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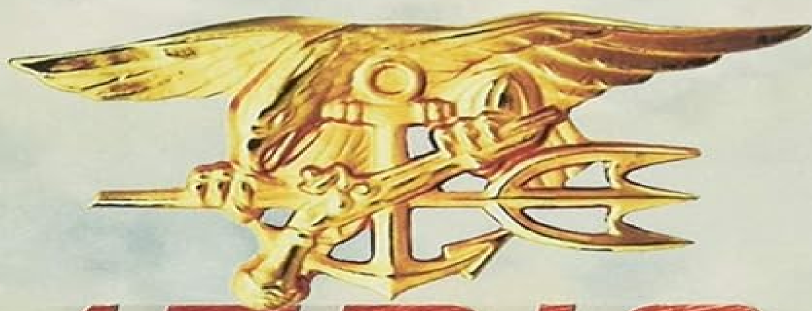
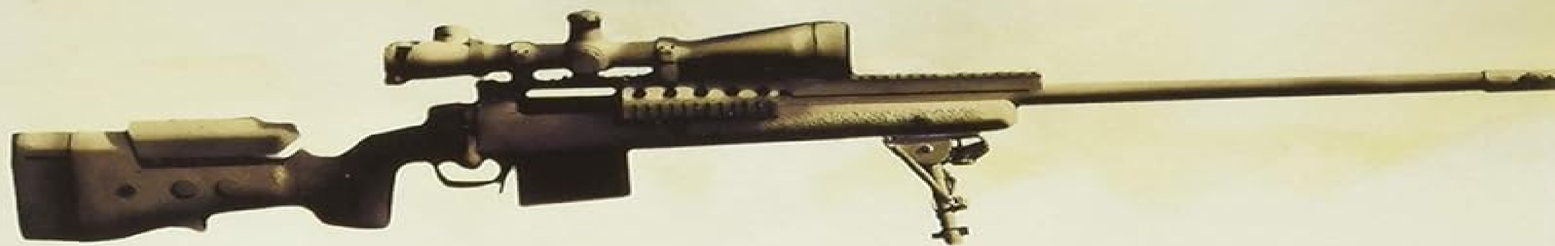
NAVY SEAL

CHRIS KYLE

WITH SCOTT McEWEN AND JIM DeFELICE



AMERICAN SNIPER



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE MOST LETHAL SNIPER IN U.S. MILITARY HISTORY

American Sniper

The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History

Chris Kyle
with Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice

WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my wife, Taya, and my kids for sticking it out with me. Thanks for still being here when I got home.

I'd also like to dedicate it to the memory of my SEAL brothers Marc and Ryan, for their courageous service to our country and their undying friendship to me. I will bleed for their deaths the r est of my life.

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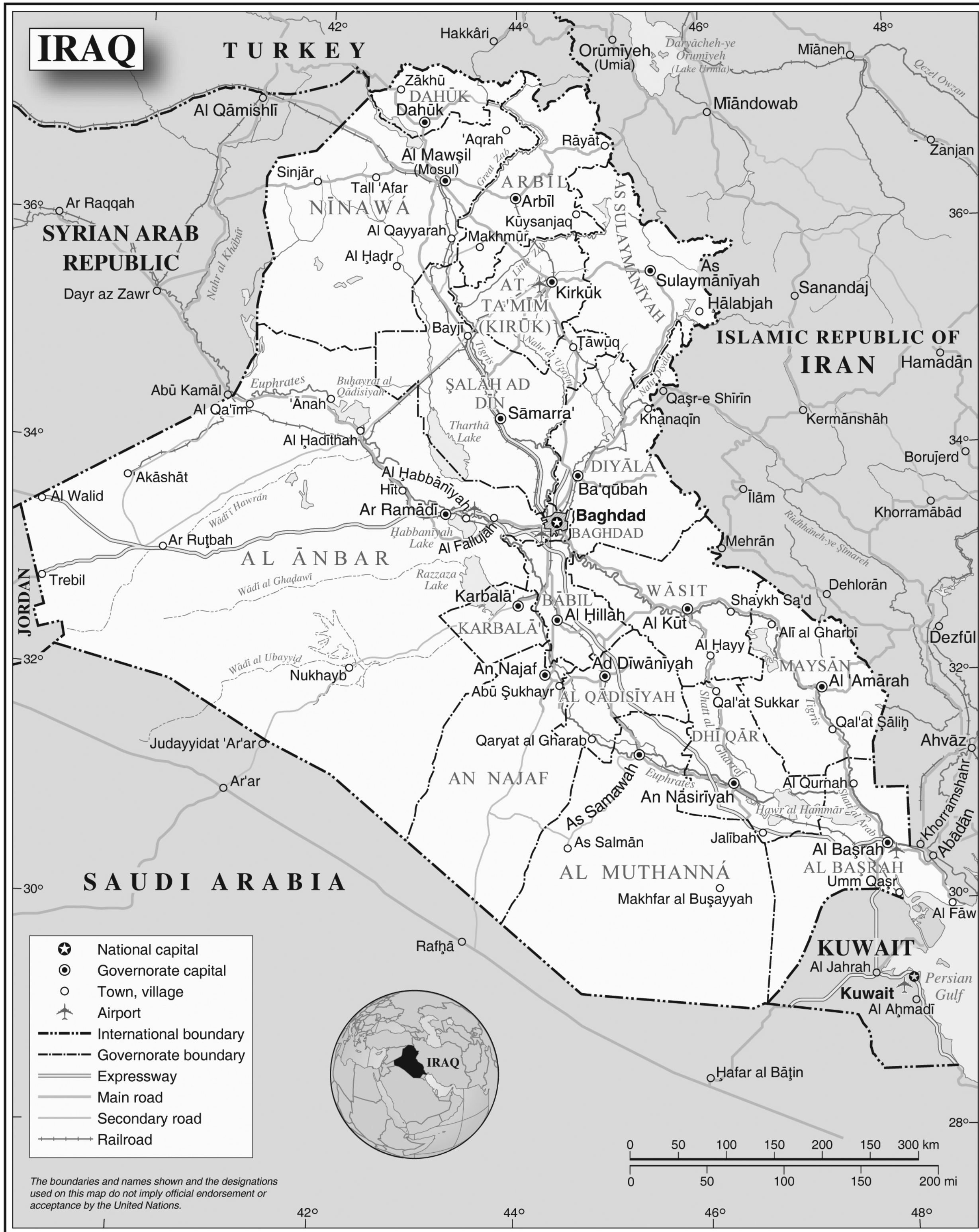
Author’s Note

