



FEARLESS



The Undaunted Courage and Ultimate Sacrifice
of Navy SEAL Team SIX Operator Adam Brown

ERIC BLEHM

New York Times Best-Selling Author of *The Only Thing Worth Dying For*

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Some dates, locations, times, distances, and names (including those of some civilians) have been changed and military tactics, techniques, and procedures altered in order to maintain operational security for the safety of the U.S. Navy SEALs and those who work alongside them.

ISBN 978-0-307-73069-5
ISBN 978-0-307-73071-8 (electronic)

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr; cover image of Navy SEAL Trident: Corbis

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America
2012—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*This book is dedicated to the fallen American heroes killed
in action on August 6, 2011, in Wardak Province, Afghanistan.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Adam Brown's civilian and military life has been recounted to me by his family, friends, and teammates—all eyewitnesses to each event portrayed in this book, including what Adam told them directly about his history and spiritual testimony. I also used official documents, statements, military records and reports, criminal records, family archives, letters, e-mails, and journal and diary entries. Some dates, locations, times, distances, and names (including those of some civilians) have been changed and military tactics, techniques, and procedures altered in order to maintain operational security for the safety of the U.S. Navy SEALs and those who work alongside them.

All information about the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, the SEALs, and individuals (including the use of real names) has already been published widely by the media and is deemed common knowledge. Nearly a dozen active-duty SEAL operators—including those in leadership roles—have unofficially, but no less meticulously, reviewed this manuscript for factuality and to point out any issues that might endanger lives in future operations. I have removed or rewritten sections to their approval, and in the few cases of discrepancy among the operators, I went with the majority. Any vagueness in the manuscript is intentional, to protect these men and their allies.

All quotes, slang, inner thoughts, dialogue, and descriptions have been conveyed to me by those intimately involved in the story to the best of their ability and individual memories. Nothing has been contrived, dramatized, or fabricated.

What you are about to read is the account of an American hero who bravely gave permission in his final written requests to share his journey, from small-town America to the gutter to jail to Jesus to war to the top tier of the U.S. military: SEAL Team SIX.

Prologue



FROM MAY THROUGH JULY 2011, when it seemed that every journalist on the planet was scrambling to get an inside angle on the Osama bin Laden kill mission in Pakistan, I was making my way around the United States interviewing over a dozen U.S. Navy SEALs. Although most were from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group or, as the Obama administration announced to the world, SEAL Team SIX—the team that had taken out bin Laden—I was meeting with them for a different reason altogether.

I traveled from California to Pennsylvania to Alaska to Virginia to Arkansas, interviewing each of the SEALs for several hours. Although the mission of a lifetime that some had taken part in only days before was still on their minds, we weren't there to focus on bin Laden. They'd met with me, an outsider to their ranks, for something equally important and deeply personal to them: the family of one of their fallen SEAL brothers—Chief Special Warfare Operator Adam Brown—wanted his story told.

And if the world was to learn about Adam Brown, the SEALs wanted it done right. As one of the men, Thomas Ratzlaff, humbly said to me while we stood in the rain watching the muddy currents of the Copper River flow through the Alaskan wilderness, "Adam is the one SEAL from our command whose story absolutely deserves a book."

"When I first heard about Adam's past," Matt Mason said, looking out over the stormy Atlantic Ocean, "I didn't believe it. It was hard for me to wrap my mind around what he overcame, and how Kelley stood by his side."

"You need to tell the whole story," John Faas admonished me as we ate at a favorite restaurant of Adam's near the Virginia Beach boardwalk. "There are enough books that show how tough SEAL training is, there's enough Tom Clancy fiction. What

there isn't enough of is the humanity. When you start digging, you are going to find a whole lot of humanity in Adam Brown."

Slapping his hand against the desk in a small hotel room, Kevin Houston said, "You need to promise me: don't start this story at BUD/S—that is so cliché. You *have* to go to Hot Springs and tell those stories."

"Has anybody told you about his last mission?" Chris Campbell asked as he prepped his gear for a week of training in Alaska. "The whole purpose of that op was to protect our brothers, these conventional Army guys who were just getting pounded by this thug, that was the mission. But then within that, you've got what we do individually for our troop, and that's protect each other. That's what Adam was doing."

