions. Name origin, the term Seabee, comes from a phonetic spelling of the initial CB, which stands for Construction Battalion.

Your official motto, and I'm not going to get the Latin right, it's Construmus Battumus, which translates to, we build, we fight. Created in 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, to fulfill critical need for military personnel who could construct advanced bases and defend themselves in combat zones. Deployed to every major U.S. conflict since World War II, including Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and we'll be talking about that today.

Capabilities and roles, the Seabees build roads, bridges, airfields, hospitals, logistical facilities, combat defense. Unlike civilian contractors, Seabees receive full military training to defend their worksites and personnel positions against enemy attack. And they've got different specializations in the Seabees, and I think you're a builder.

Yes. Yes, in the Seabees. And we usually start, anything incorrect there? No.

Okay, AI did us all right. So, I like to start by establishing your bona fides. How long have you lived in Tennessee? So, we moved to Tennessee in 1999, I believe.

I was in fourth grade, and went all the way through high school, and right out of high school, I joined the Navy. And so, you've been here since 1999. Yes.

I think that counts as you being a Tennessean. Where were you born? I was born in Pensacola, Florida, on the Naval base, actually. Okay, so you said you were born in 1999, so born in 1995? Actually, I was born in 1988.

I was in fourth grade. Oh, in fourth grade, I'm sorry. Yes, okay, so 1988 in Florida, and then moved to Tennessee in 1999, fourth grade here.

And I think I read that both of your parents were in the Navy? Yes. My mom retired after 20 years. After I was born, she was stationed in Tampa, Florida, and then we moved to England for three years, and then she retired out of Arizona.

My dad, he got out of the Navy before I was born, but he was on submarines as a sonar tech. Wow. And I imagine that having two parents in the Navy influenced your decision to join the Navy.

I think it's more my mom. I knew more of what my mom did than my dad. Okay.

But ever since I was a freshman in high school, I knew I wanted to join the Navy. I just didn't know what job. And then when I became a senior, I started talking to my grandfather, who was also Navy.

And in California, he suggested Seabees because I like to work with wood and doing carpentry and stuff. So that's what I decided to do. Yes, it's something I think a lot of people don't think of when they think about the Navy, joining the Navy, see the world.

They don't necessarily think about construction and building, but you did. You had that in your mind because of your grandfather. He kind of planted that seed for you, and you said to yourself, well, I know I'm going to join the Navy, and maybe I can get involved with construction.

I think I saw you enlisted in 2007? Yes, right after I graduated high school. June of 2007 is when I enlisted. And that was here in Knoxville? Yes.

Then I did basic up in Great Lakes, which I believe at the time was the only basic training. There used to be three, I know that. And then after basic training, you kind of let people know you were interested in the Seabees? Before you go to basic, you select your job when you go to enlist, so that's when I chose a builder.

And then after basic, you go to your specialized training, what the Navy calls A school. So that's where I learned about building, construction, and all that for my job. And where was that? That was in Gulfport, Mississippi, which there's only two active duty Seabee bases.

There's Gulfport, Mississippi, and there's Port Wainima, California, which is where I went to after my A school. Okay. And what was that like, being in Mississippi and getting up to speed with the Seabees? It was fun.

So it was more learning about the construction, doing your job. When you get to your first command, then you start learning more about the other aspects for training with military guns and stuff like that. And were you talking to your grandfather at all during this process? I think my grandfather passed away right before I was enlisted, so I didn't get a chance to talk to him.

I'm sure he would have been proud of you and would have enjoyed hearing about your Seabee training. What about your parents? What did they think about you? I'm sure you talked to them about the Seabees beforehand. My mom knew about Seabees.

In one of her commands, she had a Seabee underneath her, so she knew quite a bit about them. And she was like, I could have chosen any job I basically wanted, and I chose Seabees. And I was like, well, that's what I like to do.

That's right. But she's very proud of me. That's great.

And we talk all the time about stuff like that. Yeah. When you talk to people about your military service, and you mentioned you're in the Navy, and then you tell them you were a builder, how do you kind of explain the Seabees to people? I basically just explain it as I did construction work.

