It’s only a symbol of a single branch of service within the United States Army, but the power that symbol has to bring forth strong feelings of pride and solidarity is noteworthy. The symbol is the Army Engineer Castle. The “Castle” is a primary component of Army uniforms worn by officers and enlisted personnel, signifying their branch of service. It has been, and remains today, a central focus on red and white, large and small flags flown outside governmental office buildings, on home lawns of veterans, on field-expedient flag poles near forward operating bases, as a part of framed service mementos hanging in places of honor in offices and homes, and on military vehicles everywhere. The Engineer Castle has been hand-fabricated in brick, concrete, metal, stone and wood. It’s been used as a part of “headquarters” signs in so many locations throughout history, that an entire book of photographs could be compiled in that regard. In sum, it’s a powerful image and few (if any) others of similar purpose can match it in terms of visibility and meaning.

Continued on next page
Perhaps it’s because the Corps of Engineers has a history going back to the earliest days of the United States. Perhaps it’s because the Corps of Engineers has not only a military role, but also a “civil” role in relationship to various aspects of nation building. Lastly, perhaps it’s because of the aura surrounding something as solid and everlasting as a “castle.” Whatever the reasons, veterans of Army Engineer service, military and civilian, are emotionally connected in many ways as a result of having been associated in some form or fashion with the organization the “castle” represents.

Army Engineer veterans demonstrate their solidarity and pride of service in many ways. Some unit with comrades during annual reunions, some design and manage websites which focus on specific unit history and traditions, some write books or articles describing their special time in service, while still others stay in touch with close friends made while serving as an Army Engineer, through letters, cards, group lunches or dinners, and similar social activities.

This article will take a brief look at some of the people involved in helping to maintain the history and traditions of Army Engineer service. It will also look at some of the methods being utilized today to provide a forum for participation in engineer and engineer related activities. And as usual, a whole lot, it will pay tribute to all those who have given so much, for so many, in helping to make the Army Corps of Engineers what it has become.

Engineer Family

One need not be an actual veteran themselves to participate in activities like these. There are many siblings of veterans who are heavily involved, and in fact many of these people have carried on the legacies of their involved parent or grandparent long after their passing. One result of this is an “extended family of Army Engineers” now exists in numerous forms throughout the country.

As the number of World War Two surviving veterans declines daily, a growing number of their family members are stepping forward to assure that memories of past missions accomplished by engineers during the war are never forgotten. To look deeper into the motives behind these actions, consider the experiences of two daughters of World War Two combat engineers, the first living in New Jersey and the second in Michigan.

Mari Ippolito is the daughter of a World War Two veteran with the 297th Combat Engineer Battalion. In her own words…

Taking care of “our boys”

Army Engineer Reunion! That’s what the invite said when I signed up to join him and Mom for the 3-day reunion in the Catskills. At that reunion, I was one of three “kids” to attend. Now, almost 15 years later, there’s a “kid” or “grand kid” for almost every one of “our boys” as we call them. They’re in their mid 80s now, but as feisty as ever.

I became very involved with the battalion after that first reunion. My senior thesis was on the 297th “museum” that was co-located with a restaurant in Kentucky, owned by Hal Miller, another veteran who served with Dad. I archived as many photos as I could find, and had them scanned onto CDs for storage. It was through that project I became involved with sending the vintage photos to Army Engineer Magazine. To my delight, the 297th was featured in an outstanding photo essay. I am in contact with the members of the reunion group regularly. We even exchange holiday cards. The 297th is “my family”. Can I give examples of how and why without seeming sappy? No, I can’t.

My first example is when Hal Miller’s restaurant burned down last year, taking with it his huge 297th memorabilia collection. I got three calls about it within an hour. Dad choked up when he told me, but he said “Hal’s tough, he’ll re-open.” Hal’s daughter Evelyn and I exchanged emails weekly, keeping up on the progress, and re-open he will.