In back-to-back interviews, Brian Bill, "Big Bird" to Adam's children, explained how Adam made him want to be a better person and was the model of the father he himself hoped to be one day, while Heath Robinson said Adam was both fearless and compassionate on operations. Adam was the first to volunteer to go through that "black hole," a breached doorway into an enemy building; the first to help carry an Afghan's load; and the first to sit down and try to calm women and children after a raid.

For days I heard similar accounts from Adam's family, friends, and teammates—all of whom had one goal: to honor him by ensuring that his legend among the SEALs lived on.

Since many of the SEALs from Adam's squadron were about to embark on yet another rotation into Afghanistan, they wanted to speak with me sooner rather than later. As warriors, they were firmly grounded in the reality of their job.

"We're about to deploy," one of Adam's closest SEAL buddies said as we began our interview in June. "You never know what might happen—I could get killed on my next mission. I want to do Adam right, so let's get it done."

"Where would you like to start?" I asked him.

"Let's begin with March 17," he said. "Let's get that out of the way first."

Foundations



WHEN ADAM BROWN WOKE UP on March 17, 2010, he didn't know he would die that night in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan—but he was ready.

Seven thousand miles away, in a suburb of Virginia Beach, his ten-year-old son, Nathan, was worried about him. From the moment he'd opened his eyes that morning, he felt something bad was going to happen to his daddy, but he kept it to himself, rolled out of bed, and got ready for school. It was Saint Patrick's Day, and he made sure to wear something green so he wouldn't get pinched.

On a previous deployment, Adam had written in his journal to both Nathan and Savannah, Nathan's seven-year-old sister, a letter they weren't meant to see unless the worst happened:

I'm not afraid of anything that might happen to me on this Earth because I know no matter what, nothing can take my spirit from me... How much it pains me... to think about not watching my boy excel in life, or giving my little baby girl away in marriage... Buddy, I'll be there, you'll feel me there when you steal your first base, smash someone on the football field, make all A's. I'll be there for all of your achievements. But much more, Buddy, I'll be there for every failure. Remember, I know tears, I know pain and disappointment, and I will be there for you with every drop. You cannot disappoint me. I understand!

Adam Brown did understand what it meant to disappoint, to feel the shame he'd experienced on a hot, humid August afternoon years earlier when his parents had him arrested. "It's time for you to face what you've done," his father had told him in 1996,

just before Adam was handcuffed and escorted to the backseat of the Garland County sheriff's cruiser. When the deputy slammed the car door shut, Adam watched his mother's legs buckle, and as she collapsed, his dad caught her and held her tightly against him. She began to cry, and Adam knew he had broken her heart.

That vision—of his mother sobbing into his father's chest—would haunt him for the rest of his life, but it also sparked the journey that defined who he would become.

Officially known as a Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL), Adam Brown was one of the most respected Special Operations warriors in the U.S. Navy. He worked for the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG), a.k.a. DEVGRU. Before May 2011, details about Adam's unit—popularly called SEAL Team SIX—were neither confirmed nor commented on by the Pentagon and the White House. One night changed everything; the wave of publicity following Osama bin Laden's death thrust the little-known unit into the spotlight.

When Adam's team deployed to Operation Enduring Freedom in March 2010, the SEALs were spread across Afghanistan to cover a range of responsibilities dictated to them by the generals and admirals in charge of strategic operations. Adam and part of his team were stationed at an assaulters' base in a remote corner of northern Afghanistan. This region along the Pakistan border was still, after nearly eight and a half years of the War on Terror, a safe haven for Afghan insurgents, foreign jihadists, and terrorist cells—often working in concert. It was a land of high-value targets: raids in the region almost always resulted in fruitful intelligence, which led to further dismantling of the insurgency against the Afghan government and yielded more pieces to the puzzle that eventually revealed the whereabouts of bin Laden.

Since late 2009, intelligence networks had been tracking a Kunar Province Taliban leader—code-named Objective Lake James—who had already taken credit for numerous deaths among coalition forces. The most recent intelligence confirmed that "James" planned to attack a U.S. Army battalion preparing to relocate from its current position adjacent to the Pech River Valley. The valley was a deadly piece of real estate where insurgents could strike coalition forces and then retreat into their mountain strongholds—villages and valleys whose inhabitants, in many cases, had never seen an American. There were lines on the map beyond which the insurgents knew they would not be pursued.

That was about to change. Intelligence pinpointed James's current location, a compound in a secluded village in the mountainous Chapa Dara district of Kunar

Province. Even though this particular hamlet was a *way-over-the-line* safe haven for insurgents, Adam and his teammates began planning to either capture or kill James.

