

Naval War College Review

Volume 47
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 31

1994

Brave Men, Dark Waters: The Untold Story of the Navy SEALs

Jeff Stein

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Stein, Jeff (1994) "Brave Men, Dark Waters: The Untold Story of the Navy SEALs," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol47/iss1/31>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

and explains how this is a natural outgrowth of both the geography of the Chinese coastline and the types of threats that the National People's Liberation Army-Navy might typically have to deal with. The author also presents information of a more generalized nature explaining many of the factors that go into a nation's decision to purchase and operate these boats and craft.

Part Two of this book presents an excellent technical directory. Rather than organize the patrol boats and attack craft by country, the author has arranged them alphabetically by type or class, starting with the Turkish AB class and ending with the Polish *Wisla* class. Within each class, the craft are further broken down by nation so that the reader can get an immediate sense of how many of the type exist worldwide and then how many exist in each particular navy. Because of this organization, *Small Craft Navies* is a particularly useful reference book. For example, this arrangement enables us to learn that the Soviet Osa I and Osa II classes comprise over three hundred craft owned by a total of twenty-two nations. A review of this section also reveals that the People's Republic of China is a major exporter of attack craft, with four major classes—the Hainan, Huchuan, Shanghai, and Shantou—exported to a wide variety of nations. The Shanghai class alone is featured in thirteen navies.

Overall, *Small Craft Navies* is a lively and interesting book. Although its subject matter would initially appear

to be highly specialized and of rather narrow appeal, its importance is apparent as all navies move into an era of littoral warfare so well articulated, for the U.S. Navy case, in ". . . From the Sea." As these craft increase in numbers and importance, so too will the value of this already useful book.

GEORGE GALDORISI
Captain, U.S. Navy
USS *Cleveland* (LPD 7)

Kelly, Orr. *Brave Men, Dark Waters: The Untold Story of the Navy SEALs*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1992. 288pp. \$22.95

Pity the Navy Seals. Despite a half century's heroic service as the Navy's frogmen, they've failed to garner the spoils of their Army brethren: a hit song, a John Wayne movie, and a green beret ostentatiously sanctioned by the president of the United States.

They do have Bob Kerry, the former Seal whose Medal of Honor was his main calling card as a presidential aspirant. Unfortunately, what the general public knows about the Seals otherwise is hardly flattering: a botched jump that left four dead off Grenada; a calamitous assault on a Panamanian airfield that left another four dead and nine wounded; the awkward arrival in Somalia, where grease-faced Seals crawled out of dark surf into the bright lights of television crews. Their reputation was not helped by the best-selling memoir of former Seal commander Richard Marcinko, *Rogue Warrior*.

156 Naval War College Review

A balanced history of the Navy's frogmen was overdue but not easy to achieve. As Orr Kelly, the veteran military reporter for *U.S. News & World Report*, notes in his preface, the Seals are obsessed by secrecy and are not always their own best witnesses. One Seal warned Kelly that if he did not like the book, "I'll rain on you."

Kelly should be safe. As his title suggests, *Brave Men, Dark Waters* is a paean to the under-appreciated Navy commandos, from their bloody baptism in the surf of Tarawa fifty years ago to their largely unheralded contribution to the brilliant deception that convinced Saddam Hussein an amphibious landing was coming in Kuwait.

This book crackles with enough war stories, some revealed for the first time, to keep the most jaded reader turning pages. But Kelly is too modest when he says his goal was to "help today's and tomorrow's SEALs to know themselves better." The Seals seem to know who they are—it's their bosses who seem confused.

Kelly traces the Seals' difficulties to the hectic days after Pearl Harbor, when two overlapping and sometimes contradictory roles emerged for the frogmen. One originated in the need for a reconnaissance capability against enemy beaches and harbors, another in the demand for waterborne sabotage and demolition. First came the Scouts and Raiders, and then the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs). Each had different capabilities based on the objectives of the moment and

theater of assignment, a dichotomy that has plagued the units to this day despite their consolidation in 1962 as one big Sea-Air-Land family unit.

Nothing prepared them very well for Indochina, where the CIA first used them to train Vietnamese saboteurs sent north. As Irish Flynn, a lieutenant who later became the first Seal admiral, said, "it was an act of very great arrogance" to assume the Seals could teach tricks to soldiers who had been fighting the communists for a decade. Otherwise, except for a few submarine-based forays so ill-fated that they must be read in full to be appreciated, the Seals were employed in commando raids against Viet Cong units in coastal areas and swamps. After a year mucking around, one disillusioned lieutenant wrote headquarters, "This is not for us," and advised they be pulled out. You can imagine the answer.

Antiterrorism was added to the Seals' quiver in the 1980s, and Kelly offers a thoroughly balanced antidote to *Rogue Warrior*. Yet, for Seal Team Six, "Grenada was the first opportunity to show what it could do." The team tasked to rescue that island's governor general had to be rescued itself; yet another team, trying to capture a radio transmitter, was overwhelmed and had to fight its way to the sea. All this after four Seals had died in a parachute jump into a gale.

The author seems to agree with those who blame "the failure of senior commanders to understand the role of the SEALs . . . and use them properly" for such disasters. After Panama,

some said that tasking a multi-platoon Seal force to secure Noriega's airfield was "unfair," not suited to "SEAL doctrine," etc. "So what?" answered Admiral George Worthington, the senior Seal commander. The Seals, he said, were the best America had to offer at the moment.

One can see his point. But then why have special forces at all? *Brave Men, Dark Waters* should be required reading for anyone concerned about the future of the Seals. After reading it, however, you will not feel confident that anything will change. It is not in the nature of the beast.

JEFF STEIN
author of
A Murder in Wartime

those officers—mostly retired—who thwarted or challenged his professional or personal ambitions. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) the author's motives, this book is less an embarrassment to the Navy as an institution than an indictment of particular personalities, both patrons and enemies, who launched an unguided missile into the most politically sensitive of tasks: counter-terrorism. The lesson it contains goes much deeper than the jacket blurbs, innuendoes of broken faith, or sanitized details of Seal operations. I would recommend it for the reading list as a category of its own—"bureaucratic wars of the ego."

One cannot accurately review the book and avoid reviewing the person. No one can deny that Richard Marcinko is a very brave man. He is also (despite a twenty-one-month prison sentence that he describes as a vacation) a success story; a high school dropout with an obviously unhappy childhood who becomes a frogman, a naval officer, a Seal, and a three-time commanding officer. Unfortunately, he carries with him what his collaborator, John Weisman, politely describes as "warrior's hubris" but others might refer to as the utmost egotism. It is evident in this book that Commander Marcinko's combat experience never taught him that making enemies for fun is a deadly game, particularly in peacetime. In his eyes there are no peers and no rules. There were few below the rank of three stars whom he would not insult or ignore.

Marcinko, Richard with John Weisman. *Rogue Warrior*. New York: Pocket Books, 1992. 339pp. \$22

You will not find this book on the Navy's official professional reading list. As a matter of fact, it is the sort of book that public affairs officers wisely avoid questions about. *Rogue Warrior* is the autobiography of Commander Richard Marcinko, commissioning commanding officer of Seal Team Six, the Navy's counter-terrorist organization. Marcinko formed and commanded Red Cell, a unit designed to use terrorist tactics in testing the security of naval installations. Then he was found guilty, after two trials, of conspiracy to defraud the government. To a great extent, the book is Marcinko's way of getting even with