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WHO I AM



In war, there are no unwounded soldiers.

—JOSÉ NAROSKY

Those who know me understand I never intended to write a book, but over the years of learning how to cope with combat stress, I realized how cathartic writing had become. What started as an adjunct to therapy became an incredible psychological release. However, as my notes turned into journals I discovered the writing was less about me and more about the individuals and events that shaped my life. I felt compelled to tell others dealing with similar demons what I had learned, but I shunned the idea of letting anyone read what I had written—not because of a lack of writing ability but more from a reluctance to expose personal aspects of my life that I have kept hidden from even my own wife. As you will find out, I am neither the all-American boy nor a conquering warrior. I am simply a man who held many titles over his military career; some I worked very hard to attain, while others were simply assignments. The most difficult and at times haunting label that I have had to contend with is “hero.”

I am not a hero, but I know many worthy of the title. I have had the

distinct honor to serve among them for most of my career. I dedicated my life to preserving theirs. I trained with them for battle, bandaged them in combat, and listened to their revelations about life, everything from the birth of their first child to the burial of their closest friends. I am a man who worked hard to serve among the world's most elite warriors. I am a sailor who to the detriment of his own family placed service for his country and teammates above all else. A medical officer who struggled to maintain an oath to preserve life through medicine while taking lives in the defense of his country. A veteran who still suffers from the mental scars of war but through the grace of God, the love of my wife, and the support of the families of the fallen learned how to deal with it before it destroyed me. I am a Navy SEAL who lived by a creed and did what was expected. I am a lot of things, but a hero is not one of them.

The awards I received represent the actions of a team, not the deeds of a single man. I know how each citation reads, and I am not trivializing what is written. The line between hero and fool is razor thin, and it was the actions of the team that allowed me the opportunity to do what was required. Had the others not provided cover, coordinated air support, or maneuvered on the enemy as I moved under fire I would be buried at Arlington right now, my legacy viewed much differently. Truth be told, *they*, the team, are the reasons why I wear these medals, and I am honored to have received them on their behalf.

Until I wore the medals, I never understood their true significance. Our nation's medals represent more than the actions of any team on a single day. They embody the principles upon which our government was founded and are a tangible depiction of our military's core values: honor, courage, and commitment. The fact that the nation's top three medals for valor require a multitude of evidence only demonstrates the reverence our country has for them. However, it is my personal belief that this same standard of inviolability has also prevented many of my brethren from receiving awards commensurate with their actions. These

are the heroes of whom I speak: Americans who, when asked to face danger and adversity, continually answered the call, not for notoriety or distinction but solely out of their love for their country, family, and teammates. They are the quiet and often unknown professionals of special operations and the parents, wives, and children who support them. They are both whom I served and to whom I am forever indebted.

Out of respect of their privacy, to protect those who continue to carry the sword and for reasons of national security, many names, locations, dates, and circumstances have been changed or omitted. If you are reading this in an attempt to discover information about special operations, I recommend you look elsewhere. If you're curious about the internal struggles of a combat medic, dedicated to saving lives but forced to take them, this book is for you.

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GETTING UNDER WAY



I know well what I am fleeing from but not what I am in search of.

—MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

I grabbed my backpack and navigated through the boxes, clothes, and household items stored strategically throughout our home and bolted out the front door into the frigid dawn air of Albuquerque. Mom was waiting patiently in the car, listening to a local news station on the radio. I jumped in next to her, careful not to slip on the ice.

“Did you remember your report, Marky?”

“Yes, Mom,” I answered while rubbing the sleep from my eyes. It was five thirty in the morning; wrestling season was upon us, which meant early-morning practices. Like most teens my age, I would have preferred a warm bed until the last possible minute, but I was committed to the team and duty called. Mom was working three jobs per day back then and dropped me off on her way to the first.

