



Army Landing Craft Utility vessel 2035, "Port Hudson," is shown off the coast of Yokohama, Japan, during a Combined/Joint Logistics Over the Shore (CJLOTS) exercise in March 2013. (Photo courtesy of 10th Transportation Battalion, 7th Sustainment Brigade)

# NCOs in the Army Watercraft Field Take Pride in Leading Unique, Versatile Units

*By Meghan Portillo*

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**A**rmy NCOs working on the water as vessel engineers and operators help form one of the Army's most important assets, but many individuals don't even know they exist.

The 10th Transportation Battalion, a unit of the 7th Sustainment Brigade based at Fort Eustis, Va., conducts port and vessel operations to move cargo from port to port or from ships anchored at sea to the shore. According to information from the U.S. Army Transportation School, Army watercraft move 90 percent of the U.S. forces' supplies and equipment for operations throughout the globe.

The vessels' flat bottoms allow them to operate in shallow water. Soldiers can build a temporary pier, use a floating crane or simply drop the vessel's ramp onto a beach to unload equipment and supplies. This ability

gives the Army the flexibility it needs to react to any situation. Sgt. 1st Class Robert Plank, the first mate — second in command — aboard one of the 97th Transportation Company's seven Landing Craft Utility vessels, said that whether it is sending tanks to Kuwait, ammunition to Afghanistan or relief supplies to the site of a natural disaster, the battalion plays a key role in supporting the force.

"That's the greatest thing that sets Army watercraft apart from the Coast Guard, the Navy and the Marine Corps' boats," Plank said, comparing the Army's flat-bottomed vessels to the majority of the other branches' vessels with round or "V-shaped" hulls. "We can go where they can't go. For instance, the Philippines just got destroyed by that tsunami. There is no fixed port there whatsoever anymore. But if we can get into 5 to 7 feet of water, we can get stuff on the ground and save lives."



## Unknown to the rest of the Army

The “Waterborne” Battalion is the most deployed battalion in the Army, said Command Sgt. Maj. Jerome Smalls, command sergeant major of the 10th Transportation Battalion. Even so, the existence of Army watercraft appears to be unknown to the rest of the transportation field, let alone the rest of the Army, he said.

“I’ve been in transport for 23 years. I never knew these units existed until I got here,” Smalls said. “I didn’t even know we had boats until I showed up and realized, ‘Wow, that’s my unit!’”

When Plank re-enlisted in 1999, he said he was looking for a military occupational specialty that would allow his family to remain settled. His retention NCO recommended the watercraft field because there are few destinations for the MOS — Fort Eustis; Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, Va.; Hawaii — and Soldiers often remain in a unit for 10 or more years.

“What is that?” Plank remembered asking. “The only thing I could think of was watching those old Army commercials from the 90s with the little river boat going through the jungles of Florida — Special Forces guys. Those are the only Army boats I ever knew about. When I got to Fort Eustis and actually saw all these big gray vessels out here, I thought, ‘Wow, the Army actually has full-blown boats!’ I’ve been here ever since.”

## The small tug: Enlisted only

The battalion utilizes several types of vessels, all with the flat-bottom shape that allows them to operate in shallow water. The largest is the Logistics Support Vessel, or LSV, referred to as the “Cadillac” of the battalion. With an

overall length of 273 feet and a crew of 23 enlisted Soldiers and six officers, it is used to transport heavy, oversized cargo to destinations around the world. Another vessel used is the 174-foot long Landing Craft Utility vessel, or LCU, which has a crew of 13 enlisted Soldiers and two warrant officers. The LCUs are also oceangoing vessels and are usually used to transport vehicles and other cargo from ships to shore and to coastal areas unreachable by larger vessels. Smaller vessels, referred to as large and small tugs, are designed for coastal towing operations.

The small tugs, manned completely by enlisted personnel with a crew of 10, are used for towing within harbor areas and have the ability to tow from the back, the side and the front of the vessel. Other uses include firefighting, docking large vessels and towing segments of causeway to build floating piers at unimproved ports. The tugs are prepositioned at ports all over the world, but can also be towed overseas or deployed aboard the larger vessels if needed.

“Basically, our company works like a packing firm,” said Sgt. 1st Class Michael Vanasse, the vessel master aboard one of 73rd Transportation Company’s small tugs. “We are a floating-craft unit, which means that with the large tug, the [floating] crane and the two small tugs, we are self-deploying.”

To self-deploy, the crew would use the floating crane to pick up the small tug, then attach the tug on top of the crane. The crane and tug could then be towed overseas by a large tug or loaded aboard a semi-submersible vessel. This allows the tugs to deploy wherever they are needed.