The events that happened in this book are true, recounted from the best of my memory. The Department of Defense, including high-ranking U.S.N. personnel, reviewed the text for accuracy and sensitive material. Even though they cleared the book for publication, this does not mean they like everything they read. But this is my story, not theirs. We’ve reconstructed dialogue from memory, which means that it may not be word for word. But the essence of what was said is accurate.

No classified information was used in the preparation of this book. The Pentagon’s Office of Security Review and the Navy requested that certain changes be made for security reasons. Those requests were all honored.

Many of the people I served with are still active-duty SEALs. Others are working in different capacities for the government, protecting our nation. All may be considered enemies by our country’s enemies, as am I. Because of that, I have not given their full identities in this book. They know who they are, and I hope they know they have my thanks.

—C.K.


IRAQ
TURKEY
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
JORDAN
SAUDI ARABIA
KUWAIT
Persian Gulf
Hakkâri
Orūmīyeh (Umia)
Daryācheh-ye Orūmīyeh (Lake Urmia)
Mīāneh
Mīāndowab
Zanjan
Qezel Owzan
Al Qāmishlī
Zākhū
DAHŪK
Dahūk
'Aqrah
Rāyāt
Al Mawşil (Mosul)
Sinjār
Tall 'Afar
Great Zab
ARBĪL
Arbīl
NĪNAWÁ
Ar Raqqah
Kūysanjaq
Al Qayyarah
Makhmūr
AS SULAYMĀNĪYAH
Al Ḩaḑr
As Sulaymānīyah
Sanandaj
Ḩalabjah
Nahr al Khābūr
Dayr az Zawr
Little Zab
AT TA'MĪM (KIRKŪK)
Kirkūk
Bayjī
Ţāwūq
Nahr al 'Uzaym
Tigris
Hamadān
ŞALĀH AD DĪN
Abū Kamāl
Euphrates
Buḩayrat al Qādisīyah
Al Qa'im
'Ānah
Sāmarrā'
Qaşr-e Shīrīn
Khānaqīn
Kermānshāh
Tharthār Lake
Al Ḩadīthah
Borūjerd
Akāshāt
DIYĀLĀ
Al Ḩabbānīyah
Hīt
Ba'qūbah
Īlām
Al Walīd
Wādī Ḩawrān
Ar Ramādī
Baghdad
BAGHDAD
Khorramābād
Ḩabbānīyah Lake
Al Fallūjah
Ar Ruţbah
Mehrān
AL ANBAR
Trebil
Razzaza Lake
Wādī al Ghadawī
WĀSIT
Dehlorān
Karbalā'
BĀBIL
Shaykh Sa'd
Al Ḩillah
Al Kūt
KARBALĀ'
'Alī al Gharbī
Dezfūl
Al Ḩayy
Wādī al Ubayyid
An Najaf
Ad Dīwānīyah
MAYSĀN
Al 'Amārah
Nukhayb
Abū Şukhayr
AL QĀDISĪYAH
Shaţţ al Gharraf
Qal'at Sukkar
Qal'at Şāliḩ
Ahvāz
Judayyidat 'Ar'ar
DHĪ QĀR
Qaryat al Gharab
Ar'ar
AN NAJAF
Euphrates
Al Qurnah
Khorramshahr
An Nāşirīyah
Hawr al Ḩammār
Shaţţ al 'Arab
As Samāwah
As Salmān
Jalībah
Al Başrah
Ābādān
AL MUTHANNÁ
AL BAŞRAH
Umm Qaşr
Makhfar al Buşayyah
Al Fāw
Rafḩā
Al Jahrah
Kuwait
Al Aḩmadī
Ḩafar al Bāţin
42°
44°
46°
48°
36°
34°
32°
30°
28°
National capital
Governorate capital
Town, village
Airport
International boundary
Governorate boundary
Expressway
Main road
Secondary road
Railroad
0 50 100 150 200 250 300 km
0 50 100 150 200 mi
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Prologue

