NEVER ENOUGH

A NAVY SEAL COMMANDER ON LIVING A LIFE OF EXCELLENCE, AGILITY, AND MEANING

MIKE HAYES

CELADON
BOOKS

The names and identifying characteristics of some persons described in this book have been changed, as have dates, places, and other details of events depicted in the book.

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CHAPTER 1

CHOOSE THE HARD PATH

Excellence in Knowledge and Capacity

I was in Kosovo in 1999, in the middle of winter, leading a small surveillance team in the mountains just a few hundred meters from the Serbian border. Freezing-cold temperatures, the darkness of night, howling winds—and both Kosovar Serbian and Albanian armies somewhere in that same snowy terrain, weapons ready, looking for an enemy to fight. As we suffered through the elements, the sun soon to rise, we knew we needed to find a place to rest and hide for the daylight hours. From our vantage point halfway up the side of a mountain, struggling to maintain our balance on the steeply sloping ground, we could see a natural line of drift below—railroad tracks, a 10-foot-wide patch of flat ground, a path that would have called out to anyone as the comfortable place we should naturally set up camp. Of course we wanted to move down there. I remember a young guy on our team incredulous that we would even be out in this

kind of weather. "Humans can't survive in this," he said. "It's miserable."

The temptation to head down toward the easier path and the more comfortable site was real, but if it was calling out to us, we knew it would be calling out to anyone who happened to be coming that way. Going down there would make us more visible, more vulnerable, and more likely to run into trouble. So we set up camp a couple hundred meters up the steeply angled slope, and sure enough, within an hour and just a short time before sunrise, what looked like the entire Albanian army marched straight down that natural line of drift. Had we been camped there, they would have found us for sure. Doing the uncomfortable, exhausting thing—the hard thing—saved us that day.

When I tell that story, I call it the "this sucks, let's stay here" lesson. It's not always so black and white, such a direct line you can draw between the choice to struggle and your ultimate success, but I've seen it time and time again. Doing the hard thing is how you win, how you grow, and how you end up getting the most out of life. If there's one principle that has shaped my career, it's this one, and that's why I felt it was the perfect place to start this book. Doing the hard thing, choosing the hard path, moving toward the most difficult challenges, aiming high—and trusting that you'll either succeed or you'll learn something, so either way it's a victory—got me to the SEALs, to the White House, and to senior roles in the private sector. It's the first thing I believe everyone ought to think about when approaching their life's trajectory. Am I letting myself follow the easy path, or am I moving up that mountain, looking for the difficult campsite that will give me the best chance to achieve my ultimate mission?

Somehow I knew, even as an undergraduate at Holy Cross College, that there was value in chasing the hard path. It wasn't that I was a great student or had been born with some amazing leadership skills—I absolutely wasn't. But I did have determination, a solid work ethic, and a hero I looked up to. My grandfather graduated from the Naval Academy in 1940, and was nursing a hangover in a bungalow on the Pearl Harbor Naval Base the morning of December 7, 1941, when the Japanese began bombing. He was with seven others at the time, and when he heard that first wave of something going on, he knew he needed to get in his jeep and go toward the harbor, back to his ship. None of the others would go with him. They all believed they were safer where they were. He told me the scariest part was heading toward the ship driving past a Marine guarding the gate at 45 miles an hour, without stopping, worrying the guard would shoot him.

My grandfather made it to his ship and manned his battle station. He was on board that ship for the third wave of attacks and tended to many wounded that day. In the wake of the bombing, he realized that he didn't want to spend his career on the ground or at sea. When he'd tell me this story, he would point up at the sky and say he wanted to be "up there." He put in a transfer to become a pilot, and after flight school, as World War II raged across the Pacific, he ended up stationed in the Aleutian Islands doing long-range bombing missions from the outermost islands and helping to attack strategic sites in northern Japan. He took over as the Commanding Officer of his thirty-five-plane

bombing squadron at age twenty-six, after his own Commanding Officer was shot down, and he later served as a test pilot for the Navy's first helicopters and the Commanding Officer of the Navy's first helicopter squadron during the Korean War. He ended his career as a professor of Naval Science at Holy Cross and Commanding Officer of the school's ROTC training unit. He taught me about causes greater than self, what it means to serve, and how to keep pushing yourself to get better.

