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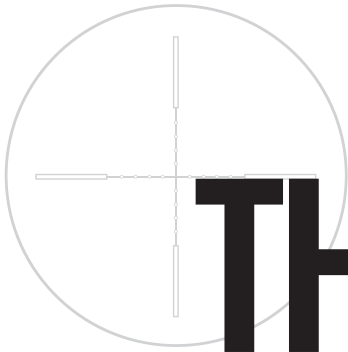
THE  
RED  
CIRCLE



MY LIFE IN THE  
NAVY SEAL SNIPER CORPS  
AND HOW I TRAINED  
AMERICA'S DEADLIEST MARKSMEN



FOREWORD BY MARCUS LUTTRELL



# THE RED CIRCLE

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HOW I TRAINED AMERICA'S DEADLIEST MARKSMEN

BRANDON WEBB

WITH JOHN DAVID MANN

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*For my three children*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the events in this book are true and are described herein to the best of my recollection; however, some details have been altered. With the exception of historical figures (e.g., Admiral Bob Harward, President George W. Bush, Harmid Karzai), close friends, and fallen comrades, I have changed most of the names; in some instances I have provided only the first names of friends who are still on active duty. Some dates, locations, and particulars of certain operations have been modified; and I have at all times sought to avoid disclosing methods and other sensitive mission-related information.

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Marcus Luttrell .....	xi
Introduction .....	1
1. Rite of Passage.....	9
2. Boot Camp.....	39
3. Obstacle Course .....	69
4. Nemesis .....	89
5. Getting Dirty .....	129
6. Cold Bore .....	168
7. When Everything Changed .....	207
8. Into the War on Terror .....	227
9. In the Caves .....	254
10. Coalition .....	293
11. My Proudest Moment .....	328
Conclusion .....	370
Acknowledgments.....	381

# FOREWORD

I first met Brandon Webb when I was a student in the Naval Special Warfare Sniper Course.

Sniper school was one of the toughest things I've ever done, in some ways even more difficult than the infamous ordeal known as BUD/S, or Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, that every SEAL undergoes. The sniper course starts with a stalking phase, which is all about stealth and concealment, training us to crawl painstaking inches and yards undetected across enemy-held territory. I have to be honest: This was not easy for me. The shooting part came naturally. The stalking part did not. I'm a pretty big guy, and trying to make myself look like an ice plant or manzanita bush instead of a six-foot Texan . . . it just wasn't happening. I don't know how I would have gotten through it, if it weren't for Brandon being my instructor.

Brandon and his cadre were incredibly tough on us.

They were intent on making us some of the best Special Operations forces in the field, and I have to admit: In that they succeeded. As I say in my book, Brandon's standards were so high they would have made an Apache scout gasp. It wasn't just a matter of making our lives hard. Brandon went beyond the call. He set aside time after course hours to answer questions and work with all the students; he mentored me, did whatever it took to make sure I knew my stuff.

Graduating sniper school was one of the proudest achievements of my life.

I went from sniper school almost directly to Afghanistan. Not too many months after being under Brandon's care I found myself in the soaring Hindu Kush mountains, a subrange of the Himalayas, not far from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border on June 29, 2005. Everyone else in my recon team was gone, including my brother Morgan's best friend, Matt "Axe" Axelson—all killed by the same couple hundred Taliban forces who were now doing their level best to kill me, too. If it had not been for Brandon's patience, care, and skill with me in the sniper course not long before, I can promise you this: I would have left these Texan bones bleaching on the Afghan hillside.

My story, the story of Operation Redwing and the brave men who gave their lives in the battle for Murphy's Ridge, is chronicled in the pages of the book *Lone Survivor*. Brandon's story is chronicled here in the pages you hold in your hands. And it's about time. His training saved my life then, just as it would again several years later in a very different environment, fighting house to house on the hot, muggy streets of Iraq.

And I know I'm not the only one. There are a lot of people out there, people whose names you'll never hear, who are alive today because of the efforts, skill, and dedication of Brandon and others like him. What you're about to read is not just the story of the making of a Navy SEAL sniper but



the story of one guy who went on to help shape the lives of *hundreds* of elite Special Operations warriors.

It was a great honor to serve on and off the battlefield with the men of the U.S. Navy SEAL teams and U.S. SOCOM (Special Operations Command). Brandon and I have both lost many great friends over the years, and it's comforting to know that the memories of these great warriors will live on in the stories we share with you. My hope is that you will come to know them as intimately as we did, and that you continue to pass on their stories of heroism so that we may never forget the ultimate sacrifice they made for the freedom we enjoy today.

Brandon has a great story to tell, and it is living proof that you can achieve anything you put your mind to. It's an honor to introduce his memoir.

*Never quit.*

*Marcus Luttrell (USN Ret.), Navy SEAL and  
No. 1 national bestselling author of Lone Survivor*

# INTRODUCTION

Four of us—Cassidy, Osman, Brad, and I—went out before dawn to patrol a site where a C-130 gunship had engaged some forces the night before, to see if we could find any bodies. We reached the coordinates we'd been given just moments before the indistinct grays of predawn resolved into the pastels of daybreak. Before we could do any serious searching, we heard voices coming from some nearby caves above us. The four of us instantly hit the ground and waited. As we watched, a spill of enemy fighters started pouring out of one of the caves—twenty, at least, and all armed.

If this were happening in the movies, we would all just leap to our feet and blow these guys away, but in real life it doesn't work that way. We were outnumbered at least five to one, and we were not exactly armed with machine guns. This was not the OK Corral, and if we leapt to our feet we would all be mowed down in short order. There was no hiding until

they were gone, either: These guys were headed our way. We would have to call in an air strike, and do it fast.

There was a B-52 nearby; Brad got it on the radio. It was my job to give him the coordinates—but there was a snag. The only way to ensure that the team in the B-52 dropped their fireworks on the other guys and not on us was to give them exact coordinates. Typically we would do this using a high-powered laser range finder hooked into a GPS so that when it ranged the target it would give us not only distance but also the target's GPS coordinates, which we could then pass on up to whoever we were calling for air support. These bombers are extremely accurate with their ordnance, like vertical snipers in the sky.

We'd only planned for a simple twelve-hour mission and didn't have all our usual equipment. Typically, for a full-on recon mission, I'd have at least a good sniper rifle. We didn't have even a decent range finder.

Training, training. As a SEAL sniper I'd been taught to estimate distances on the fly even without all the usual tools, using only my five senses and my gut, but typically I'd be shooting a 10-gram bullet from the muzzle of a rifle. In this case, we were shooting a 1,000-pound "bullet" out of a 125-ton aircraft, flying 20,000 feet above us at near the speed of sound, at a target less than 500 yards away from where we sat—and I had to get it right.

Range estimation. This was something else we covered in sniper school: You visualize a familiar distance, say, a football field. *That's one football field, two football fields, three football fields . . .* but this can be risky when you're not on level ground. Here I had to sight up a rugged, rocky incline. And daybreak lighting can play tricks with distances.

Those twenty-plus al Qaeda, or Taliban, or who the hell knew who, were trickling down the slope heading straight for our position. They hadn't seen us yet, but it would be only seconds before they did. If we were going to do this thing, it had to be *now*.

"Brandon!" Cassidy hissed. "You need to Kentucky-windage this

drop!" "Kentucky windage" is a term that means basically this: *Wing it. Give it your best shot.* I gave Cassidy a bearing I estimated as 100 meters *past* the group. If I was going to be off at all, better to guess long than short, and if I was balls-on accurate, a drop 100 meters behind them should at least buy us a few seconds to adjust and drop a second time.