Evil in the Crosshairs

Late March 2003. In the area of Nasiriya, Iraq

I looked through the scope of the sniper rifle, scanning down the road of the tiny Iraqi town. Fifty yards away, a woman opened the door of a small house and stepped outside with her child.

The rest of the street was deserted. The local Iraqis had gone inside, most of them scared. A few curious souls peeked out from behind curtains, waiting. They could hear the rumble of the approaching American unit. The Marines were flooding up the road, marching north to liberate the country from Saddam Hussein.

It was my job to protect them. My platoon had taken over the building earlier in the day, sneaking into position to provide "overwatch"—prevent the enemy from ambushing the Marines as they came through.

It didn't seem like too difficult a task—if anything, I was glad the Marines were on my side. I'd seen the power of their weapons and I

would've hated to have to fight them. The Iraq army didn't stand a chance. And, in fact, they appeared to have abandoned the area already.

The war had started roughly two weeks before. My platoon, "Charlie" (later "Cadillac") of SEAL Team 3, helped kick it off during the early morning of March 20. We landed on al-Faw Peninsula and secured the oil terminal there so Saddam couldn't set it ablaze as he had during the First Gulf War. Now we were tasked to assist the Marines as they marched north toward Baghdad.

I was a SEAL, a Navy commando trained in special operations. SEAL stands for "SEa, Air, Land," and it pretty much describes the wide ranges of places we operate. In this case, we were far inland, much farther than SEALs traditionally operated, though as the war against terror continued, this would become common. I'd spent nearly three years training and learning how to become a warrior; I was ready for this fight, or at least as ready as anyone can be.

The rifle I was holding was a .300 WinMag, a bolt-action, precision sniper weapon that belonged to my platoon chief. He'd been covering the street for a while and needed a break. He showed a great deal of confidence in me by choosing me to spot him and take the gun. I was still a new guy, a newbie or rookie in the Teams. By SEAL standards, I had yet to be fully tested.

I was also not yet trained as a SEAL sniper. I wanted to be one in the worst way, but I had a long way to go. Giving me the rifle that morning was the chief's way of testing me to see if I had the right stuff.

We were on the roof of an old rundown building at the edge of a town the Marines were going to pass through. The wind kicked dirt and papers across the battered road below us. The place smelled like a sewer—the stench of Iraq was one thing I'd never get used to.

"Marines are coming," said my chief as the building began to shake. "Keep watching."

I looked through the scope. The only people who were moving were the woman and maybe a child or two nearby.

I watched our troops pull up. Ten young, proud Marines in uniform got out of their vehicles and gathered for a foot patrol. As the Americans organized, the woman took something from beneath her clothes, and yanked at it.

She'd set a grenade. I didn't realize it at first.

"Looks yellow," I told the chief, describing what I saw as he watched himself. "It's yellow, the body—"

"She's got a grenade," said the chief. "That's a Chinese grenade."

"Shit."

"Take a shot."

"But—"

"Shoot. Get the grenade. The Marines—"

I hesitated. Someone was trying to get the Marines on the radio, but we couldn't reach them. They were coming down the street, heading toward the woman.

"Shoot!" said the chief.

I pushed my finger against the trigger. The bullet leapt out. I shot. The grenade dropped. I fired again as the grenade blew up.

It was the first time I'd killed anyone while I was on the sniper rifle. And the first time in Iraq—and the only time—I killed anyone other than a male combatant.

It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her.