First they viewed images of the compound. Confirming details of the landscape and structures was always difficult until the SEALs were on the ground, but the target residence didn't appear any more problematic than the hundreds of other compounds they'd raided during multiple deployments. Further surveillance of the valley revealed men armed with rifles, mostly AK-47s, as well as light machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. The men in the photographs were of fighting age, which in the past had meant men with beards. Lately, however, so as to better their chances of escape, the insurgents and jihadists had begun shaving to appear younger and were even donning burkas to disguise themselves as women. So it was difficult to accurately determine overall enemy numbers.

In the target compound, roughly five males, six females, and six children were present at various times of day. James and his men were expected to fight rather than be captured, so the civilians complicated the raid. History had shown that this enemy used both women and children freely as human shields, but the SEALs were trained to handle these scenarios.

What made Objective Lake James one of the three most difficult (described by Command as "audacious") missions in the war up to then were two facts. Located in a narrow valley deep within wooded mountains, the objective was surrounded by enemy who had chiseled their homes into formidable, often terraced slopes and rocky cliff faces. This meant the SEALs could not fly in, land or fast rope near the target, perform their mission, and fly out—their usual *modus operandi*. They would have to infiltrate by foot a great distance over extremely difficult enemy-occupied terrain, hit their target, and hike out to the helicopter landing zone (HLZ).

Adam and his team were prepared to do whatever it took not to alert the village or the rest of the valley's residents. That meant staying as quiet as possible and using suppressed weapons or knives to kill or capture the targeted individual. Once they had completed their task, they would search the premises for intelligence and detain the civilians. If doors did need to be blown open or the enemy fought back, the entire valley would hear and come out with weapons blazing, and it would be a battle all the way to the HLZ—a thirty- to sixty-minute hike. The SEALs knew that length of time under fire would feel like an eternity.

An easier way to take out James and his men would have been to drop a bomb, but that was not an option because of the women and children in the compound and the families in adjacent homes. This had to be a surgical strike, aimed at one insurgent and his cell of fighters who, if not eliminated by Adam's team, would continue to attack American or coalition forces.

That much was certain.

While prepping his equipment for the mission, Adam folded the Arkansas flag his brother, Shawn, had given him. He always carried it into battle, tucking it proudly between his body armor and his uniform.

Every SEAL who encountered Adam Brown knew in short order where he was from. He loved his home state right down to the dirt. "It is the one state in our country that can sustain itself," he'd tell you while explaining his Arkansas Bubble Theory. "Y'all could put a bubble over it, cut us off from importing anything from the rest of the world, and we would not only survive, we would eat well and prosper."

The one thing Arkansas doesn't have is an ocean, and when Adam entered the U.S. Navy's grueling twenty-seven-week Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training course in 1999, he'd swum in the sea only a handful of times. At the beginning of BUD/S, an instructor had told his class, "The reputation you forge here will follow you to the teams. Your reputation here will define you."

Adam's reputation certainly did define him, but the stories that made him a legend began long before BUD/S in the southern proving grounds of Hot Springs, Arkansas. That was where he earned the nickname Psycho for taking on the biggest players on his peewee football team, where he boldly faced a loaded shotgun, where he jumped from a moving vehicle off an interstate bridge into a lake, where he saved a life, eluded capture, and performed his first nighttime raids. Says Adam's high school football coach, Steve Anderson, "He did things a Navy SEAL would do long before he was a SEAL."

His reputation continued among his SEAL buddies in DEVGRU. "He didn't have a 'fear bone' in his body," says Kevin Houston. "Tough as nails" is the way Brian Bill describes Adam. Heath Robinson likens him to a bored-out engine without a regulator: "He was a machine, wide open in everything he did—full throttle." With that mindset came injuries, but according to Dave Cain, a SEAL who was there when

Adam's fingers were severed in Afghanistan, "He could endure pain better than anybody I've ever known...if he felt it at all."

In truth, Adam did feel pain—lots of it. He was just incredibly determined and resilient, a toughness that began at birth. "He came out injured," says his mother, Janice. According to his father, Larry, Adam was ready to be born three minutes after his twin sister, Manda, when "the doctor discovered he was breech. So they had to dislocate his shoulder in order to get him out."