Now the enemy cluster was so close we couldn't wait any longer. We were concealed but not covered; that is, they couldn't easily see us, but once they knew where we were, our concealment would give no protection against incoming fire. We quickly moved to cover—and that's when they spotted us. There were a few alarmed shouts and then the sounds of small-arms fire.

There is nothing quite so galvanizing as the distinct *crack! snap!* of semiautomatic weaponry being fired over your head, the *crack!* being the sound of the initial shot itself and the *snap!* being the bullet breaking the sound barrier as it zings past you.

We returned fire. I sighted one guy wearing a black headdress, dropped him. Quickly resighted and dropped a second, this one wearing the traditional Afghan wool roll-up hat. Sighted a third—then glanced up and saw vapor trails in the sky. The B-52 was flying so high it was invisible to us, but I knew exactly what was happening up there: They were dropping the first bomb.

When you are this close to a big explosion it rocks your chest cavity. You want to make sure your mouth is open so the contained impact doesn't burst your lungs. Brad got the call: We were seconds from impact. We opened our mouths, dropped and rolled.

The Joint Direct Attack Munition is a big bomb and extremely accurate. When the first set of JDAMs hit, it shook the mountain under our feet, throwing rubble everywhere.

I whipped around and glanced back up the incline to assess the strike. Perfect—about 100 yards behind the target. I rolled again, adjusting

numbers in my head, and quickly shouted the new coordinates to Cassidy, who gave them to Brad to relay up to the bird. In moments like this your senses go into hyperacute mode and seconds seem to stretch into minutes, hours, a timeless series of discrete snapshots. I focused on my breathing, making it slow and deliberate, feeling the cool morning air mixed with the distinct smell of explosives teasing my lungs. I knew my numbers were accurate and that the men shooting to kill us would themselves be dead in seconds. For a brief moment, I was at peace. And then an unexpected sound sliced through the strange silence: the wail of a baby crying.

My stomach twisted. I had a five-week-old baby boy at home whom I'd not yet held in my arms; hopefully I would survive this war to meet him face-to-face. Someone up on that hillside had a baby they would never see or hold again.

I knew these people had made the decision to bring their families out here to this godforsaken fortress, knowingly putting them in harm's way. Sometimes, I'd heard, they even did this intentionally, using their own children, their flesh and blood, as living shields to prevent us from attacking. *It was their choice*, I told myself, *not ours*. But I'll never forget the sound of that baby's cry.

We opened our mouths, ducked and rolled. The second drop took them all.

The pages that follow provide a rare look into the most difficult, elite sniper training in the world and the traits it takes to produce a successful graduate: a sniper capable of stopping another man's beating heart without hesitation at distances of over a mile.

These accounts and descriptions may read like reports from an alien land. It is a unique existence of brutal conditions, extreme pressure, and hair-trigger judgment. I have never second-guessed decisions made in the field; combat is no place for Monday-morning quarterbacking, and a SEAL

sniper can't afford to indulge in the luxuries of uncertainty or ambivalence.

This doesn't mean that those of us occupying this unusual world shed or lose connection with our humanity. If anything, the opposite is the case. In a way, living in the crosshairs of split-second decisions with life-or-death consequences makes you *more* acutely attuned to the truest, grittiest realities of human fragility and the preciousness of life. It also puts you face-to-face with our deepest potential for idiocy and senselessness, and the consequences of those failings.

I am clear that the people we killed that day in the hills of Afghanistan would have employed any and all means to kill me, my family, and my friends without an instant's hesitation. In all honesty, though, I have seen similarly fanatic attitudes within our own American culture and even at the highest levels of our military. There is nothing simple about war, and there are plenty of extremists on all sides.

These pages also chronicle an extraordinary shift that has taken place in the fundamental nature of military strategy over the past decade. The October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in the Gulf of Aden was the signal event in this radical shift: a guided missile destroyer, crewed by nearly 300 sailors and costing more than \$1 billion to put in the water, was crippled and nearly sunk by two men in a small powerboat. Seventeen American servicemen were killed and another thirty-nine injured.

We had entered the age of asymmetrical warfare.

I was part of the detail assigned to guard the USS *Cole* immediately after the attack and soon became involved in a complete restructuring of Naval Special Operations and its role in war.

Up through the end of the twentieth century, our approach to combat was still shaped by the Cold War and great land wars of our past. Even as late as Desert Storm, we waged war by unleashing massive ground forces to roll across the desert. In that world, Special Ops was the bastard child,

called upon occasionally for unusual missions but mainly there to support our conventional forces.

Now that picture has completely flipped on its head. Since the events of 9/11 we have reconfigured our conventional forces—nuclear subs, aircraft carriers, destroyers, all our major assets—to support small units much like the one we took into the caves in Afghanistan that day. From being a special-case accessory, we have suddenly become the vanguard of military strategy.

In April 2009 we all watched entranced on CNN as a Navy SEAL sniper team fired three simultaneous shots, instantly executing the three pirates who had kidnapped a U.S. shipping captain off the Somali coast. From the moment they were mobilized, it took that sniper team less than ten hours to deploy, get halfway around the world, parachute with full kit at 12,000 feet into darkness and plunge into the deep waters of the Indian Ocean, rendezvous with waiting U.S. Naval forces, and complete their mission, start to finish.

As a former Navy SEAL sniper, sniper instructor, and eventually course manager (called head master) of the U.S. Navy SEAL sniper course, I know exactly what those ten hours were like—and also the last few seconds before the perfectly coordinated shot. The twenty-first-century sniper is trained to take into exacting account such variables as wind, ambient temperature, barometric pressure, degree of latitude, bullet velocity, even the deviation caused by the earth's rotation known as the Coriolis effect. Firing at such long range, with so much riding on the accuracy of the first shot, it is critical to account for all environmental and ballistic factors. At the instant before making the 1-centimeter movement of their fingers that would end three lives and save a fourth, their minds were going through dozens of calculations.

Two years later the world was stunned when we learned that a team of Navy SEALs had entered an innocent-looking suburban compound in

Pakistan and in moments eliminated the man who had been America's Public Enemy No. 1 for nearly a decade. The killing of Osama bin Laden, like the rescue of Captain Phillips off the coast of Somalia, signaled to the world that something fundamental had changed in the way we wage war and keep the peace.

In the wars of our fathers and their fathers, the decisive victories were won by tank battalions and overwhelming air support. In today's world of suicide bombers, decentralized terrorism, and rampantly adaptive piracy, the fortunes and well-being of nations rest increasingly in the hands, reflexes, and capabilities of individual warriors like the Navy SEAL sniper.

Not surprisingly, the public suddenly wants to know more about the traditionally secretive world of Special Operations, and rightly so. I hope my own story will provide an instructive window into that unseen world.



# ONE

## RITE OF PASSAGE

Every culture has its rites of passage.

Native American adolescents journeyed into the wilderness for days on end in vision quests aimed at gaining life direction from an animal spirit, or totem, through a fast-induced dream. For Australian aborigines it was the walkabout, young males trekking the outback for as long as six months to trace the ceremonial paths, or dreaming tracks, taken by their ancestors. Mormon boys ages nineteen to twenty-five are sent around the world for two years to do full-time mission work.

For me, it was shorter and simpler. My rite of passage came when I was thrown off a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean by my dad, a few weeks past my sixteenth birthday. I had to find my own path home from that oceanic wilderness, and it turned out to be a path that ultimately led to the most elite sniper corps in the world.