It was clear that not only did she want to kill them, but she didn't care about anybody else nearby who would have been blown up by the grenade or killed in the firefight. Children on the street, people in the houses, maybe *her* child . . .

She was too blinded by evil to consider them. She just wanted Americans dead, no matter what.

My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job. But I truly, deeply hated the evil that woman possessed. I hate it to this day.

Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there.

People ask me all the time, "How many people have you killed?" My standard response is, "Does the answer make me less, or more, of a man?"

The number is not important to me. I only wish I had killed more. Not for bragging rights, but because I believe the world is a better place without savages out there taking American lives. Everyone I shot in Iraq was trying to harm Americans or Iraqis loyal to the new government.

I had a job to do as a SEAL. I killed the enemy—an enemy I saw day in and day out plotting to kill my fellow Americans. I'm haunted by the enemy's successes. They were few, but even a single American life is one too many lost.

I don't worry about what other people think of me. It's one of the things I most admired about my dad growing up. He didn't give a hoot what others thought. He was who he was. It's one of the qualities that has kept me most sane.

As this book goes to print, I'm still a bit uncomfortable with the idea of publishing my life story. First of all, I've always thought that if you want to know what life as a SEAL is like, you should go get your own Trident: earn our medal, the symbol of who we are. Go through our training, make the sacrifices, physical and mental. That's the only way you'll know.

Second of all, and more importantly, who cares about my life? I'm no different than anyone else.

I happen to have been in some pretty bad-ass situations. People have told me it's interesting. I don't see it. Other people are talking about writing books about my life, or about some of the things I've done. I find it strange, but I also feel it's my life and my story, and I guess I better be the one to get it on paper the way it actually happened.

Also, there are a lot of people who deserve credit, and if I don't write the story, they may be overlooked. I don't like the idea of that at all. My boys deserve to be praised more than I do.

The Navy credits me with more kills as a sniper than any other American service member, past or present. I guess that's true. They go back and forth on what the number is. One week, it's 160 (the "official" number as of this writing, for what that's worth), then it's way higher, then it's somewhere in between. If you want a number, ask the Navy—you may even get the truth if you catch them on the right day.

People always want a number. Even if the Navy would let me, I'm not going to give one. I'm not a numbers guy. SEALs are silent warriors, and I'm a SEAL down to my soul. If you want the whole story, get a Trident. If you want to check me out, ask a SEAL.

If you want what I am comfortable with sharing, and even some stuff I am reluctant to reveal, read on.

I've always said that I wasn't the best shot or even the best sniper ever. I'm not denigrating my skills. I certainly worked hard to hone them. I was blessed with some excellent instructors, who deserve a lot of credit. And my boys—the fellow SEALs and the Marines and the Army soldiers who fought with me and helped me do my job—were all a critical part of my success. But my high total and my so-called "legend" have much to do with the fact that I was in the shit a lot.

In other words, I had more opportunities than most. I served back-to-back deployments from right before the Iraq War kicked off until the time I got out in 2009. I was lucky enough to be positioned directly in the action.

There's another question people ask a lot: Did it bother you killing so many people in Iraq?

I tell them, "No."

And I mean it. The first time you shoot someone, you get a little nervous. You think, can I really shoot this guy? Is it really okay? But after you kill your enemy, you see it's okay. You say, *Great*.

You do it again. And again. You do it so the enemy won't kill you or your countrymen. You do it until there's no one left for you to kill.

That's what war is.

I loved what I did. I still do. If circumstances were different—if my family didn't need me—I'd be back in a heartbeat. I'm not lying or exaggerating to say it was fun. I had the time of my life being a SEAL.

People try to put me in a category as a bad-ass, a good ol' boy, asshole, sniper, SEAL, and probably other categories not appropriate for print. All might be true on any given day. In the end, my story, in Iraq and afterward, is about more than just killing people or even fighting for my country.

It's about being a man. And it's about love as well as hate.

1

Bustin' Broncs and Other Ways of Having Fun

JUST A COWBOY AT HEART

Every story has a beginning.

Mine starts in north-central Texas. I grew up in small towns where I learned the importance of family and traditional values, like patriotism, self-reliance, and watching out for your family and neighbors. I'm proud to say that I still try to live my life according to those values. I have a strong sense of justice. It's pretty much black-and-white. I don't see too much gray. I think it's important to protect others. I don't mind hard work. At the same time, I like to have fun. Life's too short not to.

I was raised with, and still believe in, the Christian faith. If I had to order my priorities, they would be God, Country, Family. There might be some debate on where those last two fall—these days I've come around to believing that Family may, under some circumstances, outrank Country. But it's a close race.