My 297th “sister” Adele DePolo, arranged many of the battalion reunions with Hal, Joe Rufo and Cye Cinnamon. Her dad, Tabor (who wrote the unit history book that all families, are my “family” too. They are an extension of my father. When I’m with them, I see the “boys” they were, and the “men” they became. The ones who made it possible for my generation to grow up in freedom and peace. Who taught me to love and respect my country, and who serve it.

No history book in the world can replace a live story, told by a veteran who speaks not only of the horrors of war, but also of “liberation of a chicken coop full of eggs” so he can feed his guys something fresh after months of C-rations. The added “and besides, it’s not really stealing ‘cause they were Nazi chickens anyway…” said with twinkling eyes, not only illustrates the emotion, but the logic of a 20-year-old.

I’ve attended several reunions in the Catskills, and some fabulous ones in Washington D.C. In 2005, we toured the White House. A group of 8th graders asked me “Hey, lady, what’s the 297th Engineers and who are all those old guys?” indicating our matching t-shirts. “They’re World War Two veterans, here for a reunion.” I explained. At the
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A Box of Chocolates

Most of you will be familiar with the popular quote from the movie Forrest Gump, “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.” Well it also rings true for me. I don’t remember the first time that well-worn sepia-toned box with the raised gold filigree and the words, “Bunte – Chicago – Mi Choice Chocolates”, appeared in my life, but it seems it was always a part of my world. The objects within held a strange and constant fascination for a young girl trying desperately to hold on to the fleeting war memories relayed by her dad to his loving family and friends. The rectangular box was never far from my side, and was kept in a nightstand, as I moved from house to house and city to city. Every now and then I would sit on the floor, carefully remove the tattered lid and lovingly lay each item before me. Maybe I was hoping a name would mysteriously appear on the back of a photo, giving me some clue as to who these young men were who stood next to my father, smiling back at me. Maybe it was a source of comfort and a way for me to try and hold on to a part of my life when my father passed away when I was only twelve. Maybe it was all those things and more. But the one thing I did not know and could not know was the important role that fraying box would play later in my life.

I offer to personally host a reunion in New York every year, and look forward to being able to do so someday. Our attendance list is expanding. My goddaughter has attended several reunions and as a history teacher, is able to pass on the 297th stories to her students. In 2001, she and another young woman who are like daughters to me, attended with us. Dad was so proud to have his surrogate granddaughters there! Hallie, Hal’s granddaughter, has attended since she was a baby. She makes every vet a gift, sings at the dinner ion reunions. To keep the history and traditions of the 297th alive…for myself…for my father…for his friends…for the future.

I also attend reunions because I owe it to “the boys”. The ones who came back, and the ones who didn’t. I attend reunions because I owe it to “the boys”. The ones who came back, and the ones who didn’t. I attended because I enjoy their company, and I get to watch the fun captured among years of chaos.

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LEFT: Mari Ippolito, front left, joins other “unit siblings” of the 297th Engineers at a reunion gathering. Battalion veteran Joe Rufis is shown at the back left. BOTTOM: 297th veterans, spouses, and siblings share time together at the battalion’s 2005 reunion dinner. Man is second from the right. (Photos courtesy Mari Ippolito)

I am proud to be a part of the 297th Combat Engineer family. They stand by and stand up for each other, even after all these years. I am a better person for having known them. I am proud to be a part of the 297th Combat Engineer family. They stand by and stand up for each other, even after all these years. I am a better person for having known them.

Second World War. Not only does she maintain an impressive website, and is writing a book to document the wartime accomplishments of those who served in the unit. Now…in her own words.

L

ike Mari Ippolito, Marion Chard from Michigan is also the daughter of an engineer veteran of the Second World War. Not only does she maintain close ties with members of the VI Corps Engineers with whom she is involved, but she has designed and maintains a website, and is writing a book to document the wartime accomplishments of those who served in the unit. Now…in her own words.