I don't know if you'd call that a dreaming track, exactly,

but you *could* say it was a path taken by my ancestors, at least in one sense: My father was thrown out of the house at age sixteen by *his* father, too. And I suppose the only way to make sense out of my story is to start with him.

Jack Webb grew up in Toronto, short, strong, and stocky. A talented hockey player and avid drummer, he was always a bit of a wild man. A true child of the sixties, Jack grew out his full black beard as soon as his hormones would cooperate. His father hewed to old-fashioned values and threatened to kick Jack out if he didn't cut his beard and long hair. When my father refused, out he went.

My grandfather may have thrown his son out, but he didn't succeed in changing his mind. To this day my dad still sports a full beard, though its black is now flecked with gray.

Now on his own, Jack made his way from Toronto to Malibu, where he picked up landscaping jobs and soon had his own company. Driving home from a job one day, he picked up three young hippie girls hitchhiking. One of them, a free spirit named Lynn, became his wife.

After they married, my parents moved up to British Columbia to the little ski town of Kimberley, just north of Vancouver, where he took a job as a guide at a hunting lodge, despite the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about hunting. The guy who hired him said, "Look, don't worry about it. Stay on the trail, and you'll be fine." He was. His first time out, he took a small group into the Canadian Rockies, pointing out all sorts of wild-life along the way. When they got back, the group told my dad's boss he'd hired the greatest guide in the world. They didn't know he was flat-out winging it.

Soon Jack was working construction, and on the job he taught himself everything there was to know about building houses. In those days, if you were a builder you did it all—pouring the foundation, framing, wiring, drywall, plumbing, roofing, everything from *A* to *Z*. Jack had never grad-

uated high school, but he was a resourceful man with a big appetite for learning, and he soon became an accomplished builder with his own company, High Country Construction.

It was about this time that I came into the picture, followed a few years later by my sister, Rhiannon, and once I arrived on the scene my mother's life became considerably more complicated.

Free spirit though she may be, my mother has always been fiercely loyal to me and my sister, and to my dad, too, as far as that was possible. I always felt completely loved and supported by her, even through the difficulties to come.

My mother has also always been very entrepreneurial. She opened up a restaurant with my dad's sister, and later, when we lived in Washington for a while, she had her own boat maintenance business, sanding and varnishing the boats and keeping the woodwork in good condition. She wrote and published her own cookbook for boaters, *The Galley Companion*. Later still, when I worked on a California dive boat in my teens, she held a job there as head cook.

One more thing about my mom: She has always had a great sense of humor.

She would have had to, to cope with me.

I was born on June 12, 1974, screaming at the top of my tiny lungs, and I screamed for weeks. For the next ten months I stayed awake every night from ten till seven the next morning, yelling my head off, at which point I would sleep blissfully through the day while my mom recovered from the night's battle fatigue. My parents did everything they could to keep me awake during the day so they would have a shot at getting me to sleep at night. Didn't matter. It wasn't going to happen.

According to my mom, I was as wild as the Canadian landscape. I started crawling at six months and crawled *everywhere*. My mom talks

about a study she heard about, where they put babies on a glass counter to see how far they would crawl. Nearly all the babies would stop when they got close to the edge—but the last 1 percent went crawling off into thin air every time.

“That 1 percent?” she says. “That was Brandon.”

I started walking at nine months, and there was not a gate or door that could hold me. My mom bought every childproof lock she could find, but evidently “childproof” did not mean “Brandon-proof.” She had door-knobs that even she couldn’t open, but I always managed to get through them. She would lock me into my high chair, but if she stepped into the bathroom for even a moment, I’d be gone when she returned.

By eighteen months I discovered the joys of climbing and found I could climb up, over, and into pretty much anything. This ability, combined with my easy friendship with locks and predilection for drinking anything I could get my hands on, added up to quite a few visits to the emergency room to have my little toddler-sized stomach pumped. Among the beverages I sampled during those early years were kerosene, bleach, and Avon honeysuckle after-bath splash. I’m not saying this is a method I would endorse or recommend, but I am convinced that this is why I have always been able to hold my liquor and have never had a problem with addiction. By the time I was three, the hospital emergency room staff and my mom knew each other on a first-name basis.

When my mom was pregnant with my sister, my dad built an enclosure with a swing and what he thought was a Brandon-proof gate. (There’s that term again: “Brandon-proof.” Hadn’t they learned?) My mom still doesn’t know how I got out, since she was sitting right there reading a book—but she looked up and I was gone: I had crawled under a barbed-wire fence, scooted down a steep hill, and was out of sight.

My mother was wild with fear. Seven months pregnant, she knew there was no way she could get under that barbed-wire fence, and she

didn't have any wire cutters. The night before, she and my father had seen a pack of coyotes ranging around, and now all she could think of was how her tiny son would make a tasty little coyote meal. The only reason she spotted me was that I was wearing a red sweatshirt. Somehow she managed to coax me back up the hill and under the fence so she could grab me, crying hysterically and at the same time wanting to beat me.

From my earliest years, I always had a penchant for danger and physical extremes, and it made my poor mother's life a living hell. She likes to say that when I was little, she was the victim of parent abuse. She once called Social Services on herself when I had driven her to the edge with my behavior. She explained to the poor lady on the phone that her two-year-old son was driving her so crazy, she was about to hurt him. The social worker spent a week at our house observing, but I behaved like an angel for those seven days, and she left thinking my mom must *be* crazy.

It didn't take long for my parents to figure out that while they couldn't control my wild energy, they *could* channel it. Once they saw how madly in love I was with skiing, they knew they'd stumbled on the parenting strategy that would serve us all well for years to come: If they could get me involved in every sports activity possible, maybe it would keep me out of trouble. It did, too—at least for a while.

By age five I was on a ski team, and by age seven I had piled wrestling, football, baseball, swim, and track teams onto my athletic schedule. Later, as an adult, I found I have a love of extreme sports. The steeper the ski slope, the larger the wave, the higher the cliff, the more difficult the jump from the plane or helicopter—the more danger and adrenaline involved, the more I want to try to conquer it. In my thirties, I would channel that same impulse into a drive to conquer huge goals in the entrepreneurial world. At the age of five, my Mount Everest was a 2,500-foot hill called North Star Mountain.

My earliest memories are of the crisp cold in my face and the sibilant

*schuss* of the snow under my skis as I flew down the face of North Star. Every day, during the long months of ski season, my mom would pick me up from kindergarten and drive us straight out to the slopes. We had a season pass, and we used up every penny of it.

Less than half the height of its more famous neighbors, Whistler and Blackcomb, North Star is not really much of a mountain, but I didn't know that. To me, it seemed vast and inexhaustible. When I think back on my early childhood, what I remember most are the countless afternoons on my bright yellow Mickey Mouse K2 skis, exploring every trail and out-of-the-way patch of what seemed to me an endless world of snow and adventure.

My best friend at the time was a kid named Justin, who was as devoted to skiing as I was. We would spend every afternoon we could exploring North Star together. Justin and I got into ski racing and joined a team. By the time we were in first grade, our team was competing in tournaments at Whistler, and I was winning those races. My mom still has some first-place ribbons I took at Whistler at the age of six.

I don't think my mom was joking when she called Social Services, but the truth is, she would never have hurt me, no matter how bad I got. With my father, it was a different story.

I was not exactly scared of my dad, but I knew he was in charge and not afraid to whip out his belt and get after me when he thought I needed it. Over the years, my backside and my dad's leather belt really got to know each other. Today, now that I'm a parent myself, I believe in discipline just as much as my dad did—although instead of a spanking, my kids' punishment is push-ups. My ten-year-old son can knock out more push-ups than most adults I know.