I’ve always loved guns, always loved hunting, and in a way I guess you could say I’ve always been a cowboy. I was riding horses from the time I could walk. I wouldn’t call myself a true cowboy today, because it’s been a long time since I’ve worked a ranch, and I’ve probably lost a lot of what I had in the saddle. Still, in my heart if I’m not a SEAL I’m a cowboy, or should be. Problem is, it’s a hard way to make a living when you have a family.

I don’t remember when I started hunting, but it would have been when I was very young. My family had a deer lease a few miles from our house, and we would hunt every winter. (For you Yankees: a deer lease is a property where the owner rents or leases hunting rights out for a certain amount of time; you pay your money and you get the right to go out and hunt. Y’all probably have different arrangements where you live, but this one is pretty common down here.) Besides deer, we’d hunt turkey, doves, quail—whatever was in season. “We” meant my mom, my dad, and my brother, who’s four years younger than me. We’d spend the weekends in an old RV trailer. It wasn’t very big, but we were a tight little family and we had a lot of fun.

My father worked for Southwestern Bell and AT&T—they split and then came back together over the length of his career. He was a manager, and as he’d get promoted we’d have to move every few years. So in a way I was raised all over Texas.

Even though he was successful, my father hated his job. Not the work, really, but what went along with it. The bureaucracy. The fact that he had to work in an office. He *really* hated having to wear a suit and tie every day.

“I don’t care how much money you get,” my dad used to tell me. “It’s not worth it if you’re not happy.” That’s the most valuable piece of advice he ever gave me: Do what you want in life. To this day I’ve tried to follow that philosophy.

In a lot of ways my father was my best friend growing up, but he was able at the same time to combine that with a good dose of fatherly discipline. There was a line and I never wanted to cross it. I got my share of whuppin's (you Yankees will call 'em spankings) when I deserved it, but not to excess and never in anger. If my dad was mad, he'd give himself a few minutes to calm down before administering a controlled whuppin'—followed by a hug.

To hear my brother tell it, he and I were at each other's throats most of the time. I don't know if that's true, but we did have our share of tussles. He was younger and smaller than me, but he could give as good he got, and he'd never give up. He's a tough character and one of my closest friends to this day. We gave each other hell, but we also had a lot of fun and always knew we had each other's back.

Our high school used to have a statue of a panther in the front lobby. We had a tradition each year where seniors would try and put incoming freshmen on the panther as a hazing ritual. Freshmen, naturally, resisted. I had graduated when my brother became a freshman, but I came back on his first day of school and offered a hundred dollars to anyone who could sit him on that statue.

I still have that hundred dollars.

While I got into a lot of fights, I didn't start most of them. My dad made it clear I'd get a whuppin' if he found out I started a fight. We were supposed to be above that.

Defending myself was a different story. Protecting my brother was even better—if someone tried to pick on him, I'd lay them out. I was the only one allowed to whip him.

Somewhere along the way, I started sticking up for younger kids who were getting picked on. I felt I had to look out for them. It became my duty.

Maybe it began because I was looking for an excuse to fight without getting into trouble. I think there was more to it than that; I think my father's sense of justice and fair play influenced me more than I knew at the time, and even more than I can say as an adult. But whatever the reason, it sure gave me plenty of opportunities for getting into scrapes.

My family had a deep faith in God. My dad was a deacon, and my mom taught Sunday school. I remember a stretch when I was young when we would go to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday evening. Still, we didn't consider ourselves overly religious, just good people who believed in God and were involved in our church. Truth is, back then I didn't like going a lot of the time.

My dad worked hard. I suspect it was in his blood—his father was a Kansas farmer, and those people worked hard. One job was never enough for my dad—he had a feed store for a bit when I was growing up, and we had a pretty modest-sized ranch we all worked to keep going. He's retired now, officially, but you can still find him working for a local veterinarian when he's not tending to things on his small ranch.

My mother was also a really hard worker. When my brother and I were old enough to be on our own, she went to work as a counselor at a juvenile detention center. It was a rough job, dealing with difficult kids all day long, and eventually she moved on. She's retired now, too, though she keeps herself busy with part-time work and her grandchildren.

Ranching helped fill out my school days. My brother and I would have our different chores after school and on the weekends: feed and look after the horses, ride through the cattle, inspect the fences.

Cattle always give you problems. I've been kicked in the leg, kicked in the chest, and yes, kicked where the sun doesn't shine. Never been kicked in the head, though. That might have set me straight.

Growing up, I raised steers and heifers for FFA, Future Farmers of America. (The name is now officially The National FFA Organization.) I loved FFA and spent a lot of time grooming and showing cattle, even though dealing with the animals could be frustrating. I'd get pissed off at them and think I was king of the world. When all else failed, I was known to whack 'em upside their huge hard heads to knock some sense into them. Twice I broke my hand.

