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Charles R. Kubic and James P. Rife, *Bridges to Baghdad: The U.S. Navy Seabees in the Iraq War*. Thomas Publications, 2009. 440 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes bibliography, index.

Review by John Darrell Sherwood
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In the spring of 2003, U.S. Navy Seabees stormed into Iraq alongside the First Marine Expeditionary Force. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was the first time the Seabees had fought in a large, mobile expeditionary force since the Korean War. During Desert Storm in 1991, Seabees had mainly operated behind the lines at fixed locations. By contrast, in OIF, Seabees kept up with a mechanized Marine force fighting a lightning war. To accomplish this, the Seabees employed a new formation called the First Marine Expeditionary Engineer Group (I MEG). Lighter and more combat oriented than Seabee formations employed in Desert Storm, I MEG was designed from the ground up as a combat engineering force with an emphasis on combat.

Seabees supported the Marines by constructing semi-permanent steel bridges and other spans over many rivers and canals during the drive to Baghdad. They also built over a hundred kilometers of highway. During the Civil Military Operations segment following the major combat phase of OIF, the Seabees completed 158 construction projects, including 72 schools, in less than four months.

Bridges to Baghdad chronicles the history of the Seabees during the first year of the Iraq War and the doctrinal changes taking place within the force in the years leading up to the conflict. The lead author of the book, Rear Admiral Charles R. Kubic, commanded the 1st Naval Construction Division and the I MEG in 2003, and the book, although written in the third person, is mainly his memoir. James P. Rife, a historian with the firm History Associates, contextualized Kubic's memoir by incorporating documents and oral histories on I MEG held by the Naval History & Heritage Command.

Readers interested in the role of Seabees in modern war will learn much from this book. It also serves to broaden our historical understanding of the role played by the American sea services in OIF. Here we see a ground commitment by a Navy force, which contributed to the quick American success in toppling Saddam Hussein's regime.

The book, however, is not without peccadilloes. It examines the war mainly through the prism of Rear Admiral Kubic, a leader whose views are not necessarily

shared by everyone in the force. Some Seabees have resented Kubic's efforts to transform the community from a rear area construction organization to a frontline combat force capable of keeping up with the Marines in maneuver fighting. These critics argue the Seabees lack the mobility, firepower, resources, and combat training for such warfare. Kubic and Rife neither acknowledge the existence of this opposing viewpoint nor provide enough detailed analysis of Seabee performance in OIF as an expeditionary force to allow the readers to reach their own conclusions on this debate.

Critics of Kubic often cite the human cost of OIF for the Seabees as evidence of flaws in the new maneuver doctrine. Overall, 20 Seabees had lost their lives as of 2009, but the extent to which the new doctrine contributed to these losses remains unclear. The deadliest day for the Seabees occurred at Camp Ramadi in May 2004. In that incident, a mortar attack killed five Seabees and wounded 28 others. The journalist David Hackworth later claimed that Kubic, who had been visiting the base at the time, had ordered Seabees to assemble in an open area for a pep talk, thereby making them more vulnerable to attack. Citing an after-action report and a letter written by an eyewitness, Kubic defends his actions, arguing that the Seabees were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. In any event, the fact that the attack occurred at a base rather than in the field makes it immaterial to the broader doctrinal debate over the MEG concept.

As with other memoirs, *Bridges to Bagdad* can come across as biased. Better editing also might have helped the authors craft a more readable narrative. Nevertheless, it contributes an important understanding of the role of the Navy in OIF, and represents a strong foundation for future studies of this Seabee effort.



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