

NO EASY DAY



THE ONLY FIRST
HAND ACCOUNT OF THE
**NAVY SEAL
MISSION
THAT KILLED
OSAMA
BIN LADEN**

MARK OWEN
WITH KEVIN MAURER

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,

181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2012

001

Copyright © Mark Owen, 2012

Photographs are from the author's collection

Maps by Travis Rightmeyer

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright

reserved above, no part of this publication may be

reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,

or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,

photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior

written permission of both the copyright owner and

the above publisher of this book

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-17751-5

TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-17752-2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council™ certified paper.

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON



PROLOGUE
Chalk One

At one minute out, the Black Hawk crew chief slid the door open.

I could just make him out—his night vision goggles covering his eyes—holding up one finger. I glanced around and saw my SEAL teammates calmly passing the sign throughout the helicopter.

The roar of the engine filled the cabin, and it was now impossible to hear anything other than the Black Hawk's rotors beating the air. The wind buffeted me as I leaned out, scanning the ground below, hoping to steal a glance of the city of Abbottabad.

An hour and a half before, we'd boarded our two MH-60

Black Hawks and lifted off into a moonless night. It was only a short flight from our base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to the border with Pakistan, and from there another hour to the target we had been studying on satellite images for weeks.

The cabin was pitch-black except for the lights from the cockpit. I had been wedged against the left door with no room to stretch out. We'd stripped the helicopter of its seats to save on weight, so we either sat on the floor or on small camp chairs purchased at a local sporting goods store before we left.

Now perched on the edge of the cabin, I stretched my legs out the door trying to get the blood flowing. My legs were numb and cramped. Crowded into the cabin around me and in the second helicopter were twenty-three of my teammates from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU. I had operated with these men dozens of times before. Some I had known ten years or more. I trusted each one completely.

Five minutes ago, the whole cabin had come alive. We pulled on our helmets and checked our radios and then made one final check of our weapons. I was wearing sixty pounds of gear, each gram meticulously chosen for a specific purpose, my load refined and calibrated over a dozen years and hundreds of similar missions.

This team had been handpicked, assembled of the most experienced men in our squadron. Over the last forty-eight hours, as go day loomed and then was postponed and then loomed again, we had each checked and rechecked our equipment so we were more than ready for this night.

This was a mission I'd dreamt about since I watched the September 11, 2001, attacks on a TV in my barracks room in Okinawa. I was just back from training and got into my room in time to see the second plane crash into the World Trade Center. I couldn't turn away as the fireball shot out of the opposite side of the building and smoke billowed out of the tower.

Like millions of Americans back home, I stood there watching in disbelief with a hopeless feeling in the pit of my stomach. I stayed transfixed to the screen for the rest of the day as my mind tried to make sense of what I'd just witnessed. One plane crash could be an accident. The unfolding news coverage confirmed what I had known the moment the second plane entered the TV shot. A second plane was an attack, no doubt. No way that happened by accident.

On September 11, 2001, I was on my first deployment as a SEAL, and as Osama bin Laden's name was mentioned I figured my unit would get the call to go to Afghanistan the next day. For the previous year and a half, we'd been training to deploy. We'd trained in Thailand, the Philippines, East Timor, and Australia over the last few months. As I watched the attacks, I longed to be out of Okinawa and in the mountains of Afghanistan, chasing al Qaeda fighters and serving up a little payback.

We never got the call.

I was frustrated. I hadn't trained so hard and for so long to become a SEAL only to watch the war on TV. Of course, I wasn't about to let my family and friends in on my frustration.

They were writing asking me if I was going to Afghanistan. To them, I was a SEAL and it was only logical that we would be immediately deployed to Afghanistan.

I remember that I sent an e-mail to my girlfriend at the time trying to make light of a bad situation. We were talking about the end of this deployment and making plans for my time at home before the next deployment.

“I’ve got about a month left,” I wrote. “I’ll be home soon, unless I have to kill Bin Laden first.” It was the kind of joke you heard a lot back then.

Now, as the Black Hawks flew toward our target, I thought back over the last ten years. Ever since the attacks, everyone in my line of work had dreamt of being involved in a mission like this. The al Qaeda leader personified everything we were fighting against. He’d inspired men to fly planes into buildings filled with innocent civilians. That kind of fanaticism is scary, and as I watched the towers crumble and saw reports of attacks in Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, I knew we were at war, and not a war of our choosing. A lot of brave men had sacrificed for years to fight the war, never knowing if we would get a chance to be involved in a mission like the one about to begin.

A decade after that event and with eight years of chasing and killing al Qaeda’s leaders, we were minutes away from fast-roping into Bin Laden’s compound.

Grabbing the rope attached to the Black Hawk’s fuselage, I could feel the blood finally returning to my toes. The sniper next to me slid into place with one leg hanging outside and

one leg inside the helicopter so that there was more room in the already-tight doorway. The barrel of his weapon was scanning for targets in the compound. His job was to cover the south side of the compound as the assault team fast-roped into the courtyard and split up to our assignments.