Like I said, getting hit in the skull may have set me straight.

I kept my head when it came to guns, but I was still passionate about them. Like a lot of boys, my first "weapon" was a Daisy multi-pump BB rifle—the more you pumped, the more powerful your shot. Later on, I had a CO_2-powered revolver that looked like the old 1860 Peacemaker Colt model. I've been partial to Old West firearms ever since, and after getting out of the Navy, I've started collecting some very fine-looking replicas. My favorite is an 1861 Colt Navy Revolver replica manufactured on the old lathes.

I got my first real rifle when I was seven or eight years old. It was a bolt-action 30-06. It was a solid gun—so "grown-up" that it scared me to shoot at first. I came to love that gun, but as I recall what I *really* lusted after was my brother's Marlin 30-30. It was lever action, cowboy-style.

Yes, there was a theme there.

BRONCO BUSTIN'

You're not a cowboy until you can break a horse. I started learning when I was in high school; at first, I didn't know a whole heck of a lot. It was just: *Hop on them and ride until they quit bucking. Do your best to stay on.*

I learned much more as I got older, but most of my early education came on the job—or on the horse, so to speak. The horse would do something, and I would do something. Together, we came to an understanding.

Probably the most important lesson was patience. I wasn't a patient person by nature. I had to develop that talent working with horses; it would end up being extremely valuable when I became a sniper—and even when I was courting my wife.

Unlike cattle, I never found a reason to smack a horse. Ride them till I wore them out, sure. Stay on them till they realized who was boss, absolutely. But hit a horse? Never saw a reason good enough. Horses are smarter than cattle. You can work a horse into cooperating if you give it enough time and patience.

I don't know if I exactly had a talent for breaking horses or not, but being around them fed my appetite for all things cowboy. So, looking back, it isn't very surprising that I got involved in rodeo competitions while still in school. I played sports in high school—baseball and football—but nothing compared with the excitement of the rodeo.

Every high school has its different cliques: jocks, nerds, and so on. The crew I was hanging out with were the "ropers." We had the boots and jeans, and in general looked and acted like cowboys. I wasn't a *real* roper—I couldn't have lassoed a calf worth a lick at that point—but that didn't stop me from getting involved in rodeos around age sixteen.

I started out by riding bulls and horses at a small local place where you paid twenty bucks to ride as long as you could stay on. You would have to supply your own gear—spurs, chaps, your rigging. There was nothing fancy about it: you got on and fell off, and got on again. Gradually, I stayed on longer and longer, and finally got to the point where I felt confident enough to enter some small local rodeos.

Bustin' a bull is a little different than taming a horse. They buck forward, but their skin is so loose that when they're going forward, you not only go forward but you slip side to side. And bulls can really spin. Let me put it this way: staying on top of a bull is not an easy matter.

I rode bulls for about a year, without a ton of success. Wising up, I went to horses and ended up trying saddle bronc bustin'. This is the classic event where you not only have to stay on the horse for eight seconds, but also do so with style and finesse. For some reason, I did a lot better in this event than the others, and so I kept with it for quite a while, winning my share of belt buckles and more than one fancy saddle. Not that I was a champion, mind you, but I did well enough to spread some prize money around the bar.

I also got some attention from the buckle bunnies, rodeo's version of female groupies. It was all good. I enjoyed going from city to city, traveling, partying, and riding.

Call it the cowboy lifestyle.

I continued riding after I graduated high school in 1992 and started going to college at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. For those of you who don't know it, Tarleton was founded in 1899 and joined the Texas A&M University system in 1917. They're the third largest non-land-grant agriculture university in the country. The school has a reputation for turning out excellent ranch and farm managers as well as agricultural education teachers.

At the time, I was interested in becoming a ranch manager. Before enrolling, though, I had given some thought to the military. My mom's dad had been an Army Air Force pilot, and for a while I thought of becoming an aviator. Then I considered becoming a Marine—I wanted to see real action. I liked the idea of fighting. I also heard a bit about special operations, and thought about joining Marine Recon, which is the Corps' elite special warfare unit. But my family, Mom especially, wanted me to go to college. Eventually, I saw it their way: I decided I would go to school first, then join the military. Heck, the way I looked at it, doing that meant I could party for a while before getting down to business.

I was still doing rodeo, and getting fairly good at it. But my career ended abruptly around the end of my freshman year, when a bronco flipped over on me in a chute at a competition in Rendon, Texas. The guys watching me couldn't open up the chute because of the way the horse came down, so they had to pull him back over on top of me. I still had one foot in the stirrup, and was dragged and kicked so hard I lost consciousness. I woke up in a life-flight helicopter flying to the hospital. I ended up with pins in my wrists, a dislocated shoulder, broken ribs, and a bruised lung and kidney.

