

The Daunting Six Days of Winter SEAL Training (1974-1975):

The Personal Report of a Graduate, Dr. Robert Adams

Epigraphs

“It was supposed to rain all week [“Hell Week”], but God so far had intervened to give His blessing to this day [Day 1 of this Hell Week], for no rain yet fouled the harsh and biting winter night air. The sand was soft like crushed ice, and frustrating. Running and walking on it was like moving in slow motion. It fought you each step. The ever-present crunchy soft green ice plant covered the dunes in patches like celery laid flat, but eating it was not very rewarding. Many of the class had tried it just to see if it was palatable. It was not, but it was soothing to lie on, and if you were careful, you could run on it, and lessen the sandy suck to your boots. Each of us [in the starting class of 70 candidates], in our own time and way, had paused in the days before the start and prayed for help. We were a winter class, and winter classes had the lowest graduation rates. Winter was bad enough, but freezing rain and the lack of sun to give [a] momentary respite was damnable.” (Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible: Navy SEAL Hell Week—a Doctor Looks Back*, pp. 77-78)

“The Navy community wanted and *needed* good men, but there was no place in the [SEAL] Teams—this day or any day in the future—for a quitter. They needed *someone special*, and they were clear about exactly what that meant.” (Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible*, p. 85—italics in the original)

“This [departure of two candidate-officers senior to me] was the reason I suddenly found myself in charge [of the class, now down to thirty-nine]. Both men senior to me were gone. I was facing **an additional challenge** that I had not anticipated. As Chief [Petty Officer] Rogers [one of their SEAL Instructors, along with Instructor Mike Thornton, a 1972 Medal of Honor Recipient!] **reminded** us all, **'you will need to demonstrate that you can lead me into combat. Fail that test, and you are history.'**” (Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible*, p. 86—my emphasis added.)

“Three rings of the ever-present shiny brass bell [suddenly] echoed across the field, marking the loss of his classmate. **To ring the bell was a final insult to endure once a man called it quits.** The bell would ring three times with an instructor witness, and

the helmet would be placed in line, back at the BUD/S [“Basic Underwater Demolition/ SEAL] area, with the others already there.” (Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible*, pp. 119-120—my emphasis added.)

“Mistakes were allowed it seemed, but failure was not. I could see the instructor's truck driving around. I suspected they were looking for us....**I was not sure that I could convince the instructors** [not even the trustworthy Mike Thornton] **that I had** [as an Ensign and the Class leader] **what they needed in a combat-capable officer**. I was watching them, and they were watching me....The [training] missions continued all night, and by dawn, four more men had called it quits. They were just suddenly gone.” (Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible*, p. 152—my emphasis added.)

A close reading of Dr. Robert Adams' 2017 book will, if we are honest, challenge all of us to the depths. For sure, it will inform us—and inspire us with its vividness—about many important, but still little known, things concerning one of the major branches of the profession of arms: that is, the United States Navy's own Naval Commandos, or Navy SEALs. The SEALs were first founded only in 1962, as a strategic expansion of the Navy's more limited (and heroically famous) Under Water Demolitions Teams (“the Frogmen”); and the new SEAL concept and missions designedly operating also “beyond the high tide mark” along various coastal areas of the world. These new Teams of SEALs, unlike the UDT (Underwater Demolition Teams) historically, had to be prepared to operate more widely and resourcefully in all three challenging environments: sea, land, and air (as in HALO parachute training and various infiltration operations). With this larger framing context being now established, we may better appreciate now Robert Adams' admirable focus on one six-day portion of a SEAL's protracted and very demanding basic training: namely the Six Days of Hell Week, which is a midway part of the First Phase, and further builds upon the longer preparatory phase.

