CHAPTER TEN

THE EMPOWERMENT OF FAILURE

On September 27, 2012, I stood in a makeshift gym on the second floor of 30 Rockefeller Center prepared to break the world record for pull-ups in a twenty-four-hour period. That was the plan, anyway. Savannah Guthrie was there, along with an official from the Guinness Book of World Records and Matt Lauer (yeah, that guy). Again, I was gunning to raise money—a lot of money this time—for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, but I also wanted that record. To get it I had to perform under the *Today Show* spotlight.

The number in my head was 4,020 pull-ups. Sounds superhuman, right? Did to me too, until I dissected it and realized if I could knock out six pull-ups on the minute, every minute, for twenty-four hours, I'd shatter it. That's roughly ten seconds of effort, and fifty seconds of rest, each minute. It wouldn't be easy, but I considered it doable given the work I'd put in. Over the past five to six months, I'd rocked over 40,000 pull-ups and was stoked to be on the precipice of another huge challenge. After all the ups and downs since my second heart surgery, I needed this.

The good news was the surgery worked. For the first time in my life I had a fully functioning heart muscle, and I wasn't in a rush to run or ride. I was patient with my recovery. The Navy wouldn't clear me to operate anyway, and in order to stay in the SEALs I had to accept a non-deployable, non-combat job. Admiral Winters kept me in recruiting for two more years, and I remained on the road, shared my story with willing ears, and worked to win hearts and minds. But all I really wanted to do was what I was trained to do, and that's fight! I tried to salve that wound with trips to the gun range, but shooting targets only made me feel worse.

In 2011, after recruiting for four-plus years and spending two and a half years on the disabled list due to my heart issues, I was finally medically cleared to operate again. Admiral Winters offered to send me anywhere I wanted to go. He knew my sacrifices and my dreams, and I told him I had unfinished business with Delta. He signed my papers, and after a five-year wait, my someday had arrived.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HAS AWARDED THE

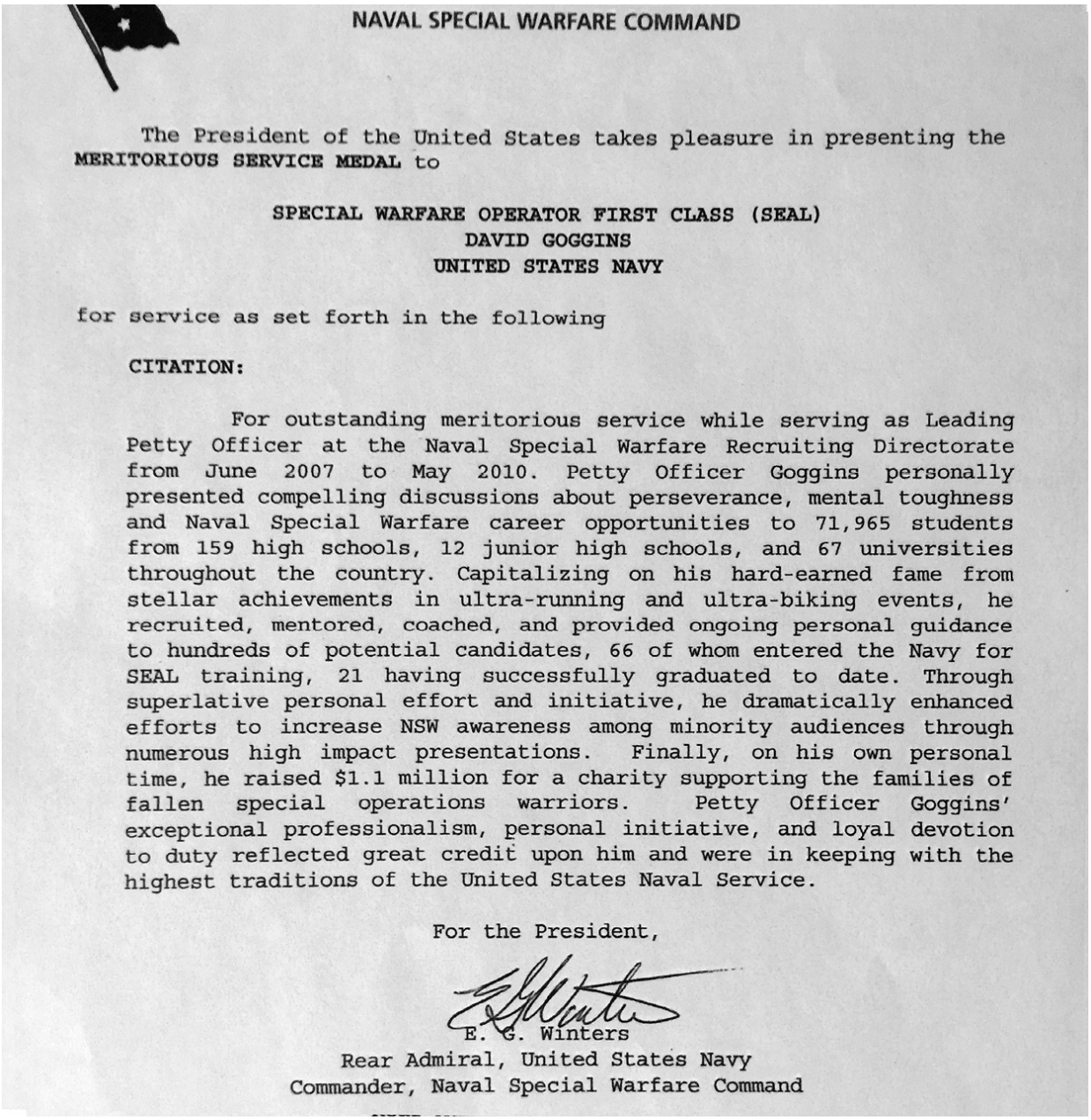
MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL

TO
SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR (SEA, AIR, AND LAND) DAVID GOGGINS
UNITED STATES NAVY
FOR

OUTSTANDING MERITORIOUS SERVICE FROM JUNE 2007 TO MAY 2010

GIVEN THIS 28TH DAY OF MAY 2010

FOR THE PRESIDENT
E. G. WINTERS
REAR ADMIRAL, UNITED STATES NAVY
COMMANDER, NAVAL SPECIAL WARFARE COMMAND



NAVAL SPECIAL WARFARE COMMAND

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the **MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL** to

SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR FIRST CLASS (SEAL)
DAVID GOGGINS
UNITED STATES NAVY

for service as set forth in the following

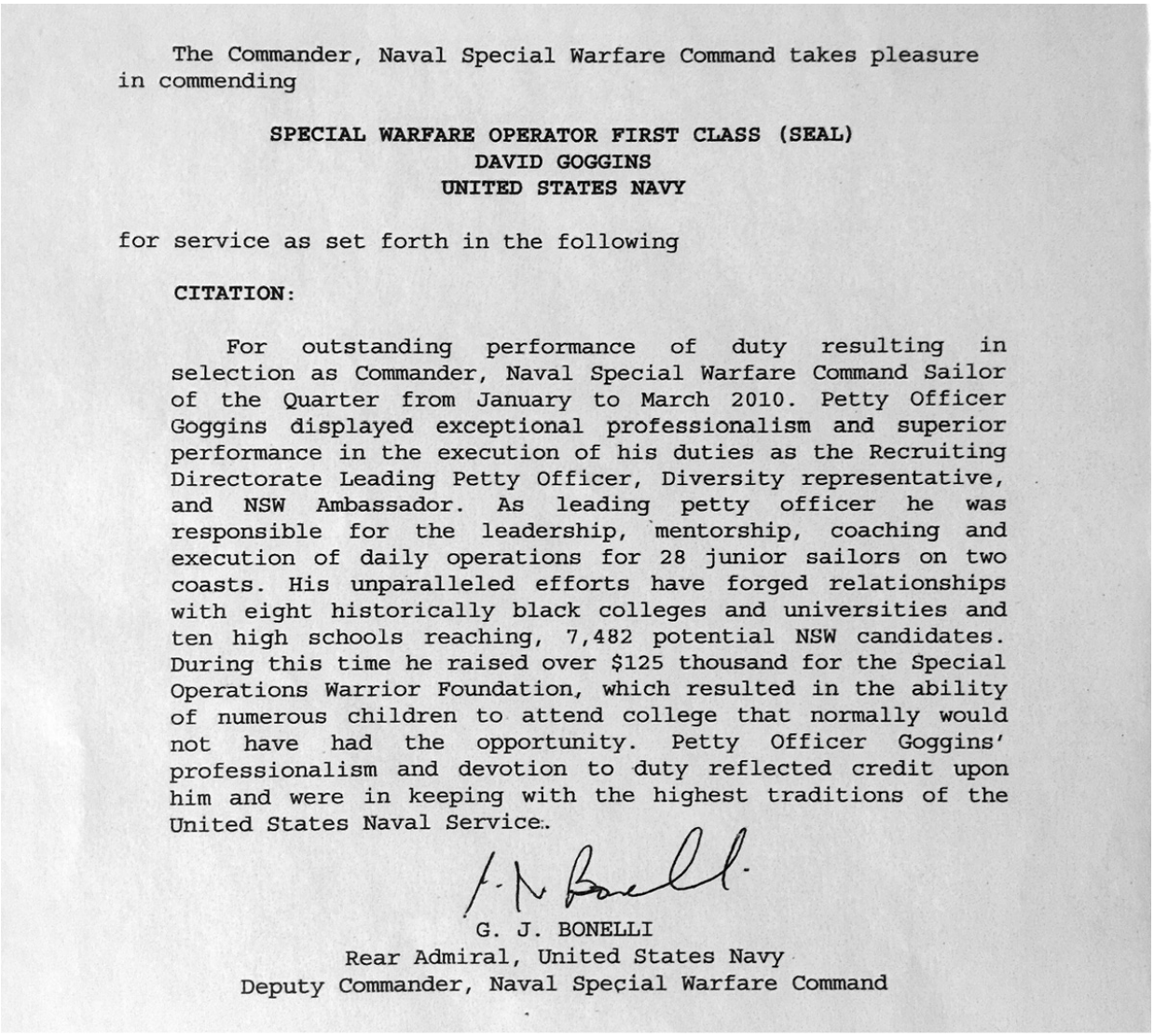
CITATION:

For outstanding meritorious service while serving as Leading Petty Officer at the Naval Special Warfare Recruiting Directorate from June 2007 to May 2010. Petty Officer Goggins personally presented compelling discussions about perseverance, mental toughness and Naval Special Warfare career opportunities to 71,965 students from 159 high schools, 12 junior high schools, and 67 universities throughout the country. Capitalizing on his hard-earned fame from stellar achievements in ultra-running and ultra-biking events, he recruited, mentored, coached, and provided ongoing personal guidance to hundreds of potential candidates, 66 of whom entered the Navy for SEAL training, 21 having successfully graduated to date. Through superlative personal effort and initiative, he dramatically enhanced efforts to increase NSW awareness among minority audiences through numerous high impact presentations. Finally, on his own personal time, he raised $1.1 million for a charity supporting the families of fallen special operations warriors. Petty Officer Goggins' exceptional professionalism, personal initiative, and loyal devotion to duty reflected great credit upon him and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

For the President,

E. G. Winters
Rear Admiral, United States Navy
Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command

Awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for my work in recruiting



The Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command takes pleasure in commending

SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR FIRST CLASS (SEAL)
DAVID GOGGINS
UNITED STATES NAVY

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For outstanding performance of duty resulting in selection as Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command Sailor of the Quarter from January to March 2010. Petty Officer Goggins displayed exceptional professionalism and superior performance in the execution of his duties as the Recruiting Directorate Leading Petty Officer, Diversity representative, and NSW Ambassador. As leading petty officer he was responsible for the leadership, mentorship, coaching and execution of daily operations for 28 junior sailors on two coasts. His unparalleled efforts have forged relationships with eight historically black colleges and universities and ten high schools reaching, 7,482 potential NSW candidates. During this time he raised over $125 thousand for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which resulted in the ability of numerous children to attend college that normally would not have had the opportunity. Petty Officer Goggins' professionalism and devotion to duty reflected credit upon him and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

G. J. BONELLI
Rear Admiral, United States Navy
Deputy Commander, Naval Special Warfare Command

Chosen as Sailor of the Quarter, January to March 2010

Once again, I dropped into Appalachia for Delta Selection. In 2006, after I smoked the eighteen-mile road ruck on our first real day of work, I heard some well-intentioned blowback from some of the other guys who were tapped into the rumor mill. In Delta Selection everything is a secret. Yes, there are clear tasks and training but nobody tells you how long the tasks are or will be (even the eighteen-mile ruck was a best estimate based on my own navigation), and only the cadres know how they evaluate their candidates. According to the rumor mill, they use that first ruck as a baseline to calculate how long each navigation task should take. Meaning if you go hard you'll eat away at your own margin for error. This time, I had that intel going in, and I could have played it safe and taken my time, but I wasn't about to go

out among those great men and only give half my effort. I went out even harder so I could make sure they saw my very best, and I broke my own course record (according to that reliable rumor mill) by nine minutes.

Rather than hear it from me, I reached out to one of the guys who was in Delta Selection with me, and below is his first-hand account of how that ruck went down:

> Before I can talk about the road march, I have to give a little bit of context in the days leading up to it. Showing up to Selection you have no idea what to expect, everyone hears stories but you do not have a complete grasp of what you are about to go through…I remember arriving at an airport waiting for a bus and everyone was just hanging out talking. For many people it is a reunion of friends that you haven't seen in years. This is also where you start sizing everyone up. I remember a majority of the people talking or relaxing, there was one person who was sitting on his bag, looking intense. That person I would later find out was David Goggins, you could tell right from the start he would be one of the guys at the end. Being a runner, I recognized him, but didn't really put it all together until after the first few days.
>
> There are several events that you know you have to do just to start the course; one of those is the road march. Without getting into specific distances, I knew it was going to be fairly far but was comfortable with running a majority of it. Coming into Selection, I had been in Special Forces for a majority of my career and it was rare when someone finished before me in a road march. I was comfortable with a ruck on my back. When we started it was a little cold and very

dark, and as we took off I was where I was most comfortable, out front. Within the first quarter mile a guy blew by me, I thought to myself, “No way he could keep that pace.” But I could see the light on his headlamp continue to pull away; I figured I would see him in a few miles after the course crushed him.

This particular road march course has a reputation of being brutal; there was one hill that as I was going up I could almost reach out in front of me and touch the ground, it was that steep. At this point, there was only one guy in front of me and I saw footprints that were twice as long as my stride length. I was in awe, my exact thought was, “This is the craziest thing I have seen; that dude ran up this hill.” Throughout the next couple of hours, I was expecting to come around a corner and find him laid up on the side of the road, but that never happened. Once finished, I was laying out my gear and I saw David hanging out. He had been done for quite a while. Though Selection is an individual event, he was the first to give a high five and say, “Nice work.”

—T, in an email dated 06/25/2018

That performance left an impression beyond the guys in my Selection class. I heard recently from Hawk, another SEAL, that some Army guys he worked with on deployment were still talking about that ruck, almost like it is an urban legend. From there I continued to smash through Delta Selection at or near the top of the class. My land navigation skills were better than they’d ever been, but that doesn’t mean it was easy. Roads were off limits, there was no flat ground, and for days we bushwhacked up and down steep slopes, in below-freezing temperatures, taking waypoints, reading maps, and the countless peaks, ridges, and draws that all looked the same. We moved through thick brush and deep snowbanks, splashed through icy creeks, and

slalomed the winter skeletons of towering trees. It was painful, challenging, and beautiful, and I was smoking it, smashing every test they could conjure.

On the second to last day of Delta Selection, I hit my first four points as fast as usual. Most days there were five waypoints to hit in total, so when I got my fifth I was beyond confident. In my mind, I was the black Daniel Boone. I plotted my point and moseyed down another steep grade. One way to navigate foreign terrain is to track power lines, and I could see that one of those lines in the distance led directly to my fifth, and final point. I hustled down country, tracked the line, turned my conscious mind off, and started dreaming ahead. I knew I was going to rock the final exam—that forty-mile land navigation I didn't even get to attempt last time because I busted my ankle two days before. I considered my graduation a foregone conclusion, and after that I'd be running and gunning in an elite unit again. As I visualized it, it became all the more real, and my imagination took me far away from the Appalachian Mountains.

The thing about following the power supply is you'd better make sure you're on the right line! According to my training, I was supposed to be constantly checking my map, so if I made a misstep I could re-adjust and head in the right direction without losing too much time, but I was so overconfident I forgot to do that, and I didn't chart backstops either. By the time I woke from fantasy land, I was way off course and almost out of bounds!

I went into panic mode, found my location on the map, humped it to the right power line, sprinted to the top of the mountain and kept running all the way to my fifth point. I still had ninety minutes until drop-dead time but when I got close to the next Humvee I saw another guy heading back toward me!

"Where you headed," I asked as I jogged over.

"I'm off to my sixth point," he said.