Yep. And people usually get it from there. Yep.

Yep. The military needs things built all the time. And it's not just engineering groups.

It's also the Seabees who will build around the world all different kinds of conditions. And every war since World War II have played an important role, not just in the Navy, but in all the armed forces and our ability to carry out wars and have military stationed around the world at all times. It's an incredible organization.

And so then did you say from Mississippi you went to California? Yes, Port William, California. Okay. And finished up, and then you had your first deployment? I was there for five years, went on four deployments.

Yep. First one was to Kuwait, which I met my battalion out in Kuwait. What year was your first deployment? 2007.

Okay. Around November, December is when I got there. Okay.

And I was there for almost four months. Okay. So 2007 was your first deployment.

Yes. And that was how long after you had enlisted? So June is when I enlisted. June 8th.

Okay. So about seven months almost. Okay.

About seven months. And that seven months was packed with basic training and training in Mississippi and California. So when I got to my battalion, I think around November is when I got there, beginning of November.

We waited until after Thanksgiving, and then me and a few other people that just joined the command flew out to be with the battalion. Okay. And then walk us through that first deployment.

So we mostly do work on the base. So when I first got out there, we were doing a lot of interior renovation for a lot of the buildings. Because Kuwait, there's a lot more infrastructure there than, say, Afghanistan.

So we were putting up drywall and stuff like that inside buildings to create housing for other military and civilians. Yep. And were you aware of what was going on with the war on terror? And is that in your mind at all? Or while you were over there and you're doing your work, are you thinking about your family and their naval service? Both.

Everything. A little bit. I would contact my mom through the computer.

Of course, phones didn't work too well at that time. And so... Yeah. And were you thinking to yourself, the work that you were doing there was part of this greater war effort? Were you thinking, gosh, you're picking up that family legacy and continuing it? Or just there, getting it done, not really thinking about much? I might have thought about it a little bit, but it's mostly just this work we're doing and just working on it.

Yep. You're given a job and you're going to get after it. Yeah, for sure.

So then what happens next? Walk us through that. So also during that deployment, we had President George Bush. At the time, he came out for a visit.

And so we had to build an extension onto the stage and a big, long walkway. This was at a base that you were at? Yeah. I don't remember the name of the base, but it was a major base.

And so we had a little over a week to get all this done. So we were working from about 7 o'clock in the morning to sometimes 10 o'clock at night to get this done. Kind of a cool thing to have the president visit you overseas.

And then I was able to stand up on stage with him and got to shake his hand. Yeah. It's a neat moment.

Something to remember for sure. And then do you come back? So we do usually about 7 to 8 months of deployment. And then we come back home to our home base and do training and other projects.

Well, let me ask you about that first deployment then. Were you married at the time? I was not. And what did your parents think about you being deployed? I didn't really talk to them about what they felt.

With my mom being a career Navy, she knew quite a bit about deployments. And my dad probably knew a little bit. He was living in California at the time, so I got to visit him a little bit.

What did you think about being deployed and being in the Middle East? Being in Kuwait, it wasn't that bad. It was mostly peaceful when I was there. It wasn't until I went to Afghanistan that it was different, way different.

So did you get to get out at all in Kuwait? I had stayed on the base. The only time we went out was if we went out to qualify for our rifles, even though we never carried one in Kuwait at all. Any impressions of Kuwait? Not really.

Okay. So how long were you there? I was in Kuwait for about four months. And then you came back to? Then we came back to Port Whitney, which was the home base for the command I was in with NMCV-40, which they are decommissioned now.

It's the second time decommissioned. So they might be back. And how long were you stateside? So we usually stayed stateside for eight months, nine months, and then we would go back out.

And so deployments, they usually switch between a peacetime deployment or a war zone, I guess you could say. And what did you do for those eight months? I had quite a few classes, some with construction, getting a little more experience with that. A lot of it was training for, I think at that time I did comms training to be able to use comms.

