

My First SEAL Team Reunion

MY EXPERIENCE:

This week I traveled with my parents to the UDT-SEAL West Coast Reunion in Coronado California. This was something that was, humbling, overwhelming, and exciting all at the same time. My father was in UDT Team 12, and SEAL Team One, Class 33. All my life I've known a little bit about his time on the teams and some of the stories and people in his early life, but I felt there was always something missing or not connecting with at some level. This trip changed all that! I got to experience something few civilians ever will.

THE PEOPLE:

I've heard the names and stories of some of his friends and others on the Teams, but when you meet them in person, it adds color and depth to the black & white print of the story. I've met Bill Jebb before at a luncheon years ago, but it was good to see him again this time surrounded by other SEAL's. Bill is like the energizer bunny but in the form of the Tasmanian Devil. This man has more energy that can't be turned off. He continues to do things men 1/3 of his age wouldn't touch. I can't imagine what he was like 60 years ago when he was at full power!

I next met John "Guns" Gulch, a man you do not want to mix words with! Still practicing law, he has a vocabulary and wit about him that keeps you on your toes. Within minutes of meeting him, he told my 25 year old nephew, while holding onto the back of his neck bringing him in close "There's just something about this guy that makes me just want to punch him in the gut!". I knew I was in for a ride. It took me all weekend to give him a couple of quips back to stand my ground, but I was quickly verbally pulverized. Although it was all in fun, I feel sorry for anyone who goes against him in the courts!

Imagine being in your 20's at one of the top beaches in the country and you need to be saved by a lifeguard, but not just any lifeguard! An 80 year old SEAL patrolling the beaches at Tower 1 for nearly 20 years, the legend known as Lance Mann. Coming back to his roots as a SEAL he stayed near the water in Coronado patrolling the shores and keeping them safe. A good looking, soft spoken gentleman with a deep, slightly raspy voice, has always been the eye candy for the ladies - well at least for my mom! On a side note Lance lost his house in Lāhainā during the Maui fires. His renters lost everything but got out safely.

At these reunions everyone meets and reacquaints themselves with old friends, but it's also a time to heal and make new friends. Robert Conger lost his wife over a year ago, and last year Robert made it a point to make new connections with fellow SEAL's. A conversation was struck up with my dad in mistaken identity, but quickly became a foothold for a new friendship. They found commonality in their backgrounds and Robert has a gift for engaging conversation and interest in the people he talks to. Although years apart in their experience, the SEAL bond has brought these two together and I'm sure a lasting friendship will be strengthened.

My father is the quietest one in this group, but still has personality traits that makes him stand out. Growing up we always knew when he was mad by the raising of his one eyebrow. He was firm, consistent, and fair, in his discipline. He has more integrity than anyone else I've ever known, and I've rarely ever gotten him to bend any rules, I've tried! Through meticulous planning, dad seems to get things done right the first time in everything he does. He is a problem solver, researcher, creative, artistic, and continues to workout in his 80's as all SEAL's seem to do. He's a protector and supporter of the family, but does so without getting in the way. Although he isn't always emotionally expressive, I have cried in laughter with him, and felt his pain in his tears. I have seen many fathers from my friends growing up, and many others in my life, all I can say is I am glad he is mine!

As I sat around and listened to their stories/conversations and met other SEAL's, I knew I was someplace very special. Now imagine 100+ more of these guys at a reunion spanning decades from different teams! There was something in the air, or presence, that I've never felt before. I was in the company of a group of very select people that would give anything for their country and their teammates, and have experiences most of us could never imagine. They were also some of the most honest, down to earth, friendliest people I've ever met. There was also a weird sense of comfort knowing that right here, right now, I was with a bunch of bad ass mother f**kers that don't put up with any shit, and they are all brothers - for life.

So how do you manage men like this? Well, it seems there is a young woman of 96 years of age who is still running circles around them, and dad's team continues to pay respect to her. Julia Viera was in charge of the SEAL Team's wives when the men were deployed. Julia still attends the reunions and our small group met at her home to share their stories. It is evident she is an anchor for these men in how much she cares for every one of them. She is an encyclopedia of information about everyone she's ever came in contact with in the Navy, and on Coronado island. Her house is a historical landmark and the inside is a museum of the Navy and her involvement. She also has a mountain of family history that would make ancestry.com look like child's play. Julia is always up beat and loves to talk to everybody. She is very personable, and she is a local celebrity that speaks her mind. At 90 she did a tandem parachute jump, at 95 went hang gliding, and plans to go gliding sometime soon. She is still setting an example for these men and their wives!

THE PLACE:

A small group of us were lucky enough to get a private tour of the state of the art facilities where the SEAL Teams train. Although things have evolved over the years in equipment and facilities, the training is very much the same. I've always heard about my dad's experiences in Hell Week and other exercises, or evolutions, but this location and the resources are unmatched. If you took the best Olympic training facilities, and professional sports team facilities and put them together, you might have something that resembles this base. But the depth of training and care beyond the physical, including, diet, recovery, mental stress/relaxation, medical, psychological,

physiological, emotional, etc. are unbelievable. The fitness courses, multiple types of shooting ranges, pool obstacles combined with the ninja warrior training elements, and the technology that goes into all this is unreal. The difference between the Olympic athlete, professional athlete, and the SEAL is their motivation. The SEAL's are highly motivated. They are not doing it for the gold medal, recognition or huge paycheck. They do it to protect this country and others with their life! They are the best at what they do, and I feel sorry for anyone who stands in their way!

LEADERSHIP:

The guest speaker this year was Rear Admiral Keith David in charge of Naval Special Warfare Center and deputy commander of Naval Special Warfare Command. He's in charge of 10,000 people including all SEAL Teams. To meet Admiral Davis is a rarity, listening to what he has to say about current topics, home and abroad and shaking his hand and talking to him - a once in a lifetime experience. During his talk he shared information few civilians would never hear, but I know it's only a snowball on top of the glacier of his intelligence. It was still fascinating, scary, and comforting. Everyone in the room had instant respect for what this man does and the decisions he must make. I felt very small leaving the assembly, but I also felt very good about what the Navy is doing for all of us.

CONCLUSION:

Being a part of my dad's reunion for the first time brought me perspective about what he's done and put his fellow SEAL's into better focus. I have the upmost respect for anyone who's ever made it through the program and served their time to ensure we are safe. I usually don't jump into politics or peoples feelings on certain topics but I'll say this; if you can't stand behind what these men are willing to do for our country, I will gladly support you to stand in front of them! Then you would get a dose of reality about what it takes to keep this country and our freedoms safe.

I heard from several SEAL's that there is one rule to upcoming SEAL's, and other matters in life, "Don't give up!". It's amazing how three simple words can be so clear and to the point in your success in whatever you do. Although he and his team have all aged, move a little slower, they all have a discipline and a fire in them that sets them apart from other men. They don't give up - they are, and always will be SEAL's.