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intense and constant shelling that forced the men to bury their trucks in the sand, in order to keep the machine shops running. It brought back a flood of memories from my childhood. “I know these stories,” I said to myself.

After a grand day together, I hugged Ira and told him what a thrill it was to meet him. I could kick myself later on because even though we continued to exchange Christmas cards for years, we never again met in person, and many of things that he imparted to me on that day were forever lost because of my failure to put pen to paper. When he passed on in the 1990’s, my only connection was severed, and I was almost back to square one in my quest to learn more about my dad’s wartime experiences.

While still living in Detroit, I contacted the National Archives in St. Louis, but it took three successive tries before I finally received a letter at our new home in northern Michigan in autumn 2003. Sorry, they informed me, but your father’s records burned in a huge fire in 1973. How could it end this way? I was so distraught it took me almost three weeks before I could show the letter from St. Louis to my husband. I then began to feel angry and that anger led me to one conclusion; I would not give up and this would not defeat me. I had the Internet didn’t I?

So as the winter months bore down on our little town, I put forth an undying effort in front of my personal computer. I re-opened the box of my dad’s wartime mementos for the umpteenth time and fed anything and everything into the Google search engine. The first few weeks were frustrating as I tried to figure out where to begin. How does one go about looking for a military unit when you don’t even know what unit a person was with? How do you write a description for a unit designation shoulder patch?

The quest was daunting considering how many Army units had fought in the ETO. I began narrowing it down with the 5th and 7th Army patches, but it was a lot of ground to cover. My job was made all the more difficult because he had one shoulder patch with a Seahorse on it and another with a Red Bull! HELP!

With bound determination, I began to feel as though I was making progress. I found a site for the 34th Infantry Division, the great Red Bulls, but conflicting info from other sites sent my head into a tizzy. The Seahorse patch belonged to the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment, but the 36th Engineers were NOT part of their organization. I sent a letter to the 34th, and then found the name of a John Fallon, 36th Combat Engineer Regiment. I began to scratch out diagrams on paper trying to come up with a divisional chart. Still, something wasn’t adding up.

A few weeks later I received a letter from Jerry Gorden, master of the 34th Infantry, along with a unit history. In the interim I found another reference to “Seahorses” and the name of Rene Rousselle, a 540th Combat Engineer, and the contact for their unit. I sent a letter in late April 2004, along with photographic scans of the pins and patches I had in my wartime collection. Oh dear, I was coming up with answers, but at this juncture I wasn’t sure which direction it was leading me.

I received a hand-written letter from Rene Rousselle the first week of May. I was overjoyed. Rene informed me that my dad was assigned to the 540th Combat Engineer Regiment. John Fallon’s email followed a few days later, and told of the 36th Combat Engineer’s proud history, and invited me to call him. I will never forget the day we first spoke, for it was the 60th Anniversary of the Normandy D-Day landings.

I’ve had the honor and privilege of meeting hundreds of WWII veterans and their families, and through their encouragement, moral support, friendship and love, have taken on the task of writing a book. I’ve also been able to create a website dedicated to my father and the VI Corps engineers (the 36th, 39th, 540th and the 1108th), www.detroitchip battengineers.com (portion shown left).

Marion Chard designed and maintains an impressive website (see link above) which is dedicated to her father and other VI Corps Engineers who served during the Second World War. The site is complete with links to articles, photos, era music and other related information of interest to veterans and friends.
So through dogged determination (I inherited my dad’s engineer gene!), the kind of countless individuals and a now unquestioning belief in divine intervention, I find myself at an unbelievable juncture. And that takes us back to that tiny box that once held an array of unanswered questions; life is like that box of chocolates, you never do know what you’re going to get!

Veterans step forward

In addition to the efforts of Mari Ippolito and Marion Chard discussed above, there are numerous other individuals who share a common purpose in helping to promote and preserve the history and traditions of Army Engineering.

