

Seabees plaque unveiled at Cape County Park Veterans Memorial

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By Patrick T. Sullivan ~ Southeast Missourian



Tom Meyer and Seabees Chapter Island 5 Commander Larry Henderschott unveil the Seabees plaque Saturday at the base of the Veterans Memorial in Cape County Park. The plaque honors the small Naval unit's 70th anniversary.

(Patrick T. Sullivan) [[Order this photo](#)]

Tom Meyer has met many veterans over the years, but rarely finds a fellow Seabee.

That's because the Seabees are a special unit of the Navy scattered throughout the world and, according to Meyer, make up less than 1 percent of the military. The unit specializes in construction and combat and has 18,000 active troops.

"It's always special to meet another Seabee because there aren't many around," said Meyer, who joined the Seabees in 1969 and served in the Vietnam War.

What Meyer describes as a rarity was anything but Saturday at the veterans memorial in Cape County Park.

About 70 Seabees veterans came to the park to honor the largely unknown unit's 70th anniversary and unveil a bronze plaque at the base of the veterans memorial.

Founded on March 5, 1942, the Seabees built the Navy's bases around the world during World War II and helped earn U.S. victories in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. During the war, more than 325,000 men served as Seabees and built more than 400 advance bases, 11 major airfields and 441 piers.

Tom Meyer tells the crowd the history of the Seabees on Saturday at Cape County Park before the dedication of a plaque commemorating the Naval unit's 70th anniversary. Seated behind Meyer are Rep. Wayne Wallingford, left, and Cape Girardeau County Presiding Commissioner Clint Tracy. Roughly 70 Seabees veterans were in attendance. (Patrick T. Sullivan)

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Since their inception, the Seabees have been instrumental in all of the United States' conflicts.

Because of its initial work in the Pacific islands in World War II, the unit names its veterans' chapters islands and assigns numbers.

"Today is one moment I hope will be an ongoing appreciation of these veterans," Rep. Wayne Wallingford, R-Cape Girardeau, said while presenting a framed resolution commemorating the unit. "The Seabees have helped build this country into the bastion of freedom it is today."

The Cape Girardeau County Commission approved the plaque's placement last month, and Seabee Island 5 raised \$1,000 for the plaque. Ford and Sons Funeral Home also helped fund the plaque.

While the Seabees are known for construction and combat, the local chapter island didn't have to put up much of a fight to get the plaque placed on the memorial.

"When Tom Meyer came to the commission for this plaque, he thought it would be a slam dunk," said Cape Girardeau County Presiding Commissioner Clint Tracy, who has served as a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserves. "And it was."

Meyer and Island 5 commander Larry Henderschott lifted a camouflage mesh tarp off the memorial and revealed a plaque with the Seabees logo -- a bee wielding a hammer, wrench and machine gun. After the plaque was unveiled, the local Marine Corp. fired shots and played taps to honor the Seabees.

"A lot of people don't know about us unless they've seen that John Wayne movie" said Rudy Bodenschatz, who served with the Seabees in Okinawa in 1945 and 1946. Wayne portrayed Seabee Wedge Donovan in the 1944 war movie "The Fighting Seabees."

Although excited about the recognition, being with dozens of other Seabees resonated with Bodenschatz.

"You can't hear too much of their stories," Bodenschatz said of his fellow Seabees. "I really enjoy being here with them."

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