

**THE RED CIRCLE: MY LIFE IN THE NAVY SEAL SNIPER
CORPS AND HOW I TRAINED AMERICA'S DEADLIEST
MARKSMEN¹**

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*Whatever it is that you do, you are making a stand,
either for excellence or for mediocrity. This is what I
learned about being a Navy SEAL: it is all about
excellence, and about never giving up on yourself. And
that is the red circle I will continue to hold, no matter
what.*³

I. Introduction

In October 2013, Sony Pictures released a movie based on the true story of U.S. merchant captain Richard Phillips who was held hostage by Somali pirates and later rescued by Navy SEALs in April 2009.⁴ Though the movie focuses on Phillips as the main character, it depicts the extraordinary abilities of the SEAL snipers who shot the three Somali pirates on rolling seas more than 100 feet away with only three shots from another vessel at sea.⁵ How does one train to become a SEAL sniper with such deadly accuracy? Brandon Webb, a former Navy SEAL sniper course manager, reveals the making of a SEAL sniper in his personal memoir, *The Red Circle*.

Inspired by Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture*, a YouTube video with over sixteen million hits, Webb writes this autobiography in a similar fashion as Pausch's lecture: documenting his life and extrapolating

¹ BRANDON WEBB, *THE RED CIRCLE* (2012).

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³ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 380.

⁴ Sony Pictures, *About, CAPTAIN PHILLIPS*, <http://www.captainphillipsmovie.com/site/#about> (last visited Sept. 10, 2013).

⁵ *Id.*; Robert D. McFadden & Scott Shane, *In Rescue of Captain, Navy Kills 3 Pirates*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 12, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/13/world/africa/pirates.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

lessons learned with a “head fake.”⁶ Readers will find the book enjoyable and credible. Though the author overstates his assertion on asymmetrical warfare, Webb successfully impresses the importance of excellence in one’s life and imparts valuable leadership lessons to the military reader. The book is worth the read for military professionals who may be inspired to seek excellence and to learn leadership principles.

II. Readable and Credible Memoir

Brandon Webb served as a Navy SEAL from 1998 to 2006, achieving the rank of chief petty officer.⁷ As the SEAL sniper course manager, he trained the SEAL sniper Chris Kyle, who had over 150 confirmed kills in action, and Marcus Luttrell, the bestselling author of *Lone Survivor*, who credits Webb for saving his life by training him how to stalk.⁸ Ever since the SEALs caught the public’s attention,⁹ Webb has become a media expert on SEALs.¹⁰ He is the editor-in-chief of

⁶ Brandon Webb, *Books*, BRANDON WEBB, <http://www.brandontylerwebb.com/books/> (last visited Sept. 7, 2013) (“My desire to write *The Red Circle* was originally inspired by ‘*The Last Lecture*’ by Randy Pausch and his dedication to his own family.”). After being declared terminally ill, Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon professor, gave his last lecture on how he achieved his childhood dreams, extrapolating his wisdoms on how to do the same. CarnegieMellonU, *Randy Pausch Last Lecture: Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*, YOUTUBE (Dec. 20, 2007), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo. Though a valuable lecture for the attendees, the lecture was Pausch’s “head fake” to document his life and pass on his wisdom to his children. *Id.* (referring to “head fake” as a teaching method to teach people materials without having them realize what they are learning until well into the teaching). *Id.*; RANDY PAUSCH, *THE LAST LECTURE* 39 (2008).

⁷ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 142–44 (becoming Navy SEAL in 1998), 361 (promoted to chief petty officer, E-7), 374 (leaving the service in July 2006).

⁸ *Id.* at 362–65 (Chris Kyle), 365–69 (Marcus Luttrell) (quoting Luttrell, “‘Brandon, listen. You need to know, that stalking course? That saved my life. If you hadn’t pounded that training into me, I wouldn’t be standing here today’”).

⁹ See McFadden & Shane, *supra* note 5; Peter Baker et al., *Bin Laden is Dead*, *Obama Says*, N.Y. TIMES, May 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/asia/osama-bin-laden-is-killed.html?pagewanted=all>. This publicity has raised concern over the Navy SEALs’ overexposure. See generally Huma Khan & Luis Martinez, *Navy SEAL Commander Advised to ‘Get the Hell Out of the Media,’* ABCNEWS (Feb. 7, 2012, 3:42 PM), <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/02/navy-seal-commander-advised-to-get-the-hell-out-of-the-media/>.

