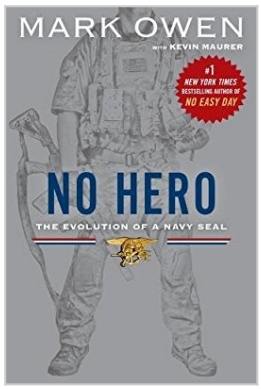

No Hero: The Evolution of a Navy Seal

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Featuring stories from the training ground to the battlefield, *No Hero* offers readers a never-before-seen close-up view of the experiences and values that make Mark Owen and the SEALs he served with capable of executing the missions that make history.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Owen emphasizes the selflessness and service of his fellow SEALs, along with the lessons he learned, in a book that is sure to appeal to the many fans of in-the-trenches special forces memoirs.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Simple, well-told stories that will interest general readers and certainly anyone contemplating a career in special operations.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Owen's writing is genuine and insightful....*No Hero* may have been intended for the next generation of SEALs, but the book's lessons can also be useful to civilians.”—Associated Press

Praise for No Easy Day

“This harrowing, minute-by-minute account by one of the highly trained members of Navy SEAL Team Six is narrative nonfiction at its most gripping....*No Easy Day* puts you right there for every tense moment.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Gripping....There is no better illustration in *No Easy Day* that SEALs are ruthless pragmatists. They think fast. They adapt to whatever faces them. They do what they have to do.”—*The New York Times*

“[Mark Owen] has given us a brave retelling of one of the most important events in U.S. military history.”—*People*

“Make no mistake: *No Easy Day* is an important historic document.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“A remarkably intimate glimpse into what motivates men striving to join an elite fighting force like the SEALS—and what keeps them there.”—Associated Press

About the Author
MARK OWEN, author of *No Easy Day* and *No Hero*, is a former member of the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Development Group, commonly known as SEAL Team Six. In his many years as a Navy SEAL, he has participated in hundreds of missions around the globe, including the rescue of Captain Richard Phillips in the Indian Ocean in 2009. Owen was a team leader on Operation Neptune Spear in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 1, 2011, which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. Owen was one of the first men through the door on the third floor of the terrorist mastermind's hideout, where he witnessed Bin Laden's death.

KEVIN MAURER has covered special operations forces for nine years. He has been embedded with the Special Forces in Afghanistan six times, spent a month in 2006 with special operations units in east Africa, and has embedded with U.S. forces in Iraq and Haiti. He is the author of four books, including several about special operations.

Publisher's Note

The author submitted this manuscript for review by the Defense Office of Prepublication & Security Review (DOPSR) at the United States Department of Defense. Some material not essential to the book was removed or rewritten during the review process. In some cases no agreement between the author and DOPSR could be reached, and in those instances the passages in question have been redacted. The names of all individuals in the book have been changed for their security.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.

PROLOGUE

Forty Names

I was home in Virginia Beach on standby when the texts started coming in.

It was August 2011 and the city was packed with tourists. Every day I drove by people on vacation, heading to the ocean for a day on the beach. I stayed away from the Oceanfront—the area that runs parallel to the beaches—where the T-shirt shops and mini golf courses attract sunburned vacationers. The tourists were in a beach state of mind, but all I could think about was Afghanistan and my upcoming deployment.

The dog and pony show of dignitaries and political leaders was finally over. Now the prospect of going back overseas had me straining against a leash like a dog, ready to get back to work. But first I had to survive standby.

Standby was the worst.

It was one "spin" after another. We got a weekly brief on the latest intelligence from the world's hot spots, which actually made things worse. We all wanted to be working, conducting actual missions. But during standby, all we could do was plan for missions that would probably never happen. Overseas it was common to get a mission, put together a plan, and execute it a few hours later. But most of the operations we were involved in during standby were spur-of-the-moment contingency operations that would eventually disappear. We'd spin up, plan the operation, only to spin back down as Washington decided on another option, or the hot spot cooled off. Making it worse, we were living at home, but we had very little time actually being at home with family. We had to keep our families at arm's length because we never knew when we'd suddenly be gone. I'd stick them in the same compartment in my brain that I used during deployments. For me, I was gone during standby, even if my parents could call me on the phone.

I know it was the same for every teammate. We all just wanted to get into the action.