"Hang on—there's not five points today?!"

"Nah, there's six today, brother."

I checked my watch. I had a little over forty minutes before they called time. I reached the Humvee, took down the coordinates for checkpoint six and studied the map. Thanks to my screw up, I had two clear options. I could play by the rules and miss drop-dead time or I could break the rules, use the roads at my disposal, and give myself a chance. The one thing on my side was that in special operations they prize a thinking shooter, a soldier willing to do what it takes to meet an objective. All I could do was hope they'd have mercy on me. I plotted the best possible route and took off. I skirted the woods, used the roads, and whenever I heard a truck rumbling in the near distance, I took cover. A half hour later, at the crest of yet another mountain, I could see the sixth point, our finish line. According to my watch, I had five minutes left.

I flew downhill, sprinting all out, and made drop-dead by one minute. As I caught my breath, our crew was divided and loaded into the covered beds of two separate Humvees. At first glance, my group of guys looked pretty squared away, but given when and where I received my sixth point, every cadre in the place had to know I'd skirted protocol. I didn't know what to think. Was I in or out?

At Delta Selection, one way to be sure you're out is if you feel speed bumps after a day's work. Speed bumps mean you're back at the base, and you're heading home early. That day, when we felt the first one jar us out of our hopes and dreams, some guys started cursing, others had tears in their eyes. I just shook my head.

"Goggins, what are you doing here?" One guy asked. He was shocked to see me sitting alongside him, but I was resigned to my reality because I'd been daydreaming about graduating Delta training and being a part of the force when I hadn't even finished Selection!

"I didn't do what they told me to do," I said. "I deserve to go home."

"You are one of the best guys out here. They're making a huge mistake."

I appreciated his outrage. I expected to make it too, but I couldn't be upset by their decision. Delta brass weren't looking for men who could pass a class with a C, B+, or even an A- effort. They only accepted A+ students,

and if you screwed up and delivered a performance that was below your capability they sent you packing. Actually, if you daydream for a split second on the battlefield, that could mean your life and the life of one of your brothers. I understood that.

“No. It was my mistake,” I said. “I got this far by staying focused and delivering my best, and I’m going home because I lost focus.”

* * *

It was time to go back to being a SEAL. For the next two years I was based in Honolulu as part of a clandestine transport unit called SDV, for SEAL Delivery Vehicles. Operation Red Wings is the best known SDV mission, and you only heard about it because it was such big news. Most SDV work happens in the shadows, and well out of sight. I fit in well over there, and it was great to be back operating again. I lived on Ford Island, with a view of Pearl Harbor right out my living room window. Kate and I had split up, so now I was really living that Spartan life, and still waking up at 5 a.m. to run into work. I had two routes, an eight-miler and a ten-miler, but no matter which I took my body didn’t react too well. After only a few miles, I’d feel intense neck pain and dizzy spells. There were several times during my runs that I would have to sit down due to vertigo.

For years I’d harbored a suspicion that we all had a limit on the miles we could run before a full-body breakdown, and I wondered if I was closing in on mine. My body had never felt so tight. I had a knot on the base of my skull that I first noticed after graduating BUD/S. A decade later it had doubled in size. I had knots above my hip flexors too. I went to the doctor to get everything checked out, but they weren’t even tumors, much less malignant. When the doctors cleared me of mortal danger, I realized I’d have to live with them and try to forget about long-distance running for a while.

When an activity or exercise that you’ve always relied on gets taken away from you, like running was for me, it’s easy to get stuck in a mental rut and stop doing any exercise at all, but I didn’t have a quitter’s mentality. I gravitated toward the pull-up bar and replicated the workouts I used to do with Sledge. It was an exercise that allowed me to push myself and didn’t make me dizzy because I could take a break between sets. After a while I

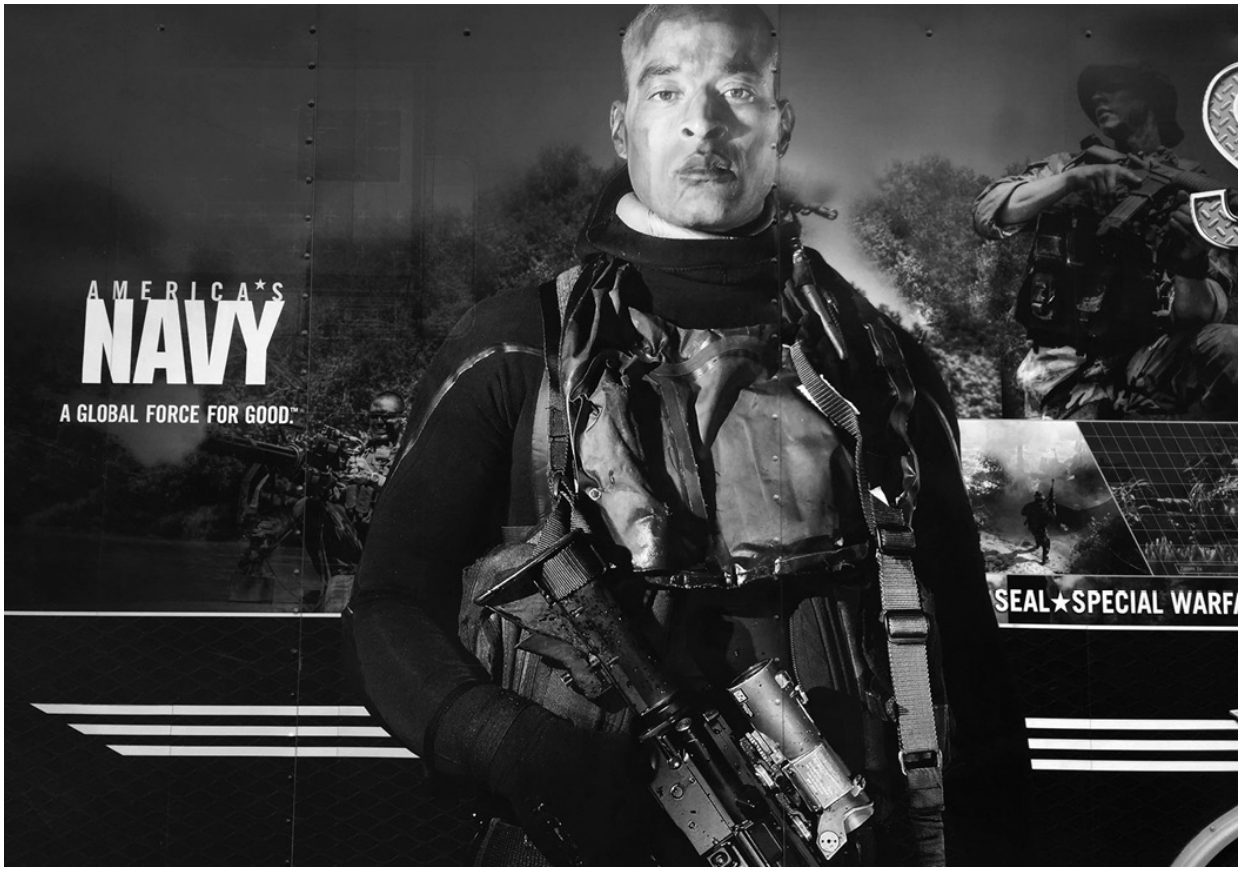
Googled around to see if there was a pull-up record within reach. That's when I read about Stephen Hyland's many pull-up records, including the twenty-four-hour record of 4,020.

At the time I was known as an ultra runner, and I didn't want to be known for just one thing. Who does? Nobody thought of me as an all-around athlete, and this record could change that dynamic. How many people are capable of running 100, 150, even 200 miles and also knocking out over 4,000 pull-ups in a day? I called the Special Operations Warrior Foundation and asked if I could help raise a bit more money. They were thrilled, and next thing I knew, a contact of mine used her networking skills to book me on the *Today Show.*

To prepare for the attempt I did 400 pull-ups a day during the week, which took me about seventy minutes. On Saturday I did 1,500 pull-ups, in sets of five to ten reps over three hours, and on Sunday I dialed it back to 750. All that work strengthened my lats, triceps, biceps, and back, prepared my shoulder and elbow joints to take extreme punishment, helped me develop a powerful gorilla-type grip, and built up my lactic acid tolerance so my muscles could still function long after they were overworked. As game day approached, I shortened recovery and started doing five pull-ups every thirty seconds for two hours. Afterward my arms fell to my side, limp as overstretched rubber bands.