As we drove in the dark, Mom passed the time by telling stories that morphed into life lessons, all with a common theme: Live for others, not for self. On that particular day, she shared a story about cleaning homes in rural Texas. She grew up in a poor but loving family, and

everyone worked, including the kids. She started her first housecleaning job at age nine.

She wrapped up the anecdote just as we pulled into the diner parking lot, nearly wiping out a newspaper machine by the front entrance.

“Mom!” I gasped.

“What, mijo?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“You don’t need to park so close! One of these days you’re going to hit someone. I can walk the few extra steps to get inside.”

“No,” she quipped, “God will let them know I’m coming. Besides, I’m your mother and I can take you anywhere I want. Now, do you have enough money for your oatmeal?” She started digging in her purse.

“Yes, Mom, I have money for breakfast. I love you,” I said as I jumped out of the car.

“I love you, too,” she said in her motherly voice before tearing out of the parking lot, off to clean the home of a rich landowner. I smiled as she left, utterly amazed at her work ethic and love for family.

Vip’s Big Boy was a popular restaurant with a friendly staff that started each day well before dawn. I walked into the bright dining area and took a seat at the counter. It would be another hour before Coach opened the gym, so I made good use of my time by doing homework.

“Marky, how’s Mom?” Rosa asked from behind the counter as I plowed into an geometry book.

“She’s fine,” I responded while trying to focus on a particularly tricky geometric equation. Rosa always asked about Mom as she gathered up my breakfast. Everyone knew my mother, and it was impossible *not* to; she was extremely sociable and knew everyone that remotely touched our lives. Mom always had the ability to make people feel loved; she draws them to her like a magnet. Within minutes of meeting her she’d ask what she could do for you and, by the end of the conversation, offer a solution. If you were cold she’d put her jacket around you, even if you were a stranger. It didn’t matter that she would go without; she simply couldn’t allow others to suffer. She devoted her life

to making other's lives better, even at the sacrifice of her own. Rosa's questions weren't small talk; she and the others thought of her as their mom, too, and they looked after me like family.

The diner was like a second home during wrestling season. My family was dealing with serious financial hardships due to my father's illness, and Mom worked three jobs in order to provide for my siblings and me. Mom's first job started before dawn, an hour before wrestling practice, and the only way I could attend practice was to wait outside the school for an hour until it opened. She simply would not have that, so one Saturday morning she walked me into the diner and asked to speak with the owner. He, like everyone else, was immediately charmed by her humility and willingness to solve a family dilemma. He listened for a short time, then interrupted her by putting his arm around her 4' 11" frame and offered a solution. The arrangement was simple; he'd let me in the diner each morning and provide a meal for a nominal cost as the staff prepared the restaurant for business.

It was the way she solved all her problems: Honestly explain the situation to those in the community and then ask for help. "Marky," she'd say, "don't be afraid to ask for help. People want to help. You just have to let them know how." This lesson would resonate throughout my life.

I started many school days in that diner even when the season had ended. Those drives with Mom taught me a lot about personal pride and the differences between self-esteem and arrogance, and the interaction with diner staff taught me about the inherent goodness in people.

MOM

Mom grew up during the 1930s and '40s experiencing the effects the Great Depression had on both sides of the border. She was raised in

Matamoros, Mexico, and Brownsville, Texas, the youngest of a very large Mexican family. It was a tumultuous time for a region experiencing the terrible effects of the Depression and heightened racial tensions due to the various ethnicities competing for work. Instead of becoming bitter and untrusting, Mom and her siblings were taught the value of family and religion during trying times, and it was those lessons of unity, commitment, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice that she'd later instill in each of us.

I distinctly remember one story that emphasized her point. At the time Mom was working as a maid for a large hotel chain, and one of her bosses treated the laborers with contempt, especially the cleaning crew. Instead of becoming angry with him like some of the others, she waited for the right opportunity to speak with the man in private. She explained how she and the cleaning staff took pride in the quality of their work, not in the type of work they did for the company. It took time and persistence, but eventually her message sank in. By the end of the year he was their most ardent supporter.