It was early evening and I'd just finished dinner. We weren't supposed to drink or party on standby. The last thing anybody wanted to do was show up drunk for a possible mission. I was looking at a lazy night in front of the TV when I received a series of text messages about a helicopter crash. The messages all read the same.

"There's a CH-47 down in Afghanistan. Ours?"

It was what we call "rumint," a mix of real news and rumor that oftentimes turned into bullshit.

Unfortunately, this time it would turn out to be true.

I had to see only one text before my mind started turning. If it was true, it didn't matter if it was SEALs, Delta, or Special Forces. They were teammates in the same fight. I called a good friend of mine who was on the squadron that was overseas. He wasn't with his team because he was home taking care of his mother, who was sick. I thought he might know something.

No answer.

I kept scrolling through my phone, calling anyone who might have information. Then I got the confirmation.

"It was ours."

The news hit me like an electric charge. In my head, I could see all of my buddies in that squadron. My cell phone buzzed as the news spread. The same message kept coming up.

"It was ours."

My stomach hurt. I couldn't sit still. I paced in my kitchen, my head down, scrolling through texts, waiting for more information, but dreading each new piece. I knew my teammates had all volunteered countless times to be in that exact place, doing what they were doing. It could have easily been me in the helicopter. Hell, I'd been in a helicopter crash a few months earlier. It was harder being back at home waiting for word, a feeling most of our wives and girlfriends knew all too well.

After a while, I couldn't be alone. I grabbed a twelve-pack of beer from the fridge and walked down the street to a fellow SEAL's house. We were going to need a few beers tonight.

The sun was fading and the streets were deserted. As I walked the few blocks to my buddy's house, I looked around the neighborhood. The development was new, with few trees. Large brick houses sat on manicured lawns. On the weekends, I watched my neighbors stress over their lawns, mowing and manicuring the bushes to perfection. It made the streets look peaceful.

Most of my neighbors were oblivious to what I or any of the guys who came to my house did when they were at work. As I walked past the houses, I was sure my neighbors were thinking about summer vacation plans, bills, or what baseball game they were going to watch that night. It struck me how wide the chasm was between what was going on in Afghanistan and what was happening at home. I knew my neighbors cared and supported the troops, but they had no idea what it was like and how often my teammates risked their lives. The war was largely absent from daily life at home except for the families left behind to wait for their sailor or soldier to return.

They would never understand the amount of sacrifice being performed by our military on a daily basis. There was nothing I could do to change that, and tonight, it really didn't matter. The sacrifice was made. Now it was left to us to make sure it wasn't forgotten. The disconnect between those of us who put our lives on the line and the rest of the country was never as stark for me as it was on that quiet night.

When I got to my buddy's house, he opened the door with the same pained look on his face as I had. He just nodded and motioned me to come inside. I walked silently to his refrigerator and dropped off the beer. I grabbed two bottles and we quickly retreated to his back deck, leaving his family alone in the living room.

I popped off the top of my beer and took a long drink. The beer didn't taste like anything. I was just seeking the effect. My buddy silently drank his and scrolled through the messages on his phone. We sat for a while.

Neither of us spoke. The helicopter was full of our friends, and they were all lost. It was a paralyzing feeling because all we wanted was to act, but there was nothing we could do.

The sun had finally set, and it was completely dark on the deck. I could barely make out my buddy's face in the shadows. He didn't bother to turn on the back light. I think we were both glad for the darkness. It made the grieving a little easier.

For months politicians and the media had been celebrating the SEAL teams after the Osama bin Laden mission. I don't know how many times I'd heard the word "hero" thrown around. "Hero" is not a word we use easily, and it had gotten to the point where it had lost all meaning in our community. Everyone was a hero now.

The weight of the losses didn't really hit in earnest until names started to appear on my iPhone screen.

We tipped back beer after beer as we recounted stories about the guys on the helicopter. We both tried hard to remember the best stories, the funny stories, about each guy. There was no shortage. Humor gets us through the toughest and most stressful moments. We reached back in our memories for anything that would bring up a laugh. My buddy was inside grabbing a couple more beers when a new name popped up on my phone.

Ray.