The carefully chosen full title of Dr. Adams' lucid book, slightly more than 200-pages, is *Six Days of Impossible: Navy Seal Hell Week—a Doctor Looks Back*.¹ (2017). For, then-Ensign Robert Adams is himself a fully qualified graduate of SEAL training who thus earned the cherished SEAL Trident Badge in Class 81, that formidable class that also endured the winter of 1974-1975, as well as the famous SEAL Petty Officer First Class, Michael Thornton himself! Indeed, as that especially

1 Robert Adams, *Six Days of Impossible: Navy Seal Hell Week—A Doctor Looks Back* (Victoria, B.C., Canada: Friesen Press, 2017), 212 Pages. Robert Adams is now a Medical Doctor, and has been one for several years, and is also now a Retired Army Full Colonel (Army Medical Corps). As a Navy Ensign he became a Navy SEAL in 1974-1975, in the memorable winter Class 81, which started with 70 men, but only graduated 11 men. He is a 1973 Graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

challenging Mike Thornton was to say—as himself a 1972 Recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor: **“This [BUD/S Class 81] was the best SEAL class I ever put through training.”**

Those of us who have gratefully made it through the U.S. Army's own “Winter Ranger Class 5 of the years 1965-1966” already know more than a little about what Ensign Adams himself and his entire Winter Class 81 had gone through. For, our Ranger Class 5—affectionately called “Frostbite 5”—went through Ranger training in the coldest winter on record; and the Ranger Staff later told us (informally and playfully) that we would henceforth be permanently allowed the privilege of putting a warming piece of FUR under our individual Ranger tabs, upon graduation! However, our own experiences in the winter of Ranger 5 were not as demanding, nor as fearsome, as the Navy SEAL training that was conducted in the winter of 1974-1975 in Coronado, California.

It was in our own Army parachute and ranger training, starting in 1965, that I first met some Navy SEALs in person. Three of them were part of both our training classes—Parachute and Ranger classes; and their morale and competence were always inspiring. (I still remember their names, two of them exactly!) Moreover, if one of the SEALs was corrected for some error or minor lapse and thereby promptly and punitively given some 30 push-ups, for example, the other two SEALs immediately dropped down and also did 30 push-ups (or a few more). What a good spirit and high morale they had—and, as a Team, they sustained that inspiring ethos throughout the entire courses!

In our own later Army Special Forces training, we also had exchanges with these memorable Naval Commandos—also on Long-Range Patrols.

We may now savor some of the essential challenge of SEAL training by considering the unexpected, severe interaction of Ensign Robert Adams and Instructor Mike Thornton:²

“Enough,” announced the instructor who inwardly smiled at the achievements of our two strongest men [Don Sayre and Bobby McNabb, who was himself later to become the Honor Graduate of SEAL Class 81]. “We do not have enough time to declare a winner, so you both win. Take a break, you two, while your classmates run the obstacle course.”

We [including the narrator, Ensign Robert Adams] left together for the short run to the now familiar obstacle course while Bobby and Don followed at a slower jog, to watch.

The obstacle course was a test of strength and agility. It was timed, and failure to meet the fifteen-minute minimum was common, but still unacceptable. We would all

2 All further and quoted references to the text of Robert Adams' *Six Days of Impossible* will be placed above, in parentheses, in the main body of this essay.

beat the required time eventually, and it would become an event to master and brag about—but now it was a small horror....Technique and strength would develop together, or failure would follow.” (47)

These activities are not yet in Hell Week, but near and soon to come:

We all knew Hell Week was coming fast, and we would need each other to finish. Bobby and Don lined up with the rest to meet the challenge of the O-course [the Obstacle Course]. Don [Sayre] was still feeling invincible, as always. His belief in himself would continue to serve him well.

The instructors noticed, and smiled. Seaman Apprentice Bobby McNabb would be chosen by the instructors, at graduation, to be our Honor Man. Of the eleven that would walk across the podium at graduation, one would be declared the best of the lot. Bobby would be that man, and he would justify that honor many times over as the months [of SEAL training] careened by. He would further justify that recognition in the [various SEAL] teams for years to follow. We would all be proud to say that he began his career with our class. (48)

Now we shall come to meet Mike Thornton:

But this morning's obstacle course was going to be very different for all [and especially for Ensign R. Adams!]. Petty Officer First Class Mike Thornton was reporting for training as our instructor. Everyone knew he was coming. ENS Muggs [John Muggs, a pseudonym of another young Naval Academy Graduate] remembered having seen him in the hallway when he had reported in, and we all had heard the slightly unbelievable story of how he had saved his officer [SEAL Lieutenant Tommy Norris] and squad on a mission deep behind [sic] enemy lines in Vietnam. That officer was severely wounded [even in the head], but made it back alive due to Mike's extraordinary bravery, leadership, and superhuman willpower. What made it historically extraordinary was that [Tommy Norris] the [SEAL] officer he saved had already [himself] earned the Medal of Honor for a previous mission [also in 1972].³

He [Mike Thornton] was intimidating to look at. **He was also burdened for life** with being known everywhere he went because of the Medal of Honor on his dress uniform. (48—my emphasis added)

We also now have a further description of Instructor Mike Thornton, and a foreshadowing:

Instructor Thornton was a large man with a serious face. He had thick, dark hair and muscles on top of his muscles. He had carried the burdensome M60 machine gun in Vietnam like [as if] it were a toy. He was unnerving, to say the least.

3 For a thorough report on the heroism of both SEAL Lieutenant Tommy Norris and also his Vietnamese combat companion, see the excellent book by John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 287-389 (Chapter 15—The Searchers). Although the name SOG was no longer used after 1971, there was still a “naval advisory attachment” (NAD) in and around Danang; and OP 31 (Maritime Operations) was then to be called the Strategic Technical Directorate (STD), See Plaster's pages 346 and 347 for more information on the NAD and the STD. The “Studies and Observations Group” (SOG) was to be called, after 1971, the STDA (the Strategic Technical Directorate Assistant), thus it was also Lt. Tommy Norris's commanding headquarters in 1972, along with other “Sea Commandos.” More could be said, but much of it is still classified..

I would be introduced to Mike up close and personal very soon. (49)

Ensign Adams would soon be detected wearing some underwear from the Naval Academy:

The obstacle course was becoming fun now...I...was happy with my time, as I stood with the finishers covered with sweat and sand....

Unfortunately for me, Instructor Joe Tyvdik, a lean, strong willow of a man was watching over all. He caught a flash of navy blue between the buttons of my BDU pants and realized that I had very likely chosen to violate the rule to not wear underwear during training. This rule made sense to avoid the inevitable **chafing** and possible infections that came from clothing and sand mixing in the groin area.

I knew the rule, and I understood the reasoning behind it, ...so I made a personal decision that I was sure no one cared about me.

Oops.

“ENS Adams,” he [Joe Tyvdik] crooned with an evil smile, as he sauntered dangerously towards me. “What have we here?” as he continued to reach for my groin area to display the blue and gold Naval academy issue, Speedo bathing suit I was hiding under my uniform....

So, I brushed Instructor Tyvdik's hand away and **playfully said in mock horror**, “Instructor Tyvdik, get your hand away from there. What are you, some kind of faggot?”I was smiling in desperation that the timing and humor was right and was rewarded with a surprised smile as he [Instructor Tyvdik] stepped back. It looked like I might just get away with it.

Only a few yards away, however, was another instructor, unaware of the flash of blue in my pants or why we were having this animated discussion, **and he had heard my comment**.

This occurred as Instructor **Mike Thornton** trotted out toward the O-course for his **first** event as **our newest instructor**...Seeing a significant opportunity for entertainment and pain [and calumny!], the other instructor waited until Mike drew close, and then screeched [with falsity, or hyperbole] for all to hear. “**Mike, that damn officer just called Instructor Tyvdik a faggot!**” (49-50—my emphasis added)

The drama and the unmistakably stern punishment of Ensign Adams will now begin. But there will eventually be a good outcome. We shall therefore attempt to select representative and coherent passages from the end of Chapter 5, although Robert Adams' entire presentation (on pages 50-56) ought to be closely scrutinized and savored by the reader!