Then we also had field exercises. We had a two-week field exercise where we'd go up to Fort Hunter Liggett, and the main command for the base in Port Whitney, they do the training for that. And what did you think about coming back from deployment, being in the classroom, doing additional training, and just generally being back in the United States? I didn't think it was really that much different from being in Kuwait, because in Kuwait, our free time, we were able to go around the base.

Because it's such a large base, there were different zones. And so you can go to the exchange or food places. So it wasn't a whole lot different.

And family was glad to have you back after the first deployment? Yeah. I didn't get to see my mom until, let's see, two years almost. After my, let's see, I think it was Christmas of 2008, when I was able to finally come home.

All 2007 and all 2008. Yeah. And that Christmas fell within that eight-month time period that you were home? Yes.

That's actually maybe a month before we were supposed to leave to go to Afghanistan, I believe. No, not Afghanistan. It was Okinawa, Japan.

Okay, that was your second deployment? Yeah, that was my second one. To Japan, yeah. What did you think about going to Japan when you heard that you were going to Okinawa? I thought it'd be, I was very interested because, you know, getting to travel to different countries, and especially like Japan, we were able to go off base and do almost anything.

Yeah, yeah. Are you flying to these bases? Yes. I've never once seen a ship.

I've been on like, you know, the museum-type ships, one in San Diego. Yeah. But I've never actually been on an actual working ship.

Yeah, but you did get to see the world. Yeah. And so what was Okinawa like? It was fun.

When we got there, we have our own little base in Okinawa, Camp Shields, which is right next to the Air Force Base. And so we mostly were there. We were able to go off base, go around the whole island if we could, and just have fun.

Yeah, yeah. And we would, for those types of deployments, for like Japan, the two times I went to Japan, we did mostly like concrete work. At the base, at the Seabees Base? So the project I was on was over on the Air Force Base on the opposite side of the airstrip over where Public Works is.

We did a concrete gazebo. It was a really, really big one. It turned out really nice.

Nice, yeah. And so how long were you at Okinawa? We were in Okinawa for about seven months, seven, eight months. That's a typical deployment.

And then came back? Yeah, then we came back to the home base, did more training, did more projects. Did more classes? Yeah, because our next deployment after Okinawa was Afghanistan. We were also, I think before Afghanistan, we were switching our uniforms to the Type 3 green digital camo.

What did you think about the new uniforms? I liked it. Yeah, because we were wearing the old woodlands. But yeah, I liked the green digital camo, which I got a hat that I usually wear.

And what year were you deployed to Afghanistan? So we left in June of 2010. I was with a detachment, the air detachment for our command. So we left two months earlier than the main command and went down to Kandahar, where we split up into smaller detachments there.

I went to Camp Nathan Smith, which was originally a Canadian base, I believe. And then the Army took it over while we were there. But there we were building, they had a huge warehouse at the base there.

So we were building five smaller buildings. They were about 40, 30 or 40 feet wide by almost 100 feet long. Just command buildings for the Army.

Any thoughts about going to Afghanistan? Very different deployment. It was a very different deployment. So one of the first couple days we got there, I know we had mortar fire come in on Kandahar Airfield, which happened quite often, I think.

So we had to deal with mortar fire coming in. And then when we first went out, we took helicopters to the bases we were going to. So we didn't... That's a different experience to get to a job site to do building by helicopter.

That's pretty fun. First time ever being in a big helicopter. I've been in a smaller one before with my dad's friend.

Impressions of Afghanistan while you were there? Definitely, I guess you could say third world. Being in Kandahar, we were actually in the city for Camp Nathan Smith. And so we would have some helpers come in from the locals and use a crane to move these big, huge concrete T-barriers.

So me and a couple of other guys were tasked with watching them through the day if they had any work. So they would come, I guess, and be paid. And if they didn't have any work, we would just kind of sit around.

Whose crane was it? It was theirs. They actually brought the crane. It was an older man and a young boy.

And so with them, safety wasn't much of a thing. Because whenever we had work to move T-barriers, the kid would just hook the chains together and stand on the chains to be lifted up on top of these T-barriers. Wow.

