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THE
FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF
THE MISSION THAT KILLED
OSAMA BIN LADEN

NO EASY DAY

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A NAVY SEAL



MARK OWEN
WITH KEVIN MAURER

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THAT KILLED OSAMA BIN LADEN

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The Autobiography of a Navy SEAL



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

The only easy day was yesterday.
—Navy SEAL Philosophy

Long live the Brotherhood.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was in junior high school in Alaska, we were assigned a book report. We had to pick a book we liked. Moving down the row of books, I stumbled upon *Men in Green Faces* by former SEAL Gene Wentz. The novel chronicled missions in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. Full of ambushes and firefights, it centered on the hunt for a rogue North Vietnamese colonel.

From page one, I knew I wanted to be a SEAL. The more I read, the more I wanted to see if I could measure up.

In the surf of the Pacific Ocean during training, I found other men just like me: men who feared failure and were driven to be the best. I was privileged to serve with and be inspired by these men every day. Working alongside them made me a better person.

After thirteen consecutive combat deployments, my war is over. This book is closure for that part of my life. Before leaving, I wanted to try and explain what it was that motivated us through the brutal SEAL training course and through a decade of constant deployments.

We are not superheroes, but we all share a common bond in serving something greater than ourselves. It is a brotherhood that ties us together, and that bond is what allows us to willingly walk into harm's way together.

This is the story of a group of extraordinary men who I was lucky enough to serve alongside as a SEAL from 1998 to 2012. I've changed the names of all the characters, including myself, to protect our identities, and this book does not include details of any ongoing missions.

I've also taken great pains to protect the tactics, techniques, and procedures used by the teams as they wage a daily battle against terrorists and insurgents around the world. If you are looking for secrets, this is not your book.

Although I am writing this book in an effort to accurately describe real-world events as they occurred, it is important to me that no classified information is released. With the assistance of my publisher, I hired a former Special Operations attorney to review the manuscript to ensure that it was free from mention of forbidden topics and that it cannot be used by

sophisticated enemies as a source of sensitive information to compromise or harm the United States. I am confident that the team that has worked with me on this book has both maintained and promoted the security interests of the United States.

When I refer to other military or government organizations, activities, or agencies, I do so in the interest of continuity and normally only if another publication or official unclassified government document has already mentioned that organization's participation in the mission I'm describing.

I sometimes refer to certain publicly recognized senior military leaders by their true names, only when it is clear that there are no operational security issues involved. In all other cases, I have intentionally depersonalized the stories to maintain the anonymity of the individuals involved. I do not describe any technologies that would compromise the security of the United States.

All of the material contained within this book is derived from unclassified publications and sources; nothing written here is intended to confirm or deny, officially or unofficially, any events described or the activities of any individual, government, or agency. In an effort to protect the nature of specific operations, I sometimes generalize dates, times, and order of events. None of these "work-arounds" affect the accuracy of my recollections or my description of how events unfolded. The operations discussed in this book have been written about in numerous other civilian and government publications and are available in open sources to the general public. These confirming open-source citations are printed in the Confirming Sources list at the end of this book.

The events depicted in *No Easy Day* are based on my own memory. Conversations have been reconstructed from my recollections. War is chaotic, but I have done my best to ensure the stories in this book are accurate. If there are inaccuracies in it, the responsibility is mine. This book presents my views and does not represent the views of the United States Navy, the U.S. Department of Defense, or anyone else.

In spite of the deliberate measures I have undertaken to protect the national security of the United States and the operational security of the men and women who continue to fight around the world, I believe *No Easy Day* to be an accurate portrayal of the events it describes and an honest portrayal of life in the SEAL teams and the brotherhood that exists among us. While written in the first person, my experiences are universal, and I'm

no better or worse than any man I've served with. It was a long, hard decision to write this book, and some in the community will look down on me for doing so.

However, it is time to set the record straight about one of the most important missions in U.S. military history. Lost in the media coverage of the Bin Laden raid is why and how the mission was successful. This book will finally give credit to those who earned it. The mission was a team effort, from the intelligence analysts who found Osama bin Laden to the helicopter pilots who flew us to Abbottabad to the men who assaulted the compound. No one man or woman was more important than another.

No Easy Day is the story of "the guys," the human toll we pay, and the sacrifices we make to do this dirty job. This book is about a brotherhood that existed long before I joined and will be around long after I am gone.

My hope is one day a young man in junior high school will read it and become a SEAL, or at least live a life bigger than him. If that happens, the book is a success.

Mark Owen
June 22, 2012,
Virginia Beach, Virginia



PROLOGUE

Chalk One

At one minute out, the Black Hawk crew chief slid the door open.

I could just make him out—his night vision goggles covering his eyes—holding up one finger. I glanced around and saw my SEAL teammates calmly passing the sign throughout the helicopter.