“This job is a lot of fun,” Vanasse said. “You get to see a lot of neat things, having the dolphins swim next to us, a lot of beautiful sunrises when you are out there. But it’s actually a very dangerous job — very stressful. When you are towing 1,000 feet between two little buoys out there, it is not easy. Bobbing back and forth, when you’re in 3- to 5-foot swells, this boat rocks like there is no tomorrow. ... The tug boat is probably one of the most dangerous jobs in the boat field because of the amount of line handling that we do.”

## Tactical and technical experts

NCOs aboard the vessels ask a lot of their Soldiers, and the Soldiers rise to the challenge.

“In the short time I have been here, I see that these Soldiers do a phenomenal job, and our NCOs are phenomenal leaders,” Smalls said. “I get blown away every day by what



Staff Sgt. Gary Pugh, the junior marine engineer aboard one of 73rd Transportation Company’s small tugs, discusses the firefighting equipment worn by Pvt. Timothy Hays, a member of the fire crew. “As a part of our weekly drills, it’s his responsibility to get dressed out in two minutes and be able to respond and fight that fire — whether that fire is on this or another vessel,” Pugh said. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

they know — their technical experience. You can talk with a specialist on that boat who will sound like he is a sergeant major because he knows so much about his vessel. ... He can tell you everything from the bottom of that vessel to the top.”

Enlisted Soldiers work aboard the vessels as 88K watercraft operators and 88L watercraft engineers. Watercraft operators are part of the piloting team and are responsible for navigation and cargo operations. Watercraft engineers are responsible for maintenance and auxiliary equipment on the vessels. Both MOSs are in need of more Soldiers, Smalls said.

“It’s a challenging field,” Smalls said. “It’s hard to get into, and it’s hard to maintain.”

Injured Soldiers often reclassify to 88K or 88L for the benefit of a low-impact job, but they quickly learn that Soldiers with more experience have an enormous advantage. Smalls said it is best for Soldiers to classify as 88K or 88L within their first couple of years in the Army.

“For our unit, the technical aspect is probably the most important,” Smalls said. “You can be good at kicking in doors and all that good stuff, but if you do not understand a technical piece of your job, you are really useless to this organization.”

As in many other fields that require Soldiers to put their lives on the line, crewmembers face stressful situations daily and depend on one another to be good at their jobs.

“It’s just like in Iraq for ground transporters,” said 1st Sgt. Billy Perdue, first sergeant for 97th Transportation Company. “Out there on that ocean, if you make a mistake, it’s unforgiving. It’s awesome when you go out there with these guys and you see them work. You understand that if something goes sideways out there, you are in some trouble unless you are prepared and understand what is going on.”

Sgt. 1st Class Jonathon Plake, the first mate on an LCU in 97th Transportation Company, agreed.

“No re-dos. You can’t pull over to the side of the road and regroup,” he said.

Should someone get injured on a smaller vessel, a junior-level medic is often the only healthcare professional aboard. Each Soldier must take it upon him or herself to become an expert in their duties.

“I think all of us take a lot of pride in our versatility and in the varieties of expertise we have in the Army watercraft field,” said Sgt. Derrick McElroy, a boatswain — one of the senior crewmen on deck — aboard one of 73rd Transportation Company’s small tugs. “Some of



Sgt. 1st Class Michael Vanasse is the “skip,” or vessel master, aboard one of 73rd Transportation Company’s small tugs. The small tug, manned completely by enlisted personnel, is designed for coastal towing operations. It is used to build temporary piers at unimproved ports and to assist in docking larger vessels. “When you are towing 1,000 feet between two little buoys out there, it is not easy,” Vanasse said. “Bobbing back and forth, when you’re in 3- to 5-foot swells, this boat rocks like there is no tomorrow.” (Photo by Meghan Portillo)



Spc. Heather Hroch, a deckhand aboard one of 73rd Transportation Company’s small tugs, prepares the forward storage room for a mission. The heaviest cargo is secured at the bottom so that if it does fall, it doesn’t go far. “Just on the missions I’ve done on this boat, I see dolphins all the time,” she said. “That’s the cool thing about being an 88K. You get to see the sights, whereas the engineers are stuck in the engine room most of the time.” (Photo by Meghan Portillo)





Sgt. Ryan Light, a junior marine engineer aboard one of 97th Transportation Company's Landing Craft Utility vessels, examines a tank level indicator, or TLI, that shows the amount of sewage being held on the vessel. "The TLI went out," Light said. "We pulled it apart and found that this transformer in here is blown." As part of their normal duties, engineers monitor the vessel's fuel, oil, sewage and drinking water. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

the similar-sized vessels in the Navy have much higher manning requirements than we do."