"He barely cried," says Janice. "The doctor put his shoulder back in place, and while Manda was still crying after coming into this cold and bright new world, little Adam was quiet, sort of curious, looking around, like he was saying, 'Okay, what *else* you got for me?'"

Adam Lee Brown was born on February 5, 1974, in Hot Springs, Arkansas. His father, Larry, had grown up there, the second of six children in a blue-collar Baptist family that went to church on Wednesday night and twice on Sunday. Larry's father, Elmer, was a World War II veteran who drove a truck for an oil company, a business he ran for months when the owner was out with a serious illness. Larry told his father that he should insist on a raise, but Elmer replied that it would be taking advantage of an unfortunate situation.

"It wouldn't be right," Elmer said when his family gathered around the dinner table one night, "and you do what's right, no matter what." Then he reminded them, "God is watching us, all the time."

Once dinner wrapped up each weeknight, Larry's mother, Rosa, would rush off to the night shift at a nearby shoe factory, coming home in time to make breakfast and send Elmer off to work. Larry began contributing to the family coin jar in elementary school with a paper route, and later, as a teen, he baled hay in the summer and worked in chicken houses year-round. He attended Hot Springs High School—in the same class as future Arkansas governor and U.S. president Bill Clinton, though they didn't know each other. During his campaigns, when Clinton talked about the character-building life of hard-working Arkansans, Larry knew firsthand what that meant. His junior and senior years in high school, he washed logging trucks on the weekends and the other five days worked three to eight in the morning at a doughnut shop, finishing the shift with just enough time to run to school.

It was a hard life, but the siblings were tight, the parents loving, and as a family, they were content—never wanting for anything, even though they didn't have much to speak of. "You gotta do what you gotta do," Elmer would tell Larry, "and when you're done, you'll be stronger for it."

After high school Larry became an electrician's apprentice, and a year later he began dating Janice Smith, a high school senior who had grown up only a few blocks away but with a very different family situation. She never knew her father and was raised mostly by her maternal grandparents instead of her mother, who had to work two jobs in order to support her three children. The situation didn't really bother Janice, though. She loved her grandparents dearly and respected their values, one of which was "Always do the right thing."

As she grew older, Janice realized that her mother's priorities centered around money. Even though it was out of necessity, it still "didn't feel right." Following her heart did, and she eloped with Larry Brown her senior year.

Their relationship was all about fun and young love, but Janice knew she wanted a family someday. Larry was already working hard to be a provider, making money as an electrician and attending night school in Little Rock to earn his license so he could join the union.

His maturity did little to endear him to Janice's mother or grandparents, however, who didn't like the idea of Janice being married while still in high school and who persuaded her to have the marriage annulled. They broke up, and within a week a heartbroken Larry was notified that he was a potential draftee for Vietnam. He didn't wait to be drafted, so he went to visit the recruiting office in downtown Hot Springs and chose the Navy, whose signals intelligence and radio operator schools seemed most in line with his work as an electrician. Also, everybody he knew, including his father, an infantryman who helped hold the line at Bastogne in World War II, advised him to stay off the ground.

He and Janice wrote back and forth while he was in boot camp, and when she closed a letter with "Love ya," he proposed again. This time they were married in the backyard garden of her grandparents' home. He was twenty; she was nineteen. After the wedding they drove to Florida and moved into a trailer near Naval Air Station Jacksonville, where Larry was based.

He was ordered to war as a radioman on a P3 bomber that patrolled the coastal waters of Vietnam, eavesdropping on and hunting Chinese submarines and other enemy watercraft. Returning home from his tour in time for the arrival of their first child, Larry Shawn Brown, on December 13, 1968, he deployed again less than a year later. He didn't see much action, but he did see the shell shocked, the wounded, and the body bags as they passed through his air base en route to hospitals or home. He also watched small teams depart for secret missions—elite volunteers from the Army Special Forces, Air Force Commandos, and Navy SEALs, all operating in the dark and dangerous jungle and its waterways.

When Larry flew his missions, he imagined what the men “submerged” in the jungle below were facing. He held them in the highest regard, and he thought of them every night when he ate a warm meal and crawled into a dry bed.

Once Larry completed his four years of service, he put the war behind him and moved with Janice from Florida back to Hot Springs, finished his electrician's apprenticeship, and began working for a local contractor. Determined to provide for his family without Janice having to work, Larry earned enough so they could save a little money each month. After three years of frugal living, they had scraped together the down payment on a thirty-thousand-dollar starter house in a subdivision two hundred yards from Lake Hamilton. It wasn't large, maybe fifteen hundred square feet, but following nearly a decade of tiny apartments and trailers, it felt like a mansion—the perfect home in which to expand their family.

