

Reprinted from

The New York Times

National

July 9, 2005

Heavy Toll in Afghan Fight for Navy's Proud Elite

By JAMES DAO

VIRGINIA BEACH, July 8 - It was a risky maneuver: sending a slow-moving helicopter during daylight into rugged mountains teeming with heavily armed Taliban fighters. But to Rear Adm. Joseph Maguire, head of the Naval Special Warfare Command, his special operations unit had no choice.

"When we've got four Seals on the ground, four brothers who say, 'We're under fire, we've been shot, we need help now,' we can't wait for the night," Admiral Maguire said Friday at the Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek here, after a memorial service that drew more than 2,000 people. "The covenant we have with each other is that we will leave no man on the battlefield."

Eight members of the Navy Seals - the informal name for the Sea-Air-Land units, the Navy's specialists in unconventional warfare - and eight Army special operations soldiers died on June 28 when their copter was shot down in eastern Afghanistan. They were on a mission to rescue a four-member Seal team engaged in a firefight with Taliban rebels; two members of that team died, a third was rescued days later, and a fourth remains missing.

The 10 confirmed deaths made the day the deadliest in the four-decade history of the Seals, deeply shaking their community, the smallest of the military's special operations commands and, by many accounts, the tightest-knit and tightest-lipped.

As search efforts continue for the missing seaman amid the rugged peaks of eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province,

active and retired members of Seal units have shared information and theories via e-mail while keeping mum to outsiders, fearing the release of details that might endanger their comrades.

"Whatever happens in-country stays in-country," said Don D. Mann, a former Seal member who lives in Williamsburg, Va. "No matter who they are, even if they are generals, if they aren't in the community, they probably don't need to know. So you don't tell them. It's a matter of safety."

The deaths have turned an uncomfortable spotlight on the Navy's commandos, giving a glimpse of their secret work, which today often involves dropping out of planes, burrowing into foxholes and chasing landlocked insurgents, a far cry from their traditional roles as frogmen and riverine warriors.

In the profiles of the dead that have emerged, the world has also learned something about the competitive zeal, derring-do culture and camaraderie of the Seals.

There was, for instance, Petty Officer Second Class James Suh, 28, the son of Korean immigrants, who competed on swim and tennis teams in high school, studied statistics in college and knew he wanted to be a Navy commando by the time he was a teenager. Slightly shorter than six feet tall, he prepared for months for the grueling 26-week training program to become a member of the Seals, and then marveled that he passed the program when more powerfully built men failed.

"He was not ever prepared to be second best," said his sister, Claudia Suh Bown, 29. "Not just out of a competitive

nature. It was all about bettering himself."

There was also Lt. Cmdr. Erik S. Kristensen, 33, who won academic awards at the Naval Academy that he forgot to claim, spoke fluent French, taught English literature and loved "Moby Dick." The son of a rear admiral who played on the Navy football team that reached the 1964 Cotton Bowl, Commander Kristensen craved the bond his father shared with his teammates.

"I think that's why he became a Seal," Commander Kristensen's mother, Suzanne, said. "It was the same feeling of camaraderie, togetherness, team play that he saw in the Seal community."

The deaths have sent a shock wave through Virginia Beach, a sprawling beach and military town that is home to four Seal teams and where 6 of the 10 dead commandos lived.

The Virginia Beach region is also home to hundreds of retired Navy commandos, many of whom run security firms or work in local police forces or government. Among the most famous is Rudy Boesch, who competed in the first season of the television reality show "Survivor."

Residents of Virginia Beach say that the Navy commandos are a quiet but unmistakable presence, occasionally announcing themselves by zipping past the beach in rubber rafts or dangling from helicopters.

Mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf said the identities of many Seal members were not known to other residents because "they don't advertise it."

"And most of us are so loyal that we don't pry," she said.

Mayor Oberndorf added that, unlike nearby Norfolk Naval Station, where the return of aircraft carriers are noisy, festive events, the arrivals and departures of Seal teams are not publicized. "Their reputation is to provide strong training, quiet deployments and quiet returns," she said.

Daniel Ziegler, the owner of Awful Arthur's Oyster Bar, a Navy hangout in Virginia Beach, said he had learned to distinguish commandos preparing to deploy: they grow beards and let their hair get shaggy. But they never discuss their missions, he said. And many of them blend in easily.

"The majority of the population has no clue who they are," he said. "They carry themselves a bit harder and heavier, but most of them are average guys."

The first Seal units were officially created by President John F. Kennedy to patrol the shores and infiltrate the jungles of Vietnam, but Navy special operations began in the underwater demolition teams that cleared beaches and laid mines during World War II.

Today, there are 2,400 active duty members of the Seal units. Each year, only about 200 sailors pass the training program; the dropout rate is around 70 percent, and the motto is, "The only easy day was yesterday."

The small number in the Seals, the harshness of their training and the fact that they operate in teams of 14 or fewer men, often far behind enemy lines, make secrecy and camaraderie lifesaving values, current and former commandos said.

But for their family and friends, the secret nature of the work can complicate conversation. The parents of Lt. Michael P. Murphy, 29, who died in the Afghan firefight, said they knew when their son was deploying, but not where he was going.

"We didn't even know he was in Afghanistan," Lieutenant Murphy's father, Daniel, said.

Claudia Suh Bown said that her brother would tell fantastic stories to explain injuries or describe experiences without revealing classified details. Once, after returning home with a deep gash across his forehead, Petty Officer Suh told her that he had been bitten by a jackrabbit.

Jean Paul Fontan, brother of Chief Petty Officer Jacques J. Fontan, 36, said his brother did not hide the fact that he was a member of Seal Team 10. But he would good-naturedly parry questions

about his work with a joke or a Jack Nicholson imitation.

"He'd use the line from the movie 'A Few Good Men' where Jack Nicholson says, 'I stand on that wall providing that blanket of freedom you sleep under,' " Mr. Fontan, 37, said. "And so whoever was pushing the subject would back off."

Other Seal team members who died included Lt. Michael M. McGreevy Jr., 30; Senior Chief Petty Officer Dan Healy, 36; Petty Officer First Class Jeffery A. Lucas, 33; Petty Officer First Class Jeff Taylor, 30; Petty Officer Second Class Eric Shane Patton, 22; and Petty Officer Second Class Danny P. Dietz, 25.

Though Friday was a day of mourning, it was also a day of celebration for the commando who escaped, and a day of anxious hope for the one still missing. Neither of those names has been released.

The wounded commando was found hiding in the woods by a villager who had followed his trail of blood, Shamsur Rahman Safi, an official in Kunar Province, said in an interview. The villager took the sailor to his house, gave him milk and helped bandage a shrapnel wound to his leg, Mr. Safi said, adding that he himself contacted American forces, who retrieved the sailor the next morning.

In the first official account of the rescue effort, Admiral Maguire on Friday said that the commando traveled more than two miles through "extremely mountainous terrain" while firing his weapon at pursuing Taliban rebels before reaching safety. Admiral Maguire said the commando was in good condition.

The admiral also said he remained hopeful that the missing commando remained alive, though he offered no evidence to bolster his faith. And he pledged that the search would continue until the sailor was found.

"He's a Seal," Admiral Maguire said. "So until we know otherwise, we are going to assume he is out there, and he's alive."