Although my dad was very strict, he was also not afraid to hug me and tell me he loved me. He was a good father, and I have a lot of happy memories of him from those early years.

When my dad went out on construction job site visits, he often took

me with him, and I loved it. It always felt like an adventure, just me and my dad going on trips to these serious grown-up work sites—and they were great places to pick up colorful new ways of using the English language. I also went along when he played gigs with his country rock band, Jack the Bear, of which he was the drummer and principal sponsor. Jack the Bear played to a pretty rough-and-tumble crowd in the rural backcountry taverns of the Canadian Rockies. By the age of five I had the mouth of a sailor. Typically I would stay in the bar for the first set, and then Dad would tuck me in for the night in our VW Westphalia van outside with the family dog, Shy, where I would lie awake listening to the music and voices until finally fading off into sleep.

Best of all, there was hockey.

My dad has always been an outstanding hockey player. During those early years he was captain of his hockey team, and I would go with him when they would play their games, which were typically pretty late at night. It was a working league and the players all had their full-time jobs, so that was the only time they could play.

I was only five, but no matter how late it was, I never got tired at my dad's hockey practice. I would go through the place looking for lost pucks or fish for quarters and play the big, brand-new Atari Asteroids video game console they had there. Crawling around, exploring every inch of the place, it felt a lot like being up on the mountain, only in a way this was even better, because I was there with my dad. After practice we would go hang out in the locker room, surrounded by sweaty hockey players who were cursing and laughing and cracking beers. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. It was just us, just the guys.

I could tell my dad really enjoyed having me there. I looked up to him, and in many ways, he was my hero.

Then, about the time I turned six, our lives changed.



My father had always been into sailing. My parents had a dream of sailing around the world, and business was now doing so well they decided it was time to take a few years off and hit the water, just the four of us, to make that dream into a reality. We owned a beautiful 60-foot Sparkman & Stephens ketch, which he kept moored on the California coast; why not let that become our new home as we circled the globe?

Just as we were getting ready to leave, my dad decided to do one more big project. My mother objected, but my dad prevailed: One last gig, he said, and that would really set us up. A group of investors was going to put up the money, so he took out a large construction loan and built the place. Then the recession of 1980 hit—and the project collapsed. My dad was left with the bill and no investors. He tried to negotiate with the bank. He kept trying for two years. They came and took our house. My dad declared bankruptcy and we lost everything.

Being so young at the time, I didn't quite grasp what was happening, and nobody ever sat me down and said, "Brandon, we're ruined, wiped out." Even so, there was an ominous undercurrent that I couldn't have missed.

I remember going into the bank one day with my dad to close our accounts—the same bank he'd been wrestling with for the past year—because we were about to move away from Kimberley. One of these was a savings account he had opened for me some two years earlier.

This had been quite a big deal for both of us when we opened it. "Look, Brandon," I remember him telling me, "this is your first savings account. We're opening it in *your* name—this is going to be *your* money." He showed me the passbook and the first line, where he had entered the initial deposit. "Now you get to watch it grow." I was so excited about it, and I could tell he was, too.

Now, when we asked where it stood, my dad was informed it had a zero balance.



“*What?*” he practically shouted at the teller. He was livid. “How is that possible?”

I don’t remember how much he had put in there in the first place, but it wasn’t much, and whatever it was had been wiped out by monthly fees, without my dad realizing it. He had wanted to teach me a life lesson about how you can invest and save—but the only lesson I learned that day was about how you can get wiped out without even realizing it.

When I was seven we left Canada for good, moving to a little town called Blaine, jammed right up into the northwest corner of Washington state, where we began the painful process of starting over.

As huge a change as this financial collapse was for my parents, it crept up on Rhiannon and me only gradually. It was only now, when we picked up and moved to Washington, that I began to realize that something pretty serious was going on here. No more Jack the Bear gigs or late-night hockey practices, and no more skiing the North Star face with my friend Justin. All of a sudden I was yanked out of the life I loved and we were living in a strange place in a smaller house. Now, when my mom took me shopping for new school clothes, we were hitting the thrift shops instead of going to the big department stores. It wasn’t just that we were living in a different place. Our *lives* were different. I never saw Justin again.

My dad was different, too. He became moodier and angrier, and tougher on me. The whole thing had devastated him. Today, thirty years later, he is still getting over it, and I can’t say I blame him. As a seven-year-old, though, I didn’t understand any of that. All I knew was that before, I would go with him everywhere—and now I didn’t see him all that much. I always loved my dad, but I think it was during these years that a wedge started quietly building between us, one that would have life-changing consequences in later years.

It was in Blaine that I started getting into trouble, getting into fights with other kids and raising hell. Fortunately, my parents already had a

formula for dealing with that, and they got me as involved in athletics as they could. Soon I was doing sports again year-round.

What I remember most about Blaine is baseball and wrestling. I was crazy about wrestling, and it was also one of the few places where I would still regularly connect with my dad. My mom was at all the baseball games, but at the wrestling matches it was always my dad cheering our team on. I could tell he was proud of me. I especially loved going on trips with our wrestling team to compete in matches. In fourth grade I placed second in the regionals and made it to the state championships.

Another thing that made life in Blaine better was that making new friends, even in tough circumstances, has always come pretty easy to me. I had three especially good buddies there, Chris Bysh, Gaytor Rasmussen, and Scott Dodd; we all stay in touch to this day. Chris became my best friend, and as with Justin back in Vancouver, we got into lots of athletics together—especially baseball.

On our Little League team, Chris played catcher and I was the pitcher. We did pretty well and made All-Stars. We even got invited to attend a special baseball camp being hosted by the Orioles. I was so excited about going. This was going to be a blast!

It never happened. Instead my parents shipped Rhiannon and me off to Toronto to stay with relatives for that whole summer. I was absolutely furious at my dad. What was wrong with him? I could not believe he was going to take away this incredible opportunity and ruin my summer, and for no good reason whatsoever!

He actually had a very good reason; it was just one he couldn't tell us. At the time, my parents' marriage was on rocky ground. I don't know the details of what happened, but I'm sure that whatever it was, the financial stress didn't help. They were making a serious effort to reconcile and put things back on an even keel and thought they would have a better shot at it if they didn't have to tiptoe around Rhiannon and me for a few months.

But of course, I didn't know any of this until many years later, and it wasn't easy to find anyplace in me that could forgive him for taking this prize away from me.

While we were living in Blaine, my father started picking up the pieces of his career. He found a job as foreman for a large construction company and was soon building houses again. He and my mom had never given up on their dream of sailing around the world, and by the time I entered fifth grade we were able to purchase a 50-foot ketch.

Soon we were leaving Blaine behind and moving 100 miles or so south to Seattle, where we began living on our new boat, which we christened *Agio*, Italian for "ease." There were times when life on the *Agio* lived up to its name—and there would be times when it most definitely did not.

My parents were excited about the move and hopeful about the future. Me, I was pissed. This was the sixth time we had moved since I was a baby, and I was starting to seriously resent it. It seemed like as soon as I would make some new friends and start to settle into a social group, we'd be up and moving yet one more time, and I'd have to go through the whole process all over again. Even though I was pretty good at easing my way into new situations and making new friends, this was getting old. I was tired of being uprooted, tired of being picked on as the new kid. It probably served to build character and develop in both Rhiannon and me the ability to adapt to new circumstances, but at the time, it just felt hard. I was jealous of the kids who got to stay in one town and have friends they'd known since preschool. We never had that.