My grandfather didn't pressure me to follow his footsteps into the Navy, but he set an example of service and sacrifice that I've tried to live up to my entire life. I remember as a Holy Cross freshman going to a memorial service for a recent ROTC Navy SEAL graduate named John Connors, who had died in the US invasion of Panama in 1989. I learned what the SEAL community was that day, and what it meant to be part of it. John's selfless service, his push to contribute, and his impact on the world all made me want to be a SEAL. I had signed up for ROTC mostly because it was a path to paying for college. I initially figured I would put in my four years of obligatory service, maybe become a logistics officer or fill some other non-combat function, get out with a few years of great, meaningful experience and go get an MBA. But the summer after my sophomore year, I had to do three weeks of service, aimed to help decide if I wanted to serve on a ship, on a submarine, as a pilot, or in some other typical Navy role. My group had one day of SEAL exposure, where everyone we met told us how hard it was to be a SEAL—and the more they talked about how hard it was, the more I became attracted to the challenge.

The next summer, I spent three weeks on what they called an aviation summer cruise. I got to fly an A-6 jet off the aircraft car-

rier USS *Saratoga*, explore the Spanish vacation island of Mallorca in my off-hours, and spend lots of time hanging out with adventurous pilots. I thought it was all some of the coolest stuff I'd ever done. And then I went to Coronado, California, for what was called Mini-BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training). It was a one-week course designed to reduce attrition in the regular BUD/S program by exposing ROTC students to the rigors of what SEAL training was actually like, with the goal of keeping people from applying for the SEALs unless they were certain it was something they wanted and thought they could handle. The days were long. We were tested in the water and out of it: obstacle courses, grueling runs, endless swims. There would be only twelve ROTC students nationwide chosen to become SEAL officers, versus a few hundred slots for pilots.

During my senior year, and shortly before I had to choose whether to apply to become a pilot, a SEAL, or something else, Father Michael Ford sat next to me at a hockey game and changed the course of my life. Father Ford told me there had been a last-minute cancellation opening up a spot in his five-day silent retreat, the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. It was a highly sought-after program, and Father Ford said he wanted me to attend. I tried to find a reason to say no, but I didn't have one. Instead of a week of winter vacation, I spent the time with twenty classmates in a retreat house on the ocean in Narragansett, Rhode Island. There was no speaking, just thinking, reading, contemplating, and reflecting.

At the time, my Naval "service selection" choice felt like a hard decision to make—pilot or SEAL?—but during the retreat, I realized that at the elemental level, there was a key difference: being a pilot is man against machine; being a SEAL is man

against himself. As a pilot, you're an expert at one task. As a SEAL, you're doing something different all the time. You're exposed to every element of military work—and expected to have the agility to step into any role and instantly thrive. If being a pilot was like playing one instrument to perfection, being a SEAL was like conducting a band. (That's a theme that will show up again later in the book.) By the end of the five days, after prayer and reflection, it became clear to me: I wanted the challenge. I wanted to be a SEAL. In fact, by the end of the spiritual retreat, I was jumping into the freezing-cold water every day after my long afternoon run, just to start testing myself—knowing that SEAL training would be hard, I wanted to make sure I could handle the discomfort. I wanted to make sure I could do the hard things.

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Before we get too far into this book, I should tell you what it means to be a SEAL, for readers who may not know much about the organization. In some ways, the SEALs are similar to any high-performance organization. In other ways, of course, it's different—the stakes, every day, are about as high as they can be. Fundamentally, the SEALs are one of the world's preeminent special operations forces, tasked with knowing how to get anything done—from covert direct-action missions in the dark of the night to working with local forces to improve security, governance, or infrastructure. We build bridges, open schools, and try to win the hearts and minds of local citizens. To sum it up, when you're faced with the hardest problems, you go to a SEAL. We're trained to be experts in getting to a desired outcome, and,

in fact, figuring out multiple ways to get there. We pick the best risk-adjusted plan of attack, and then we execute. We're dynamic—we process information on the fly and change the plan as needed. We know how to put aside human discomfort and be hyperlogical, separate important information from noise, and dispassionately achieve our goals. At any given time, there are approximately 3,000 SEALs on active duty out of 1.2 million active military in the United States. There are four SEAL Teams on each coast—and I've been on all four of the East Coast teams (numbered 2, 4, 8, and 10) in my career. (I should also note that the SEALs were throughout my career an all-male force. The stories in this book are disproportionately about the men I served with because the majority of the stories are about the SEALs themselves. But I want to add that I also worked with so many tremendously talented women during my service—lawyers, public affairs officers, communications and technology experts—without whom we could never have accomplished our missions.)