Mom's dedication to hard work and caring for others wasn't anything new. Since childhood she always held a job and balanced it with service in the church and community. Even in her eighties she still insists on working and taking care of those in need.

Back then, Mom would start her day as a personal maid for the wealthy, then head home for dinner with the family before leaving to clean offices until late at night. Housekeeping was her life's work.

Ironically, our home looked like a hoarder's paradise, at least to outsiders. In reality, the "junk," as Mom jokingly called it, was a meticulously inventoried collection of clothes, housewares, canned food, and anything else she felt our family or friends might need. It started with her collecting the obvious items, jackets and gloves, but over time, and as our financial situation deteriorated, she expanded her collection to include every type of necessity, taking full advantage of closeouts, garage sales, and the generosity of others. Everything from blankets

to school paper was cataloged, organized, and placed in a closet or a makeshift cardboard cabinet. If something was needed I guarantee Mom would be able to pull it from the rubble, which is what the rest of us called it, in a matter of minutes.

It wasn't like she was suddenly afflicted with some pathological condition that drove her to retain useless or sentimental items. Rather, it was a reasonable reaction to our circumstances based on her experiences during her youth and my dad's health; perhaps a primitive survival instinct to provide for the family. Still, I was ashamed and embarrassed when a stranger came to our home. They must have thought we were all a bit nuts, and perhaps we were, but our house wasn't a manifestation of mental derangement. It was a means of our survival, and had been for years.

DAD

Dad was a gringo born to parents that neglected him. At age seventeen, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and never looked back. He worked hard and rose through the ranks, eventually attaining the rank of chief warrant officer. After retiring from the military, Dad placed the family savings into a small gas station he was sure it would allow him to enjoy a simpler life being his own boss. What he didn't count on was the Middle Eastern oil restrictions and governmental regulations that threw the country into an oil and gas crisis. To make matters worse, even though the shop was in a rough neighborhood, Dad insisted on living close by in order to spend as much time with the family as possible, a luxury he never had in the military. Instead of making a quick trip home for lunch, though, he spent more time away dealing with the break-ins, vandalism, and robberies that seemed to occur on a weekly basis. The economy was in a free fall, and major oil companies were shutting out independent dealers like Dad. It didn't take long before

the business went under, leaving him searching for work during a time of high unemployment and financial uncertainty.

In just a few years Dad went from being an army officer to being an unemployed veteran in a recession. His decision to leave the military to become a businessman had given him little time to plan for life's contingencies, and he didn't have the coping mechanisms to adapt. I believe it was this loss in status and a return to the same impecunious life he knew during his early years that escalated psychological problems that began in his youth and intensified over his military career.

In an effort to quell his inner demons Dad reached for the bottle. Of course, no one outside the home knew anything about Dad's problem. He was a master at hiding his drinking from the outside world—so good at it, in fact, that he finally landed a job in corporate collections and began to climb the company ladder. Shortly after, he decided to move us to the Heights, an upper-middle-class neighborhood on the good side of town. I suppose buying a house on the right side of the tracks was his way of making it up to us after struggling for so long.

In his heart, he believed he was giving us the opportunity to succeed, however, Mom saw it differently. She understood that fights, teen pregnancy, and gangs were realities of Albuquerque, and our ability to reject temptations was the key to our survival. For Mom the ability to counter these entrapments wasn't based on a geographic location but on how involved she and Dad were in our daily lives. That meant spending time together as a family and not working extra hours or a second job to live in a neighborhood we couldn't afford. In hindsight I am sure Dad wished he'd listened. Instead he was committed to moving the family, so he went to work trying to convince Mom, and himself, that everything would work out fine. While Mom ended up being supportive, she definitely wasn't secure with the decision, and she was right.