No matter how much we moved around and how difficult things sometimes got, one thing Rhiannon and I always did have was each other. Like any typical brother and sister, we'd fight sometimes and get on each other's nerves, but we were close all through these years. Sometimes we'd talk together about how we felt about it all. Typically, I would be angry, and she would cry.

After a few years in Seattle, we pulled up stakes and moved yet again, sailing down the coast to head for Ventura, California. The trip was not an easy one. To me, it felt like the weather pretty accurately reflected my mood: 100 miles off the coast of Oregon, we hit the tail end of a hurricane. For more than twenty-four hours we struggled with the full force of nature, beating into the gale-force winds, until my father finally dropped our sails and put out a sea anchor. We hove to and waited for the storm to pass.

The next few dozen hours left a deep impression. I remember my mother gripping Rhiannon and me close to her, life jackets donned and survival raft at the ready, wondering which would turn out to have more staying power—us or the hurricane. In the end, after nearly two days, the storm must have decided we were not worth it: It finally released its grip and moved on. We found we had been pushed almost 200 miles in the wrong direction.

When we finally pulled into Coos Bay, Oregon, a crowd of locals had gathered on the docks to hear about the family that had been out there on the ocean's angry face and survived the storm. Everyone loves a good sea story.

I was ten when we arrived in Ventura, and California has been my home ever since. My father's great passion in life was sailing, and the next few years involved plenty of it. We continued to live on the *Agio* for the better part of the next six years, and while we each had our own stateroom, it was still tight quarters and I looked for every opportunity to escape. A few times I tried to run away from home.

Life in California revolved around the water. All my new friends surfed, and I soon joined them. I also started getting into trouble again. My mom, who went to work for a few years on California's offshore oil platforms, never knew what to expect when she would come home. Once she found me and a few friends hunting down squirrels with homemade blowguns.

Another time she saw the boat's mast swaying as she approached. She broke into a run, and when she reached the boat she saw that my friends and I were taking turns pushing off and swinging around the mast high above the deck on a harness I'd rigged.

During most of this time, my father and I might as well have been living on separate planets. He was working his tail off. He would leave early in the morning and come back at five o'clock—briefly—for dinner. My mom was pretty good about corralling us inside for family dinner together, but as soon as we pushed back our plates we would all head off to do our own thing.

There was a period there, in eighth grade, when my dad made an extra effort to get me into ice hockey. The closest rink was in Thousand Oaks, nearly an hour's drive away. During hockey season he would get up every Saturday at 5:30 A.M. to drive me out to Thousand Oaks for practice. He even helped coach our team. Throughout that hockey season the two of us had an opportunity to bond again, just as we had when we were back in Kimberley. That soon came abruptly to an end, and my sports career with it.

I'd noticed that my knees were starting to ache, and toward the end of that hockey season it got pretty severe. I could play through it, but after practice I would have two swollen bumps on my knees, and if you tapped it in just the right spot, it felt like someone was jamming an ice pick into my knee.

My folks took me to the doctor, and he knew what it was right away.

"Your boy has Osgood-Schlatter syndrome. He's been so involved in sports, so constantly and for so long, his knees haven't had the chance to develop properly."

In rare cases, he told us, surgery was indicated. He didn't think that would be necessary for me, but I would have to wear a brace for a while.

"Of course," he added, "he'll have to cut out the sports."

My mom nearly gasped. "What do you mean, *cut out the sports?*" She

was terrified: Without sports, she knew it would be no time at all before I was getting into worse and worse trouble.

They tried putting my legs in braces, but as soon as the braces were on I was off skateboarding around the harbor. Finally they realized they had no choice but to put me in casts. As much as I hated them, those casts probably saved my life, or at least my knees. Confined to plaster casts, my joints were finally able to grow properly, and I've never had any knee problems since.

At the time, it was also a catastrophe of sorts. I was a freshman in high school, and I desperately wanted to wrestle and play baseball. No dice. I spent my ninth-grade year with casts on my legs. As soon as they were off, so was I—off getting into trouble again.

Without athletics to absorb my time and energy, my mother hit on a new tack: getting me a job. Soon before my thirteenth birthday, she introduced me to a man named Bill Magee, who owned a charter dive boat in Ventura Harbor, the *Peace*. Bill offered to let me work on his boat.

I worked on the *Peace* all summer, every summer, for the next few years. Everything about being on that dive boat, with the tantalizing possibility of adventure outside the harbor and west to the Channel Islands, completely captivated me. It's no exaggeration to say that going to work on the *Peace* changed the course of my life.

Bill Magee was one of the nicest men I've ever known. He and the boat's captain, Michael Roach, were like second fathers to me. They watched out for me and entrusted me with a lot of responsibility. I had not really had that experience before. They showed me a whole new side to the concept of respect and instilled in me the belief that I could *be* somebody and do something special with my life.

Bill had made some money in construction and eventually sold a successful roofing company up in the Bay Area, which had allowed him to fulfill a dream I expect he'd held on to for some time. Sport diving was his

hobby, and he had put a chunk of the proceeds from his sale into the *Peace*—cashed in his chips and taken to the sea.

Captain Roach was the perfect complement to Bill, the classic salty Irish sea captain. He taught me how to give a firm handshake and look a man straight in the eye when you are talking to him.

Bill Magee was also pretty wild—the Hugh Hefner of the high seas. Bill had a new girlfriend every week, usually about half his age, and he was always throwing hot tub parties (I believe the *Peace* was the first boat to feature a hot tub) with lots of women, alcohol, and God knew what else. Strictly speaking, the *Peace* was a *dive* boat, which meant that people were paying to be taken out scuba diving. Unofficially, it was also a hell of a party boat. We'd take our passengers on tours of the Channel Islands off Ventura, taking out groups of divers four at a time—and in between dives, when we were anchored up for the night, we would *party*. Bill would front me a few hundred dollars so I could sit down and join the interminable poker games. Here I was, at thirteen, drinking Scotch and playing poker with the guys.

At the same time, the diving was no joke. When you weren't on an anchor watch, it was fine to whoop it up and party, but when you were on, you had to be *on*. You had to know your limits and capacities. I didn't know it at the time, but it was great preparation for the Navy SEALs.

As low man on the totem pole, I often got the chores on the *Peace* nobody else wanted to do. One of these was diving down whenever the anchor got stuck to get in there and free it. This often happened in the middle of the night. Many were the times I was roused out of a deep sleep to hear, "Wake up, Brandon! We have to move and the anchor is stuck. Get your wet suit on—you're going in."

I'd dive down there with a flashlight, scared shitless. It was a hell of a way to get over one's fear of sharks, let alone fear of the dark.

Sometimes I would get to depth to find the anchor wedged under a 1-ton ledge that was being rocked off the ocean floor by the weight of the

boat it was attached to and the pull of sea swell on the surface. With a blast of air, I would signal the guy pulling the anchor to let out some slack in the chain, and then go to work untangling the mess. A second blast of air to the surface signaled that my work was done, and the crew would haul the anchor up while I stayed below, watching to make sure it had come fully clear of the bottom. Often it would stick again, and I'd have to repeat the entire routine. When it was finally clear, I would blast a final jet of air to signal where I was and alert them to my position and ascent. Once back on board, I would run through a fast hot shower and try to get in some hurried shut-eye before the break of the new day. It was terrifying, and I loved it.