The SEALs are primarily a direct-action force. There are other incredible special operations forces or larger military units that do an amazing job working alongside or through locals to get tasks accomplished. The SEALs' main orientation is to do things ourselves. We pride ourselves on taking on the hardest missions needed for the good of the nation and then achieving success. The attrition rate through training is high—as I said in the introduction, my class of 120 was whittled down to 19 by graduation—but that's because the demands are intense. To survive, you need to be able to play many roles, and play them all well. You need to be able to excel physically, mentally, and

emotionally. You need to execute on even the smallest details—and, at the same time, see the bigger picture and understand where you fit in the plan.

Being a SEAL—going through training, and then being out in the world helping to save lives and achieve your nation's strategic goals—you realize two things about excellence that define what I want to get across in this first chapter of the book: first, that the greatest trajectory to excellence is trying really hard things; and second, that the day you stop trying to improve is the day you stop being a SEAL. Every day, you need to maintain the state of mind that even the most excellent person can never decide that he or she is excellent enough.

We can take these two ideas and dive deeper into each one.

The Greatest Trajectory to Excellence Is Trying Really Hard Things

This was my epiphany during those five days of silence at Father Ford's retreat. If I wanted to be the best I could be, I needed to challenge myself with the greatest challenge there was. We are all faced with choices every day. There are always easier and harder paths in front of us. Do we look for the greater reward that carries with it more work, more risk, more uncertainty, and more chance for failure? Or do we aim for the smaller prize, limit our ambition, and play it safe? I've been convinced through everything I've seen in the world that in the long run, the path to success, meaning, and impact is the harder road to travel, every time. On the surface, sure, there is more opportunity to fail—but even in failure, we learn, and we use that knowledge to inform everything we do from that point on. Moving to the harder path and

failing—but learning—is still a better outcome than doing what's easy and, even in success, not learning anything at all. If you don't keep learning, whether in success or failure, you don't grow. And if you don't grow, you'll never be able to tackle those harder hills.

SEAL training is all about moving to the harder path. We force young SEALs to conquer the hardest situations a human being can handle: timed 4-mile runs in soft sand while wearing full gear, including heavy boots; seven-man "boat crews," where you are forced as a team to carry a boat on your head everywhere you go for an entire day; "surf torture," where you are kept for hours in freezing ocean water, shivering and shaking, unsure when you will be allowed out; "drownproofing" exercises, where your hands and feet are tied and you need to survive in the pool for an hour without the use of your limbs; a 50-meter underwater swim that starts with an underwater somersault designed to disorient you and take away any forward momentum; and many more exercises just like that.

These drills are designed not just to be difficult, and not just to train SEALs to maintain their composure during the most challenging life-or-death situations, but to engender learning, growth, and the realization that you can do more than you think you can. Stick to easy tasks, and you'll never know how much you are capable of. We think we have certain limits, but if we don't stretch ourselves to test them, then we'll never know how much we can truly accomplish. That's why we must choose the hard path every time. It becomes a snowball effect: the confidence you gain from succeeding at something that seemed out of reach helps power you to even greater heights the next time. You learn that the only limit is the negative thoughts in your head. You learn that you can do anything.

At the start of SEAL training, for instance, everyone is told that there will be a 5.5-nautical-mile swim by the end. That's a long swim, more than two hours at least. Hardly anyone when they arrive has ever done a swim that long before. It sounds nearly impossible. And then we work our way up to it, conquering physical challenges along the way that go well beyond that one, and by the time that nearly impossible swim comes up, it's not only easy—it's boring. One stroke after the next, and everyone makes it through.

"Okay," you might be thinking, "except I know that there are things I absolutely can't do, physically. I can't survive in the pool for an hour with my arms and legs tied. I just don't have the muscle strength." Let's put the physical challenges aside for a moment, because those, honestly, you can train for. The training may be hard, and the goal may seem out of reach, but we can all get stronger and stronger, better and better. And even if we ultimately can't survive in the pool for an hour with our arms and legs tied (and, please, don't try this without proper SEAL supervision!), we'll have gained so much from the training process. The truth is that often, the biggest obstacles preventing us from trying hard things aren't physical at all—they're mental. We don't want to be embarrassed. We don't want others to see us as failures. We care too much about what people will think.