On the eve of my record attempt, my mom and uncle flew into New York City to help crew me, and we were all systems go until the SEALs nearly killed my *Today Show* appearance at the last minute. *No Easy Day*, a first-hand account of the Osama bin Laden raid, had just come out. It was written by one of the operators in the DEVGRU unit that got it done, and Naval Special Warfare brass were not happy. Special Operators are not supposed to share details of the work we do in the field with the general public, and lots of people in the Teams resented that book. I was given a direct order to pull out of the appearance, which didn't make any sense. I wasn't going on camera to talk about operations, and I wasn't on a mission to self-promote. I wanted to raise one million dollars for families of the fallen, and the *Today Show* was the biggest morning show on television.

I’d served in the military for nearly twenty years by that point, without a single infraction on my record, and for the previous four years the Navy had used me as their poster boy. They put me on billboards, I was interviewed on CNN, and I’d jumped out of an airplane on NBC. They placed me in dozens of magazine and newspaper stories, which helped their recruitment mission. Now they were trying to stifle me for no good reason. If anybody knew the regulations of what I could and could not say it was me. In the nick of time, the Navy’s legal department cleared me to proceed.



Billboard during my recruiting days

My interview was brief. I told a CliffsNotes version of my life story and mentioned I’d be on a liquid diet, drinking a carbohydrate-loaded sports drink as my only nutrition until the record was broken.

“What should we cook for you tomorrow once it’s all over?” Savannah Guthrie replied. I laughed and played along, but don’t get it twisted, I was way out of my comfort zone. I was about to go to war with myself although I

didn’t look like it or act like it. As the clock wound down I took my shirt off and was wearing only a pair of lightweight, black running shorts and running shoes.

“Wow, it’s like looking at myself in a mirror,” Lauer joked, gesturing toward me.

“This segment just got even more interesting,” said Savannah. “All right David, best of luck to you. We will be watching.”

Someone hit play on *Going the Distance*, the *Rocky* theme song, and I stepped to the pull-up bar. It was painted matte black, wrapped with white tape, and stenciled with the phrase, *SHOW NO WEAKNESS* in white lettering. I got the last word in as I strapped on my gray gloves.

“Please donate to specialops.org,” I said. “We’re trying to raise a million dollars.”

“Alright, are you ready?” Lauer asked. “Three…two…one…David, go!”

With that, the clock started and I rocked a set of eight pull-ups. The rules laid down by the Guinness Book of World Records were clear. I had to start each pull-up from a dead hang with arms fully extended, and my chin had to exceed the bar.

“So it begins,” Savannah said.

I smiled for the camera and looked relaxed, but even those first pull-ups didn’t feel right. Part of it was situational. I was a lone fish in a glass box aquarium that attracted sunshine and reflected a bank of hot show lights. The other half was technical. From the very first pull-up I noticed that the bar had a lot more give than I was used to. I didn’t have my usual power and anticipated a long day. At first, I blocked that out. Had to. A looser bar just meant a stronger effort and gave me another opportunity to be uncommon.

Throughout the day people passed by on the street below, waved, and cheered. I waved back, kept to my plan, and rocked six pull-ups on the minute, every minute, but it wasn’t easy because of that rickety bar. My force was getting dissipated, and after hundreds of pull-ups, dissipation took

its toll. Each subsequent pull-up required a monumental effort, a stronger grip, and at the 1,500 mark my forearms ached like never before. My massage therapist rubbed them down between sets, but they bulged with lactic acid which seeped into every muscle in my upper body.

After more than six long hours, and with 2,000 pull-ups in the bank, I took my first ten-minute break. I was well ahead of my twenty-four-hour pace, and the sun angled lower on the horizon, which reduced the mercury in the room to manageable. It was late enough that the whole studio was shut down. It was just me, a few friends, a massage therapist, and my mother. *Today Show* cameras were set up and rolling to clock me and make sure I kept to regulations. I had more than 2,000 pull-ups still to go, and for the first time that day, doubt carved out a home in my brain.

I didn’t vocalize my negativity, and I tried to reset my mind for the second half push, but the truth was my whole plan had gone down the toilet. My carbohydrate drink wasn’t giving me the power I needed, and I didn’t have a Plan B, so I ordered and downed a cheeseburger. It felt good to have some real food. Meanwhile, my team tried to stabilize the bar by tying it to the pipes in the rafters, but instead of recharging my system like I’d hoped, the long break had an adverse effect.

During first pull-up record attempt

My body was shutting down, while my mind swirled with panic because I'd made a pledge and staked my name on a quest to raise money and break a record, and I already knew that there was no way on this earth I was gonna be able to get it done. It took me five hours to do another 500 pull-ups—that's an average of under two pull-ups per minute. I was verging on total muscle failure after doing only 1,000 more pull-ups than I would rock in three hours at the gym on a typical Saturday with no ill effects. How was that possible?

I tried to bull my way through, but tension and lactic acid had overwhelmed my system and my upper body was a lump of dough. I had never hit muscle failure before in my life. I'd run on broken legs in BUD/S, run nearly a hundred miles on broken feet, and accomplished dozens of physical feats with a hole in my heart. But late at night, on the second floor of the NBC tower, I pulled the plug. After my 2,500th pull-up, I could barely lift my hands high enough to grip the bar, let alone clear it with my chin, and just like that, it was over. There would be no celebratory breakfast with Savannah and Matt. There would be no celebration at all. I failed, and I'd failed in front of millions of people.

So did I hang my head in shame and misery? What do you think? To me a failure is just a stepping-stone to future success. The next morning, my phone was blowing up so I left it in my hotel room and went for a run in Central Park. I needed zero distractions and time enough to go back through what I'd done well and where I'd fallen short. In the military, after every real-world mission or field exercise, we fill out After Action Reports (AARs), which serve as live autopsies. We do them no matter the outcome, and if you're analyzing a failure like I was, the AAR is absolutely crucial. Because when you're headed into uncharted territory there are no books to study, no YouTube instructional videos to watch. All I had to read were my mistakes, and I considered all variables.

First of all, I should never have gone on that show. My motivation was solid. It was a good idea to try to increase awareness and raise money for the foundation, and while I required exposure to raise the amount I'd hoped, by thinking of money first (always a bad idea) I wasn't focused on the task at hand. To break this record, I needed an optimal environment, and that realization blasted me like a surprise attack. I didn't respect the record enough going in. I thought I could have broken it on a rusty bar bolted to the back of a pickup truck with loose shocks, so even though I tested the bar twice before game day, it never bothered me enough to make a change, and my lack of focus and attention to detail cost me a shot at immortality. There were also way too many bubbly looky-loos buzzing in and out of the room, asking for pictures between sets. This was the beginning of the selfie era, and that sickness most definitely invaded my safe space.

Obviously, my break was too long. I figured massage would counteract the swelling and lactic acid buildup, but I was wrong about that too, and I should have taken more salt tablets to prevent cramping. Before my attempt, haters found me online and predicted my failure, but I ignored them and didn't fully absorb the hard truths couched in their negativity. I thought, as long as I trained hard, the record would be mine, and as a result, I wasn't as well-prepared as I should have been.

You can't prepare for unknown factors, but if you have a better pre-game focus, you will likely only have to deal with one or two rather than ten. In New York, too many bubbled up, and unknown factors usually blaze a wake of doubt. Afterward, I was eye to eye with my haters and acknowledged that my margin for error was small. I weighed 210 pounds, much heavier than anyone else who had ever tried to break that record, and my probability of failure was high.

I didn't touch a pull-up bar for two weeks, but once back in Honolulu I hammered sets at my home gym and noticed the difference in the bar right away. Still, I had to resist the temptation to blame everything on that loose bar because odds were that a firmer one wouldn't translate into an extra 1,521 pull-ups. I researched gymnast chalk, gloves, and taping systems. I sampled and experimented. This time I wanted a fan set below the bar to cool me down between sets, and I switched up my nutrition. Instead of running off pure carbs I added in some protein and bananas to prevent cramping. When it came time to choose a location to attempt the record, I knew I needed to get back to who I am at my core. That meant losing the glitz and setting up shop in a dungeon. And on a trip to Nashville, I found just the place, a CrossFit gym a mile from my mother's house, owned by a former marine named Nandor Tamaska.

After emailing a couple of times, I ran over to CrossFit Brentwood Hills to meet him. It was set in a strip mall, a few doors down from a Target, and there was nothing fancy about the place. It had black mat floors, buckets of chalk, racks of iron, and lots of people putting in work. When I walked in, the first thing I did was grab the pull-up bar and shake it. It was bolted into the ground just like I'd hoped. Even a little sway in the bar would require me to adjust my grip mid-set, and when your goal is 4,021 pull-ups, all

minuscule movements accumulate into a reservoir of wasted energy, which takes a toll.