Yeah. Either while you were in Afghanistan or before you deployed, anything with the war on terror kind of on your mind? I followed it a little bit. I didn't follow it too much.

They would give us some information about what to expect there. And then when we got there, we had more training, like with helping identify IEDs and stuff like that. But the Navy's ordering you there, and you're just going, and you're going to do whatever they tell you to do? It's just what they've got for me, and I'll just go what I'm told.

Yeah, that's right. That's right. And so how long were you in Afghanistan? I was in Afghanistan for ten months this time, because we left early.

So I was moved to one other base, Camp Wilson, or Bob Wilson, I think was what it was. And so when I moved from Nathan Smith to Wilson, we were in MRAPs, which I think it was our own – we were attached to a reserve unit out there, and so it was the Seabees that transported us. There might have been maybe a couple Army vehicles there, too, in the convoy.

But we went late at night, so we didn't really see much. Now, my guess is, when you're deployed to these different bases, that you're going with different Seabees each time. Yes, and so we would – in our command, we had four companies.

We had a headquarters company, which was mostly the administrative people. And then we had Alpha Company, which is more equipment operators and mechanics for them. Bravo Company was electrician men, utilities men.

And then Charlie Company was my company, and that was builders, steel workers. And about how many people in your company? That was broken down into platoons. I think we had three platoons, and then each platoon had about seven or eight squads, and then we'd break that down into fire teams.

And I imagine then that the people you were with in Kuwait were different than the people you were with in Okinawa or different than the people you were with in Afghanistan. Yes, so every time we came back from a deployment, we would restructure in the company and be with different people. What did you think about the different Seabees that you were with? I met a lot of friends.

There's a few that I still talk to sometimes when I get a chance, people from all over the country that you get to meet and their experiences and whatnot. Did it matter where you were? Were the Seabees the Seabees in Kuwait? Were the Seabees the Seabees in Okinawa and in Afghanistan? You're all around the world, different locations, but it kind of feels like... Just one big family. Because Seabees make up, I think, about almost maybe 1% of the entire Navy.

Can you talk about that, about what it felt like to be in the Seabees in Japan or in Afghanistan? Did you feel like we're a special group in the military? I felt we were kind of a special group. So when we go to A school, we have our training, which also the Army and Air Force, their construction, Army Corps of Engineers and Air Force has Red Horse, their construction. Shout out to the builders out there.

They would come and do the training with us when they first started. They wouldn't do as much as us. They would get up to a certain point, and then they would go and do whatever they needed to do.

But we would train with them. It didn't really interact too much with the main Navy, I guess you could say, with people on ships. The third time I went to Japan, or the second time I went to Japan, which was my last deployment, we were in Sasebo, which is the southern part of the mainland.

There we were a real small detachment, and they had ships coming into the port there, but we didn't really interact, I guess, with too many of the fleet side. We call it fleet side. You're at these bases or places where construction is needed, and you're doing your work.

You're getting after it, and you're working together with other Seabees. Any work outside the Seabees or with other military personnel, let's say when you're in Afghanistan, did you work with the Army Corps of Engineers? The only time that I really remember us working with them was in Kuwait when the president was coming. We had a few Army Corps of Engineers that would come over and help do some stuff, but it was mostly just working with Seabees.

What did you think about, did you prefer just working with Seabees? I imagine you did, or just didn't mind everybody getting after it? I didn't mind, but I believe the Seabees do have a lot more experience with doing the construction. In Afghanistan for 10 months, and then you come home back to the States, and what do you do when you come home this time after Afghanistan? We had to do a mental health debriefing kind of thing. Shout out to the entire military for recognizing that coming home from active war zones is a harder deployment and need special training for that.

There were definitely some people in Afghanistan. We had a group that was out, mostly equipment operators. They were going with the Army and clearing out roads and stuff.

I know one time we had a group that hit an IED, and our chief got injured and he got sent out. The Seabees really do go everywhere, and they really do build everything for the entire United States military. It's an incredible organization.

You're back in the States, and you've done this special training after coming home from Afghanistan. What else? Back to more training, more projects. More classes.