I urge you to ask yourself, "What's the worst that can happen if I try this hard thing and fail?" Will your friends and family think less of you? If so, they shouldn't. Will the world think less of you? Will you not get the recognition you want or think you deserve? Well, you certainly won't get that recognition if you don't even try. Our fears are usually worse than the reality. Bad outcomes are usually not as bad as we imagine them to be. If

we carefully walk our minds through the worst-case scenario of failure from whatever we're trying to do, we will usually realize that the stakes just aren't that high. The downside is insignificant compared to the upside of success. And yes, in the SEALs, the downside risks are sometimes tremendous—but we also take things step by step, and we make sure to only assume risk that is worth assuming. Most endeavors are not as high-stakes as SEAL missions, and the reality is that even in failure, we learn, we get better, we clarify what challenges are most meaningful to us, and we put ourselves in a stronger position for success the next time we try something hard.

Which brings us to the second point . . .

The Day You Stop Improving Is the Day You Stop Being a SEAL

Or, really, it's the day you stop being excellent, because an excellent person is someone who knows they are never excellent enough, and that you have to keep striving, keep learning, and keep pushing. Choosing the hard path is only half the equation for success. You choose the hard path, and then you extract from those experiences all the lessons, all the growth, all the improvement you possibly can. We do have SEAL trainees who fail at tasks. We train to the point of failure—so we fail by design. Any future SEAL might stumble during a particular training event or exercise, and the organization knows that. There is almost always another chance to succeed. You stop, you think about what you did wrong, you think about what you could do better, and you try again. In the end, you might still fail, absolutely. And perhaps, at a certain point, you realize the SEALs may not be

for you. But then you know you've pushed yourself to your limit, and you've learned something valuable: there are other journeys you may be better suited for, other places in this world where you can have an even bigger impact, more tailored to your strengths, your gifts, and your passions.

Sometimes, you do succeed. During the last five weeks of training (held on an isolated island where it was said that no one could hear us scream), SEAL trainees are forced to do a certain number of pull-ups before every meal, or we're not allowed to eat in the dining hall. Instead, we're forced to run down to the water, jump in, and sit in the surf zone—alone, or with anyone else who has failed to perform—while a buddy brings over a tray of food and we eat, soaking wet. The first of those weeks, it was 12 pull-ups, then 14, 16, 18, and finally 20. Pull-ups were my weakest physical ability, by far. Even in my initial test to be admitted to SEAL training, I was only able to do 14, while some of my peers did 50. Each week, I was right at my limit and didn't think I could do even one more pull-up. But I worked as hard as I could, pushing myself every time I mounted the bar, and—with the exception of one meal, on my twenty-second birthday, where I ended up eating alone, soaking wet, smiling and laughing, trying to reframe it in my mind and think of it as a birthday present to myself—I did it. I reached deep down inside and did the pull-ups I needed to do to be able to eat dry.

We have to strive to keep getting better, to realize that there is always more growth ahead. That realization is so critical, that quest for improvement driving people to far greater heights than any amount of raw talent alone ever can. Between a person with greater raw abilities and a person always looking to improve, I will choose the second every time, no question. Long-term

success is about hunger, passion, drive, and determination. We are limited only by our imagination and our work ethic. The decision isn't whether we can do something, but whether we are willing to put in the work it will take and make the necessary sacrifices.

You can be talented without having that drive to succeed, without being willing to do the work and stretch yourself. When I meet trainees with talent but insufficient hunger, I know they're going to fail. If you tell me that you're 99 percent sure you'll make it through SEAL training, I'm 100 percent sure you won't. You have to believe, you have to want it so badly, you can't allow even that 1 percent doubt to creep in. You have to know that you'll do whatever is required.

I've found that the hungriest people will, in fact, do whatever it takes, and they'll also get better and better along the way. The growth that gets us to be more and more excellent over time is powered by hard work, absolutely, but it's also powered by reflection and real learning. I can't emphasize this next point enough: the way to extract maximum knowledge from these hard challenges we undertake is to be truly objective and reflective about our performance, in success just as much as in failure. The way to get better over time is to know where we aren't good enough, what aspects of our life are not satisfying enough, which goals we're chasing aren't the right ones. This isn't always easy to internalize. We all have a natural tendency to want to focus on the positive, not dwell on what we could have done better. Especially when the result is good, we don't always want to rehash the mistakes we made along the way. And yet those are the mistakes that might lead to a poorer outcome next time, when the circumstances may be a little bit different.