A month before the due date of their second child, the doctor gave Janice some startling news.

“Mrs. Brown,” he said with a smile, “there's a little something extra I failed to notice before.”

“Extra? Like what?” Janice asked.

“Extra, like an extra baby. You're having twins, ma'am.”

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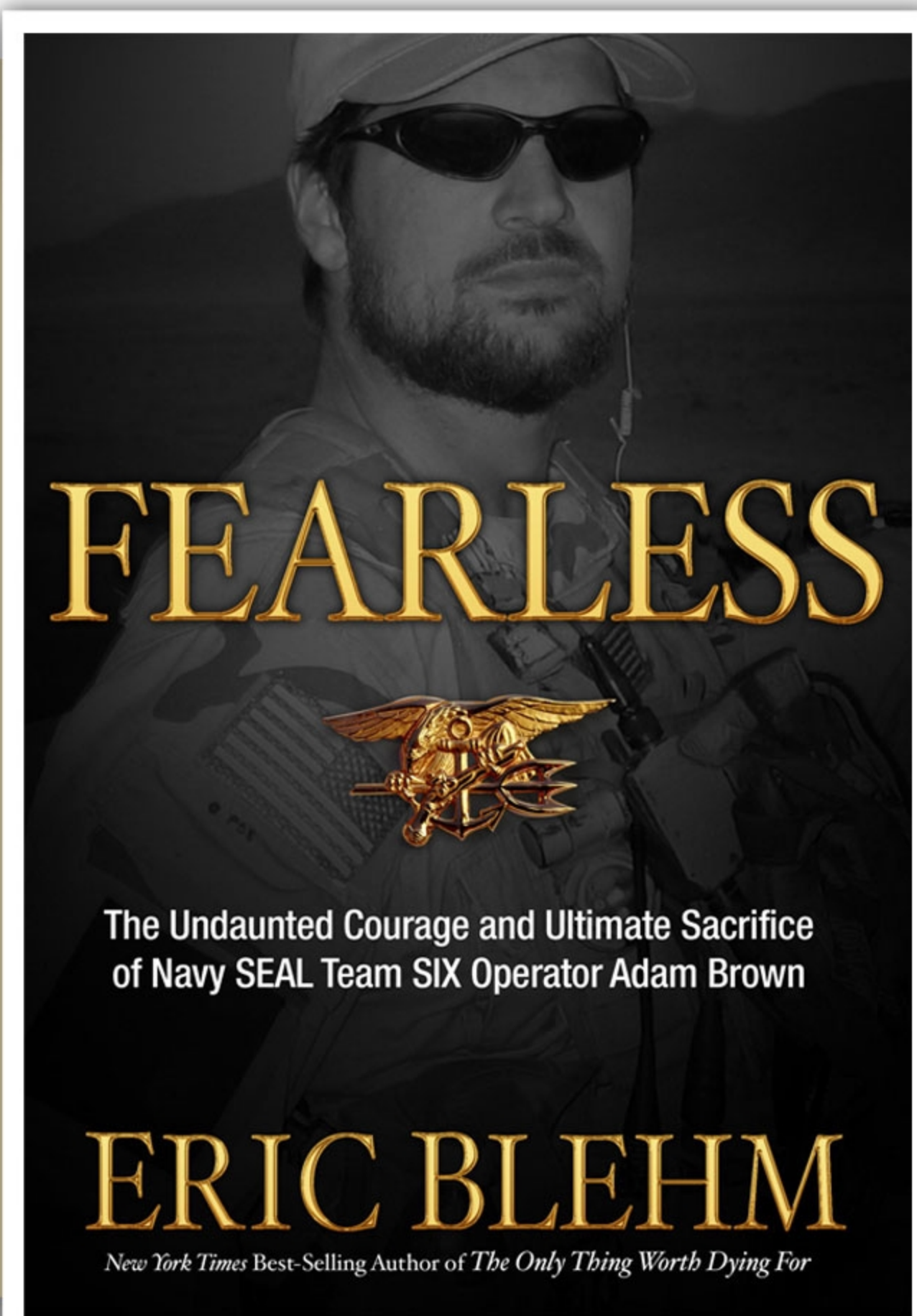
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