For some things, depending on what we needed for the next. I was mostly on projects. We started building a running track over on one of the other bases, and we also started building a quarry or a wash basin.

That's what it was supposed to be over in China Lake, which was a couple hours away from where we were. We would go there for about a week and then come back for the weekend, go for another week and then come back, and then we would switch out. Can I ask you a stupid question? Is there a difference in your mind between building in an active war zone like Afghanistan or back home in the States, or is it you've been assigned to do this, you're going to do it no matter where it is? There's quite a bit of difference, I think.

In Afghanistan, when I was on FOB Wilson, I was with two or three other guys, and we had one project where we went over to the Army Supply Yard and built them a SWAT hut. So we did that for them, and then we would do more smaller projects, not really having a plan at first, so we would have to plan it out and then do the project. For doing it in Japan, that was more like before we went to Sasebo, we had already had plans for what we were going to be doing.

And so we were already planning and estimating for that project, and when we got there, we had to do a little more planning and estimating for some other projects. But the CBs in Afghanistan kind of had to adjust on the fly, make these plans as demands came in, right, and had to adjust. Yes.

Yeah. And so then you're back in the States after Afghanistan for how long before your next deployment back to Japan? We were back for about eight months. Okay.

Yeah. That's right. My wife.

Yeah, yeah. Shout out to his wife, to Derek's wife out there. It'll be done soon.

So, and get time to spend with family this time before your last deployment to Japan? I think I came home for Christmas. Okay. And then... How do those Christmases feel after three deployments overseas? Any different? Not really.

For me, I'm really easygoing. Yeah, you are. Yeah, yeah.

Just take it as a stride. Yeah, I just enjoy the time being home, visiting my grandparents and my mom. And knowing that you're going back to Japan, did you have any thoughts about going back to Japan a second time? Looking forward to it? Thinking, oh man, I really don't want to go back to Japan? Any thoughts? I was looking forward to it because it was a different part of Japan.

And since I was with a smaller detachment, I think you get closer to your coworkers and friends and hang out with them quite a bit. We got to go around town quite a bit and just see the sights. And where was this second deployment to Japan? Sasebo.

Okay. And what did you do there? So, our first project, I was in charge of building a concrete guard shack at one of the weapons depots there. And so... Where did the Seabees get their materials from? So, I know for us in Sasebo, there was a guy who was prior in Navy, I believe Navy.

He was our point of contact for getting materials. And so, if we needed something... You just let him know what you needed. Yeah.

And he got it for you. Yeah. And he was an older gentleman.

Any difficulties on your forward deployments and getting materials? We never had any difficulties getting materials. Always had what you needed to get the job done. Yeah.

That's amazing. Through four deployments that you never had an issue with that. And what did you say? Did you know that this was your last deployment overseas? Yes.

Did you know it was going to be your last? I didn't know it was going to be my complete last because I wanted to stay in. And I talked to my wife, which I met her in 2008 after my first deployment. And then we were dating through my second one.

And then we got married right after that one. Shout out to Derek's wife for supporting him through his deployments. Yeah.

So, she went through me going to Afghanistan and my last deployment, being married. Being in Afghanistan, it really worried her. Yeah.

For sure. But she got to come here while I was there and she got to hang out with my mom. And my mom was like, you're worrying, it's worrying me, so I'm going to find you something to do.

Yeah. So, that's when she started crocheting. Yeah.

She learned how to crochet. Yeah. And now she has a small business doing that.

But now she jokes, she's like, so you taught me this, but I'm still worried. But now it's just another thing to spend money on. Yeah.

That's true. That's right. But I imagine she felt okay with you going to Japan, your wife? Yes.

To Japan. She was actually a little jealous because she's always liked Japan culture and stuff. So, she was jealous that I got to go.

Did you bring anything home for her? Yes. Okay. Can you say what it was? I don't really remember.

Okay. But yeah, I did bring some stuff home for her. Derek's wife, if you watch this, maybe you can comment in the comments to the video and let us all know what he brought home from overseas.