Central to those efforts are dedicated veterans of Army Engineer service themselves, who for various reasons feel motivated to help organize others. Most form veteran unit reunion groups which are key to retention of organizational cohesiveness as time moves on. In all cases, the formation of such entities was a result of volunteer work on the part of a few individuals, or in many cases a single individual.

Gene Kuentzler is one such person. He is a 1966-67 veteran of the 19th Combat Engineer Battalion with service in South Vietnam at Bong Son and Tam Quan. Gene is representative of hundreds of others who have worked, and continue to work, to sustain the close bonds of engineer service. And now, how Gene Kuentzler and others “made it happen” (in his own words)

I’d like to share how our 19th Combat Engineer Battalion Vietnam Association was formed, to encourage others who have not yet found their long-lost buddies how to organize their own unit alumni. It only takes one member to get things started, but as others get involved they’ll step up to take the various positions needed to keep things rolling along.

Before the internet was widely available, around 1980, I started trying to locate two 19th Engineer guys I served with in Vietnam: Master Sergeant Chuck Kisling, and Sp/4 Dick Yost. Every time our family took an out-of-town trip I’d check the phone book for their names. In 1991 at a veterans event in Indiana, four others who served in the 19th accidentally and separately ran into one another.

Wearing a t-shirt with 19th Engineers printed on the front by my daughter, I came across Jack Sawvel, B/19th (68-69), Marty Walker, A/19th (68-69), Bob Knutsen, Hq/19th (68-69) and Tom Ebrite, Hq/19th (67-68). Since we had gone to Vietnam and returned as individuals rather than as a complete unit, we discovered that many of us had carried similar feelings about our separate service, quietly to ourselves. Although we never talked about that service for many years, each of us had a lost buddy or two they wanted to find. We discussed ways to locate others and ideas on how to form a veteran association. To be frank, it was tough trying to locate members before the internet, but as that capability evolved, we had more tools to work with in searching for others.

Tom Ebrite began posting reunion notices in veteran magazines, other association members wrote to the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), requesting unit rosters from their service time period and company of assignment. This effort provided us the names of many others to contact. The NPRC is also the place to request a complete individual 201 file (service record).

Over the next few months, letters began pouring in with more and more names and addresses of 19th veterans and it was obvious that I was going to be volunteered by the others to be the “bush” for organizing everyone. By going through a long-ago packed away box of mementos, I discovered I had some unit information and many items which I felt would be of interest to share, so I decided to start a newsletter.

An old typewriter served to put together the first edition. It included a copy of our unit history, and articles from original 1967 issues of “Colt 45 News”, “Castle Courier”, “Kysu” magazine, and our “Seahorse News”. We also listed all the attached units to the 19th (including them in our group), and the final page was a relatively small roster with names and addresses of those found at that point in time. By the end of our first year we’d located 51 alumni. And, as a great personal reward for me, I eventually found the two guys I was initially searching for—Chuck Kisling and Dick Yost.

Our first reunion was at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri where many of us received our initial entry engineer training prior to going to Vietnam. During that reunion we voted two-year terms for President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Historian. We also created by-laws and a mission statement.

Our mission statement reads as follows: The 19th Combat Engineer Battalion, Association Vietnam is organized by past members of the battalion who served together in Vietnam. Our purpose is to (1) locate and bring together past members of the 19th, or those who were members of an attached unit, while that unit was attached to the 19th; (2) preserve and foster the spirit of fellowship among former members and provide an organization through which they may unite in bonds of comradeship; and (3) to commemorate the memory of 19th Engineer Battalion soldiers who gave their lives in service of our country.

To help spread the word about our association activities, we restored for our membership, the publication of the original unit’s newsletter, the “Seahorse News”, as a quarterly issue.