“This is exactly what I need,” I said, gripping the bar.

“Yeah,” Nandor said. “They have to be sturdy to double as our squat racks.”

In addition to its strength and stability, it was the right height. I didn’t want a short bar, because bending your legs can cause cramping in the hamstrings. I needed it high enough that I could grab it when standing on my toes.

I could tell right away that Nandor was a perfect co-conspirator for this mission. He had been an enlisted man, got into CrossFit, and moved to Nashville from Atlanta with his wife and family to open his first gym. Not many people are willing to open their doors and let a stranger take over their gym, but Nandor was down with the Warrior Foundation cause.

My second attempt was scheduled for November, and for five straight weeks I did 500-1,300 pull-ups a day at my home gym in Hawaii. During my last island session, I did 2,000 pull-ups in five hours, then caught a flight to Nashville, arriving six days before my attempt.

Nandor rallied members of his gym to act as witnesses and my support crew. He took care of the playlist, sourced the chalk, and set up a break room in back in case I needed it. He also put out a press release. I trained at his gym in the run-up to game day, and a local news channel came by to file a report. The local newspaper did a story too. It was small scale, but Nashville was growing curious, especially the CrossFit junkies. Several showed up to absorb the scene. I spoke with Nandor recently, and I liked how he put it.

“People have been running for decades, and running long distances, but 4,000 pull-ups, the human body isn’t designed to do that. So to get a chance to witness something like that was pretty neat.”

I rested the full day before the attempt and when I showed up to the gym I felt strong and prepared for the minefield ahead. Nandor and my mom collaborated to have everything dialed in. There was a sleek digital timer on the wall which also tracked my count, plus they had two battery-powered wall clocks running as back ups. There was a Guinness Book of World

Records banner hanging over the bar, and a video crew because every rep had to be recorded for potential review. My tape was right. My gloves perfect. The bar was bolted solid, and when I started out, my performance was explosive.

The numbers remained the same. I was gunning for six pull-ups every minute, on the minute, and during the first ten sets I rose up chest high. Then I remembered my game plan to minimize needless movement and wasted energy. On my initial attempt I felt pressure to get my chin well over the bar, but while all that extra space made for a good show, it did not and would not help me get the record. This time I told myself to barely clear the bar with my chin, and not to use my arms and hands for anything other than pull-ups. Instead of reaching down for my water bottle like I had in New York, I set it on a stack of wooden boxes (the kind used for box jumps), so all I had to do was turn and suck my nutrition through a straw. The first sip triggered me to dial back my pull-up motion and from then on, I remained disciplined as I piled up numbers. I was on my game and confident as I had ever been. I wasn't thinking of just 4,020 pull-ups. I wanted to go the full twenty-four hours. If I did that, 5,000 was possible, or even 6,000!

I remained hyper vigilant, scanning for any physical issues that could crop up and derail the attempt. All was smooth until, after almost four hours and 1,300 pull-ups, my hands started to blister. In between sets my mom hit me with Second Skin so I could stay on top of the cuts. This was a new problem for me, and I remembered all the doubting comments I'd read on social media prior to my attempt. My arms were too long, they said. I weighed too much. My form wasn't ideal, I put too much pressure on my hands. I'd disregarded that last comment because during my first attempt I didn't have palm issues, but in the midst of my second I realized it was because the first bar had so much give. This time I had more stability and power, but over time that bar did damage.

Still, I labored on and after 1,700 pull-ups my forearms started aching, and when I bent my arms, my biceps pinched too. I remembered those sensations from my first go-round. It was the beginning of cramps, so between sets I downed salt tablets and ate two bananas, and that took care of my muscular discomfort. My palms just kept getting worse.

A hundred and fifty pull-ups later I could feel them splitting down the middle beneath my gloves. I knew I should stop and try to fix the problem, but I also knew that might trigger my body to stiffen up and shut down. I was fighting two fires at once and didn't know where to strike first. I opted to stay on the minute by minute pace, and in between experimented with different solutions. I wore two pairs of gloves, then three. I resorted to my old friend, duct tape. Didn't help. I couldn't wrap the bar in pads because that was against Guinness rules. All I could do was try anything and everything to stay in the fight.

Ten hours into the attempt, I hit a wall. I was down to three pull-ups a minute on the minute. The pain was excruciating and I needed some relief. I took my right glove off. Layers of skin came off with it. My palm looked like raw hamburger. My mom called a doctor friend, Regina, who lived nearby and the two of us went into the back room to wait for her and try to salvage my record attempt. When Regina showed up she evaluated the situation, pulled out a syringe, loaded it with local anesthetic and dipped the needle toward the open wound on my right hand.

My hand during the second pull-up record attempt

She looked over. My heart pounded, sweat saturated every inch of my skin. I could feel my muscles cooling down and stiffening up, but I nodded, turned away, and she sunk that needle in deep. It hurt so bad, but I held my primal scream inside. *Show no weakness* remained my motto, but that didn't mean I felt strong. My mom pulled off my left glove, anticipating the second shot,

but Regina was busy examining the swelling in my biceps and the bulging spasms in my forearms.

“You look like you’re in rhabdomyolysis, David,” she said. “You shouldn’t continue. It’s dangerous.” I had no idea what she was talking about, so she broke it down.

There’s a phenomenon that happens when one muscle group is worked way too hard for way too long. The muscles become starved of glucose and break down, leaking myoglobin, a fibrous protein that stores oxygen in the muscle, into the bloodstream. When that happens, it’s up to the kidneys to filter all those proteins out and if they become overwhelmed, they shut down. “People can die from rhabdo,” she said.

My hands throbbed with agony. My muscles were locking up, and the stakes couldn’t be higher. Any rational person would have thrown in the towel, but I could hear *Going the Distance* booming from the speakers, and knew that this was my 14th round, *Cut me, Mick*, moment.

Forget rationality. I held up my left palm and had Regina sink her needle in. Waves of pain washed through me as a bumper crop of doubt flowered in my mind. She wrapped both palms in layers of gauze and medical tape and fitted me with a fresh pair of gloves. Then I stalked back out onto the gym floor and got back to work. I was at 2,900, and as long as I remained in the fight, I still believed anything was possible.

I did sets of twos and threes on the minute for two hours, but it felt like I was gripping a red hot, melting rod, which meant I was down to using my fingertips to grip the bar. First I used four fingers, then three. I was able to gut out one hundred more pull-ups, then one hundred more. Hours ticked by. I crept closer but with my body in rhabdo, breakdown was imminent. I did several sets of pull-ups with my wrists dangling over the bar. It sounds impossible, but I managed until the numbing agents stopped working. Then even bending my fingers felt like I was stabbing myself in the hand with a sharp knife.

After eclipsing 3,200 pull-ups, I worked out the math and realized if I could do 800 sets of one, it would take thirteen hours and change to break the

record and I would just beat the clock. I lasted forty-five minutes. The pain was too much and the vibe in the room went from optimistic to somber. I was still trying to show as little weakness as I could, but the volunteers could see me messing with my gloves and grip, and knew something was drastically wrong. When I went into the back to regroup a second time I heard a collective sigh that sounded like doom.

Regina and my mother unwrapped the tape on my hands, and I could feel my flesh peeling like a banana. Both palms were filleted open down to the dermis, which is where our nerves lie. Achilles had his heel, and when it came to pull-ups, my gift, and my undoing, were my hands. The doubters were right. I wasn't one of those lightweight, graceful pull-up guys. I was powerful, and the power came from my grip. But now my hand better resembled a physiology mannequin than something human.

Emotionally, I was wasted. Not just because of my sheer physical exhaustion or because I couldn't get the record for myself, but because so many people had come out to help. I'd taken over Nandor's gym and felt like I'd disappointed everyone. Without a word, my mother and I slipped out the back door like we were escaping a crime scene, and as she drove to the hospital, I couldn't stop thinking, *I'm better than this*!

While Nandor and his team broke down the clocks, untied the banners, swept up chalk, and peeled bloody tape off their pull-up bar, my mom and I slumped into chairs in the ER waiting room. I was holding what was left of my glove. It looked like it was lifted from the OJ Simpson crime scene, like it had been marinated in blood. She eyeballed me and shook her head.

"Well," she said, "I know one thing…"

After a long pause I turned to face her.

"What's that?"

"You're gonna do this again."

She read my mind. I was already doing my live autopsy and would run through a complete AAR on paper as soon as my bloody hands would allow. I knew there was treasure in this wreckage and leverage to be gained

somewhere. I just had to piece it together like a puzzle. And the fact that she realized that without my saying so fired me up.

