

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Operator

#### *Firing the Shots That Killed Osama bin Laden and My Years as a SEAL Team Warrior*

O'Neill, Robert. *The Operator: Firing the Shots That Killed Osama bin Laden and My Years as a SEAL Team Warrior*. New York, NY: Scribner, Publisher: 2018. 368 pages. ISBN-10: 1501145037/ISBN-13: 977-1-5011-4503-2

Review by Scott P. Graverson, PhD

Pull up a stool, grab a beer, and prepare for a book full of “There I Was” war stories from one of the U.S. Navy SEALs’ most recognized warriors. Chief Robert O’Neill, the Operator credited with killing Osama bin Laden, regales us with tales from the more exciting operations he took part in. The story begins in Butte, Montana, with Robert, a jilted teenager, making an impulsive decision to enlist in the Navy to graduate Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S). Growing up in the Rocky Mountains and living the frontier life gave Robert certain advantages—the outdoor lifestyle kept him fit, his love for hunting honed his acumen with firearms, and his father’s engagement in sports (specifically, basketball) instilled him with the discipline necessary to complete the world’s most rigorous military training. The only thing lacking on his resume was the thing SEALs do most: swim. Rob took this challenge head-on and went to the pool at the local university every day. He was fortunate enough to enlist the help of a high-school friend who swam for the University of Notre Dame. He learned some basic techniques and worked hard to master them. For 6 months, he did nothing but run, swim, and do pull-ups.

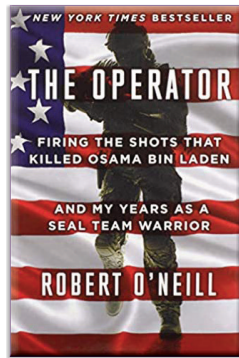
Growing up, Rob and his dad played one-on-one basketball; games concluded with a free-throw competition. Once they made 20 free throws in a row, they would treat themselves to a steak dinner. Once it became easy to accomplish the 20 free throws, they upped the goal to 40, then 70 free throws. During high school, an active-duty SEAL hired Robert as a hunting guide. His performance across the rocky terrain earned him high marks from his employer, who suggested he might be fit to serve on one of the teams. This initial seed gave him the confidence to try out for the elite teams, and the free-throw competitions with his dad gave him the tenacity to never give up, even when he thought he would drown.

Rob details many of his more exciting deployments with the SEAL team—at least as much as he can, given the sensitive nature of the team’s work and the potential that the stories may contain classified information. The author redacted parts of the book to comply with the DoD Prepublication and Security Reviews; however, some redactions are clumsily done. “At the time, the only two SEAL teams were One and Two, so [SEAL founder Richard] Marcinko and the other planners settled on the name SEAL Team \*\*\* to confuse the Soviets and make them wonder where Teams Three, Four, and Five were (p. 26).” The reader can quickly ascertain the redacted information with a few inferences or a quick Google search.

These redactions were a minor distraction compared to the tales of adventure woven in this book. Most interesting to this reader was the intersection of operations told in other books, such as the search for Marcus Luttrell in “Lone Survivor.” Rob was on the SEAL operation to recover Luttrell. They went on foot to the top of the

mountain near the Afghan village where Luttrell was located. The commanders decided the best extract was to helicopter in a platoon of U.S. Army Rangers and grab Luttrell. Rob’s SEAL team served as “mission redundancy” in case the helicopter came under fire or had to abort the mission for any reason.

Rob was also part of the mission to rescue Richard Phillips, Captain of the merchant ship Maersk Alabama when Somali pirates seized the boat off the coast of Somalia. While Rob was not one of the snipers involved in the takedown of the pirates, he learned a valuable lesson regarding when a unit member is in the public spotlight: too much attention to warriors who operate in the shadows can have a deleterious effect on individual and unit morale.



The book concludes with several chapters dedicated to the book’s tagline: the demise of the world’s most wanted terrorist, Osama bin Laden, architect of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The book describes the weeks of training the team underwent to prepare for the mission in a mock compound in North Carolina through the mission’s execution. Like the sniper who pulled the trigger to liberate

Captain Phillips from the Somali pirates, Rob received unwanted attention. In addition to dealing with the celebrity status and calls for interviews, rumors floated about book deals, movie rights, and the like, which caused a lot of tension in the unit and eventually forced Rob to decide to leave the Navy after 15 years of service, 5 years short of retirement eligibility.

Ultimately, Rob completed 400 combat missions, earned two Silver Stars, four Bronze Stars with Valor, a Joint Service Commendation Medal with Valor, three Presidential Unit Citations, and a Navy/Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Valor. He also had a mortgage, no job, no pension, and no degree. This begs the question, “What does a former Special Forces Operator do when he leaves the service?” Of all the skills acquired during the extensive training, not many of them translate well to a corporate job. Rob realized he was not the only Operator needing direction; hundreds of Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, and Air Force Pararescuemen retire or leave the service every year. Rob now uses his SEAL training to focus his energy on motivational speaking and assisting Operators to transition to civilian life. Rob supports the Special Operators Transition Foundation (formerly Your Grateful Nation).

If you like swapping war stories with your combat buddies or simply hearing the tales regaled by the warriors who lived them, this book is for you. The authors wrote this book for military veterans and civilians alike. Rob takes the time to explain the military jargon to the civilians so that it is not an annoyance to the veteran. A word of warning, though: this book contains a fair amount of coarse “team room” language, so be ready to look behind that curtain.



# J<sup>S</sup>OM

**JOURNAL of SPECIAL OPERATIONS MEDICINE™**



Summer 2023  
Volume 23, Edition 2

THE JOURNAL FOR OPERATIONAL MEDICINE AND TACTICAL CASUALTY CARE



## *Inside this Issue:*

- › FEATURE ARTICLES: Risk of Harm in Needle Decompression
- › Aspiration Pneumonia in Combat › Testing SGA Devices in Military Combat
- › Arterial Occlusion: MTET versus CAT
- › Selection of Pediatric Pelvic Circumferential Compression Devices
- › Prehospital Trauma-Induced Hypocalcemia
- › Pre-Deployment Vascular Access Curriculum for Non-Surgeons
- › COVID-19 in Austere Operational Environments
- › Maladaptive Cognitions in EMS Professionals as a Function of COVID-19
- › SARS-CoV-2 and Cleaning of Army Combat Uniforms
- › Ultrasound Localization of REBOA in a Cadaver Model › Military Medical Student Training
- › Dental and Oral-Maxillofacial Medical Evacuations › Toward a Serious Game to Help with Mass Casualty Incidents
- › SOF Truths and HRO Principles › Type 3c Diabetes in a Tactical Athlete
- › SOST Catastrophic Injury Exposure › CASE REPORT: Critical Hypophosphatemia in a Combat Dive Candidate
- › ONGOING SERIES: Infectious Diseases, Prolonged Casualty Care, Book Review, TCCC Updates, and more!

*Dedicated to the  
Indomitable Spirit,  
Lessons Learned &  
Sacrifices of the  
SOF Medic*