Probably the worst part of the recovery was the dang pins. They were actually big screws about a quarter-inch thick. They stuck out a few inches on either side of my wrists, just like on Frankenstein's monster. They itched and looked strange, but they held my hands together.

A few weeks after I was hurt, I decided it was time to call up a girl I'd been wanting to take out. I wasn't about to let the pins get in the way of a good time. We were driving along and one of the long metal screws kept hitting the signal indicator as I was driving. It pissed me off so bad I ended up breaking it off at the base close to my skin. I don't guess she was too impressed with that. The date ended early.

My rodeo career was over, but I continued partying like I was on tour. I ran through my money pretty quick, and so I started looking for work after school. I found a job in a lumberyard as a delivery guy, dropping off wood and other materials.

I was a decent worker, and I guess it showed. One day a fellow came in and started talking to me.

"I know a guy who owns a ranch and he's looking for a hired hand," he said. "I wonder if you'd be interested."

"Holy hell," I told him. "I'll go out there right now."

And so I became a ranch hand—a real cowboy—even though I was still going to school full-time.

LIFE AS A COWBOY

I went to work for David Landrum, in Hood County, Texas, and quickly found out I wasn't near as much of a cowboy as I thought I was. David took care of that. He taught me everything about working a ranch, and then some. He was a rough man. He would cuss you up one side and down the other. If you were doing good, he wouldn't say a word. But I ended up really liking the guy.

Working on a ranch is heaven.

It's a hard life, featuring plenty of hard work, and yet at the same time it's an easy life. You're outside all the time. Most days it's just you and the animals. You don't have to deal with people or offices or any petty bullshit. You just do your job.

David's spread ran ten thousand acres. It was a real ranch, very old-school—we even had a chuck wagon during the spring round-up season.

I want to tell you, this was a beautiful place, with gentle hills, a couple of creeks, and open land that made you feel alive every time you looked at it. The heart of the ranch was an old house that had probably been a way station—an "inn" in Yankee-speak—back in the nineteenth century. It was a majestic building, with screened porches front and back, nice-sized rooms inside, and a big fireplace that warmed the soul as well as the skin.

Of course, because I was a ranch hand, my quarters were a little more primitive. I had what we called a bunkhouse, which was barely big enough for an actual bunk. It might have measured six by twelve feet, and my bed took up most of that. There wasn't space for drawers—I had to hang all my clothes, including my underwear, on a pole.

The walls weren't insulated. Central Texas can be pretty cold in the winter, and even with the gas stove on high and an electric heater right next to the bed, I slept with my clothes on. But the worst thing about it was the fact that there wasn't a proper foundation under the floorboards. I was

continually doing battle with raccoons and armadillos, who'd burrow in right under my bed. Those raccoons were ornery and audacious; I must've shot twenty of them before they finally got the message that they weren't welcome under my house.

I started out riding the tractors, planting wheat for the cattle in the wintertime. I moved on to sluffing feed to the cattle. Eventually, David determined I was likely to stick around and started giving me more responsibilities. He bumped my salary to $400 a month.

After my last class ended around one or two in the afternoon, I'd head over to the ranch. There I'd work until the sun went down, study a bit, then go to bed. First thing in the morning, I'd feed all the horses, then head to class. Summer was the best. I'd be on horseback at five o'clock in the morning until nine at night.

Eventually, I became the two-year man, training "cut horses" and getting them ready for auction. (Cutting horses—also called carving horses, sorting horses, whittlers—are trained to help cowboys "cut" cows from the herd. These working horses are important on a ranch, and a good one can be worth a good amount of money.)

This is really where I learned about dealing with horses, and became much more patient than I had been before. If you lose your temper with a horse, you can ruin it for life. I taught myself to take my time and be gentle with them.

Horses are extremely smart. They learn quickly—if you do it right. You show them something real small, then stop, and do it again. A horse will lick its lips when it's learning. That's what I looked for. You stop the lesson on a good note, and pick up the next day.

Of course, it took a while to learn all this. Anytime I messed up, my boss would let me know. Right away he'd cuss me out, tell me I was a worthless piece of shit. But I never got pissed at David. In my mind, I thought, *I'm better than that and I'll show you*.

As it happens, that's exactly the kind of attitude you need to become a SEAL.

"NO" FROM THE NAVY

Out there on the range, I had a lot of time and space to think about where I was headed. Studying and classes were not my thing. With my rodeo career ended, I decided that I would quit college, stop ranching, and go back to my original plan: join the military and become a soldier. Since that was what I really wanted to do, there was no sense waiting.

And so, one day in 1996, I made my way to the recruiters, determined to sign up.