After the exacerbating Instructor loudly called out for Mike Thornton's own attention and assistance, the situation changed rapidly, and worsened (it was not “chaffing” but “chafing”):

We all froze, as a dark cloud came over Mike's face, while he slowed to a trot [on the way to the Obstacle Course] and pulled up right in front of me. I was petrified....He

glanced at my name tag and gold collar bars of an ensign and screamed, “Drop for twenty, you filthy maggot.”

As I fell to a leaning rest position, he fell with me, and crammed his nose against my forehead as we moved together up and down in quick push-ups. “Do you want to call *me* a faggot, Mr. Adams?” he screamed, as we pushed up and down, fused together at my forehead. “If you even *think* about it, I will bite your head off and [a sordid word and image] in the hole. His spittle was spraying in my face, and I could feel the heat from his own red face. **The other instructors and students were moving quietly and quickly out of range.** (50—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added)

To Thornton's implied threat, all that Mr. Adams could say by way of reply was “No, Instructor Thornton.” (50)

Thornton not only told Adams to run the obstacle course again, “right now,” but, he added: “And I want you to run it **backwards**. Now go, **and do not even consider not making a passing time.**” (51—my emphasis added)

In Adams' own words after hearing this severe and unusual command, we read:

I took off immediately for the last barbed wire obstacle....Other seemingly insurmountable problems lay ahead, but I was running on adrenalin, and I was somewhat relieved to be on my own, away from perceived certain death [by and from Thornton] that had threatened me moments ago.

The class was formed up and ready to go when I crawled back to the original starting line, filthy and exhausted....“Mr. Adams, you are an officer, a *leader*. Get to the front of the formation and lead this run,” he [Thornton] bellowed, as he pushed me forward, while I tried to catch my breath. “Double-time march,” came the order, and the class leaped ahead on our planned three-mile run....“Catch up with your class Mr. Officer, you are supposed to be a leader,” shouted Mike as he propelled me [for, I had fallen behind!] towards the class. I sprinted with all I had and made it to the main group.(51—italics in the original)

The narrative now will lead us to Mike Thornton's other inflicted taunts and humiliations:

Five minutes further on [in the 3-mile run], Mike had fallen behind to harass some of the stragglers that were not keeping up [on the run], when he realized I was not there. He saw a large puddle coming up on the dirt road ahead, came alongside the main group, and ordered all of us to drop for push-ups in the muddy water.

“Mr. Adams, are you in there?” he queried. “I need you to head on back to the compound, and save us all a lot of pain and suffering. Ring the bell now [as a voluntary quitter] so we can get on with the training. You, sir, are not going to make it. Today is your last day here. I promise you that, so take off now. Ring the f@#*ing bell.” (52—my emphasis added)

Understandably “stunned” by these trenchant words, which seemed to Adams to be so unjustly

disproportionate as a punishment for his deliberate breach of a small rule that prohibited wearing underwear or even a Naval Academy bathing suit during SEAL training, Adams nonetheless then showed his resolve not to ring the bell:

I looked up at this giant of a man, looked at him direct in the eye, and **whispered** the words “**No way.**”

He [Thornton] read my lips and **seemingly liked what I had mouthed at him.**

“Get up all, and resume the run. Adams drop for twenty more,” he ordered, and I stayed in the mud pushing out twenty more as the class moved on, **grateful to be rid of me** [sic]....

Instructor Thornton came in next [from the run and rebuking the stragglers] and stationed himself at the chain link fence gate entrance watching the class come in. **He was looking for me....** When the last few had come in, he looked around and asked another instructor where I was.

“He's over there with the main group. He finished with the pack.”

“No [expletive deleted] way!? Mr. Adams, get over here and give me twenty push-ups again. Did you finish that run [of three miles] with the main group?”

“Yes, Instructor Thornton,” I panted as respectfully as I could.

“**Well, you just wasted your time and effort, since this is the last day of training for you.** Get your ass down to the ocean, get wet, and roll yourself in the sand until every nook and crack of your body is covered...Go.”....