In the SEALs, after every single mission we spend time running through what didn't go well enough. Even if things seemed to turn out perfectly, there are always places to improve, issues that can too easily be papered over until it's too late. We don't spend a lot of time talking about what went right. If something went well, it will likely go well again. The highest return on investment in conversations like these is achieved when we discuss in an honest and direct way what we could have done better. True, honest, and specific feedback is how we improve.

I should refine that just a bit. True, honest, specific, and *shared* feedback is how we improve. We debrief as a group because we can all learn lessons from each other, and because the leader of a group isn't the only one whose ideas and opinions matter. We also want to get all our thoughts on the table instead of splintering our team with backchannel discussions and private finger-pointing. When I worked in the White House, I was responsible for running the process to get a group of interagency experts to agree on a proposed draft version of a nuclear treaty with the Russians. I'll draw more lessons from this experience in later chapters, but relevant here is that after our first meeting, I received emails and calls from several stakeholders with complaints about other people in the room, sidebar information they thought I ought to know, whispers and secrets that kept us from having honest, productive conversations in the room.

I knew this was no way to get to a good outcome. At the beginning of the very next meeting, I stood at my spot at the head of the table and announced that if there was something worth saying, it should be said to the group. We have to own our opinions and be honest with each other, or we'll never have trust and we'll never reach the best outcome. Even if things are

uncomfortable to share, you have to find a way to say them—it's the only way to get better.

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Hopefully, you're with me so far. Choose the hard path, and keep striving to improve. An excellent person is never excellent enough—true excellence comes from the continued striving. Reflective and objective feedback is critical. But I talk about choosing the hardest opportunities, and I talk about never losing that hunger to get better, never being too confident in what you already know, and I realize there are some traps that are easy to fall into while taking that advice. Three big traps, in fact, which I'll spend the rest of this chapter explaining how to avoid.

The L in SEAL Stands for "Lazy"

Or the longer version of this point: Choosing the hard path doesn't mean working hard simply for the sake of working hard. As SEALs, we focus on outcomes, not outputs. In the military—and certainly outside it—it's easy to get caught up in thinking about production. How many reports have you written? How many tasks have you completed? How many emails have you sent? None of it matters. The size of the effort ultimately doesn't count; our long list of tasks keeps us busy but doesn't actually get us closer to the goal. We don't get points for how many hours we studied for the exam, how much activity we generated, how many items were on our to-do list, or how many boxes we ultimately checked off. We get credit for how many questions we got right.

It's easy in so many contexts to think about the journey and

not the destination, to measure what we do instead of the outcome it leads to. But I'd rather my SEALs find the fastest path to the goal and save the rest of their time and energy for something else. Do it efficiently, achieve the desired outcome, and then move on. Life is either work or leisure. Get the work done, and then you have a valuable option: choose more work or enjoy more leisure. The hardest path doesn't always mean the longest hours—at least not if you're smart about it.

And it definitely doesn't mean pointless busy work. Heck, in SEAL training, one of my instructors had us do a thousand sit-ups. It's not that any of us couldn't do a thousand sit-ups, but if you're going to do a thousand sit-ups, you can be smart about it. When the instructors are watching, give them the perfect sit-up. But if no one's looking and sit-up number 712 is a little sloppy, and maybe really only half a sit-up, keep the bigger-picture goal in mind—even a thousand half sit-ups is a pretty good workout. There is power in conserving energy and focusing on the end result.

Doing Hard Things Is Not the Same as Doing Risky Things

Scaling a mountain without a harness is hard. It's also stupid. In the SEALs, any operation has risk. As I've mentioned already, we only want to take on risk that's worth assuming. In my very first deployment as a SEAL, I was in El Salvador, in charge of a seven-man SEAL squad. We were doing demolition training with our El Salvadoran counterparts, the FOEs (Fuerzas de Operaciones Especiales), the country's most elite special forces unit. We were alone in the jungle, blowing things up, no one in sight,

and we decided to put together a larger fireball charge than any of us had ever made before—an explosion, a huge one, because we were twenty-something-year-old kids with piles of explosives and gasoline, and there didn't seem to be any danger in doing so. We poured 45 gallons of fuel into a 55-gallon drum, added the necessary steel wool and the C-4, or plastic explosives, and found a safe place to watch at a distance, with plenty of time until the resulting explosion.