¹⁰ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 377–78 (depicting media seeking insights when Navy SEAL rescued a U.S. merchant captain from Somali pirates in 2009 and when the unit killed Osama bin Laden in 2011).

SOFREP.com¹¹ and has co-authored books on Navy SEAL snipers and the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.¹² Unlike his other books, *The Red Circle* is about Webb's personal life. Because of his writing style and organization, the book is quite readable with few distractions.

As a first-person narrative, the book is entertaining and a quick read. The author uses informal prose, skillfully interweaving his recollection of events with his thoughts and perspectives. Like other autobiographies written by former Navy SEALs, the book contains the genre's common elements: the difficulty of becoming a SEAL¹³ and the vivid account of one's deployment experience.¹⁴ Despite the numerous naval and sniper terms and concepts, Webb explains them with sufficient detail that a novice can understand and appreciate the SEAL operator's extraordinary abilities and toughness.¹⁵

Chronologically organized, the book is simple to follow and digest. It covers the author's life from his early childhood to his life in the private sector.¹⁶ The author does, however, deviate from the chronological organization once—the hook. He starts his introduction

¹¹ The website informs the public about the activities of U.S. and coalition special operations units. *SOFREP Explained*, SOFREP, <http://sofrep.com/about-sofrep-com/> (last visited Sept. 8, 2013).

¹² Webb, *supra* note 6.

¹³ Compare WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 89–128 (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training), 131–44 (SEAL tactical training and receipt of the SEAL “Trident” badge), 168–205 (SEAL sniper course), with MARCUS LUTTRELL, *LONE SURVIVOR* 79–107 (pre-BUD/S training), 108–51 (BUD/S training), 151–59 (SEAL qualification training (SQT) and SEAL sniper course) (2007), and CHRIS KYLE, *AMERICAN SNIPER* 29–50 (BUD/S training), 50–53 (SQT), 128–43 (SEAL sniper course) (2012).

¹⁴ Compare WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 207–15 (guarding USS *Cole*), 228–40 (interdicting “terrorist transport boat”), 254–92 (sensitive site exploitation of Zhawar Kili), 293–316 (combined special operations with German and Danish special operations units), with LUTTRELL, *supra* note 13, at 160–348 (Operation Redwing and his survival), and KYLE, *supra* note 13, at 80–87 (boarding and searching ships for SCUDs), 92–122 (first deployment to Iraq), 156–264 (second deployment to Iraq as sniper), 294–398 (third deployment to Iraq).

¹⁵ See, e.g., WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 56–58 (Navy “A” school), 69 (thermocline), 151–54 (various SEAL trainings), 180–84 (sniper shooting techniques: keep-in-memory, ballistics, and spotting), 197–202 (sniper stalking techniques: dead space and stalking), 348–53 (mental management).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 9–38 (from his parents' background to his decision to join the Navy), 39–68 (his boot camp experience), 69–88 (his experience as Navy's search and rescue swimmer), 89–206 (training to become a Navy SEAL and SEAL sniper), 207–26 (pre-9/11 SEAL deployment), 227–327 (post-9/11 SEAL deployment), 328–69 (SEAL sniper course instructor/manager), 370–80 (life after leaving active duty).

with an event from his deployment to Afghanistan that gleams both his amazing skill as a SEAL sniper and his admirable humanity.

Near the caves of Zhawar Kili, Webb and his teammates encounter a superior Taliban force. Without heavy weapons or a range finder, Webb estimates the enemy's coordinates using a sniper technique of range estimation; he then calls in an airstrike so close that his team have to open their mouths to prevent their lungs from bursting. During the airstrike, he hears a baby cry from the impact area and is immediately troubled, sympathizing with the parent who will no longer hold that baby.¹⁷

This vivid account elegantly juxtaposes seemingly contradictory qualities of a SEAL: the extraordinary skill and bravery to kill the superior enemy force without remorse and the ability to feel the human frailty.¹⁸ It piques the reader's curiosity as to how one becomes a SEAL sniper while retaining one's humanity. Either for expedience or lack of effort, Webb chooses to repeat the same story word-for-word later in the book, which is distracting but not fatal.¹⁹

In addition to this hook, Webb uses a form of foreshadowing throughout his book: he hints that a certain individual, information, or event will appear later with a significant impact or connection to him.²⁰ For example, Webb describes his platoon's conflict with two Air Force combat controllers and then hints that this conflict will result in his downgraded award and his platoon member's early release from theater.²¹ This technique spurs readers to read further with interest.