Though the Navy also operates landing craft vessels to transport equipment and troops to the shore, the NCOs were confident in claiming that more is expected of their Soldiers than of enlisted sailors in the Navy.

"Years ago, when the watercraft field was up for debate on whether the Army was even going to keep us or not, they looked at the Navy and asked if they could man our boats," Plank said. "They couldn't, because they would need a larger crew to do what we do as a crew of 12. ... So that idea got squashed pretty quickly. That kind of made me feel good — the Army finally got that one-up on the Navy."

### Certifying above grade

Extensive training is required to make sure each crewmember is qualified for his or her position, and the schooling is challenging. Plake explained that the courses at the U.S. Army Transportation School's Maritime Training Department at Fort Eustis are the only military courses that lead directly to a civilian license to drive a vessel.

"We have to pay for the license, but we don't need any additional training to receive it," Plake said. "There are officers in the Coast Guard and the Navy who can't even get those certifications without further training."

Both watercraft operators and engineers are required to obtain certifications and licensing at each skill level. Certification is gained through academic instruction, whereas licensing is gained through unit training and Duty Performance Tests based on vessel-specific tasks.

"If you are a sergeant first class but are not certified to grade, I really can't use you," Smalls said. "So it's really important to stay up on your certifications and to stay motivated, because every five years, your certifications go away. If you don't have that certification, you are just a warm body that can't be used."

The Soldiers in the battalion often surpass the high expectations set for them. Several are even certified above grade, creating a unique dynamic aboard the vessel.

"For vessel units, if there is somebody who is more technically proficient, we acknowledge that and send them to school to be certified and licensed above grade," Perdue said. "With that certification, he can serve at a higher grade, but only while on the vessel."

For example, an E-4, who would normally certify at skill level 10, may certify at skill level 30. That Soldier would be a specialist working as a staff sergeant, serving directly below his first mate. He may even have an E-5 working below him who is certified at skill level 20.

Though Soldiers who are certified above grade do not wear anything different on their uniform, the crew knows who is working in which position, Perdue said. Crewmembers recognize that, because lives are at stake, it is important to give authority to the most capable individual.

"In the Army, we all know rank is very important," Plank said. "Could a specialist tell a sergeant certain things? No. But when it comes to operating that vessel, that [skill level] 30 is in charge of that [skill level] 20. In my experience, it puts some stresses in there. But in the end, the mission is accomplished, and no disrespect or hard feelings are ever shared."

### Leading the experts

Despite working on water instead of land, being an NCO in the Army watercraft field is like being an NCO anywhere else, Smalls said.

"You enforce standards and discipline," he said. "You lead from the front, making sure Soldiers are doing the right thing. You make sure Soldiers are trained and held accountable for their actions. You make sure the families and the Soldiers both stay resilient."

Perdue explained that, as a first sergeant, his job is to take care of his Soldiers and manage the company, attending to the things his Soldiers shouldn't have to worry about because they are busy on the vessels. He



Spc. Adam Hartman examines a map in the bridge — the command center — of one of 97th Transportation Company's Landing Craft Utility vessels. Hartman is certified above grade at skill-level 20, and operates as an E-5 while on the vessel. The vessel has two electronic chart systems, but in the event the electronic systems fail, the crew is also prepared to navigate using a map and compass. "Spc. Hartman has responsibilities as the vessel's quartermaster, or navigator," said Sgt. 1st Class Robert Plank, the vessel's first mate. "He is a genius when it comes to plotting our course on those paper charts." (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

said that, even though his role in the organization does not require him to be an expert in watercraft operation or maintenance, he must learn about his Soldiers' jobs in order to understand the issues they face and take care of their welfare.

"It tends to get a little bit tedious when I get on the vessel and they're like, 'What are you doing?' They have to explain things to me, and they are not used to that," said Perdue, who spent the majority of his career as an 88M motor transport operator. "But how could I profi-

ciently take care of my Soldiers if I don't understand the importance of their jobs and what they do out here?"

With every word, the NCOs expressed pride in their Soldiers and in their units' capabilities. They know they are leading younger Soldiers in a job that truly makes a difference in the Army.

"When you see all the pieces come together, it's thrilling to know that I'm a part of this," Plank said. "A lot of things couldn't happen without our Soldiers and our boats. It's pretty cool." ■



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