

THREE SHELLS

From the drama of watching her son run over the berm into the cold Pacific Ocean for the beginning of the infamous Hell Week, through his second deployment as a lieutenant in the Navy SEALs ... a mother recalls the journey both he and she took.

My husband, Bill, and I checked into the Hotel del Coronado on the island across the bay from downtown San Diego to witness the start of “Hell Week” for a Navy SEAL candidate — our 23 year-old son.

A short distance down the beach from this grand “Hotel Del” is the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL program (BUD/S)) training ground at the United States Naval Special Warfare Center. If “destined” ...it is at this west coast training complex that a young man becomes a Navy SEAL (acronym: Sea, Air, and Land) ... becoming a member of the elite Naval Special Warfare unit trained for unconventional warfare. “Destined” because there are more factors than imagined in determining if he’s a success — or even of he wants to succeed.

A microcosm of life in its entirety, faced at the very beginning of a young man’s journey.

It is here where my son, Ryan, was facing a dream that had haunted him since he was eight years old. After four years of college — then extensive mental and physical training just to qualify for Officers Candidate School in Pensacola Florida — Ryan was finally on the Coronado base. As the warm sand of winter mixed with the cold Pacific Ocean in the first weeks of intense training, he could accept that his dream was becoming a reality ... at last.

Going in, Ryan was prepared to never give up. Life-long sports had taught him how to seal himself against physical pain. And mentally, he'd found the answer to survival: His unwavering focus. The drive to get into the SEAL program as fast as he could carried him from the moment he graduated high school. More than a mother would have suspected from the teenager she once knew.

But that wasn't enough. Ryan's destiny would demand more from him. While BUD/S is grueling, his own extraordinary circumstances would challenge him spiritually, and his belief in himself. The normal 24 weeks of unrelenting, uncompromising SEAL training turned into almost ... *a year*.

How do you watch your son, having just reach manhood, endure a year of physical, and mental torture for a lifelong dream? the Universe was throwing him one of its famous life-changing curves. For Ryan, it tested everything he had. And for me? I would have to actively decide whether I was going to practice faith, or easily give in to fear. This was *my baby*. Had I really done my spiritual homework?? I'd been tested before, but this was going to be a doozy.

Within the first few weeks of arriving — during the physical conditioning indoctrination period — Ryan was on the daily six-mile early morning run with his classmates, when something went terribly wrong. He had no idea why he was in pain, but he kept running. He didn't report to medical. Getting a “medical release” was far better for saving face than “ringing the bell” when one wanted to get out of the program. Medical was usually suspicious of candidates coming in with injuries. Already, several had rung the bell.

Gritting his teeth, Ryan somehow got through the next 10 hours of continual physical activity, and the next day he started the morning run. The instructors' trucks follow the runners, and they'd been watching Ensign Ryan fall drastically behind. The rest of the class had already

finished when he was still a mile behind. One instructor (a highly experienced SEAL, but a non-officer), “requested” that Ryan get in the truck. The newly minted officer declined the request and kept limping along. Two more requests were offered with the word “sir” in front of them, and both were denied. Finally the instructor yelled: “Damnit Ryan ... get it the damn truck; now, *sir!*”

Ryan had two stress fractures; a broken leg. During “medical” he was required to wait two class rotations — his existing new class and the next class after that. Navy doctors warned him that this was an injury few SEAL candidates had overcome successfully enough to re-enter the program. Determined, he envisioned only getting back to his training, and would accept nothing else as an answer.

While waiting for the bones in his leg to heal, he and the others in medical, spent months starting their day with cold fire hoses spraying them for hours on the pool deck — before they moved on to more difficult conditioning. It was an incredible challenge. But the real torture for Ryan was watching the two classes go by and graduate.

Finally healed, and allowed to join a new class starting the indoctrination period again, his leg held-up, and he made it to Phase 1 (Physical Conditioning) and *Hell Week*. This is a ritual the world’s heard so much about, and family were allowed to observe this experience from a short distance away. My heart was pounding ... this was only Phase 1 of 3, and there was still much ahead for him. I forced myself to concentrate on the moment; to be grateful that he was whole, and protected. Apparently he was still on the right track for his life. If he weren’t, the doors would have closed long ago.

Hell Week was the Navy's first major test for "weeding the pack." Fear or Faith — I had made my choice, and now I had to stick to it. "He'd come this far, why doubt?" I repeated several times ... and wore out a few other prayers as well.

Walking on the sandy berm, we approached the two massive tents on the beach sequestering the "resting" class. From a small slit one tent, a long arm reached out and quickly waved at us. Must be our son. We waited there in the sand as the late afternoon sun slipped away. It was then that I picked up three little shells, just touching each other — but otherwise completely alone — near the surf line. I placed them in my pocket.

Finally dark, the candidates emerged from the tents under gun and mortar shots exploding over their heads. Running out over the huge berms in full work uniforms, they dove into the cold, raging surf. Thoroughly soaked, they returned to spend five minutes rolling in the sand. Thus started their five-nights of no sleep, and six-days of torture.

During this drama we were joined by SEALs from previous classes. They spoke of their feelings while waiting for their Hell Week start — and how they felt at the end for surviving it. Gently holding the three small shells in my pocket, I looked at the moon and said, "He can do this God." I visualized Ryan proudly standing on this berm someday watching a future class; reliving his memories with the pride he would feel for having accomplished it.

Still under fire, the candidates ran back into the SEAL base to grab their six-manned inflatable boats and return to the turbulent sea. We would next see them as they arrive on the beach at the Hotel Del.