It hit me like a gut punch. I set the phone down on the table and started to pace along the wooden boards of the deck. I met Ray for the first time in 1999 on the beach in San Diego. We were both about to start BUD/S, the SEAL training course. He'd been to college in Louisiana. He completed a year before giving in to his desire to be a SEAL. I had made it through college before I'd finally succumbed to the same lifelong itch. I remember standing next to Ray in the sand, looking at the surf, and listening to the instructors yell at us. He looked determined, focused. All the noise and chaos didn't seem to affect him at all.

Ray came across as a bit quiet until you got to know him. Unlike me, he was a natural athlete. He had been a soccer player in high school, and he had that lean physique. Over time I would see Ray naturally excel at most of the physical challenges that the instructors could throw at him. What made him so solid was his consistency. He always finished whatever we were doing—a swim, a beach run, the obstacle course—at or near the front of the pack, no matter the conditions.

We both graduated BUD/S in December 1999. Ray was stationed at SEAL Team Three. I was assigned to SEAL Team Five. Since we were both based in San Diego, we saw each other as often as possible. However, with our busy schedules, we were usually on different sides of the globe.

Ray had a black cat's nine lives.

Some of his close calls had become legend. Ray got shot in the neck a few months before he screened for selection and training, or S&T. He was on a six-month deployment to Guam with SEAL Team Three. He and some of his friends had gone to a bar to celebrate Christmas. After a minor altercation with some locals, Ray and his fellow SEALs decided to call it a night. They climbed into a taxi and were headed back to the base when one of the guys from the bar, hanging out of the window of a nearby car, opened fire.

The bullets smashed into the taxi's windows. One of the bullets struck Ray in the neck, traveling clean through. Larry, another SEAL in the taxi, got hit in the ear. The bullet came out of his nose. The taxi driver rushed them both to the hospital. Ray stanched the blood with his shirt and walked into the emergency room for treatment.

A couple months later he showed up for S&T. He was in my class and we made it through together, but just like after BUD/S, we wound up assigned to different squadrons.

Now Ray was dead. I still didn't believe it.

My buddy came back with another round of beers, shaking me out of my funk. We sat for a few more minutes silently. We both had our phones out, scrolling through the messages. But I was still thinking about Ray.

"Hey," I said. "You ever see that footage of Ray in Afghanistan?"

My buddy gave a knowing chuckle.

"If it were me, I'd be dead," my buddy said.

Most mornings when we got into work and checked our email, there would be an After Action Review (AAR) waiting for us. An AAR is a report, sometimes including video footage from overhead drone coverage, generated by everyone involved in a mission. Everyone from the helicopter pilots to the intelligence analysts to the SEALs discussed all the things that went right and all the things that went wrong during the night's mission. These AARs were distributed within the community so that, whether you were on the mission or not, you could learn the same lessons that the team on the ground had learned. It also gave us a lot to talk about after a particularly interesting mission.

Ray's mission was a must-see. Ray's squadron had been in Afghanistan. His troop was assaulting a cluster of buildings behind a mud wall. Ray was one of the lead snipers and had climbed on top of a nearby building overlooking the compound where the Taliban commander was holed up, so that he could provide cover for the assaulters.

As I watched the footage, I could make out the assaulters moving silently toward the target compound. I had done the same thing a million times, so I knew exactly how those guys felt. I was still getting excited just watching them. I knew their senses were on fire, listening for an opening door or the crunch of stones under a pair of Taliban Cheetah sneakers. I caught myself scanning the walls of the compound looking for some movement.

As Ray set up to cover the assaulters, he took each step with care. I'm sure every creak of the thin mud roof gave him pause, knowing a wrong move would give away his position to people who could be sleeping in the house.

As the assault force closed in on the target, a door directly under Ray's position was thrown open from the inside. Then the distinct shape of an RPG—the thin tube with a cone-shaped warhead on the front—poked out. There was a brief pause, maybe a few seconds. I guessed someone inside Ray's building had heard him on the roof or had heard the assaulters patrolling the compound. The Taliban fighter was probably trying to make out the approaching SEALs in the dark. Seconds later, the rocket raced out, cutting a path right in front of the assaulters and detonating some distance away.

The shock wave from the backblast created by the RPG was powerful enough to cause the mud roof to collapse. The middle of the roof opened like a giant mouth and swallowed Ray, dropping him in the middle of the house.