Mom had a sixth sense for cause and effect in our family and could predict with shocking accuracy the consequences of our family's individ-

ual and collective actions. I believe she has a direct connection with the Almighty, and he speaks to her on such matters. In this case the Good Lord was right. Just as Mom predicted, the move would serve as a catalyst for breaking the family apart; despite her objections, Dad moved us anyway, miles away from the crime-ridden streets and underperforming schools.

Over the next couple of years, the family started to fall apart. The effects of Dad's alcohol were magnified, and, quick to anger, he might erupt into a fit of violence. At first Mom would stand in front trying to protect us, but her small frame hardly stood a chance. Then Dad wrecked the company car in a drunken stupor, the first of several DWI accidents that would eventually leave him permanently disabled and unable to work. Feelings of inadequacy continued to build inside until all he knew was hate. Refusing to abandon him with a divorce, Mom rented a small apartment for him across town so that she could care for him without continuing to put her children at risk.

Strangely, Dad's absence from the home hurt all of us, but Dad's decline was hardest on Michael.

MICHAEL

Michael was my older brother and my greatest protector. In our youth he helped Mom look after my sisters and me, but as we grew older he took a much more hands-on approach. Tall, thin, and shy, he was an easy target for schoolyard bullies and Mexican gangs, but as he matured and used the weight room to release anger, his body began to develop into a hulking figure. Unfortunately, without Mom and Dad's direct involvement in his life, his naïveté allowed others to influence his decisions, and his judgment began to slip.

As early as I can remember, Michael was enamored with Dad's military service. He and I would play soldier with his army equipment

and reenact key battles with toy soldiers. But where I was concerned about the types of gear the men carried, Michael concentrated on the circumstances that caused the battle. Dad was an ardent history buff and patriot who would spend hours explaining America's history, and Michael ate it up. Dad spent every spare moment discussing American history or visiting museums with us; narrating the past had become his way of nurturing. Considering Dad had no interaction with his own parents, and therefore no parenting model, his history lessons proved remarkably effective with Michael. The themes of Dad's stories of history and life were honor and loyalty, and it was just those values that influenced Michael to put aside his dream of serving in the Ranger Battalions to support the family after Dad's decline.

Mom tried to stop him, but his mind was made up. "No, Michael, you don't need to worry about me."

"Mom, I'm not going to let you work more and more hours when I can make money at the construction yard." Michael raised his voice, as if raising his voice were going to make a difference with Mom.

"No, Michael, we'll get by. We'll ask for help, just until you get through school."

"Mom, no one should help us when we have the ability to help ourselves," he declared. His voice shifted to a softer tone. "You raised me better than that. You tell us all the time the difference between a hand-out and help is the effort those in need put into the solution. I can do this."

I heard Mom reluctantly agree through tears, but what else could she do? Things were falling apart, and she knew we couldn't survive this way much longer. She also knew that her role as teacher and loving parent would diminish the second Michael took a job in the adult world; others would influence his life, and that's hard for any parent.

Dad's internal pain and alcohol abuse had transformed him from a loving parent to a violent brute, and through the years, Michael and my eldest sister were often at the receiving end of his rage. I remember com-

ing home and finding my brother's blood on the floor and walls as he stood protecting our mother or simply absorbing the anger before my sister and I arrived home. At first Michael had no ability to counter the blows, but as he grew into a streetwise young man weighing 200 pounds, he could better defend himself. Still, he couldn't raise a fist to the one man from whom he so desperately wanted approval, so each week he'd take a beating for the rest of us. Over time the effects changed him from a friendly and innocent teen to an introverted and indignant man who locked himself in his room, which he began to call "the dungeon."

The dungeon wouldn't shelter Michael from a family tragedy that would soon shake us all to the core.

SISTERS

My oldest sister, Diana, married a serviceman at a very young age and left the house when I was in my early teens. Today we're close, but as a youth maturing into a man, I only saw her sparingly and of course on holidays.