I learned how to scuba dive without any pool sessions; it was all open-water Pacific Ocean dives from the start. Pretty soon I found I preferred diving without a buoyancy compensator, a kind of inflatable vest with an air hose plugged into it that most divers wear. I thought it was a crutch. To me, it was like the difference between swimming in a full suit of clothes and swimming in a Speedo. So I never used one. I also found I liked going down with two tanks, instead of the single tank most sport divers prefer. A second tank adds significant weight, so you have to be fit enough to handle it, but you get more bottom time and can swim serious distances. Sport divers typically just drop straight down and goof around for a while. Serious hunters mean business and wear two tanks.

By my second summer on the *Peace* I had logged over two hundred dives and was equipped with twin steel 72s (72-cubic-foot-capacity scuba tanks), no buoyancy compensator—just a single- and second-stage scuba regulator and a large speargun.

It was Captain Mike and James Hrabak, the alternate second captain, who taught me how to stalk and hunt in the reefs and open water—skills that would prove enormously useful later on. Soon I was an accomplished hunter on tanks or free diving (just holding my breath). It didn't matter if



it was yellowtail, calico bass, halibut, abalone, or lobster—I was all over it, and nothing was safe.

Usually when we took paying customers out on a dive it would be a pretty mellow thing. There was one group of hard-core divers, though, guys I thought of as the Animals, who would come out with us a few times a year. With the usual passengers, we might dive three times a day. With the Animals, we would do six serious dives every day, hunting for lobster in the winter, halibut or some other fish in the summer. These guys got the biggest kick out of seeing me surface with no buoyancy compensator, two steel tanks, and a 40-pound halibut in my bag.

Eventually I became a rescue diver and an accomplished deckhand. I was often trusted at the helm of the boat from midnight to 2:00 A.M. on a night transit to the islands. As a teenager, manning the helm of a 70-foot dive boat with thirty-two sleeping passengers while transiting through one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, I knew this was a huge responsibility. I took it very seriously and never had an incident. By the time I approached my sixteenth birthday, I had made more than a thousand dives and had enough hours and knowledge to take the Coast Guard 100-ton Master Captain license.

As wild a lifestyle as Bill Magee lived, with his hot tub and girlfriends and poker parties, I believe it was Bill and Captain Mike who set my ethical rudder toward true north. The phrase “they ran a tight ship” was never more apt: Bill and Captain Mike set a standard of excellence that I would often be reminded of during my time with the Navy SEALs. The guys I worked with on that boat were really good at what they did and took their jobs seriously.

I wish that had been true of everyone we encountered; unfortunately, it wasn't.

There was one guy we especially hated because of his slipshod ways and sloppy attitude. George Borden owned a dive shop in the area. You

could tell the dive shop owners and instructors who were genuinely professional, like my friend Mike Dahan, who ran a good class and really taught the fundamentals. Not George. To him, it was all a numbers game: Doesn't matter if these people really know how to dive or not, just push 'em through. Every time George chartered the *Peace*, it would be a mess and create more work for us.

One time he brought a group out to do an advanced certification class. One of the students was an Iranian girl named Mahvash, which means "beauty of the moon"—and she was indeed absolutely beautiful. I was completely smitten with her.

Mahvash was just eighteen and had done only six dives, which was the bare minimum to be certified. We couldn't believe George was allowing her in this advanced class, which included making a few deep dives, deep enough to require decompression stops on the way up. When they boarded the boat, her mother was clearly against it. "I don't know if you're ready for this," she argued, but Mahvash joined the class anyway.

We took the boat out to Catalina Island, a fantastic place with its own little resort town on the southern end. We left at night and anchored at Catalina, then dove all the next day. The following day we went out to a deep diving spot off the back side of Catalina. This area is a preserve; the reefs start at 100 feet out, and the visibility goes on forever. I was not on duty that morning, so I made a dive on my own, just for fun. It was amazing, as it always is.

As I came back up, pausing to do a decompression stop on the anchor chain, I looked down and noticed a whole cluster of George's students down there on a deep dive. *Oh, man*, I thought, *what a mess*. I went all the way up, got on the boat, and took off my gear, then started helping other people with theirs.

A few minutes later, George surfaced with his students and his "assistant." (By regulation, he was required to have a certified dive master

with him, but this guy was only a dive master-in-training. As I said, George always cut corners.)

As they helped the students up onto the boat one by one, someone suddenly said, "Hey, where's Mahvash?"

George was only a few feet away from me, and when I saw the look in his eyes I said, "Oh, shit." Mahvash wasn't with them. None of them had a clue where she was. They panicked—but there was nothing they could do. None of them could go back down for her, because when you dive that deep, you can't go back down again for at least twelve hours.

I had just come up from my own dive, so I couldn't go either.

Our dive master, Ivan Fuentes, whipped on his tanks, jumped over the side of the boat, and went down. We waited. A very long five minutes later he surfaced, a couple hundred yards from the boat, and waved for me. I swam a rescue line out to him. When I got close, I saw that he had Mahvash with him. She wasn't moving. As I got even closer, I saw that the girl with the beauty of the moon was dead.

For a moment, my own heart stopped. It was the first time I had ever seen death up close. I wanted to cry and scream at the same time. I wanted to swim back and choke the life out of that idiot George. By his carelessness and disregard for safety, as far as I was concerned, he had caused this girl's death.

Ivan told me he had found Mahvash about 100 feet down, hovering 10 feet off the ocean floor. Apparently she had gotten separated from the group, panicked, spit her regulator out, and drowned. We tried doing rescue breathing with her, but it was too late. She had embolized coming up: That is, her lungs had burst.

That night I tried to cry, but the tears wouldn't come—they were choked off by fury. It was a lesson I've never forgotten: how precious life is, and at the same time, how fragile.

The family wanted to press charges, and I gave a deposition for them,

but nothing came of it, and George was never prosecuted. It wasn't the last time I would see innocence and beauty crushed with impunity by what I considered to be arrogance and crass thoughtlessness.

At the close of my freshman year at Ventura High, my parents decided the time was finally right for us to embark on our world-encircling sailing trip on the *Agio*. They had saved enough money, and they knew that the longer they put it off, the older Rhiannon and I would be. They figured, better do it while we were still young enough to go along with the family's plans.

Whenever they would talk about this voyage, I would ignore it and hope the whole idea would go away. I was having a great time working on the *Peace* and enjoying the incredible freedom of my harbor lifestyle. Because of my position as deckhand, most of the shop owners assumed I was much older than I really was, and I was never carded for drinks when the boys and I went out for dinner. I was quite content in my own little world at the harbor. Sailing off to faraway places didn't sound thrilling to me. I had more important things to do—like diving, surfing, chasing girls, and getting my driver's license.

Unknown to me at the time, Captain Bill talked to my parents and offered to let me stay with him on the *Peace* if they wanted to leave me behind. They appreciated the offer, but no, they decided, the time had come, and we were going to make this trip all together as a family. They put Rhiannon and me on independent studies for a year, and we started packing up the boat to leave. The plan was to sail to New Zealand and see how things shook out. If things went well that far, we'd make the rest of the trip around the world, and if things weren't going as well as we hoped, well, we could always turn back at that point.

Just as we were getting ready to leave, we had an unexpected visit from friends we'd known back in Kimberley: Ken and Gail, parents of my

childhood pal Justin. I was shocked when I saw them; we all were. They were both a complete mess, especially Gail, and we soon learned why.