Despite the lack of footnotes or endnotes and the disclaimer that "some details" were altered or modified,²² the events in the book remain credible in light of the author's established credentials as a former

¹⁷ *Id.* at 1–4 (depicting how the author's "stomach twisted" when he heard the baby cry).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 5 ("[L]iving 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.").

¹⁹ Compare *id.* at 1–4 (introduction), with *id.* at 268–72 (chapter nine).

²⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 70 (stating, "[a] few years later I would use [thermoclines] to my advantage in a most unexpected circumstances"), 157–58 (using thermoclines to avoid dolphins trained to detect intruders).

²¹ *Id.* at 245–46 ("Months down the road, this would come back to bite us. It planted a seed of resentment that ended up costing me a medal and getting Osman sent home.").

²² *Id.* author's note.

SEAL; SEAL peers' acceptance of his work; the photographs Webb includes; and outside some sources confirming his recitation of events.²³

Webb delivers a well-organized, entertaining memoir but overstretches when he concludes from his experience that the “age of asymmetrical warfare” has arrived and how it propelled the special operations to the center of U.S. military strategy.²⁴ Unfortunately, the reader will find Webb's rationale falling short and will prefer him to focus on his personal stories and lessons gleaned.

III. Asymmetrical Warfare

Webb asserts that the attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000 radically changed the “fundamental nature of military strategy,” signaling the age of a new kind of war—“asymmetrical warfare”—and that the special operations is now at the “core” of military strategy.²⁵ Without defining “asymmetrical warfare,” Webb supports his assertion somewhat adequately based on his observation that the enemy is a decentralized group of nonaffiliated terrorists and that conventional forces are in the support role for the special operations units.²⁶ Though plausible, he goes too far in his declaration.

There is no dispute that the attack on the USS *Cole* was an example of asymmetric warfare, defined as “the use of unconventional tactics to counter the overwhelming conventional military superiority of an adversary.”²⁷ Such warfare, however, is not new. In his book, *Invisible*

²³ See *supra* notes 9–10, 12–14 and accompanying text (Webb's credibility); Marcus Luttrell, *Foreword* to WEBB, *supra* note 1 (peer's acceptance); *Id.* back cover (endorsements by former SEALs, Chris Kyle and Howard E. Wasdin), photograph sec. (providing thirty-nine photos depicting Webb's accounts in the book); Dwight Jon Zimmerman, *Task Force K-Bar—Special Operations Forces and Operation Enduring Freedom*, DEFENSEMEDIANETWORK (Sept. 19, 2011), <http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/operation-enduring-freedom-the-first-49-days-6/> (depicting SEAL recon mission into Zhawar Kili in Jan. 2002); see also *Navy SEALs in Operation Enduring Freedom*, SPECIAL OPERATIONS.COM, <http://www.specialoperations.com/Navy/SEALs/OEF.html> (last visited Sept. 9, 2013).

²⁴ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 5, 217.

²⁵ *Id.* at 5–6, 217–18 (“It was a new kind of war. . .”).

²⁶ *Id.* at 217–18.

²⁷ “Asymmetric Warfare,” *The USS Cole, and the Intifada*, 12 ESTIMATE, no. 22, Nov. 3, 2000, available at <http://www.theestimate.com/public/110300.html> (“[T]he attacks on the Cole . . . serve . . . as object lessons on what military theorists call ‘asymmetric warfare.’”).