The roar of the engine filled the cabin, and it was now impossible to hear anything other than the Black Hawk's rotors beating the air. The wind buffeted me as I leaned out, scanning the ground below, hoping to steal a glance of the city of Abbottabad.

An hour and a half before, we'd boarded our two MH-60 Black Hawks and lifted off into a moonless night. It was only a short flight from our base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to the border with Pakistan, and from there another hour to the target we had been studying on satellite images for weeks.

The cabin was pitch-black except for the lights from the cockpit. I had been wedged against the left door with no room to stretch out. We'd stripped the helicopter of its seats to save on weight, so we either sat on the floor or on small camp chairs purchased at a local sporting goods store before we left.

Now perched on the edge of the cabin, I stretched my legs out the door trying to get the blood flowing. My legs were numb and cramped. Crowded into the cabin around me and in the second helicopter were twenty-three of my teammates from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU. I had operated with these men dozens of times before. Some I had known ten years or more. I trusted each one completely.

Five minutes ago, the whole cabin had come alive. We pulled on our helmets and checked our radios and then made one final check of our weapons. I was wearing sixty pounds of gear, each gram meticulously

chosen for a specific purpose, my load refined and calibrated over a dozen years and hundreds of similar missions.

This team had been handpicked, assembled of the most experienced men in our squadron. Over the last forty-eight hours, as go day loomed and then was postponed and then loomed again, we had each checked and rechecked our equipment so we were more than ready for this night.

This was a mission I'd dreamt about since I watched the September 11, 2001, attacks on a TV in my barracks room in Okinawa. I was just back from training and got into my room in time to see the second plane crash into the World Trade Center. I couldn't turn away as the fireball shot out of the opposite side of the building and smoke billowed out of the tower.

Like millions of Americans back home, I stood there watching in disbelief with a hopeless feeling in the pit of my stomach. I stayed transfixed to the screen for the rest of the day as my mind tried to make sense of what I'd just witnessed. One plane crash could be an accident. The unfolding news coverage confirmed what I had known the moment the second plane entered the TV shot. A second plane was an attack, no doubt. No way that happened by accident.

On September 11, 2001, I was on my first deployment as a SEAL, and as Osama bin Laden's name was mentioned I figured my unit would get the call to go to Afghanistan the next day. For the previous year and a half, we'd been training to deploy. We'd trained in Thailand, the Philippines, East Timor, and Australia over the last few months. As I watched the attacks, I longed to be out of Okinawa and in the mountains of Afghanistan, chasing al Qaeda fighters and serving up a little payback.

We never got the call.

I was frustrated. I hadn't trained so hard and for so long to become a SEAL only to watch the war on TV. Of course, I wasn't about to let my family and friends in on my frustration. They were writing asking me if I was going to Afghanistan. To them, I was a SEAL and it was only logical that we would be immediately deployed to Afghanistan.

I remember that I sent an e-mail to my girlfriend at the time trying to make light of a bad situation. We were talking about the end of this deployment and making plans for my time at home before the next deployment.

"I've got about a month left," I wrote. "I'll be home soon, unless I have to kill Bin Laden first." It was the kind of joke you heard a lot back then.

Now, as the Black Hawks flew toward our target, I thought back over the last ten years. Ever since the attacks, everyone in my line of work had dreamt of being involved in a mission like this. The al Qaeda leader personified everything we were fighting against. He'd inspired men to fly planes into buildings filled with innocent civilians. That kind of fanaticism is scary, and as I watched the towers crumble and saw reports of attacks in Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, I knew we were at war, and not a war of our choosing. A lot of brave men had sacrificed for years to fight the war, never knowing if we would get a chance to be involved in a mission like the one about to begin.

A decade after that event and with eight years of chasing and killing al Qaeda's leaders, we were minutes away from fast-roping into Bin Laden's compound.

Grabbing the rope attached to the Black Hawk's fuselage, I could feel the blood finally returning to my toes. The sniper next to me slid into place with one leg hanging outside and one leg inside the helicopter so that there was more room in the already-tight doorway. The barrel of his weapon was scanning for targets in the compound. His job was to cover the south side of the compound as the assault team fast-roped into the courtyard and split up to our assignments.

Just over a day ago, none of us had believed Washington would approve the mission. But after weeks of waiting, we were now less than a minute from the compound. The intelligence said our target would be there; I figured he was, but nothing would surprise me. We'd thought we were close a couple times before.

I had spent a week in 2007 chasing rumors of Bin Laden. We had received reports that he was coming back into Afghanistan from Pakistan for a final stand. A source said he'd seen a man in "flowing white robes" in the mountains. After weeks of prep, it was ultimately a wild-goose chase. This time felt different. Before we left, the CIA analyst who was the main force behind tracking the target to Abbottabad said she was one hundred percent certain he was there. I hoped she was right, but my experience told me to reserve judgment until the mission was over.