In addition to being total ski animals, Justin and I had also been rabid hockey buffs even at the tender age of five. While my knee problems had later benched me, Justin had kept playing competitively right up through high school. Earlier that year, Ken told us, Justin had been in a freak hockey accident. He got body-checked by another player, went down, and hit his head on the ice pretty hard, hard enough to give him a concussion. They took him home, put him to bed.

He never woke up.

When I heard what happened, the bottom fell out of my stomach. I couldn't believe Justin was gone. It had been nearly ten years since I'd seen him, but I'd always known he was there, somewhere, probably doing a lot of the same things I was doing. Only now he wasn't.

Justin had been an only child; now his parents were alone in the world, and I felt awful for both of them, as well as heartbroken and freaked out that my friend was gone. I also felt something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. The words "lost innocence" didn't occur to me at the time, and it was only later on, at the climax of our ocean voyage, that I began to identify that sinking feeling: It was as if Justin's passing had marked the end of an era, a childhood I would never come back to.

Our first stop was San Diego Harbor to stock up on supplies, after which we headed down to Guadalupe Island and Cabo San Lucas. After a few weeks' stay in Cabo, we sailed around the tip of Baja into La Paz, then spent a few weeks in and around the surrounding islands before heading over to mainland Mexico. We hit Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, and finally Acapulco, our last point to resupply before leaving the continent behind. Soon we headed southwest, traversing thousands of miles of open water into the heart of the South Pacific, bound for the sparsely

populated Marquesas Islands, not far from Tahiti. It would take us a month to reach our destination.

Thirty days doesn't sound like a lot, but when you're out on the open sea with nothing but water stretching to every horizon, it is an eternity. My sister and I had some good times on that voyage. We would sit up on the bow watching the dolphins jumping and playing in our boat's bow wake. We always had a line out and caught quite a few fish.

A long stretch at sea is an excellent time to get to know yourself. My dad and I split the night watch between us. I would take over from my mom and sister at midnight, watch from then till 4:00 A.M., and then hand it off to my father, who took it till sunrise. The night sky over the South Pacific was amazing. There were times when the sky was so clear and filled with stars it felt like we were floating in space. Every ten minutes or so I would see a shooting star.

These interludes of solitude, with the heavens opened up like the pages of a book before me, began working on my mind. During those long hours I started reflecting on my life, on all the experiences I'd had, and could not help but think about the future and where it might be going.

I think this is something most kids never have the chance to experience, this kind of break in the day when there is nothing to think about but the expanse of time and the possibilities it holds. While my family and I were crossing the South Pacific, all my friends back home were back at school, running around, going to class, chasing girls, going to bed, and then waking up and doing it all over again the next day. Distractions and commotion, and little time for genuine introspection. As an adult, I have met people who grew up on ranches and found they had experiences similar to my ocean transit at sixteen.

I can't say I came to any startling new self-knowledge during that time, but in some way I couldn't have articulated, it felt like my thinking sank a little deeper, and maybe grew bigger. I began getting a sense that I

wanted to do something different, something special, with my life. I didn't know exactly what that might be, but I knew that as much as I loved the life of a dive boat captain, which is what Bill Magee and Captain Mike had been grooming me for during the last few years, I would never be content with the harbor. Despite the incredible tranquility of the ocean, there was an impatience growing inside me, an urge that was starting to whisper, *Wherever my life is heading, let's get on with it!*

Those thirty days at sea also provided the time to accomplish a lot. I finished my entire school year (months ahead of schedule), taught myself how to juggle, and read a ton of books. I went through the entire Lord of the Rings series and a carton full of classic novels. Steinbeck was one of my favorites. I liked his direct, in-your-face style, and I identified with his strong connection to California.

I also practiced celestial navigation with my dad. This was in the days before GPS. We had a sat nav (satellite navigation) unit, a precursor to today's GPS devices, but it would take a wait of twelve hours for a satellite to get overhead for us to fix our position that way. So we did a lot of our navigation the old-fashioned way: celestial observation and dead reckoning.

After thirty days at sea we made landfall at Hiva Oa, one of the larger (that is, least tiny) of the remote Marquesas Islands. Shrouded in a nearly constant cloud cover, the Marquesas rise majestically out of the Pacific, with an appearance similar to the north shore of the Hawaiian chain. The local harbor was a thing of beauty with its gorgeous black sand beaches and, high up on the distant cliffs, a panorama of waterfalls. Gauguin spent his last years here, as did the Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel. Both Herman Melville and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote books inspired by visits to Hiva Oa.

We anchored the *Agio* in a cove and took a small boat ashore. The lifestyle of the people we encountered was both amazing and hilarious to

me: They lived in fairly primitive, thatched-roof huts—and drove brand-new Toyota four-wheel drives, subsidized by the French government.

On Hiva Oa I met a girl I will never forget. I never knew her name; there was a complete language barrier between us. Somehow, though, we just clicked. We took long walks through the most stunning tropical scenery, past the most amazing waterfalls, and as beautiful as our surroundings were, she was even more so. She was something out of a dream. I never tried anything with her, never even kissed her, but after we left, I missed her badly. Of course, I knew we couldn't stay there and that it wasn't my dad's fault we had to leave, but still, I hated it, and this added fuel to the coals of resentment that were already burning.

Up to this point in our trip, my dad and I had been having a steadily escalating series of disagreements on points of seamanship. So far these had been fairly minor—but things were about to change.

On the open ocean it wasn't that bad. When you're sailing straight in one direction, all you're really doing is taking fixes and monitoring your course. Every time we'd get closer in to land, though, and especially when it came to navigating the coastal waterways, the two of us would start to butt heads. I wanted more of a say in how we managed the boat. I felt like I should be consulted. By this time I'd had a lot of experience in coastal waterway navigation. "Look," I'd say, "I'm no slouch, I know what I'm doing here."

In the South Pacific, because of the nature of the deepwater reefs, it's common to set two anchors. First you set a bow (front) hook, and then you throw a stern anchor off the back and snug the boat up tight. For both anchors, my father was using a type of anchor called a CQR he'd used for most of his cruising life in Seattle, California, and Mexico. A CQR is a plow type of anchor that does an excellent job of holding in sand, clay, or mud bottoms, but it's not the best choice to hold in rocks or coral reef.

We also had on board a multipurpose Bruce anchor I had salvaged



from my time on the dive boat, and this was the anchor I favored. The Bruce is designed to function in a wide range of seafloor compositions. Because of its fierce reliability, it is the choice of most commercial boats. The Bruce and I knew each other well, going back to my early days working on the dive boat; in fact, it was the reason for many of those 2:00 A.M. wake-up calls. That frigging Bruce anchor would hold fast in *anything*.

“Look,” I said, “we’re in a coral reef. I get what the underwater topography looks like here, Dad, I’m a diver. Do you have any idea how many stuck anchors I’ve dealt with? Trust me, we need the Bruce on the bow.”

My father didn’t see it that way. “There’s only one captain on this boat,” was all he’d say, “and you know who that is.”

I was so frustrated. At the same time, I was being a cocky smart-ass about the whole thing. I was well aware that my own attitude was not going a long way toward selling the idea, but my heels were dug in. My parents couldn’t stop me from screaming my head off when I was two weeks old, and at sixteen I guess I hadn’t gotten much easier to persuade.

That first night in port we set our bow and rear anchors, again both CQRs. Of the two, the bow is the more important—and when we awoke the next morning I was delighted to see that we had dragged the bow anchor right along the ocean floor and nearly grounded our boat. I couldn’t wait to give my dad an earful about what a useless piece of crap that damn CQR was. Equally well spelled out was this ancillary point: what an obnoxious prick I was being.