Just over a day ago, none of us had believed Washington would approve the mission. But after weeks of waiting, we were now less than a minute from the compound. The intelligence said our target would be there; I figured he was, but nothing would surprise me. We'd thought we were close a couple times before.

I had spent a week in 2007 chasing rumors of Bin Laden. We had received reports that he was coming back into Afghanistan from Pakistan for a final stand. A source said he'd seen a man in "flowing white robes" in the mountains. After weeks of prep, it was ultimately a wild-goose chase. This time felt different. Before we left, the CIA analyst who was the main force behind tracking the target to Abbottabad said she was one hundred percent certain he was there. I hoped she was right, but my experience told me to reserve judgment until the mission was over.

It didn't matter now. We were seconds away from the house and whoever was living in there was about to have a bad night.

We had completed similar assaults countless times before. For the last ten years, I had deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and to the Horn of Africa. We had been part of the mission to rescue Richard Phillips, the captain of the container ship

Maersk Alabama, from three Somali pirates in 2009, and I had operated in Pakistan before. Tactically, tonight was no different from a hundred other operations; historically, I hoped it was going to be very different.

As soon as I gripped the rope, a calm came over me. Everyone on the mission had heard that one-minute call a thousand times before and at this point it was no different than any other operation. From the door of the helicopter, I started to make out landmarks I recognized from studying satellite images of the area during our weeks of training. I wasn't clipped into the helicopter with a safety line, so my teammate Walt had a hand on a nylon loop on the back of my body armor. Everybody was crowding toward the door right behind me ready to follow me down. On the right side, my teammates had a good visual of the trail helicopter with Chalk Two heading to its landing zone.

As soon as we cleared the southeastern wall, our helicopter flared out and started to hover near our predetermined insert point. Looking down thirty feet into the compound, I could see laundry whipping on a clothesline. Rugs hung out to dry were battered by dust and dirt from the rotors. Trash swirled around the yard, and in a nearby animal pen, goats and cows thrashed around, startled by the helicopter.

Focused on the ground, I could see we were still over the guesthouse. As the helicopter rocked, I could tell the pilot was having some trouble getting the aircraft into position. We veered between the roof of the guesthouse and the wall of the compound. Glancing over at the crew chief, I could see he had

his radio microphone pressed against his mouth, passing directions to the pilot.

The helicopter was bucking as it tried to find enough air to set a stable hover and hold station. The wobbling wasn't violent, but I could tell it wasn't planned. The pilot was fighting the controls trying to correct it. Something wasn't right. The pilots had done this kind of mission so many times that for them putting a helicopter over a target was like parking a car.

Staring into the compound, I considered throwing the rope just so we could get out of the unstable bird. I knew it was a risk, but getting on the ground was imperative. There wasn't anything I could do stuck in the door of the helicopter. All I needed was a clear spot to throw the rope.

But the clear spot never came.

"We're going around. We're going around," I heard over the radio. That meant the original plan to fast-rope into the compound was now off. We were going to circle around to the south, land, and assault from outside the wall. It would add precious time to the assault and allow anyone inside the compound more time to arm themselves.

My heart sank.

Up until I heard the go-around call, everything was going as planned. We had evaded the Pakistani radar and anti-aircraft missiles on the way in and arrived undetected. Now, the insert was already going to shit. We had rehearsed this contingency, but it was plan B. If our target was really inside, surprise was the key and it was quickly slipping away.

As the helicopter attempted to climb out of its unstable

hover, it took a violent right turn, spinning ninety degrees. I could feel the tail kick to the left. It caught me by surprise and I immediately struggled to find a handhold inside the cabin to keep from sliding out the door.

I could feel my butt coming off the floor, and for a second I could feel a panic rising in my chest. I let go of the rope and started to lean back into the cabin, but my teammates were all crowded in the door. There was little room for me to scoot back. I could feel Walt's grip tighten on my body armor as the helicopter started to drop. Walt's other hand held the sniper's gear. I leaned back as far as I could. Walt was practically lying on top of me to keep me inside.

"Holy fuck, we're going in," I thought.

The violent turn put my door in the front as the helicopter started to slide sideways. I could see the wall of the courtyard coming up at us. Overhead, the engines, which had been humming, now seemed to scream as they tried to beat the air into submission to stay aloft.

The tail rotor had barely missed hitting the guesthouse as the helicopter slid to the left. We had joked before the mission that our helicopter had the lowest chance of crashing because so many of us had already survived previous helicopter crashes. We'd been sure if a helicopter was going to crash it would be the one carrying Chalk Two.

Thousands of man-hours, maybe even millions, had been spent leading the United States to this moment, and the mission was about to go way off track before we even had a chance to get our feet on the ground.

I tried to kick my legs up and wiggle deeper into the cabin.

If the helicopter hit on its side, it might roll, trapping my legs under the fuselage. Leaning back as far as I could, I pulled my legs into my chest. Next to me, the sniper tried to clear his legs from the door, but it was too crowded. There was nothing we could do but hope the helicopter didn't roll and chop off his exposed leg.

Everything slowed down. I tried to push the thoughts of being crushed out of my mind. With every second, the ground got closer and closer. I felt my whole body tense up, ready for the inevitable impact.