Armies, Max Boot concludes that asymmetric warfare, “a resort of the weak against the strong,” has existed since mankind conducted wars.²⁸ Boot also shows that the United States has faced asymmetric warfare throughout its history facing enemies such as the American Indians in the eighteenth century, Mexican guerrillas in Mexican-American War, Filipino insurgents in the Philippines in the early twentieth century, Vietcong in Vietnam, and many others.²⁹

In regards to his claim of special operations being at the center of military strategy, Webb failed to address how the current overall military strategy still relies on conventional forces to conduct stability and counterinsurgency operations.³⁰ The current National Security Strategy requires the armed forces to “enhance its capacity to defeat asymmetric threats” and to maintain “conventional superiority.”³¹ The current strategy relies on building regional partnerships with other nations employing conventional forces to conduct “military-to-military cooperation.”³² Hence, Webb’s claim regarding the role of special operations in the military strategy is exaggerated. These overreaching statements, however, do not detract from the author’s primary assertion that one must pursue excellence and never give up.

IV. Excellence Matters

Webb elegantly uses the sniper scope’s electronic aiming point as the symbol of his mental tenacity to achieve excellence: the act of holding the red dot on the target no matter what symbolizes his life lesson that one should always strive for excellence and never give up.³³ Webb supports his claim by juxtaposing the effects of good and bad leadership

²⁸ MAX BOOT, *INVISIBLE ARMIES*, at xx–xxi, xxiii–xxiv (2013) (referring to asymmetric warfare as the broader category of guerrilla and terrorist tactics under the category of asymmetric warfare).

²⁹ *Id.* app. (The *Invisible Armies* database).

³⁰ See U.S. DEP’T OF DEF., *SUSTAINING U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP* 6 (2012).

³¹ PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, *NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY* 5 (2010).

³² See U.S. DEP’T OF DEF., *supra* note 30, at 3; see also C. Todd Lopez, *With Drawdown in Afghanistan, Army Regional Alignments Likely to Increase*, www.army.mil (May 31, 2013), <http://www.army.mil/article/104/593>.

³³ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 191 (referring to the aiming point on a PEQ (portable laser special) laser sight as “red circle”), 371, 379–80.

traits³⁴ and by describing his victories through his undaunted tenacity and the defeats of those who gave up.³⁵ He stresses that both Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training and SEAL sniper training are all about mental strength, and not necessarily about physical strength.³⁶ It implies that one achieves excellence with mental concentration and perseverance. His successful deployment experience and his success as a SEAL sniper course manager serve as proof for the reader of why excellence matters.³⁷

In addition to his experience, Webb also relies on two outside sources to support his claim: journalist Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 bestselling book, *Outliers*, and shooting champion Lanny Bassham's mental management training.³⁸ Relying on Gladwell's "10,000-Hour Rule," which states that one must practice a skill over 10,000 hours to achieve "outstanding (outlying) success," Webb attributes SEAL's excellence to its "eighty hours a week" training for "two and half years"—roughly 10,000 hours.³⁹ As the sniper course manager, Webb used Bassham's mental management training, in which one must have "complete and total confidence" and practice "mental rehearsal," to train two of his students he mentored.⁴⁰ At the class's first shooting test, the two shot "the highest score in U.S. Navy SEAL sniper course history."⁴¹ Readers will find it hard to refute his argument for how to achieve excellence; instead, they will find themselves questioning whether they themselves are pursuing excellence or settling for mediocrity. As Webb successfully impresses the importance of excellence, the reader will appreciate his insight into leadership through his experience as a follower and a leader.

³⁴ *Id.* at 24–26 (Captains Bill and Mike versus George Borden), 74–77 (Lieutenant Burkitt versus Lieutenant Kennedy), 84–85 (USS *Lincoln* versus USS *Kittyhawk*), 265–67 (Cassidy versus Smith).

³⁵ *Id.* at 92 (Lars, pre-BUD/S buddy, quits the first week), 103–05 (Webb toughs it out in Hell Week), 117 (Travers, Naval Academy grad, quits), 140 (Oldwell, BUD/S Honor Man, quits).

³⁶ *Id.* at 104 ("What SEAL training really tests is your mental mettle."), 168–69 (asserting that to become a SEAL sniper, "Most of it is mental.").

³⁷ See sources cited *supra* notes 13–14; WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 347 (commended for graduating "highest percentage of qualified snipers in Naval Special Warfare Center (NSWC) history).