He **smiled professionally** as I moved away **stuttering my disbelief.** He knew what I had done and why. He had done it himself when he was in [SEAL] training, **but I was destined to fail today, if he had his way....**

I had clearly crossed a line that I did not know was there, and now I was **facing an angry nightmare with the Medal of Honor.** (52-53—my emphasis added)

Robert Adams then said that, despite all these barriers and discouragements, “I decided to go on. I could imagine no way out. I had no other choice. I believed it would end eventually, at least I hoped so.” (53)

Referring to Thornton again, Adams said:

He had promised to run me out of training....Instructor Thornton was once again entreating me to quit because what was going on was going to continue until I did so. I endured. It was the only hope I had....

“O.K. Mister, we are done here. Go join your class,” stated my tormentor firmly and officially, and he walked away.

I was left alone, confused and exhausted as I watched my dedicated tormentor just walk away. (54—my emphasis added)

Soon after these recent trials and dislocations, and though he seemed to have survived for the time being, Ensign Adams had a somewhat grim reflection:

My biggest worry was that the test was not complete. What if I had made a fatal mistake? **Could I go through all that again?**

The next morning at **0430** [hours, or 4:30 A.M.], we again gathered on the grinder in our assigned positions for morning PT. I had just assumed my front row spot [as a Class Leader still] when **I was summoned.**

“ENS Adams, get your ass over here, and give me twenty-five,” growled Mike Thornton....A few [of my classmates] wondered if they would ever see me again....

Mike Thornton was seated on a platform over me, legs crossed, and watching carefully.

“So, Mr. Adams, do you remember yesterday when I told you I was going to run you out of training?”

“Yes, Instructor,” I replied as my mind tried to digest the horror of that statement. We had months and months of training ahead [even after Hell Week], and if I had to do yesterday again today, and every day, there was no chance I would ever survive.

“Well, I changed my mind. You did well yesterday. I am not going to run you out. As a matter of fact, I am going to make sure that you graduate,” he stated calmly and with conviction. (55-56—my emphasis added)

At these consoling but entirely unexpected words Ensign Adams was “speechless” (56) and “I felt the muscles in my back and legs relax.” (56)

But, lest Adams might now become complacent or too self-assured, the manly Thornton had this to add by way of warning:

“But let me be clear about one thing, if you screw up, you will answer to me, and the penalty will be severe. So, when you graduate, and you *will* graduate, there will be no question in your mind that you, *sir*, have been through training.”....

“Hooyah, Instructor Thornton,” I replied, **and risked a small smile.**

I think I saw **him smile too when** he turned away. (56—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added)

Later on, after Hell Week and after the attained graduation on 4 April 1975, we are to see another tribute from the class leader of “BUD/S Class 81,” Ensign Robert Adams:

To this day [in 2017], despite many other momentous events in our lives, most of us will recall with pride **the handshakes we were offered by our instructors.** Chief Rogers reserved the personal privilege, and right, to render a first Team salute to the

three officers that finished with our class. [Instructor] Steve Frisk, who would train, and see, nineteen classes graduate, and had guided us all, shook our hands and smiled with pride. **Mike Thornton**, wearing a dress uniform with the Medal of Honor ribbon, **smiled like a new dad**. We were his **first** class to train.

“Welcome to the Teams [the Operational SEAL Teams], sir,” Chief Rogers stated as he whipped a perfect salute to each officer individually. **This moment** would **resonate** in our individual and collective memories....

The chief petty officer that had **accosted and challenged** the eight officers in our [original] class **to prove to him that we could lead his teammates into combat**, rendered our first salute at graduation to only three [officers], as new members of **his** elite community. (199—my emphasis added)

CODA

Some twenty-five years later—from 2000-early 2003—I met several SEALs who were then either active Students at, or on the Teaching Faculty of, the Joint Special Operations University at Hurlburt Field, Florida—where I, too, was a visiting professor.