Ray landed on a heap of broken wooden beams and mud. He immediately saw five Taliban fighters through the dust cloud, holding AK-47 assault rifles and wearing chest racks carrying extra magazines. A few were

lying on the floor, stunned by the RPG's backblast.

Ray had only a few seconds to make a decision: stay in the room and shoot the five fighters or get out of the house before his fellow SEALs, who might not have seen him fall, opened fire on the building.

Ray decided to get out of the house.

He spotted a window and crashed through it. On the footage, I saw Ray fall out of the window in a heap, landing at the base of the wall. Ray yelled to his teammates, identifying himself as one of the good guys. He hoped his fellow assaulters would realize he wasn't one of the Taliban. The footage showed Ray rolling away from the window and calmly pulling out a grenade. Crouching under the lip of the windowsill, he tossed the grenade into the house. From the drone feed, I thought Ray looked calm. All of his movements were smooth and fluid. He had a way of making something crazy look easy.

Ray rolled away from the open window and dove for some cover. The grenade exploded and sent a cloud of debris out of the hole in the roof. Inside the house, the shrapnel cut down the fighters.

Ray, like many of us, had served his country for more than a decade in some pretty hairy conditions. His actions reinforced the concepts we live by for the whole team, and I know that watching Ray operate at the peak of his ability made us more effective and saved lives down the line.

As I sat on my buddy's deck, I wished I'd had one more chance to have a beer with Ray. For the rest of the night, we talked about our fallen brothers and tried to forget everything else. It didn't matter how they died. It mattered only that they were gone.

Days later, details started to come in about the crash. It was important that we learned from it, like we did from Ray's mission. The lost guys had been part of a quick reaction force that night. The QRF is a standby unit, often waiting near a mission, that is ready to act as reinforcement at a moment's notice, if things turn bad.

Army Rangers had gone out to hit a target in Jaw-e-Mekh Zareen village in Wardak Province's Tangi Valley. The SEALs were originally offered the target but passed because illumination from the moon was high that night and they thought it would be safer to wait for darker conditions. But when the SEALs passed, the Rangers decided to hit the target instead.

They were after a senior Taliban leader. A firefight broke out almost as soon as the Rangers landed. Taliban fighters from up and down the valley came to defend the compound. The fight raged for at least two hours before a small group of Taliban started to flee. The Rangers called the QRF for help. They feared the group that had taken off included the commander and his bodyguards, and they didn't want to lose him.

As the helicopter—call sign Extortion Seventeen—came in to help the Rangers, an RPG from one of the Taliban fighters struck the aft rotor assembly. Ray and the guys didn't have a chance.

Two days later, commanders in Afghanistan claimed that the fighter who had fired the rocket-propelled grenade was killed by an F-16 bomb strike.

That didn't make it any easier.

Later, rumors about an elaborate trap started to circulate. There was talk that the Taliban had lured the SEALs to the target and shot down the helicopter in retaliation for the Osama bin Laden raid. But whatever the truth, the reality is that the downing of Extortion Seventeen was a tragedy. When the QRF is called in,

it’s almost always because something went wrong. Being the QRF is dangerous. There is no element of surprise, especially when you arrive in a CH-47 Chinook, which is essentially a flying school bus. Sometimes, there isn’t enough skill or luck in the world when it is your time.

As the details rolled in that night, I knew a bunch more teammates had lost their lives in Afghanistan. Thirty-eight service members were killed when an RPG hit Extortion Seventeen. More than a dozen were SEALs. The crash was the deadliest day of the decade-long war in Afghanistan. The sight of the flag-draped caskets on the way to the memorial services is forever etched into my mind.

Of course, Ray isn’t the only friend who was lost during my fourteen-year SEAL career. I have forty names in my cell phone contact list that I’ll never call again. There have been many more than just forty SEALs killed since September 11, but these were the forty whom I was lucky enough to have known and served with.

We’ll never relive the glory days of past deployments over a beer. No more cookouts or training trips. All forty guys are more than coworkers or friends. They are brothers. Every time I scroll through my contacts, I’ll run across a name and instantly relive a memory.

We all arrived in San Diego with the same dream. It was a bond that put a kid from the backcountry of Alaska on the same page as a surfer from California and a pig farmer from the Midwest who saw the ocean for the first time on the first day of training.