A lot of us surround ourselves with people who speak to our desire for comfort. People who would rather treat the pain of our wounds and prevent further injury than help us callous over them and try again. We need to surround ourselves with people who will tell us what we need to hear, not what we want to hear, but at the same time not make us feel we're up against the impossible. My mother was my biggest fan. Whenever I failed in life she was always asking me when and where I would go after it again. She never said, *Well, maybe it isn't meant to be.*

Most wars are won or lost in our own heads, and when we're in a foxhole we usually aren't alone, and we need to be confident in the quality of the heart, mind, and dialogue of the person hunkered down with us. Because at some point we will need some empowering words to keep us focused and deadly. In that hospital, in my own personal foxhole, I was swimming in doubt. I fell 800 pull-ups short and I knew what 800 pull-ups felt like. That's a long day! But there was nobody else I'd rather have been in that foxhole with.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll start calling those witnesses up as soon as we get home."

"Roger that," I said. "Tell them I'll be back on that bar in two months."

* * *

In life, there is no gift as overlooked or inevitable as failure. I've had quite a few and have learned to relish them, because if you do the forensics you'll find clues about where to make adjustments and how to eventually accomplish your task. I'm not talking about a mental list either. After the second attempt, I wrote everything out long-hand, but didn't start with the obvious issue, my grip. Initially, I brainstormed everything that went well, because in every failure a lot of good things will have happened, and we must acknowledge them.

The best takeaway from the Nashville attempt was Nandor's place. His dungeon of a gym was the perfect environment for me. Yeah, I'm on social

media, and in the spotlight from time to time, but I am not a Hollywood person. I get my strength from a very dark place, and Nandor's gym wasn't a phony, happy factory. It was dark, sweaty, painful, and real. I called him the very next day and asked if I could come back to train and make another run at the record. I'd taken a lot of his time and energy and left behind a mess, so I had no idea how he'd respond.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's go!" It meant a lot to have his support again.

Another positive was how I handled my second meltdown. I was off the mat and on the comeback trail before I even saw the ER doc. That's where you want to be. You can't let a simple failure derail your mission and allow it to take over your brain and sabotage your relationships with people who are close to you. Everyone fails sometimes and life isn't supposed to be fair, much less bend to your every whim.

Luck is capricious. It won't always go your way, so you can't get trapped in this idea that just because you've imagined a possibility for yourself that you somehow deserve it. Your entitled mind is dead weight. Cut it loose. Don't focus on what you think you deserve. Take aim on what you are willing to earn! I never blamed anyone for my failures, and I didn't hang my head in Nashville. I stayed humble and sidestepped my entitled mind because I knew all too well I hadn't earned my record. The scoreboard does not lie, and I didn't delude myself otherwise. Believe it or not, most people prefer delusion. They blame others or bad luck or chaotic circumstance. I didn't, which was positive.

I listed most of the equipment we used on the positive side of the AAR, as well. The tape and chalk worked, and even though the bar tore me up, it also got me 700 additional pull-ups, so I was headed in the right direction. Another positive was the support of Nandor's CrossFit community. It felt great to be surrounded by such intense, respectful people, but this time I'd need to cut the number of volunteers in half. I wanted as little buzz in that room as possible.

After listing out all the plusses, it was time to kick the tires on my mindset, and if you're doing your post-faceplant due diligence, you should do that too. That means checking yourself on how and what you were thinking

during the preparation and execution phases of your failure. My commitment to preparation and determination in the fight are always there. They didn't waver, but my belief was shakier than I cared to admit, and as I prepared for my third go-round it was imperative to move beyond doubt.

That wasn't easy because after my second failure in as many attempts, the doubters were everywhere online. The record holder, Stephen Hyland, was light and spidery strong with thick, muscular palms. He was the perfect build for the pull-up record, and everyone was telling me I was just too big, my form was too brutal, and that I should stop trying to go for it before I hurt myself even worse. They pointed to the scoreboard that doesn't lie. I was still over 800 pull-ups away from the record. That's more than I gained between my first and second attempts. From the beginning some of them had predicted my hands would give out, and when that truth revealed itself in Nashville it presented a big mental hurdle. Part of me wondered if they were right. If I was trying to achieve the impossible.

Then I thought of an English middle-distance runner from back in the day named Roger Bannister. When Bannister was trying to break the four-minute mile in the 1950s, experts told him it couldn't be done, but that didn't stop him. He failed again and again, but he persevered, and when he ran his historic mile in 3:59.4 on May 6, 1954, he didn't just break a record, he broke open the floodgates simply by proving it possible. Six weeks later, his record was eclipsed, and by now over 1,000 runners have done what was once thought to be beyond human capability.

We are all guilty of allowing so-called experts, or just people who have more experience in a given field than we do, to cap our potential. One of the reasons we love sports is because we also love watching those glass ceilings get shattered. If I was going to be the next athlete to smash popular perception, I'd need to stop listening to doubt, whether it streamed in from the outside or bubbled up from within, and the best way to do that was to decide that the pull-up record was already mine. I didn't know when it would officially become mine. It might be in two months or twenty years, but once I decided it belonged to me and decoupled it from the calendar, I was filled with confidence and relieved of any and all pressure because my task morphed from trying to achieve the impossible into working toward an

inevitability. But to get there, I'd have to find the tactical advantage I'd been missing.

A tactical review is the final and most vital piece of any live autopsy or AAR. And while I had improved tactically from the first attempt—working on a more stable bar and minimizing wasted energy—I still fell 800 reps short, so we needed to delve deeper into the numbers. Six pull-ups per minute on the minute had failed me twice. Yes, it placed me on a fast track to 4,020, but I never got there. This time, I decided to start slower to go further. I also knew from experience that I would hit some sort of wall after ten hours and that my response couldn't be a longer break. The ten-hour mark smacked me in my face twice and both times I stopped for five minutes or longer, which led to ultimate failure pretty quickly. I needed to stay true to my strategy and limit any long breaks to four minutes max.

Now, about that pull-up bar. Yeah, it would probably tear me up again, so I needed to find a workaround. According to the rules, I wouldn't be allowed to switch up the distance between my hands mid-attempt. The width would have to remain the same from the first pull-up. The only thing I could change would be how I was going to protect my hands. In the run-up to my third attempt, I experimented with all different types of gloves. I also got clearance to use custom foam pads to protect my palms. I remembered seeing a couple SEAL buddies use slices of foam mattresses to protect their hands when they were lifting heavy weights, and called on a mattress company to custom design form-fitting pads for my hands. Guinness approved the equipment, and at 10 a.m. on January 19, 2013, two months after failing for the second time, I was back on the bar at CrossFit Brentwood Hills.

I started slow and easy with five pull-ups on the minute. I didn't strap my foam pads with tape. I just held them in place around the bar, and they seemed to work well. Within an hour the foam had formed around my hands, insulating them from molten-iron pain. Or so I hoped. At around the two-hour, 600 rep mark, I asked Nandor to play *Going the Distance* on a loop. I felt something click inside and went full cyborg.

I found a rhythm on the bar and between sets I sat on a weight bench and stared at the chalk-dusted floor. My point of view narrowed into tunnel

vision as I prepared my mind for the misery that was to come. When the first blister opened on my palm I knew it was about to get real. But this time, thanks to my failures and forensics, I was ready.

That doesn't mean I was having any fun. I wasn't. I was over it. I didn't want to do pull-ups anymore, but achieving goals or overcoming obstacles doesn't have to be fun. Seeds burst from the inside out in a self-destructive ritual of new life. Does that sound like fun? Like it feels good? I wasn't in that gym to get happy or do what I wanted to be doing. I was there to turn myself inside out if that's what it took to blast through any and all mental, emotional, and physical barriers.

After twelve hours, I finally hit 3,000 pull-ups, a major checkpoint for me, and felt like I'd run headfirst into a wall. I was exasperated, in agony, and my hands were starting to come apart again. I was still a long way from the record, and I felt all the eyeballs in the room upon me. With them came the crushing weight of failure and humiliation. Suddenly, I was back in the cage during my third Hell Week, taping my shins and ankles before mustering up with a new BUD/S class who'd heard it was my last chance.

It takes great strength to be vulnerable enough to put yourself on the line, in public, and work toward a dream that feels like it's slipping away. We all have eyeballs on us. Our family and friends are watching, and even if you're surrounded by positive people, they will have ideas about who you are, what you're good at, and how you should focus your energy. That's just human nature, and if you try to break out of their box you'll get some unsolicited advice that has a way of smothering your aspirations if you let it. Often our people don't mean any harm. Nobody who cares about us actually wants us to get hurt. They want us to be safe, comfortable, and happy, and not to have to stare at the floor in a dungeon sifting through shards of our broken dreams. Too bad. There's a lot of potential in those moments of pain. And if you figure out how to piece that picture back together, you'll find a lot of power there too!