Although many in our group remember one another from their time together in Vietnam, we have had instances of a few “wanna-be” 19th veterans attempted to claim they served in or with the battalion. In order to screen applicants, we require each prospective member provide our Membership Committee with verification of service such
THE CASTLE

Strength, pride, heraldry, prestige, and honor. The castle remains the premier symbol of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The medieval castle is inseparably connected with fortifications and architecture. In heraldry, the castle and the tower are often used on coats of arms. In this country the term “castle” has been applied to the strongest of our early fortifications such as Castle Pickney in Charleston, South Carolina, and Castles Williams and Clinton in New York Harbor.

The Corps Castle is a highly stylized form without decoration or embellishment. The Army unofficially adopted the castle to appear on the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at West Point, all of whom were part of the Corps of Engineers until the Military Academy left the charge of the Chief of Engineers and came under the charge of the Army at large in 1866, also wore the castle on their cap beginning in 1841.

Subsequently, the castle appeared on the shoulder knot, on the saddlecloth, as a collar plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt plate in 1840. Soon afterwards the cadets at the Corps of Engineers’ epaulets and belt place.

We conduct a formal business meeting and also present a “slide show”, with some memories being seen for the first time in 40 years. On the last night we read the names of our fallen brothers, which are posted on our Memorial Castle. After the names are read, we ring a brass bell 19 times. The bell is from a San Francisco Cable Car, donated by Jose Diaz, who served in A company (68-69).

Also, our wives have created their own “bonding” and call themselves the “Seahorse Sweeties”. We’ve provided them with their own monogrammed shirts “Seahorse Sweeties of the 19th Engineers”. We couldn’t do it all without them!

Organizations in support

Besides groups such as those just discussed, there are much larger organizations such as the Army Engineer Association and the Society of American Military Engineers which offer their respective members various forums during which they may engage in activities fostering common bonds of engineer and military service in general. At the national level, these organizations offer programs and services focused directly or indirectly on Army Engineering, but it is at the local level where “the rubber meets the road”.

For example, the Meigs Chapter of the Army Engineer Association (AEA) located in Washington DC, has for years met on a regular schedule, normally in a monthly luncheon format, with invited guest speakers of special interest. Since the chapter is located in the Washington DC metropolitan region, it is attractive to both active and retired personnel associated with the Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). The current Chapter President, Colonel (Retired) Ed Gibson, followed his distinguished military career with an equally distinguished period of service as a Department of the Army Civilian on the USACE staff. Now long retired from active federal service, he joins others who earlier served in the position of Chapter President, as people who truly made a difference. The Meigs Chapter is by far the most successful AEA chapter with a relatively large annual membership. However, there are other AEA chapters located elsewhere throughout the United States, Germany and Korea, which have been successful from time to time in their own right.

Prior to the creation of the AEA in 1991, the Society of American Military Engineers (SAME) was the only major organization engaged in activities which helped bring together Army Engineers at local levels. Oriented on military engineering as a whole, SAME has always focused on the past and current day activities and accomplishments from not only within the U.S. Army, but from all other military services and industry as well.

We couldn’t do it all without them!

On the last night (of our reunion) we read the names of our fallen brothers, which are posted on our Memorial Castle. After the names are read, we ring a brass bell 19 times.”

as a DD-214 Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty and (perhaps) orders of assignment/ attachment to the 19th Engineers. I suppose the above may sound a bit harsh, but we truly value our time in service format with the 19th and wish to limit our activities accordingly.


We routinely conduct our annual reunion in September, always being held at the Roubidoux Spring Campground in Waynesville, Missouri near Fort Leonard Wood. Some attendees camp in motor homes, while others stay at local motels. Some have never missed a reunion in 16 years! These are “family oriented” events and members bring their wives, children and grandchildren, arriving from New York to California. Members bring their service memorabilia items, and we have tables set aside for photo albums. Many bring “Seahorse items” and donate them for a raffle. Every year the kids look forward to being involved with passing out raffle tickets, drawing the winning numbers and presenting the items.

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