

No Hero: The Evolution of a Navy SEAL

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The companion volume to the multimillion-copy bestseller *No Easy Day* by former Navy SEAL Mark Owen reveals the evolution of a SEAL Team Six operator.

Mark Owen's instant #1 New York Times bestseller, *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden*, focused on the high-profile targets and headline-grabbing chapters of the author's thirteen years as a Navy SEAL. His follow-up, *No Hero*, is an account of Owen's most personally meaningful missions, missions that never made headlines, including the moments in which he learned the most about himself and his teammates in both success and failure.

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. 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 stanchied 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 m...

Other Books

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