And then, as the 7-minute fuse burned down, we saw a small South American aircraft come out of absolutely nowhere, at most a hundred feet in the air, puttering along, directly toward where our fireball charge was set to detonate. We looked at each other in total disbelief, then we looked at our demolition site, a couple hundred meters away from us. We knew we didn't have time to run back and disable the explosive without putting ourselves at huge risk, so there was nothing we could do but wait and hope. There we were, watching this plane unknowingly fly right into the danger zone and thinking we were about to witness a terrible disaster.

Our fireball charge exploded right on cue, sending a huge plume of smoke into the air. As the smoke cleared, we saw the plane, still puttering along—it flew just over our fireball, and fortunately, while I'm sure we gave the pilot quite a scare, there were no horrendous consequences.

Except that my team and I learned a huge lesson: Not all risks are obvious. Sometimes there are dangers you won't anticipate. You need to train yourself to expect the unexpected, and no matter your motives, only take on risk that is worth taking on. We didn't need to detonate an explosive quite so large in

order to get the same benefit from our training. We didn't have a strategic reason for doing so, and we created a risk we didn't need to create. That early-career scare has stuck with me ever since.

Another story, again from my time as a brand-new SEAL: The Navy needed four of us to help test some new equipment, and I was "volun-told" to take part in the exercise. They took us in a boat, two or three miles offshore, dropped us in the water, and told us to swim to the beach, stay for a few minutes, and then swim back to the boat together. It turned out that conditions were unexpectedly harsh—40-knot winds, nearly 8-foot-high waves—and the four of us immediately lost each other, unable to see more than a few feet in front of us. I swam for what felt like hours before I finally got to the beach . . . and once I was there, I could not see my teammates. I waited, and waited, but there was simply no sign of them. I figured maybe I had missed them, maybe I'd gotten slowed down by the waves, maybe they'd already made their way back. So I got back in the water and tried to return to the boat, even though I couldn't see it. In my mind, I had to complete the assigned mission at all costs, just keep going—this is what a SEAL has to do.

I couldn't find my way back to the boat. Because of the harsh conditions, I was using my Silva Ranger compass to do my best to swim a straight line of bearing to the planned link-up point. But it didn't work. I realized I must have drifted much more than I expected. I couldn't see back to the beach, either. For a few hours, I was basically lost at sea, worrying the three other (more experienced) SEALs would think I was a total screw-up. I had broken a fin strap, and at one point, I was startled (okay, scared) when I was moved about 10 feet in the water, bumped hard by a massive sea mammal. I imagined that no one would ever find

my body, and everyone in the SEALs would think I must not have been a good swimmer—despite entering BUD/S training with one of the fastest swim times in the history of the program, and, along with my swim buddy, Chris Cassidy, coming seconds away from the fastest ever 2-mile timed swim in BUD/S (you'll hear more about Chris in chapter 2).

Eventually, finally, the boat found me and picked me up, and I was quickly excoriated for being stupid enough to make the swim back out to sea. My three teammates had ended up down the beach from where the current had taken me—just a bit too far away for me to see them—and they stayed on the beach until the boat came for them, knowing conditions were too miserable to even attempt to head back. I had put myself at risk—for a training exercise!—because I confused doing the hard thing with doing the right thing. My decision was far too risky to make sense, even as a confident and capable swimmer.

For me, in that moment, the harder thing would have been to admit that trying to swim back to the boat was ridiculous. Changing the plan based on severely harsh conditions was the harder choice that I should have made, instead of taking a silly and unnecessary risk just to prove that I was a good, obedient "new guy."

There's a version of that story where I could blame my team for letting me down, the boat for not being at the right pickup point, or the trainers for not creating a better contingency plan for bad weather. But when I look back on it, the truer telling of that story is that nearly being lost (or eaten!) at sea drove me not to blame anyone for what could have happened, but to figure out what I needed to learn so that it would never happen again. And what I needed to learn was humility and risk assessment.

