

Selfridge Navy 'Seabee' Battalion Is Building More Than Just Reputation

SELFRIDGE AIR NATIONAL GUARD BASE, Mich. – Need it built? Call the Navy.

The Navy's best construction battalion – led by one of the service's top officers – calls the Detroit area home.

Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 26, based at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, was recently awarded the Rear Adm. John R. Perry Award as the most outstanding naval construction battalion in the U.S. Navy Reserve.

The battalion's commanding officer, Commander Regina Marengo, has been awarded the Navy's Joy Bright Hancock Award, which honors "inspirational, innovative and imaginative leadership."

The awards, for service in 2011, cover a period when Marengo and the battalion of about 700 sailors, best known as the Seabees, were deployed to the Kandahar Province in southern Afghanistan.

"The whole team, this battalion is so strong," said Marengo. "It really would not have been possible for them to do better in Afghanistan than the way they performed."

The Perry Award recognizes the top battalion in the combined areas of leadership, readiness, construction accomplishments, equipment management, logistics programs, retention, and safety.

In Afghanistan, the sailors of NMCB 26 built seven combat outposts, added to the fortifications of others and widened, improved and laid several miles of road, often operating in territory where contact with unfriendly forces was highly likely. Marengo said her sailors were often operating "on the very forward edges" in Afghanistan.

Teamwork was a key attribute in getting the job done, battalion leaders say.

"The sailors of NMCB-26 not only have talents as builders, but they are dedicated to working together as a team and pushing each other to the highest levels. That teamwork was clearly on display during the battalion's deployment to

Afghanistan last year," said Master Chief Petty Officer Richard Heiland, who is the command master chief and senior enlisted sailor in the battalion.

Marengo said planning and preparation were key to the successful execution of the battalion's assignments in Afghanistan.

"When we received an assignment, we had to peel back the layers of the onion and look at every possible angle: security, logistics and the building effort itself before we took our show on the road," the commander said.

"We were going to our assignments in armored convoys, sometimes flying in by helicopter. Every last nail had to be planned for, because once we went out, there was no running back to the hardware store to grab something you forgot."

Heiland said living and working in austere locations in Afghanistan required closely coordinated teamwork across the entire battalion.

"We had to utilize every single resource," he said.

Like Reserve and National Guard forces across the country, NMCB 26 has to maintain a readiness level while at home station, in anticipation of a call for deployment.

When Marengo was first assigned to command of the Selfridge-based battalion, which includes 10 detachments in three states, the plan was to not mobilize the unit for the immediate future.

Less than two months later, the plan changed and the unit was ordered to mobilize for the overseas deployment. Counting training and time in Afghanistan, the unit was away from home for about a year.

It all amounted to a "can-do experience," Marengo said. The battalion's senior-enlisted sailor agreed:

"When you couple the dedication of our enlisted sailors with the strong leadership and professional expertise Cdr. Marengo and her officers bring to the table, the strengths of the battalion are amplified. It was no surprise to me that both the battalion and the skipper were given top awards for what we have accomplished in the past year," said Heiland.

"The Perry Award and the Hancock Award give us a new challenge, to set the bar even higher in 2012 and beyond." The Joy Bright Hancock Leadership Award honors the visionary leadership of a Naval officer whose ideals and dedication led to the integration of women into the regular Navy.

One senior officer, one junior officer and one senior enlisted member is selected from across both the Navy and the Marine Corps to receive the award. The award winner "must have shown exceptional leadership over time and have persevered to overcome challenges." Marengo, who lives in the Bronx in New York City, joined the Navy Reserve 19 years ago. Her timing was good – about six



Commander Regina Marengo, lower left, stands with some of the sailors from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 26 at a work site in Afghanistan, where the battalion spent the last half of 2010 and the first half of 2011. Both the battalion and the commander were each recently honored as being among the best in the Navy. NMCB-26 is based at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Mich., and has detachments in 10 locations across Michigan, Ohio and Indiana. About 700 Navy Reserve Seabees serve in the battalion.

months after she received her commission, women were first allowed to serve in naval construction battalions.

"I don't know if I would still be in the Navy if I hadn't been able to join a battalion," Marengo said.

"The people I have been able to work with, the opportunities I have had, it has added to me

personally, professionally, in every way."

Marengo said the Navy Reserve Seabees she commands bring an amazing set of skills to their duties, drawing on experiences from both inside and outside the Navy. In her civilian career, Marengo is a partner in a Bronx civil engineering firm, Ensign Engineering.

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