This recruiting station was its own mini-mall. The Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force offices were all lined up in a little row. Each one watched as you came in. They were in competition with each other, and not necessarily a friendly competition, either.

I went to the Marine door first, but they were out to lunch. As I turned around to leave, the Army guy down the hall called over.

"Hey," he said. "Why don't you come on in here?"

No reason not to, I thought. So I did.

"What are you interested in doing in the military?" he asked.

I told him that I liked the idea of special operations, and that from what I'd heard of Army SF, I thought I'd like to serve in that branch—if I were to join the Army, that is. (Special Forces, or SF, is an elite unit in the Army charged with a number of special operations missions. The term "special forces" is sometimes used incorrectly to describe special operation troops in general, but when I use it, I mean the Army unit.)

At the time, you had to be an E5—a sergeant—before you could be considered for SF. I didn't like the idea of waiting all that time before getting to the good stuff. "You could be a Ranger," suggested the recruiter.

I didn't know too much about Rangers, but what he told me sounded pretty enticing—jumping out of airplanes, assaulting targets, becoming a small-arms expert. He opened my eyes to the possibilities, though he didn't quite close the sale.

"I'll think about it," I said, getting up to leave.

As I was on my way out, the Navy guy called to me from down the hall.

"Hey, you," he said. "Come on over here."

I walked over.

"What were you talking about in there?" he asked.

"I was thinking about going into SF," I said. "But you have to be an E5. So we were talking about the Rangers."

"Oh, yeah? Heard about the SEALs?"

At the time, the SEALs were still relatively unknown. I had heard a little about them, but I didn't know all that much. I think I shrugged.

"Why don't you come on in here," said the sailor. "I'll tell you all about 'em."

He started by telling me about BUD/S, or Basic Underwater Demolition/Scuba training, which is the preliminary school all SEALs must pass through. Nowadays, there are hundreds of books and movies on SEALs and BUD/S; there's even a pretty long entry on our training in Wikipedia. But back then, BUD/S was still a bit of a mystery, at least to me. When I heard how hard it was, how the instructors ran you and how less than 10 percent of the class would qualify to move on, I was impressed. Just to make it through the training, you had to be one tough motherfucker.

I liked that kind of challenge.

Then the recruiter started telling me about all the missions SEALs, and their predecessors, the UDTs, had completed. (UDTs were members of Underwater Demolition Teams, frogmen who scouted enemy beaches and undertook other special warfare assignments beginning in World War II.) There were stories about swimming between obstructions on Japanese-held

beaches and gruesome fights behind the lines in Vietnam. It was all bad-ass stuff, and when I left there, I wanted to be a SEAL in the worst way.

Many recruiters, especially the good ones, have more than a little larceny in them, and this one was no different. When I came back and was about to sign the papers, he told me I had to turn down the signing bonus if I wanted to make sure I got the SEAL contract.

I did.

He was full of it, of course. Having me turn down the bonus made him look pretty good, I'm sure. I don't doubt he's got a great career ahead of him as a used-car salesman.

The Navy did not promise that I would be a SEAL; I had to earn that privilege. What they did guarantee, though, was that I would have a chance to try out. As far as I was concerned, that was good enough, because there was no way that I was going to fail.

The only problem was that I didn't even get a chance to fail.

The Navy disqualified me when my physical revealed that I had pins in my arm from the rodeo accident. I tried arguing, I tried pleading; nothing worked. I even offered to sign a waiver saying that I'd never make the Navy responsible for anything that happened to my arm.

They flat-out turned me down.

And that, I concluded, was the end of my military career.

The Call

With the military ruled out, I focused on making a career out of ranching and being a cowboy. Since I already had a good job on a ranch, I decided there was really no sense staying in school. I quit, even though I was less than sixty credits shy of graduating.

David doubled my pay and gave me more responsibilities. Larger offers eventually lured me to other ranches, though for different reasons I kept coming back to David's ranch. Eventually, just before the winter of 1997–98, I found my way out to Colorado.

I took the job sight-unseen, which turned out to be a big mistake. My thinking was, I'd been spending all my time in the Texas flatlands, and a move to the mountains would be a welcome change of scenery.

But wouldn't you know it: I got a job at a ranch in the only part of Colorado flatter than Texas. And a good deal colder. It wasn't long before I called up David and asked if he needed some help.

"Come on back," he told me.

I started to pack, but I didn't get very far. Before I finished making arrangements to move, I got a phone call from a Navy recruiter.

"Are you still interested in being a SEAL?" he asked.

"Why?"

"We want you," said the recruiter.

"Even with the pins in my arm?"

"Don't worry about that."

I didn't. I started working on the arrangements right away.