We had many candid (often Classified) discussions together—about Vietnam and MACV-SOG and about the later post-1962 history and missions of SEALs, even as **strategic** assets of U.S. Military and National Strategy. More than a few mid-level SEAL officers—Navy Lieutenants—were seriously considering leaving the SEALs and Navy altogether. Their “operational tempo” and the “personnel tempo” and “uncertain missions” were becoming too depleting and too much of a strain, especially for those who had families and young children to consider (some SEAL officers only saw their families a few weeks of the year.) I could say more, but not here. (Robert Adams' book also prepares us well to know the backgrounds and aspirations of many SEALs and their families, and even their parents! His compassionate and humane depictions of his fellow classmates are interwoven throughout his book, and these presentations include those eleven men of seventy who would survive and graduate, and those who would not.⁴ These vignettes greatly enhance Adams' narrative, and he has the empathy to teach us and to perceive the deeper things and matters of moment in life and its inescapable suffering. He shows us how to suffer well. And even to consecrate that suffering unto a noble **sacrifice** and for the **greater** good—that is to say, giving up a lesser good for a greater good.)

4 By contrast, my mentor Lieutenant General Sam V. Wilson, (Ret.) told me in person in the late 1990s about the attrition rate of the first class in the Army's “Delta Force” Training. During my visit to him in Virginia, I had sent him especially warm personal greetings from General Peter Schoomaker, then the Commanding Officer of the U.S. Special Operations Command (1997-2000) in Tampa, Florida; and these greetings were sent to General Wilson through me after my own invited talks there in Tampa (about psycho-biological warfare), having just come from the Air Force Academy. General Wilson smiled warmly and said: “I remember General Schoomaker very well. In the first training class for “Delta Force,” there were over a hundred beginners as trainees—even 120, as I recall— and only TWO of them graduated. **One of them was Captain Pete Schoomaker**. We are one of the few countries in the world that can afford and that can withstand such an attrition rate.” It was similar once with the SEALs. Perhaps, it is still so. But I do not know.

Moreover, I once told Admiral Eric Olson (himself a SEAL) in person some of the most important and heartfelt things those younger (and other) SEALs had said to me at the Special Ops University; and he then promptly and earnestly—and admirably—took something out of his wallet: a few of his cards which had on them his private numbers and other direct means and points of contact to reach him expeditiously. He asked me to give them especially to those SEALs who were thinking of leaving the Navy, for he sincerely wanted to know, forthrightly and candidly, WHYSO! (Admiral Olson was himself then in 2001 the Chief of all the SEALs at Coronado, California; and all the SEALs I met cherished him. He would later become—from 2007 to 2011—the Commander-in-Chief (CINC) of the Joint Special Operations Command in Tampa, Florida—as a four-star Admiral.)

It is fitting, in conclusion, that I tell how a SEAL officer by the name of Olson once saved my life in Vietnam, though he likely still does not know it. This formidable SEAL, head of the Naval Detachment at OP-31 in Danang (Da Nang), Vietnam in early 1968, after the earlier TET attacks, was like an Achilles to us. I remember him as “Commander Olson”—also known as “Norman Olson,” and also, more affectionately, as “Stormin’ Norman Olson.” (He later retired as a Navy Captain and has been indispensable in the founding and sustaining of the UDT-SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida.)

Briefly stated, as a member of MACV-SOG, I was to go further north from Danang. As a young Army Special Forces Captain, I was to be merely an observer and passenger on a special mission on one of SOG's specially outfitted C-130s (with its darkly colored and distinctively camouflaged paint). It is not necessary for me to say here what that mission was; but when our aircraft arrived at Danang (Da Nang)—to deliver documents and also to refuel—Commander Olson met our aircraft and told me at once that plans had changed and I was to disembark from the C-130 and then go on a maritime mission to “Paradise Island,” which was off the coast in the sea slightly southeast of Danang.

I did what I was told. Only later—two months later—I was told that that “Black SOG C-130” never came back. No one knew anything about what happened. That C-130 was the only SOG aircraft that was lost and, to this day, never accounted for. I would have been on that lost aircraft, had not Commander Olson authoritatively directed me to another SEAL mission, and part of a larger Joint Special Operations initiative: Strategic Diversion and Deception Operations. A sensitive topic.

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