It didn't matter now. We were seconds away from the house and whoever was living in there was about to have a bad night.

We had completed similar assaults countless times before. For the last ten years, I had deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and to the Horn of Africa.

We had been part of the mission to rescue Richard Phillips, the captain of the container ship *Maersk Alabama*, from three Somali pirates in 2009, and I had operated in Pakistan before. Tactically, tonight was no different from a hundred other operations; historically, I hoped it was going to be very different.

As soon as I gripped the rope, a calm came over me. Everyone on the mission had heard that one-minute call a thousand times before and at this point it was no different than any other operation. From the door of the helicopter, I started to make out landmarks I recognized from studying satellite images of the area during our weeks of training. I wasn't clipped into the helicopter with a safety line, so my teammate Walt had a hand on a nylon loop on the back of my body armor. Everybody was crowding toward the door right behind me ready to follow me down. On the right side, my teammates had a good visual of the trail helicopter with Chalk Two heading to its landing zone.

As soon as we cleared the southeastern wall, our helicopter flared out and started to hover near our predetermined insert point. Looking down thirty feet into the compound, I could see laundry whipping on a clothesline. Rugs hung out to dry were battered by dust and dirt from the rotors. Trash swirled around the yard, and in a nearby animal pen, goats and cows thrashed around, startled by the helicopter.

Focused on the ground, I could see we were still over the guesthouse. As the helicopter rocked, I could tell the pilot was having some trouble getting the aircraft into position. We veered between the roof of the guesthouse and the wall of the compound. Glancing over at the crew chief, I could see he had his radio microphone pressed against his mouth, passing directions to the pilot.

The helicopter was bucking as it tried to find enough air to set a stable hover and hold station. The wobbling wasn't violent, but I could tell it wasn't planned. The pilot was fighting the controls trying to correct it. Something wasn't right. The pilots had done this kind of mission so many times that for them putting a helicopter over a target was like parking a car.

Staring into the compound, I considered throwing the rope just so we could get out of the unstable bird. I knew it was a risk, but getting on the ground was imperative. There wasn't anything I could do stuck in the door of the helicopter. All I needed was a clear spot to throw the rope.

But the clear spot never came.

“We’re going around. We’re going around,” I heard over the radio. That meant the original plan to fast-rope into the compound was now off. We were going to circle around to the south, land, and assault from outside the wall. It would add precious time to the assault and allow anyone inside the compound more time to arm themselves.

My heart sank.

Up until I heard the go-around call, everything was going as planned. We had evaded the Pakistani radar and anti-aircraft missiles on the way in and arrived undetected. Now, the insert was already going to shit. We had rehearsed this contingency, but it was plan B. If our target was really inside, surprise was the key and it was quickly slipping away.

As the helicopter attempted to climb out of its unstable hover, it took a violent right turn, spinning ninety degrees. I could feel the tail kick to the left. It caught me by surprise and I immediately struggled to find a handhold inside the cabin to keep from sliding out the door.

I could feel my butt coming off the floor, and for a second I could feel a panic rising in my chest. I let go of the rope and started to lean back into the cabin, but my teammates were all crowded in the door. There was little room for me to scoot back. I could feel Walt’s grip tighten on my body armor as the helicopter started to drop. Walt’s other hand held the sniper’s gear. I leaned back as far as I could. Walt was practically lying on top of me to keep me inside.

“Holy fuck, we’re going in,” I thought.

The violent turn put my door in the front as the helicopter started to slide sideways. I could see the wall of the courtyard coming up at us. Overhead, the engines, which had been humming, now seemed to scream as they tried to beat the air into submission to stay aloft.

The tail rotor had barely missed hitting the guesthouse as the helicopter slid to the left. We had joked before the mission that our helicopter had the lowest chance of crashing because so many of us had already survived previous helicopter crashes. We’d been sure if a helicopter was going to crash it would be the one carrying Chalk Two.

Thousands of man-hours, maybe even millions, had been spent leading the United States to this moment, and the mission was about to go way off track before we even had a chance to get our feet on the ground.

I tried to kick my legs up and wiggle deeper into the cabin. If the helicopter hit on its side, it might roll, trapping my legs under the fuselage.

Leaning back as far as I could, I pulled my legs into my chest. Next to me, the sniper tried to clear his legs from the door, but it was too crowded. There was nothing we could do but hope the helicopter didn't roll and chop off his exposed leg.

Everything slowed down. I tried to push the thoughts of being crushed out of my mind. With every second, the ground got closer and closer. I felt my whole body tense up, ready for the inevitable impact.