

CAREERS



Rick Benoit, diver

JOHN BULL

Cool Careers

These professionals found
their dream jobs in the Corps

By Matt Alderton

THE U.S. ARMY CORPS of Engineers designs, builds and maintains critical public infrastructure. But there's a lot more to the Corps than its name suggests. For one, it doesn't just execute projects in the United States; rather, it has customers in more than 130

countries around the world. Nor is its workforce limited to soldiers; the majority of its 37,000 employees are actually civilians. And finally, not all of those employees are engineers; in fact, many of them have occupations that have nothing to do with engineering at all. Here, for example, are four individuals whose jobs within the Corps are as unexpected as they are exciting:

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SHAZLI MAW

RICK BENOIT, DIVER

NORTH ATLANTIC DIVISION

Some people wear a suit and tie to work. Rick Benoit wears a wetsuit — the standard uniform when working in an underwater office, which he often does as an emergency management specialist and dive program manager within the USACE North Atlantic Division's Regional Readiness and Contingency Operation Branch at Fort Hamilton, N.Y.

Benoit learned to scuba dive while he was in the U.S. Navy, after which he studied journalism at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass. Although he began his career as a journalist in the 1980s, he later traded words for water when he became a diving instructor for the state of Maine, which employed him to teach safe diving to commercial fishermen.

That experience ultimately led him to USACE, where he and other divers perform underwater inspections of Army-owned waterfront facilities and Corps-managed assets including dams,

bridges, piers and wharves.

"We do underwater inspections everywhere from the Marshall Islands, where it's 80 degrees and sunny, to places like the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, where we're working in the middle of a polar vortex," explained Benoit, who said divers may also operate underwater robots that assist with searches and recoveries of sunken ships, conduct in-water environmental and biological surveys, perform dives looking for unexploded bombs or ammunition and teach diving to engineers and scientists.

"Every day I've come to work at the Corps has been something different," continued Benoit, who said the highlight of his career so far took place in 2016 and 2017, when he spent 10 months on a floating barge overseeing dive safety for a multinational team of partners that was repairing and rehabilitating the Mosul Dam in Iraq. "There's always another mission and a new challenge."

KELLY ELDRIDGE, ARCHAEOLOGIST

ALASKA DISTRICT

Alaska is a living, breathing time capsule. As an archaeologist for the USACE Alaska District, it's Kelly Eldridge's job to uncover it, then protect and preserve its contents.

"Any time there's a federal undertaking, section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires the federal government to make sure it does not destroy or adversely impact any significant cultural resources," said Eldridge, who is based in Anchorage. "My job is to identify historic properties, evaluate them, assess the effects that federal undertakings will have on them, and, if there's going to be adverse effects, mitigate them."

These "federal undertakings" include civil works, environmental cleanup and military construction projects, while "cultural resources" encompass historic sites and artifacts, such as those related to Russian and American colonization, the Alaska Gold Rush, the Aleutian Campaign of World War II, the Cold War or any of Alaska's 229 federally recognized native tribes.

It's an ideal job for someone who's unquenchably curious about other communities and cultures — which Eldridge is. She has been since at least the sixth grade, when a geography assignment ignited an interest in anthropology.

"I did a report on Papua New Guinea, which has more than 800 indigenous languages and an amazing amount of cultural variability. That was the first time I'd ever thought about cultures outside of those I'd been raised with," said Eldridge, who earned bachelor's and master's degrees in anthropology, and is currently working on her Ph.D. "Now I get to travel around the state and learn about the history of tribal people who have been living in Alaska for thousands of years. How cool is that?"

Admittedly, pretty cool — especially when you consider that her office often is an inflatable boat, all-terrain vehicle, turboprop or helicopter. "I can't tell you how many mountains and cliffs I've hiked up for this job," Eldridge laughed.



USACE ALASKA DISTRICT

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DENA DICKERSON, RESEARCH BIOLOGIST

U.S. ARMY ENGINEER RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CENTER

It's difficult to imagine someone loving their co-workers more than Dena Dickerson loves hers. That's because her colleagues consist not only of fellow humans — scientists and engineers, mostly — but also various animal species, including sea turtles, sturgeon, shark, manatees, whales, dolphins, crocodiles, snakes and birds, to name a few.

"I was fascinated with animals and nature from a very early age," said Dickerson, a research biologist in the Environmental Laboratory of the Engineer Research & Development Center in Vicksburg, Miss. "Mother figured out that an easy and cheap babysitter would be to take me to the (zoo) for me to watch the animals and she could read a book. Even as a small toddler, I could happily watch the animals for hours."

These days, Dickerson doesn't just watch animals. Rather, she protects them: It's her job to develop environmentally friendly solutions that allow civil works projects to proceed in ways that

preserve threatened and endangered species. For example, she works with engineers to develop protocols for when and how shipping canals should be dredged to prevent harming sea turtles that live and feed there.

Sometimes, she has the opposite objective: developing solutions to eradicate invasive or nuisance species. For example, she used her skills as a certified animal trainer and behavior consultant to develop a program that uses trained border collies to chase nuisance birds like seagulls, pelicans and geese away from USACE locks and dams.

For Dickerson — who has a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in biology and math — every day is an opportunity to do what she loves while making a difference in the world of conservation. "I feel that through my job I may have been able to make a small difference in protecting some species of animals and the environment," she said.

HANS HONERLAH, RADIOLOGICAL HEALTH PHYSICIST

BALTIMORE DISTRICT

When you consider how many comic books feature radiation-induced superheroes — Spider-Man, the Hulk and Daredevil, to name a few — it's a wonder that Hans Honerlah doesn't have superpowers himself. Fortunately, he doesn't need them; he protects people and the environment every day just by doing his job.

That's because Honerlah is a radiological health physicist in the USACE Baltimore District. There, he provides radiological expertise and oversight to miscellaneous Corps projects that carry radiological risks or concerns, including projects to decommission nuclear reactors, clean up radioactive waste and provide disaster response in areas where there are radiological assets.

For example, he has worked on Department of Energy sites that were contaminated during the making of the first atomic bombs,

supported Army activities associated with depleted uranium and assisted the Navy with evaluating assets that were contaminated during the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan.

On those and similar projects, his duties include navigating regulatory issues, assessing radiation in the environment and developing solutions that keep people and the environment safe in the presence of radiation.

"When radiological issues are identified on project sites, many people's first reaction is fear," explained Honerlah, an Air Force veteran who joined USACE in 1995 after earning a bachelor's degree in health professions. At that time, he was one of only three health physicists in the Corps. Now, he's one of 15. "My biggest challenge typically is teaching people to understand radiation, not just fear it."



CHRISTOPHER AUGSBURGER