I kept my break to just four minutes, as planned. Long enough to stuff my hands, and those foam pads, into a pair of padded gloves. But when I got back on the bar I felt slow and weak. Nandor, his wife, and the other volunteers saw my struggle, but they left me alone to put in my ear buds,

channel Rocky Balboa, and keep grinding one rep at a time. I went from four pull-ups on the minute to three, and found my cyborg trance again. I went ugly, I got dark. I imagined my pain was the creation of a mad scientist named Stephen Hyland, the evil genius who was in temporary possession of my record and my soul. It was him! That guy was torturing me from across the globe, and it was up to me and only me to keep piling up numbers and steamroll toward him, if I wanted to take *his* soul!

To be clear, I wasn't angry with Hyland—I don't even know him! I went there to find the edge I needed to keep going. I got personal with him in my head, not out of overconfidence or envy, but to drown out my own doubt. Life is a head game. This was just the latest angle I used to win a game within that game. I had to find an edge somewhere, and if you find it in the person standing in your way, that's potent.

As the hours ticked past midnight I started closing the distance between us, but the pull-ups weren't coming fast and they weren't coming easy. I was tired mentally and physically, deep into rhabdo, and I was down to three pull-ups a minute. When I hit 3,800 pull-ups I felt like I could see the mountain top. I also knew it was possible to go from being able to do three pull-ups to no pull-ups in a flash. There are stories of people at Badwater who reached mile 129 and couldn't finish a 135-mile race! You never know when you'll reach your 100 percent and hit the point of total muscle fatigue. I kept waiting for that moment to come, when I couldn't pick my arms up anymore. Doubt stalked me like a shadow. I tried my best to control it or silence it, yet it kept reappearing, following me, pushing me.

After seventeen hours of pain, around 3 a.m. on January 20, 2013, I did my 4,020th and 4,021st pull-up, and the record was mine. Everyone in the gym cheered, but I stayed composed. After two more sets and 4,030 total pull-ups, I took my headphones out, stared into the camera and said, "I tracked you down, Stephen Hyland!"

In one day, I'd lifted the equivalent of 846,030 pounds, nearly three times the weight of the Space Shuttle! Cheers spread to laughter as I pulled off my gloves and disappeared into the back room, but much to everyone's surprise, I was not in the mood to celebrate.

Does that shock you too? You know that my refrigerator is never full, and it never will be because I live a mission-driven life, always on the hunt for the next challenge. That mindset is the reason I broke that record, finished Badwater, became a SEAL, rocked Ranger School, and on down the list. In my mind I'm that racehorse always chasing a carrot I'll never catch, forever trying to prove myself to myself. And when you live that way and attain a goal, success feels anti-climactic.

Unlike my initial shot at the record, my success barely made a ripple in the news cycle. Which was just fine. I wasn't doing it for adulation. I raised some money, and I learned all I could from that pull-up bar. After logging more than 67,000 pull-ups in nine months, it was time to put them in my Cookie Jar and move on. Because life is one long imaginary game that has no scoreboard, no referee, and isn't over until we're dead and buried.

And all I'd ever wanted from it was to become successful in my own eyes. That didn't mean wealth or celebrity, a garage full of hot cars, or a dozen beautiful women trailing after me. It meant becoming the hardest man who ever lived. Sure, I stacked up some failures along the way, but in my mind the record proved that I was close. Only the game wasn't over, and being hard came with the requirement to drain every drop of ability from my mind, body, and soul before the whistle blew.

I would remain in constant pursuit. I wouldn't leave anything on the table. I wanted to earn my final resting place. That's how I thought back then, anyway. Because I had no clue how close to the end I already was.

CHALLENGE #10

Think about your most recent and your most heart-wrenching failures. Break out that journal one last time. Log off the digital version and write them out long-hand. I want you to feel this process because you are about to file your own, belated After Action Reports.

First off, write out all the good things, everything that went well, from your failures. Be detailed and generous with yourself. A lot of good things will have happened. It's rarely all bad. Then note how you handled your failure. Did it affect your life and your relationships? How so?

How did you think throughout the preparation for and during the execution stage of your failure? You have to know how you were thinking at each step because it's all about mindset, and that's where most people fall short.

Now go back through and make a list of things you can fix. This isn't time to be soft or generous. Be brutally honest, write them all out. Study them. Then look at your calendar and schedule another attempt as soon as possible. If the failure happened in childhood, and you can't recreate the Little League all-star game you choked in, I still want you to write that report because you'll likely be able to use that information to achieve any goal going forward.

As you prepare, keep that AAR handy, consult your Accountability Mirror, and make all necessary adjustments. When it comes time to execute, keep everything we've learned about the power of a calloused mind, the Cookie Jar, and The 40% Rule in the forefront of your mind. Control your mindset. Dominate your thought process. This life is all a mind game. Realize that. Own it!

And if you fail again, so be it. Take the pain. Repeat these steps and keep fighting. That's what it's all about. Share your stories from preparation, training, and execution on social media with the hashtags #canthurtme #empowermentoffailure.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHAT IF?

Before the race even kicked off I knew I was in a bad place. In 2014, the National Park Service wouldn't approve the traditional Badwater course, so Chris Kostman redrew the map. Instead of starting in Death Valley National Park and running forty-two miles through the hottest desert on the planet, it would launch further upcountry at the base of a twenty-two-mile climb. That wasn't my problem. It was the fact that I toed the line eleven pounds over my usual race weight, and had gained ten of those pounds in the previous seven days. I wasn't fat. To the average eye I looked fit, but Badwater wasn't an average race. To run and finish strong, my condition needed to be tip top, and I was far from it. Whatever was happening to me came as a shock, because after two years of substandard running, I thought I'd gotten my powers back.

The previous January I'd won a one-hundred-kilometer glacial trail race called Frozen Otter. It wasn't as hard as the Hurt 100 but it was close. Set in Wisconsin, just outside Milwaukee, the course laid out like a lopsided figure eight, with the start-finish at the center. We passed it between the two loops, which enabled us to stock up on food and other necessary supplies from our cars, and stuff them into our packs with our emergency supplies. The weather can turn evil out there, and race organizers compiled a list of necessities we were required to have on us at all times so we wouldn't die of dehydration, hypothermia, or exposure.

The first lap was the larger loop of the two and when we set off the temperature was sitting at zero degrees Fahrenheit. Those trails were never plowed. In some places, snow piled into drifts. In others the trails seemed purposefully glazed with slick ice. Which presented a problem because I

wasn’t wearing boots or trail shoes like most of my competitors. I laced up my standard running shoes, and tucked them into some cheap crampons, which theoretically were supposed to grip the ice and keep me upright. Well, the ice won that war and my crampons snapped off in the first hour. Nevertheless, I was leading the race and breaking trail in an average of six to twelve inches of snow. In some places the drifts were piled much higher. My feet were cold and wet from the starting gun, and within two hours they felt frozen through, especially my toes. My top half wasn’t faring much better. When you sweat in below-freezing temperature, salt on your body chafes the skin. My underarms and chest were cracking raspberry red. I was covered in rashes, my toes hurt with every step, but none of that registered too high on my pain scale, because I was running free.

For the first time since my second heart surgery, my body was beginning to put itself back together. I was getting 100 percent of my oxygen supply like everyone else, my endurance and strength were next-level, and though the trail was a slippery mess, my technique was dialed-in too. I was way out front and stopped at my car for a sandwich before the last twenty-two-mile loop. My toes throbbed with evil pain. I suspected they were frostbitten, which meant I was in danger of losing some of them, but I didn’t want to take off my shoes and look. Once again, doubt and fear were popping in my brain, reminding me that only a handful of people had ever finished the Frozen Otter, and that no lead was safe in that kind of cold. Weather, more than any other variable, can break a man down quick. But I didn’t listen to any of that. I created a new dialogue and told myself to finish the race strong and worry about amputated toes at the hospital after I was crowned champion.

I ran back onto the course. A blast of sun had melted some of the snow earlier in the day, but the cold wind iced up the trail nicely. As I ran, I flashed to my first year at Hurt 100 and the great Karl Meltzer. Back then, I was a plodder. I hit the turf with my heel first, and peeling the muddy trail with the entire surface area of my foot increased my odds of slipping and falling. Karl didn’t run like that. He moved like a goat, bouncing on his toes and running along the edges of the trail. As soon as his toes hit the ground he fired his legs into the air. That’s why he looked like he was floating. By design, he barely touched the ground, while his head and core remained stable and engaged. From that moment onward, his movements were

permanently etched in my brain like a cave painting. I visualized them all the time and put his techniques into practice during training runs.