³⁸ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 214 (Gladwell's 10,000-Hour Rule), 349–53 (Bassham's mental management). See generally MALCOLM GLADWELL, *OUTLIERS* (2008); LANNY BASSHAM, *WITH WINNING IN MIND* (3d ed. 2011).

³⁹ WEBB, *supra* note 1, at 214.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 349–53.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 353.

V. Leadership Lessons

Throughout the book, Webb illustrates leadership principles through situations that military professionals will readily identify with: a comparison of the crew's morale between two ships, demonstrating the importance of keeping subordinates abreast of a leader's intent and plans;⁴² a superior's failure to properly counsel subordinates before giving a low evaluation;⁴³ a reorganization of a SEAL platoon, demonstrating that leadership matters even in a unit with highly trained SEALs;⁴⁴ an officer's humility to admit his failings and willingness to follow a subordinate's better plan,⁴⁵ contrasted with another officer's lack of humility;⁴⁶ Webb's moral courage to confront his supervisor's deficiency;⁴⁷ and Webb creating a mentor relationship between sniper instructors and students, demonstrating the importance of leaders to invest and care for subordinates' development.⁴⁸ These are all superb highlights of Webb's narrative; the reader will become engaged in the stories as he pores over these outstanding portions of *The Red Circle*.

These leadership lessons echo the common leadership principles of the armed forces: "build and sustain" a unit's morale by keeping subordinates informed;⁴⁹ set and maintain standards by proper

⁴² *Id.* at 84–85 ("I often found myself reflecting on the lesson of the two captains: the importance of talking to your people, sharing the plan with them so they know where you're headed and the purpose behind it. . . . Engage your crew. Have a dialogue; let them know that you know they exist and that they're part of what you're all up to.").

⁴³ *Id.* at 87 (depicting Webb's rating officer correcting Webb's evaluation because Webb "was never given an opportunity to correct the deficiency").

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 223 ("[Echo Platoon was] a mess in general. It was so clear that they had never had any really good leadership. They'd had no one to look up to or learn from.").

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 250 ("One thing about Cassidy I really appreciated: He wasn't afraid to admit when he'd been wrong. To me, this is one of the strongest marks of great leadership. Nobody is always right. Great leaders use that to learn and improve instead of fighting it."), 267 ("[Cassidy] was our officer in charge, but he also knew he wasn't the most tactically experienced guy there. Like a good leader, he was the first to defer to the person with more experience.").

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 257–58 (depicting Lieutenant Commander Smith insisting that team wears armor not heeding the advice of more tactically, operationally experienced subordinates).

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 360–61 (depicting Webb risking his Navy career by documenting his supervisor's deficiencies and reporting it to higher) ("I knew it could be the end of my career in the [N]avy—the unfortunate fate of Chief Chris had made that abundantly clear—but we couldn't keep operating like this. Harvey was screwing up the course.").

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 346–47 (depicting the mentorship of the students made the instructors take ownership over their mentees, resulting in higher graduation rate).

⁴⁹ See U.S. DEP'T OF DEF., THE ARMED FORCES OFFICER 57–59 (2007).

counseling;⁵⁰ build trusting bonds with subordinates;⁵¹ display moral courage by doing “what is right, even when it is difficult or not in your immediate best interests”;⁵² and develop subordinates by creating an inspirational organizational culture and environment.⁵³ Readers will find that immersing themselves in Webb’s accounts reinforces these valuable and laudable principles.

VI. Conclusion

The Red Circle is overall an inspiring book, recommended for military professionals; however, like Pausch, Webb succeeds in writing a memoir with a “head fake”—the book is really for his three children.⁵⁴ Thus, Webb achieves his purpose in writing, but for the readers not related to Webb, the book makes a great addition to a military reader’s professional book collection.

⁵⁰ *See id.* at 54–55.

⁵¹ *See id.* at 52–54.

⁵² *See id.* at 56.

⁵³ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP paras. 35–37 (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012).

⁵⁴ *See supra* note 6 and accompanying text (on Pausch’s “head fake”); *see also* WEBB, *supra* note 1, dedication (“For my three children”); Webb, *supra* note 6 (“It’s written for my own family, who would otherwise not know what I was doing overseas or why when I was gone all the time.”).