I chased that dream from high school in Alaska to BUD/S. Once I got my trident, the iconic badge SEALs wear on their uniforms, I tried to excel at every task. For me, and for many of my teammates, being a SEAL was just the start of our dream. Being a great teammate, pushing to constantly improve, and being there for the guys to your left and right became a kind of religion for us.

I never became numb to the loss. For me it stung more and more as my career progressed. My teammates sacrificed everything for their country. They spent months away from family and loved ones, long hours suffering in the cold mountains of Afghanistan, and some, like my buddy Ray, paid the ultimate price. Not one of them thought of himself as a hero.

I was faced with a decision.

I’d spent fourteen years trying to be the best SEAL I could be. But now I either had to reenlist and stay in the Navy long enough to earn my pension—another six years—or get out and find a new challenge.

The decision weighed on me like nothing else in my life. Being a SEAL on one of the nation’s premier ..... teams was more than just my job. It was my identity and one of the chief ways I brought order and meaning to my life. It wasn’t like I could go overseas and run missions part-time. I knew once I left, the train was going to leave me far behind, and most of what I’d known my entire adult life would change forever.

As I wrestled with the decision, I spent nights examining my career and the events and lessons that came to define me. I ultimately decided to leave the Navy and forge a new path. In doing that, I had to reinvent myself.

The publication of the book thrust me into a world I had never been in before, one where millions of people I had never met suddenly wanted to talk to me and hear what I had to say. Most of the people I met were supportive, but there was criticism as well. It was a new challenge, one that I couldn’t be sure my SEAL training had prepared me for.

It took me thirteen deployments in thirteen years to become the operator I was when I left the Navy. Getting off the speeding train was difficult partly because I was heading into a world where I had no idea if my skills would apply.

When people hear about SEALs, they assume we're superheroes who jump out of airplanes and shoot bad guys. We do both those things, but those skills don't define us. When we make mistakes, we try again and again and again until we get it right. We're not superheroes. We're just committed.

There is no "secret sauce," but there is a lot of hard work, dedication, and drive.

The reality is that SEALs don't think of themselves as special. We simply strive to do the most basic tasks extraordinarily well. One of the best leaders I know used to challenge his junior guys to be engaged and part of the team.

"At what level are you willing to participate?" he'd ask.

"All in, all the time," was the only acceptable answer.

We've learned, often the hard way, how to excel. Excelling means communicating with each other, testing, leading, listening, studying, and teaching, day after day, year after year. It means not just being able to trek miles through the mountains of Afghanistan carrying sixty pounds on your back, but also letting others call you out on your mistakes. And getting called out by your teammates is often harder than spending hours in the cold surf.

As I faced new challenges in my first year outside the Navy, I spent a lot of time going back to the lessons I learned during my SEAL career, and the moments and people whom I know I will carry with me the rest of my life. What I realized is that the important moments for me are not the moments that made headlines back home. They are the missions that have no name, in which my team was tested and learned something that made us better. They are the mistakes I made that I thankfully survived and learned from so I wouldn't make the same mistake the next time. The most important moments are the ones that taught me what the SEAL brotherhood really means.

This book is about those moments, and the lessons from each one that define me.

Taken together, I hope these stories provide an intimate glimpse into the life and work of a SEAL and the lessons passed down to me by the teammates I served with and those who came before me.

Being a SEAL is not just a job. It is a lifelong commitment to challenge yourself, and your teammates, to exist in a constant state of evolution, examining your decisions and learning from your mistakes so that you and your team can be as effective as possible.

The lessons I learned over my career make up the legacy of the men, like Ray, we lost and all the other active and former SEALs who have dedicated their lives to this country. Many were learned the hard way, through the sacrifice of friends. This book is dedicated to my brothers.

SEALs are taught to mentor the younger generation and to pass the lessons we've learned on to the newer guys. I wrote *No Hero* because that is what I plan to do.

CHAPTER 1

The Right to Wear the Shirt

Purpose

It was just a black T-shirt.

Size medium, one hundred percent cotton.

On the front was a skeleton in a wetsuit crawling over the beach. He had an M-16 in his hands and a knife on his belt. The skeleton was coming out of the surf, the dark waves crashing behind him. A SEAL trident was on the left breast of the T-shirt. The trident was the sole reason I got the T-shirt in the first place.