I was much closer to Cassandra, who was my older sister by four years, a sweet and intelligent girl with a promising academic future. She got top grades in high school and earned a scholarship to a small Christian school back east, thirteen hours from Albuquerque.

During the spring of my sophomore year, the chaos at home had calmed, until a fateful day when Mom received a call from Cassandra's school. "Something" had happened to Cassandra in her dorm, and she was in a serious crisis. I arrived home from wrestling practice to find Mom and Michael packing frantically for the cross-country journey to Cassandra's school. An hour later they left with little ceremony, both frightened and desperately concerned for Cassandra.

I was left alone with no money, expected to care for myself and still make it to school and wrestling practice on time. Mom was cleaning

buildings at night to cover the expenses of Dad's apartment, and I was expected to assume those janitorial duties as well. All of this at age fourteen. I tell you this not to elicit sympathy but to illustrate the expectations I faced as a young man. My mother's *find a way to get it done* attitude, I firmly believe, built a foundation in my psyche that would later prove invaluable in my special operations career.

Cassandra returned home with Mom and Michael and was exhibiting symptoms of acute schizophrenia. It's impossible to say if the illness existed in her early teens or if the traumatic event at college triggered it. Regardless of the impetus, she was in desperate shape and suffered terrible hallucinations; she claimed to be Jesus on several occasions and the president of the United States of America on others. She saw biblical scriptures flowing from the stucco walls and engaged in conversations with imaginary persons that were very real to her. None of us was equipped to deal with Cassandra's illness, especially Dad, who exiled himself from the rest of us as a means to cope with his daughter's condition. This, of course, led to more anger at everyone but himself and more chaos at home. I did my best to concentrate on academics and sports, and Mom did her best to keep the family intact. Yet we knew the family was falling apart, and my chances at a decent life in Albuquerque were fading away.

COACH SPARAGO

For me, wrestling was more than an athletic endeavor. It was a lifestyle that embodied every aspect of physical and psychological conditioning, and I believe it's one of the main reasons I made it through SEAL training. Coach Sparago was a big influence and encourager and pushed me to meet my goals, both academically and on the mat. Although I never told him I had troubles at home, I think he sensed it and concentrated on teaching me how to stay focused on both school and sports. Later,

when Mother Nature forced me into a weight class with one of my best friends, who just happened to be city champion, Coach was there to remind me what the sport, like life, was really about.

“Mark,” he said pulling me aside, “you may have to move up in a weight class and wrestle kids bigger than you, but that doesn’t make you less competitive. It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, it’s the size of the fight in the dog.” He paused to see if his point was sinking in. He often used clichés but spoke with such sincerity that the point hit home every time.

“I want you to be competitive at everything you do. If you’re on a conditioning run, try to be the first one in. If you’re in the classroom, try for the best grade in the class. Heck, if you get up to sharpen your pencil, try and make it the sharpest pencil in the room. You’ll never be the best at everything, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be the best at something. Just don’t quit trying to get there!”

I absorbed his advice and tried to incorporate it in all aspects of my life, including my choices during military service.

STAFF SERGEANT SANDOVAL

I first met Staff Sergeant Sandoval in the main hallway at the high school. He stood next to a folding table covered with recruiting materials, and he looked damn sharp in his dress blues. He was smart and personable, a good combination for a recruiter. He saw me walking by and mentioned my wrestling shirt, which led to a conversation about the sport and my love for it. He didn’t even mention the marines that day, although he made a big impression on me.

Not as big as the next time I saw him, though. It was two weeks later, and I was wrestling in a regional tournament at the high school. Staff Sergeant Sandoval showed up and greeted me by name. He had driven all the way out to the school to watch me wrestle, and frankly,

I was stunned. Yes, I know, it was probably a recruiting ploy, but he was *there*, and aside from Mom, who made every match, even if it was on her way to one of her three jobs, no one really cared about my wrestling career.