Sometimes the Hardest Thing Is Sticking to Your Values and Beliefs

Choosing the hard path certainly isn't always physical, and isn't always about the amount of effort or amount of time something will take. In fact, I think the hardest choices we make are often the ones that involve going out on a limb, bucking conventional wisdom, or standing up to people in positions of authority when they're telling you something you simply don't believe. People generally don't get in trouble for following the rules—but when the rules conflict with what you know is right, whether in a moral sense ("We shouldn't treat people that way") or a practical sense ("There's a better way to make that paper clip"), sometimes the hard choice you need to make is to follow your instincts and accept whatever consequences might result.

In the SEALs, we're taught that if you think your mission has been compromised, you exfiltrate—you get out. That may mean canceling an entire mission, setting weeks of work—and ego—aside and saying you just can't take the risk involved with trying to accomplish what you've set out to do. That you need to go back to safety, come up with a new plan, and start again.

In 1997, I was in Kosovo on a reconnaissance mission to help enforce the Dayton Accords, the peace agreement ending the war in Bosnia between the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs who jointly occupied Kosovo. It was the very beginning of high-tech surveillance, where we had night-vision cameras for the first time and satellite radios to send near real-time images back to headquarters. These were huge breakthroughs at the time, cutting-edge technology. For these particular missions, we would go out

in the field in groups of six—two two-person "observation posts" and one two-person "command post," the observation guys pushing into the dangerous areas to keep their eyes on the target and the command guys hanging back, placed centrally between the observation posts but out of the immediate danger zone, communicating via radio. I was at the command post with Jimmy G, our radio guy, and we were talking to our observation guys (Tom and Allan on one team, Chad and Steve on the other), who had eyes on a house out of which there appeared to be a huge transfer of illegal arms between the Russian forces, who were part of the peacekeeping mission, and the Kosovar Serbian forces. This was in direct violation of the Dayton Accords, and a big deal at the time. Our guys got pictures, and I communicated what we were seeing back to headquarters . We called our Green Beret counterparts, who manned a nearby location, and asked them to come search the house for confirmatory evidence.

It's important to note that we were traveling very light, as would be expected for a reconnaissance mission like this. We were not planning on getting into a gunfight, and even though we were armed, this was not intended to be an offensive, direct-action mission. I was quite young in my career, at a level known as O3—a lieutenant—and taking orders from the Army Special Forces major (an O4-level officer, my superior at the time) back at headquarters.

I suggested to the major that we should come off the target immediately after the Green Berets left, because we would be compromised at that point—the Russians or the Kosovar Serbians would see that someone had been in the house, and they would know that someone out there was watching them. And they would quite predictably come looking for us, putting us

in great danger, particularly since we weren't armed for such a situation.

The major said no, that we should stay in the field for 48 hours and "Charlie-Mike," or continue mission, watching after the army guys finished trying to gather evidence. I told him via radio that this broke SEAL doctrine, and reminded him of the adage I had learned from experienced SEALs before me: "If you think you've been compromised, assume you have, and exfiltrate." I believed we absolutely needed to exfiltrate, but he disagreed, and said it was an order for us to stay in the field. What do you do when your boss gives you a bad direction? I canvassed my guys and stated my logic, and we all asked each other how strongly we felt about it. We knew that pushing back was the right thing to do, but we also didn't want to go down the road of disobeying an order and potentially facing consequences—unless following that order was something we truly felt was going to put us in clear danger. In all honesty, we didn't feel strongly about it. We didn't think it was anywhere close to a certainty that anyone would find us where we were, and we knew that the easier path would be to listen to the order and save our fight for another day. This was an error in judgment and, in retrospect, could have cost us our lives.

We stayed out there, hidden among the neat rows of evergreens in a several-acre manicured forest that had been planted for firewood. (We cut, bent, and strategically placed extra branches to hide ourselves during the day.) And sure enough, not two hours after the Army forces checked out the house, our observation guys saw three Kosovar Serbians approach the building and realize that windows had been broken—and then figure out that someone had been watching them. Those three

ran off quickly, presumably down to their village, and came back at first darkness with 19 armed soldiers—our guys counted—who began hunting for us in the forest. Chad, one of our observation guys, communicated back to me, "We have two armed soldiers methodically working their way down the edge of the forest. They are likely to see us. We need to either pull back or shoot them."

"I'm behind you either way," I told Chad, trusting him to make the right call, "but if you shoot them, just know that it will be a massive situation, and we are greatly outnumbered." There was no easy answer. Shoot, and then everyone knows where we are. But pull back, and we're eyes off the target, we're not doing the mission we're there to do, and we're all at risk because we don't know where the enemy is.