I remember when it came in the mail. There was no way I could get a shirt like this from a store in the Alaskan village where I grew up. I put it on as soon as I opened it, and wore it practically every day. If that shirt was clean in the morning, I was wearing it.

To everyone else, it was just a shirt I always wore. But to me, it represented my goal in life. Each time I wore it, the shirt renewed my quest to become a SEAL. I slid the shirt into my suitcase and finished packing the rest of my clothes—including a borrowed suit and dress shoes—and headed for the airstrip. I was on my way to a conference in Washington, D.C., for "future military members." It was 1992, and to this day I don't know how I got invited, but it probably came from one of the many recruiters I'd talked with about being a SEAL.

The airstrip was on the outskirts of the village, and it was our only lifeline to "civilization," if you can call any town in Alaska that. The frontier lifestyle is why people move to Alaska. If you want convenience, stay in the lower forty-eight.

I watched the bush plane clear the trees at the far end of the strip and come in for a landing. As the pilot and a newly arrived group of hunters unloaded, I hugged my parents near the small one-room building that served as the airport terminal.

The trip was a first for me. It was the first time I'd left Alaska alone. It was my first trip to Washington, D.C. But of all the firsts, I was most excited that I was going to meet my first SEAL.

Everyone in my village in Alaska knew I wanted to be a SEAL. It was something I talked about with my friends and dreamed about at night. I read every book I could find on the SEALs.

I knew nothing of SEAL Team ..... until I read *Rogue Warrior* by Richard Marcinko. "Demo Dick" and "Shark Man of the Delta" were some of his nicknames. He operated in Vietnam and later started SEAL Team ..... *Rogue Warrior* tells the story of the creation of the unit. If you believe that book, every SEAL can bench-press five hundred pounds and eat glass. I wanted more than anything to prove I could too. Except for maybe eating glass.

At the time, I just thought it would be cool to be a SEAL. I knew the training would be hard, but I was too young to really understand how hard. I certainly didn't know all of the sacrifices I would have to make. I just wanted to be like the guys I read about, and at the time that was enough to push me forward.

I was lucky. I figured out my purpose early on. I don't think I understood it at first, but from the moment I found out about SEALs, I knew that was my goal, because of the challenge. If you asked me then to say *why* I wanted to join, a sense of duty would be on the list, but not at the top. At the top was a need to prove to

myself I could make it through the toughest training the U.S. military had to offer. Why would I want to do something that was easy? If it were easy, everybody would do it. Looking back now, I'm not sure why I had to prove myself. All I knew was after reading the history books, I decided the SEALs always stood out as the hardest and most challenging. I guess I figured if I was going to join the military, I might as well go big.

The pilot helped me stow my suitcase and I climbed aboard the plane. I waved to my parents from my cramped seat in the back as we taxied into position on the runway. My family wasn't rich, but my parents offered to cover the airplane ticket, and two Army veterans from the village covered the remaining costs.

At the airport in Anchorage, I pulled the itinerary for the trip out and went over it again. Before the SEAL session, I'd have to endure trips to the national monuments and listen to sessions on the Army and Air Force.

But it was worth it to meet a SEAL.

I got to Washington and instantly fell into the rhythm of the conference. We went to the Pentagon, which is much cooler in the movies. It is really just an odd-shaped office building. We also saw the Lincoln and Vietnam Memorials. At the time, nothing held my interest. The vast number of names on the Vietnam Memorial took me aback, but the impact faded because I hadn't experienced loss like I would years later in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thinking back now, I really had no idea that someday I'd look at a list of names like the wall and understand just what it means to lose close friends and teammates. Visiting the wall now, I understand the gravity. But at that time, I was just fixated on meeting the SEAL.

Everything was scheduled to the minute, and each morning as I pulled on my clothes I saw my T-shirt still neatly folded. I was saving it for the SEAL session.

The session was in the afternoon, so after the typical sandwich-and-cookie conference lunch, I hurried over to the meeting room where the SEAL was going to speak. Unfortunately, when I got to the door, they said the room was full.

The room was jammed with people, but I could still see a few chairs. I tried to reason with the woman guarding the door. She was one of the chaperones and organizers who were with us throughout the week. I could tell she wanted to let me in, but there were only a set number of seats.

She was apologetic but didn't budge.