A week later, I found myself in the staff sergeant's office, and a week after that, I broke the news to Mom that I wanted to be a marine. It's important to understand Mom's position in all of this. She saw how the military affected my father, and she was scared witless the same thing would happen to me. On the other hand, she also knew the military would take me away from the streets of Albuquerque and the stresses at home and would present opportunities that would allow me to succeed on my own. I relayed Mom's concerns to Staff Sergeant Sandoval, so he invited Mom and me to the office for a chat. Upon arrival, we were introduced to his parents, who both happened to be deaf. He spoke sign language to his parents and fluent Spanish to Mom, which of course melted her on the spot. We visited for two hours, and Mom began to admit this might be good for her "mijo" but was still unable to let go. Staff Sergeant Sandoval listened politely, fully grasping Mom's concerns; after all, he'd heard them many times before from other concerned mothers.

He crossed the room and sat next to Mom, then patted her hand and spoke gently. "Mrs. Donald, I understand you want to keep your boy close by. It's the way of our people." He then gestured to his mother and father. "My parents are right here; family is very important to me, too. But Mark is a smart young man with tremendous potential. Maybe he'll have a better chance of reaching that in uniform. Mark seems to think so."

"I understand, Sergeant, but he is my boy, and like you say, family is everything," she said. "This is very difficult for me."

Staff Sergeant Sandoval paused for a few seconds and then smiled. "I think I have an idea."

He then proposed a reserve contract and explained that as a Marine

Corps reservist, I would be a part-time marine, which meant I could stay in Albuquerque and drill on the weekends with a specialized unit. I would attend boot camp, of course, but otherwise serve as a reservist and live at home. Mom was amenable to the idea and agreed to meet again in a couple of weeks. I, however, had a hard time with the compromise. I wanted to enlist and get far away from Albuquerque, and the thought of returning to the same hell I was currently in didn't make me happy. Still, I wasn't going to leave without Mom's approval, so I met privately with Staff Sergeant Sandoval to discuss the options.

We met after practice at Vip's Big Boy, my early-morning sanctuary and study hall. Staff Sergeant Sandoval explained how reservists were expected to attend schools just like active-duty marines; not only that, they could also apply to join one of the United States Marine Corps Reconnaissance units, commonly known as Recon. He briefly explained the missions of Recon Marines, and the thought of being part of a secretive small unit that gathered intelligence and did cool-guy missions similar to those carried out by the Navy SEALs and the army's Special Forces really intrigued me—but there was a catch. First, the closest reserve Reconnaissance command was right here in Albuquerque. Second, I would eventually have to qualify as a Reconnaissance Marine, which meant passing a grueling training program; otherwise, I might have to drill with another unit. I didn't care for the idea of coming back home, but if I made it I could be spending many months and sometimes years in schools far away from here. I was in optimum shape at the time, so I couldn't imagine not being able to make the cut. That was it. My mind was set on joining the Corps, and I knew Mom would eventually come around, too. Another week passed, and we all met to discuss details.

Mom finally agreed, but with one requirement. As tears welled up in her eyes, she looked at Staff Sergeant Sandoval and said, "Staff Sergeant, my husband served over twenty years, and I know men in dress uniforms will visit me if something were to happen to my boy. So when

you come to take him away from me I deserve that same respect. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

Staff Sergeant Sandoval took her hand, looked her in the eye, and promised he did. To this day, I choke up thinking about that moment and the impact a mother feels hearing her child will be leaving her for the military.

It took a couple of months to finish school, fill out paperwork, visit MEPS (the Military Entrance Processing Station) for a medical exam, and button up the details of my enlistment, but the day finally came. We all watched as Staff Sergeant Sandoval pulled up to the house in the government sedan, exited the car, and walked to our door, in his United States Marine Corps dress blue uniform with his medals dangling. Mom opened the door, and the staff sergeant politely removed his hat and formally announced, “Mrs. Donald, I’m here for your son.”