So, how long were you in Japan this last time? The last time I was there for, I believe, seven months. Okay. And you mentioned that you thought, you didn't think this would be your last deployment.

No, I thought I would stay in longer. Okay. So, the last deployment, after we came back, that's when I was up for being transferred to a new command.

And we were also decommissioning the battalion right as we got back. So, we were dealing with all that. I left maybe a couple weeks before they decommissioned.

What year was this? This was 2012. Okay. That's when I changed commands.

And so, I got orders to go to Public Works in Washington, D.C. So, I was able to take leave for about two weeks, almost three weeks, I think. Go home, see your wife. Yeah.

Yep, yep. And so, after coming back from Japan and when I moved commands, that's the time when my wife's able to come with me because it's a permanent move. And so, we actually just got a U-Haul and drove cross-country.

He stopped here for a bit, stayed for about a week or so, and then went up to D.C. And surprisingly, we were able to find on-base housing within 24 hours of being there. Yeah, that's great. Which was good.

Did you and your wife enjoy being in D.C.? Yeah, we had fun. We got to go around to a lot of the museums and got to see a lot of stuff there. So, my brother and a friend of ours came up one time, and we went to the National Cemetery.

And so, we were there walking around, and we met this gentleman, older gentleman, and he helps out there, and he knows a lot of the history, and he was also prior Navy, was stationed in Bethesda, did a lot of VIP stuff. And he was taking us around, showing us stuff, and telling us all this stuff. And he was also a firefighter, and he was at the Pentagon when, he was basically at the door when that plane hit in 9-11.

Yeah, amazing. And he told us that story, and it was like... Yeah, yeah. And then eventually, you make your way back to Knoxville.

Yes. And back to Tennessee. And you go to Pellissippi, and then to UT.

I never planned on going to college. Yeah. So, when I got out in 2015... Because you're a builder.

Yeah. Which, actually, I didn't even know if I wanted to still do construction. So, I chose to try out security.

So, I was an armed security guard, actually, right down the road here, Fort Sanders. I was there for about four years. Then I got moved... Why no more construction? That's interesting.

I don't know. I just... You done it. I wanted to try something different, I guess.

Try something different. Yeah. And so, I did that for four years.

Then I moved to a site supervisor position at Mastercraft Boats. Was there for a couple years. And then decided I didn't want to do that anymore.

So, I started to work with my friend who owns a small business making knives. I met him when I was at Fort Sanders. We worked together.

He was a Marine. Or is a Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine.

What got you thinking about using your GI Bill to go to Mississippi and then to UT? Me and my friend... Or me and my wife, sorry. We visited her friend, her best friend up in Iowa. And her husband was prior Army.

He had to get out medical because his convoy hit an IED. And he got very injured. But he told me about GI Bill and using benefits and whatnot.

And so, after talking to him a little bit, I decided, well, why not? I mean, they'll pay for me to go to school for free. Pay for me also monthly. Shout out to the GI Bill and veteran benefits in general.

And all the organizations that help connect veterans to all those benefits. I know the Veterans Success Center here at UT helps veterans to do that. Yes.

So, I decided I wanted to look more into, I guess, the construction side of things. And so, at Mississippi, I chose to get an associate's in architectural design technology. And so, I completed that in 24, at the end of 24.

And then I wanted to try to get into the architecture program here at UT, but I was denied. And so, I was going to try and do an online degree for architecture at Academy of Arts, out of San Francisco somewhere. Did that for one semester.

And I was like, it's too hard for me. I've tried online courses. I guess not really courses.

I tried online when I was still in. It works for some people. It doesn't work for others.

And I had a hard time with it. So, I decided I wanted to do it in person. So, I chose construction management.

Bachelor's in construction management here at UT. And so, that's what I'm working on now. Yep, right on.

Well, it was a pleasure hearing about your military service. And thank you for your military service. And thank you for being here at the Center.

And y'all watching, if you find a really good history book on the Seabees, if you would drop a link in our comments, I'd appreciate that. I always like learning about new things and new histories. Thank you.