Chad and Steve quickly decided to pull back. After they were certain these two armed men were gone, they came back to the command post with me and Jimmy, so now the four of us were together. All of a sudden, we heard shots ring out. The Kosovar Serbians had begun shooting, an attempt to get us to shoot back and reveal our location. They sprayed the tree line with maybe thirty to sixty rounds of sporadic machine gun fire. Once the shooting settled down, we communicated to our other two observation guys out in the field, telling them to pull back to where we were so that all six of us could be together, do our best not to be discovered, and get picked up by our "Quick Reaction Force" vehicles, which were on standby a few kilometers away. During the hours that followed, as we tried to avoid a gunfight, we were actively hunted. I was twenty-six years old and in charge of the lives of five other men. At one point, I heard approaching footsteps—stealthy footsteps, a noise I knew well, because I

was often the one making it, trying to place one foot at a time down on a forest floor without crunching a single dead leaf or breaking a single twig. I heard someone taking one step about every ten seconds. I aimed my rifle in his direction and eventually saw him—long before he could see me. I took the slack out of my trigger, just a hair away from firing, and held my aim dead center on him. He got as close as six feet from me as I watched him crouch, squint, scan, and hunt us. I just remember thinking, *No . . . no . . . no . . .* If he had seen me, I would have had to kill him. But he didn't, and I was relieved I wouldn't have to give away our position to all the other men hunting us. It could not have been closer.

Carefully, silently, slowly, we got out. The intelligence we had gathered was useful, for sure, helping us figure out that the Russians were colluding with the Kosovar Serbians, support we hadn't been aware of and didn't have proof of until that point. But it wasn't worth the risk to our lives. I should have stood up to the major, done what I knew was right, and not accepted the unnecessary risk. The hardest thing in that situation would have been to disobey a direct order—but I chose the easier path. It was a mistake. (And as soon as shots were fired, I knew that the major himself realized it was a mistake, although he never directly acknowledged it.)

Years later, in Afghanistan in 2012, I saw a similar pattern emerging. I canceled a 72-hour mission just 24 hours in because I felt we had been compromised. I looked back at what I wished had happened in 1997 and made the hard call to end that mission early, to avoid the unnecessary risk. The leader on the ground in Afghanistan tried to fight me to keep the mission going. He said they had the high ground and full visibility on the

enemy, and that they were going to be able to execute if they did get into a gunfight. But I sent a helicopter and pulled his team from the mission anyway, and afterward I sat them down and explained my thinking. You could get the best intelligence, you could kill thirty dangerous Taliban fighters—but if our odds had just changed, if our 99 percent chance of success fell to 96 percent, or 92 percent, the added risk was too much to take on in this situation. It is not worth the extra risk to your lives, I said, or to the missions down the road you are yet to accomplish, and will never accomplish if you're wounded or dead. They thought the hard thing was completing the mission. I knew the hard thing was setting ego aside and canceling it.

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We do the hard things. We never stop learning. We're objective and reflective so that we can apply our lessons in the future and never make the same mistake twice. As you look at your own life, you may not always know what the hard path is. Do you stay in a frustrating job that may get you to your goal, or do you leave for a more satisfying position that may not have as much upside? Do you start that new business you've been dreaming about, or do you convince yourself that the risks are too great and the chance of failure too high to make it worth it? The hard path isn't always obvious—clearly, I didn't have the best sense of it when I was deciding whether to swim back from the beach during that training exercise, or whether to push back against my superior in Kosovo. But we learn over time, and with experience. Now, when faced with two paths, I often find myself asking an important question: Which path makes me more uncomfortable? You may think it's smart to shy away from discomfort, but

that's not where this advice is heading. Discomfort is often the biggest key to growth, and it's what tells you if the road ahead is the right kind of hard, the kind that you should be pursuing. I absolutely felt uncomfortable when I was heading to Washington to serve as a White House Fellow, and even when I decided to write this book. But that's how I knew these were challenges worth tackling.

In the next chapter, we'll talk all about discomfort, and how building your capacity for withstanding difficult conditions is just as critical as building your knowledge by always trying to learn and grow. It's not enough to do the hard things—you have to embrace them, be comfortable with them, and build your capacity to never shy away from the right challenge.