Every time we argued, my sister would go to her room to get away from the tension, while my mom would try to be the peacemaker. Of course, she would side with my dad, but then later on she would come to my stateroom privately, sit down with me, and say, “Brandon, you have to chill out. I know you have a lot of experience, but this is your dad’s boat.” I would vent my frustration to her, and she would be understanding and try to keep the situation from spiraling out of control. For a while, she succeeded.

Our trip continued on through the rest of the island chain to the Marquesas' main northern island, Nuka Hiva, and then on to the Tuamotu Archipelago, a series of coral atolls that comprise the largest atoll chain in the world. All the while, my father and I continued arguing. By the time we pulled into Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, the situation had badly deteriorated.

I don't remember what I said that finally set him off, but whatever it was, it brought to an end not only my trip with my family but also my life with my family. Suddenly my dad had me by the scruff of the neck, his fist curled and ready to lash out, both of us screaming at each other. *My God*, my mother thought, *he's going to kick the crap out of Brandon*. He didn't hit me, but we both knew we were going to a place that neither of us wanted to. We'd reached a point of no return. One of us had to go—and it wasn't going to be him. With my mom and sister wailing in grief and disbelief, my father threw me off the boat.

He didn't actually hurl me off physically. He just told me that I should take a pack with me and find passage aboard another boat to my destination of choice. He said it like he meant it.

Before I knew it I was off the *Agio* for good—and on my own in the middle of the South Pacific.

In a way, I was relieved. The tension between us had grown unbearable, and I knew that if we hadn't parted ways, something really bad would have happened, and it would have caused irreparable harm to both of us, and for sure to our relationship.

Still, I was somewhat in shock at what *had* happened. I was also scared.

In later years we would reconnect and rebuild our friendship, but for now my father wanted nothing to do with me. My mom knew there was no reconciling us at that point, but she did what she could to make sure I would be okay. She knew that if I could make my way home, Bill Magee

would take me in and look after me, and before I left Tahiti she helped me get a radio call patched through to Ventura so we could fill him in on my situation. She also helped me secure passage on the *Shilo*, a 40-foot catamaran headed north for Hilo, Hawaii, a journey of nearly 3,000 miles. My boatmates were a family of three: a couple and their three-year-old boy. The mom's hands were pretty full taking care of their infant son, and they had been looking for crew. I stood the midnight shift, which left me plenty of time to think about the future.

In a way, I didn't blame my father for throwing me off the family boat. It felt like the only possible thing to do. My mom was completely torn up and had pleaded and pleaded with him to relent, and yet I think that she also realized that there was no going back.

During the day on the *Shilo*, I was either asleep or occupied with the practical matters of the boat. During the nights, I was alone with my thoughts. Those nights were rough. Rhiannon and I had been a lot less close since we'd both become California teenagers with our own sets of friends—but she was my sister and had been a part of my life since as early as I could remember. Now she was gone. My whole family was gone. I was alone. Those first few nights on that 40-foot cat, I cried myself to sleep.

As I said, I was scared, too, but I told myself I had to get past being scared, and when I did I found there was also a part of me that was excited about whatever lay ahead. I knew my life had hit a major turning point. I'd had experiences most other sixteen-year-olds had not. Still, I was far from an adult. I didn't even have my driver's license yet.

Often, during those lonely nights, I thought about what had happened with my dad and me back in the harbor off Papeete. On the one hand, it was a hard lesson in the demands of authority. My dad was right: There's only one captain on a ship, just like there's only one person in charge of a mission, or a department, or any venture. At the same time, he *was* making the wrong decision. I had learned how to take orders during

my time on the *Peace*, and that sense of respect for the chain of command would become a crucial trait later on during my service in the military. Still, as we shall see, there would be quite a few other occasions when I would feel it was my duty to challenge authority, despite my training, when my gut told me the guy in charge was leading us down the wrong path.

That catamaran was *fast*—way faster than any single-hull boat I'd ever sailed. It took us less than two weeks to make Hilo.

A day before we reached our destination, I came up on deck from my stateroom on the port side of the boat. It was a gorgeous morning. As I stood on deck, something in the hull caught my eye. I bent down to look. Just above the waterline, a swordfish had rammed our boat during the night, spearing himself straight through the hull and breaking off the tip of his snout. That damn fish must have leapt clear out of the water to spear us. I grabbed my camera to take a picture of it. I still have that snapshot. The next day we breezed into the harbor at Hilo with a short length of swordfish beak jammed through our hull.

The image of that swordfish stuck in my mind as firmly as its beak stuck in the *Shilo's* flank. What the hell was going on for that fish? What made it leap up out of the water to attack this strange, unknown vessel? Did it know it was going up against something more than ten times larger and heavier than itself?

What future was *I* leaping out of the water to go up against?

Years later I would learn this odd factoid of biology: Although like all fish it is cold-blooded, the swordfish has special organs in its head that heat the eyes and brain as much as 60°F above ambient temperature, greatly enhancing the animal's vision and therefore its ability to nail its prey. The falcon or eagle would probably be most people's choice, but if you were looking for a totem to represent the idea of a sniper—especially a sniper who works in water—the swordfish would not be a bad pick.

Perhaps this *had* been a vision quest, after all.

Once we reached Hilo I made my way back to the mainland by plane and met up with my old boss, Bill Magee. As my mom had known would be the case, Bill was happy to see me and said I could go back to work for him and live on board. "Hey," he said, "you've already got your schoolwork out of the way for the rest of the year. Why don't you just settle into boat life?"

I can't even imagine how my life might have turned out if he hadn't made this kind offer.

Soon after I rejoined Captain Bill and the *Peace*, the Animals showed up for a few days of diving. This time one of them, a younger guy, brought a few friends with him. These guys were rugged. I didn't know what they did, but you could see that whatever it was, they knew it inside and out. They weren't muscle-bound showoffs or tough guys with attitude; it was more subtle than that. Being around them, you could just sense that there was something special about the way these guys carried themselves. It felt like they could take on a shark on a bad day and come out smiling.

On our first dive, when these guys saw me, a sixteen-year-old kid diving with no buoyancy compensator and my twin steel 72s, they *noticed*. "Holy shit," said one of them, "who *is* this kid?"

The two of us got to talking. He wanted to know how I'd come to be a deckhand, and I told him a little bit about my background.

"You know," he said, "you should check out the seals."

At least that's what I thought he said. I had no idea what he was talking about. Seals? Was this guy seriously into seals, like whale watching and shit? Was he making a joke?

"No," he said, "not seals—*SEALs*."

I still didn't get it.

"Navy maritime Special Operations Forces," he explained. "SEALs. It stands for Sea, Air, and Land. SEALs."

I'd never heard of them before.

“To become a SEAL,” he added, “you go through the toughest military training in the world.”

Now, that got my attention. I didn’t know much about the military, but I had always been fascinated with aviation and wanted to be a pilot when I grew up, maybe even an astronaut. What he was describing intrigued me. *I love the water*, I thought, *and I’m a pretty good diver. That sounds like a hell of a challenge.*

The truth was, I knew I needed a plan, somewhere to go and something to aim at. At the time, when I wasn’t on the dive boat, I would surf and hang out with some guys around the harbor. They were starting to get into crystal meth. I had no interest in it—I would drink beer and that was the extent of it—but seeing them and where they were heading scared me. I knew that I had to get the hell out of there sooner or later, if I wanted to make anything better out of my life.

From that point on, my goal was fixed: I was going to become a Navy SEAL.

I had no idea how hard it would be.