There was a small crowd gathering outside. The SEAL session was the hallmark of the period. Through the door, I could see the SEAL in his uniform talking with the younger chaperones. Time was running out. I opened my itinerary, looking at the other sessions, but nothing came close. I didn't know what to do. I'd flown more than four thousand miles to attend this session. At that moment, the whole trip was wasted. I was crushed.

Then, just before the session was about to begin, the lady at the door waved me over to her. She told me they were going to let a few more people go in and ushered me inside. It was standing-room only. I found a spot in the back and waited for the SEAL to begin.

The SEAL was wearing a green BDU camouflage uniform with a black balaclava pulled down around his neck. His pants were tucked into black-and-green jungle boots. He had longer hair than you'd expect for someone in the military. Not shaggy, but not the high-and-tight haircut favored by the Marines. He had an air of cockiness about him, a fact I realized years later. More cocky than confident, he lacked the self-awareness to know that it wasn't cool to act cool.

His session started with the SEAL boilerplate stuff. SEALs are the Navy's primary special operations force. The acronym SEAL comes from the unit's ability to operate at sea, in the air, and on land. President John F. Kennedy saw a need for special operations forces to fight guerrilla wars and created the SEALs with the Army's Special Forces. In his 1961 speech announcing plans to land a man on the moon, Kennedy also laid out plans to invest one hundred million dollars to create and train special operations forces.

Populated at first by members of the Navy's underwater demolition teams, SEALs were deployed to Vietnam, where they worked with the CIA and set up ambushes to slow the supply lines in the Mekong Delta. SEALs earned the nickname "men with green faces" because of the camouflage face paint they often wore on missions.

I hung on each word for the hour-long presentation. He told stories about Basic Underwater Demolition/SEALs or BUD/S training. He stressed how tough it was; nothing about BUD/S was easy, from the frigid swims in the ocean to the grueling runs in the soft beach sand. His stories just made me want it more.

After the question-and-answer period, we had a short break before the next event. I ran upstairs to my hotel room to change into my black SEAL T-shirt. I wanted to get my picture taken with the SEAL. I figured if I was going to get a photo, I'd better be wearing my favorite shirt. When I got back to the room, the SEAL was still talking and taking questions.

I waited patiently for my turn.

"Hey, can I get a picture with you?" I asked, shaking his hand.

He smiled and put an arm over my shoulder. If he told me to shave my head and walk backward the rest of the week, I'd have done it. Just before one of the chaperones snapped the picture, he leaned over and whispered into my ear.

"Hey, you know you usually get your ass kicked for wearing a SEAL T-shirt when you're not a SEAL," he said.

I smiled and thanked him, but at that moment all I wanted to do was get the shirt off. I raced up to my hotel room and buried the shirt in the bottom of my suitcase. I never put it on again. When I got home, I put it in the back of my dresser drawer. I wasn't a poseur. I just hadn't had a chance to prove myself yet. The comment didn't sting as much as it fueled my passion to actually become a SEAL. I felt like I'd cheated myself by wearing it. It was then I realized my desire to be a SEAL wasn't an adolescent fantasy. It was the only thing in my mind that would give my life some real meaning and purpose. I wanted to earn the right to wear the shirt.

Once I realized my purpose was to be a SEAL, I never stopped trying to achieve it. Looking back, I think my parents taught me that having a purpose and living up to it was important. My parents were young when their purpose brought them to Alaska, and I knew it meant sacrifice and hardship.

My parents were missionaries. Their faith drove them to move our family from California to Alaska, far from any of the creature comforts of a city. There was nothing easy about living in a village, but that didn't matter to my parents. Everyone was poor by suburban American standards, but really it was just a more simple life.

We lived in a two-story house one hundred yards off a river. I saw moose from my front door so often that it didn't amaze me. There was one TV station and no radio. Our house had water and electricity, but no central heating. We used a massive iron stove in the living room to keep warm in the winter. My father would get up

in the middle of the night to make sure the fire was still going.

A huge hopper stood next to the stove. It was my job to keep it full of wood in the winter. I'd split the logs and keep the woodpile stacked on the porch. As the stack in the hopper dwindled, I'd be out on the porch getting another load. Chores for me weren't a way to make some spending money. We never got paid. It was part of my family's team effort to survive in Alaska.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Helen Woodson:

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