We returned to the hotel for a needed drink. Within the hour, there were seven large rubber boats, each filled with six wet, completely indistinguishable men, fighting the rugged surf that was violently smashing them against the boulders strewn across the sand. In the dark. Only

the beach itself was lit with the hotel's floodlights. Finally landing, they looked like an invasion. The glow-lights worn around their necks made this strange scene look like the Dance of Sea Creatures.

As the instructors scream like banshees, we search the faces of one identical body after another as they perform torturous maneuvers on the hard, wet sand. Which one was our son? Who could tell? Each one was dressed in wet camouflage uniforms, hats dripping and shading their eyes, with faces coated with sand. Still, I felt we'd make contact with Ryan. I continued to finger the shells in my pocket.

Just for a second, one instructor looked away. In that microsecond — as the hotel's massive floodlights illuminated the rows of men — we witnessed a brief, but broad smile form across the thick sand-coated mask that was his face; our son. Bill's arms tightened around me as my breath silently gasped. Ryan has been waiting for this all his life ... and pride during that miserable moment overtook us.

Within minutes, they picked their heavy rubber boats and held them high over their heads. As they ran in unison through the dark back to the base, boats high in the air, we heard them yelling some strange chant that had to limit their wind control.

Hell week was tough — but more of the same lay ahead. All three phases are designed to test mind, body, and spirit. The rest of Phase 1, and the long haul of Phase 2 (Combat Diving), were no picnic. But it was Phase 3 (Land Warfare) that presented Ryan with the next kick to the stomach.

They would be spending weeks out at San Clemente, the Navy's isolated island 30 miles off the coast. This was the setting for the the hardest, yet least known phase. And for good reason. Along with further instructions in fighting a real war, with real explosives, this is last

time the SEAL instructors have a chance to eliminate those who might have bluffed it until now.

Could their spirit be broken? Only 1% of the candidates of any class finish BUD/S. By Phase 3 their rigorous land and sea tests had been passed (Jump School would be after they completed this program). But did they have the temperament; the right SEAL Team attitude? Could they handle adversity under devastating emotional circumstances?

The instructors were brutal; some more than others. They made hell rain down on the final candidates as they honed their skills from morning to night. Time to weed out the mortals from the Gods.

Ryan and an instructor clashed during an important test in the field, and Ryan failed. No excuses. That was the instructor's job; to make a difficult assignment impossible. Within an hour, Ryan was put on the power boat back to the SEAL base; immediately going up in front of a review board.

Once again, time stopped for him.. He had always *expected* to be a SEAL. For years, through every crisis and decision he'd faced, he held on to that. Now his life as he knew it, hung in the balance. For 24 hours Ryan could only lean on a higher power as he went through a dark tunnel. All he could do was to trust.

The board found extenuating circumstances, a rare occurrence, and sent him back to the island for the last week of Phase 3. Another major challenge, another wrenching set-back, and a hard-earned bounce back. Just what the Navy was hoping for — exactly what all SEALs face during actual deployment in enemy territory.

The last night was a bonfire on the beach at the island. If you were there, it meant that the graduation in a week was yours. Ryan's class was now down to 1/4 of the men they started with. Hooyah.

I later asked Ryan how he got through each torturous day of that year, knowing that the next day was more of the same.

"I never thought past the next 15 minutes. Ever. Otherwise, I might have rung the bell." Such sage, real-life advice earned in the heat of fire. I hold on to it often ... to this day.

After all those years of watching my son dream, hope, and prepare, Ryan's SEAL graduation was an out-of-body experience. He looked almost regal in his dark officer's uniform ... every man up there, no matter their rank, looked regal. The base's Admiral spoke: "We've done everything humanly possible to prepare the men sitting behind me for both the enemy without and the enemy within. Take heart those who love them, they are prepared." I did.

During festivities later, we had a moment to speak privately: "Mom, something far greater than my determination got me thru this." Putting my hand to his cheek, I smiled, "I know sweetheart, me too." He winked and put his arms around me.

I carried those three shells in my pockets for the next six years, all through Ryan's two deployments in active war zones. I would touch them often, and release the energy into the universe. Generated from the soul of our very being ... these strong vibrations are the greatest power we have. They transform the world. Proof has manifested itself in my life too many times to doubt. And yet ... I *still* I keep learning how to demonstrate faith; the unwavering acceptance of God in action.

The shells weren't the magic, but they were the vehicle for me to unlock the magic ... an acceptance that God was flowing through me to Ryan. Always a prayer surrounding my son.

The very feel of the three shells in my pocket always allowed me to dissipate doubt, and return to the real definition of faith: Believing unconditionally in the unseen, until it's seen on the visible plane.

From the beginning, the tiny shells not only comforted me, they renewed my strength — strength available for my son to draw on. For years thereafter as I touched the shells, I felt Ryan surrounded with protection ... wherever he went, whatever he did ... and for *whatever* his destiny.

Trusting that “everything will work out for the best,” is not for the faint of heart. Once the dream was within Ryan’s grasp — he had to be willing to fail. And to get back up. To “hold on” to the invisible. That took an active spiritual core — and believing that he could *be* what he saw himself as — no matter the outward conditions. Faith.

And for my own “survival training?” Renewing a continual and active faith at a level I’d never known before. I leaned into it. It was the only way I could accept the reality of my child putting himself in harms way — and applauding him for it. I gave him up to God’s protection ... as I have since the day he was born.

I carried those three little shells everywhere ... until years later when I came home with his discharge papers. After entering the private sector, he asked me to pick them up at the nearby government building.

As I reached in my pocket and pulled them out one last time, I smiled. “He doesn't need these anymore, and neither do I.” The protection is forever; it always has been.

I let the little shells fall out of my hand into a large vase that holds the hundreds of shells we’ve collected from beaches worldwide.

To this day, they seem quite happy there.