They say it takes sixty-six days to build a habit. For me it takes a lot longer than that, but I eventually get there, and during all those years of ultra training and competition I was working on my craft. A true runner analyzes their form. We didn't learn how to do that in the SEALs, but being around so many ultra runners for years, I was able to absorb and practice skills that seemed unnatural at first. At Frozen Otter, my main focus was to hit the ground soft; to touch it just enough to explode. During my third BUD/S class and then my first platoon, when I was considered one of the better runners, my head bounced all over the place. My weight wasn't balanced and when my foot hit the ground all my weight would be supported by that one leg, which led to some awkward falls on slippery terrain. Through trial and error, and thousands of hours of training, I learned to maintain balance.

At Frozen Otter it all came together. With speed and grace, I navigated steep, slippery trails. I kept my head flat and still, my motion quiet as possible, and my steps silent by running on the front of my feet. When I picked up speed, it was as if I'd disappeared into a white wind, elevated into a meditative state. I became Karl Meltzer. Now it was me who looked to be levitating over an impossible trail, and I finished the race in sixteen hours, smashing the course record and winning the Frozen Otter title without losing any toes.

Toes after Frozen Otter

Two years earlier I was stricken with dizzy spells during easy six-mile runs. In 2013, I was forced to walk over one-hundred miles of Badwater, and finished in seventeenth place. I'd been on a downslide and thought my days of contention for titles were long past over. After Frozen Otter, I was tempted to believe I'd made it all the way back and then some, and that my best ultra years were actually ahead of me. I took that energy into my preparations for Badwater 2014.

I was living in Chicago at the time, working as an instructor in BUD/S prep, a school that prepared candidates to deal with the harsh reality they would face in BUD/S. After more than twenty years, I was in my final year of military service, and by being placed in a position to drop wisdom on the would-bes and wanna-bes, it felt like I'd come full circle. As usual I would run ten miles to work and back, and squeeze in another eight miles during lunch when I could. On the weekends I'd do at least one thirty-five- to forty-

mile run. It all added up to a succession of 130-mile weeks and I was feeling strong. As spring bloomed I added a heat training component by slipping on four or five layers of sweats, a beanie, and a Gore-Tex jacket before hitting the streets. When I'd show up at work, my fellow SEAL instructors would watch, amazed, as I peeled off my wet clothes and stuffed them into black trash bags that together weighed nearly fifteen pounds.

I started my taper four weeks out, and went from 130-mile weeks to an eighty-mile week, then down to sixty, forty, and twenty. Tapering is supposed to generate an abundance of energy as you eat and rest, enabling the body to repair all the damage done and get you primed for competition. Instead, I'd never felt worse. I wasn't hungry and couldn't sleep at all. Some people said my body was starved of calories. Others suggested I might be low on sodium. My doctor measured my thyroid and it was a little off, but the readings weren't so bad to explain how horrible I felt. Perhaps the explanation was simple. That I was over-trained.

Two weeks before the race I considered pulling out. I worried it was my heart again because on easy runs I felt a surge of adrenaline that I couldn't vent. Even a mellow pace sent my pulse racing into arrhythmia. Ten days before the race, I landed in Vegas. I'd scheduled five runs but couldn't get past the three-mile mark on any of them. I wasn't eating that much but the weight kept piling on. It was all water. I sought out another doctor who confirmed there was nothing physically wrong with me and when I heard that, I was not about to stop pushing forward.

During the opening miles and initial climb of Badwater 2014, my heart rate ran high, but part of that was the altitude, and twenty-two miles later I made it to the top in sixth or seventh place. Surprised and proud, I thought, let's see if I can go downhill. I've never enjoyed the brutality of running down a steep incline because it shreds the quads, but I also thought it would allow me to reset and calm my breath. My body refused. I couldn't catch my breath at all. I hit the flat section at the bottom, slowed my pace, and began to walk. My competitors passed me by as my thighs twitched uncontrollably. My muscle spasms were so bad, my quads looked like there was an alien rattling around inside them.

And I still didn’t stop! I walked for four full miles before seeking shelter in a Lone Pine motel room where the Badwater medical team had set up shop. They checked me out and saw that my blood pressure was a bit low but easily corrected. They couldn’t find a single metric that could explain how off I felt.

I ate some solid food, rested and decided to try one more time. There was a flat section leaving Lone Pine and I thought if I could knock that out perhaps I’d catch a second wind, but six or seven miles later my sails were still empty, and I’d given all I had. My muscles trembled and twitched, my heart jumped up and down the chart. I looked over at my pacer and said, “That’s it, man. I’m done.”

My support vehicle pulled up behind us and I climbed inside. A few minutes later I was laying on that same motel bed, with my tail between my legs. I’d lasted just fifty miles, but any humiliation that came with quitting—not something I was used to—was drowned out by an instinct that something was way off. It wasn’t my fear talking or my desire for comfort. This time, I was certain that if I didn’t stop trying to break through this barrier, I wouldn’t make it out of the Sierras alive.

We left Lone Pine for Las Vegas the next night, and for two days I did my best to rest and recover, hoping my body would settle somewhere close to equilibrium. We were staying at the Wynn, and on that third morning I went for a jog to see if I had anything in the tank. One mile later, my heart was in my throat, and I shut it down. I walked back to the hotel, knowing that despite what the doctors said, I was sick and suspected that whatever I had was serious.

Later that night, after seeing a movie in the Vegas suburbs, I felt weak as we strolled to a nearby restaurant, the Elephant Bar. My mom was a few paces ahead and I saw her in triplicate. I clenched my eyes shut, released them, and there were still three of her. She held the door open for me and when I stepped into the cool confines, I felt a bit better. We slid into a booth opposite one another. I was too unsteady to read the menu and asked her to order for me. From there, it got worse, and when the runner showed up with our food, my vision blurred again. I strained to open my eyes wide and felt woozy as my mother looked to be floating above the table.

“You’re going to have to call an ambulance,” I said, “because I’m going down.”

Desperate for some stability, I laid my head on the table, but my mom didn’t dial 911. She crossed to my side and I leaned on her as we made our way to the hostess stand and then back to the car. On the way I shared as much of my medical history as I could recall, in short bursts, in case I lost consciousness and she did have to call for help. Luckily, my vision and energy improved enough for her to drive me to the emergency room herself.

My thyroid had been flagged in the past, so that’s the first thing the doctors explored. Many Navy SEALs have thyroid issues when they reach their thirties, because when you put people in extreme environments like Hell Week and war, their hormone levels go haywire. When the thyroid gland is suboptimal, fatigue, muscle aches, and weakness are among more than a dozen major side effects, but my thyroid levels were close to normal. My heart checked out too. The ER docs in Vegas told me all I needed was rest.

I went back to Chicago and saw my own doctor who ordered a battery of blood tests. His office tested my endocrine system and screened me for Lyme, hepatitis, Rheumatoid arthritis, and a handful of other autoimmune diseases. Everything came back clean except for my thyroid which was slightly suboptimal, but that didn’t explain how I’d morphed so fast from an elite athlete capable of running hundreds of miles into a pretender who could barely muster the energy to tie his shoes, let alone run a mile without verging on collapse. I was in medical no-man’s-land. I left his office with more questions than answers and a prescription for thyroid medication.

Each day that went by I felt worse. Everything was crashing on me. I had trouble getting out of bed, I was constipated and achy. They took more blood and decided I had Addison’s disease, an autoimmune illness that occurs when your adrenals are drained and your body doesn’t produce enough cortisol, which was common in SEALs because we’re primed to run on adrenaline. My doctor prescribed the steroid Hydrocortisone, DHEA, and Arimidex among other meds, but taking his pills only accelerated my decline, and after that, he and the other doctors I saw were tapped out. The look in their eyes said it all. In their minds, I was either a crazy

hypochondriac, or I was dying and they didn’t know what was killing me or how to heal me.

I fought through it the best I could. My coworkers didn’t know anything about my decline because I continued to show no weakness. My whole life I’d been hiding all my insecurities and trauma. I kept all my vulnerabilities locked down beneath an iron veneer, but eventually the pain became so bad I couldn’t even get out of bed. I called in sick and lay there, staring at the ceiling, and wondered, could this be the end?

Peering into the abyss sent my mind reeling back through the days, weeks, years, like fingers flipping through old files. I found all the best parts and tacked them together into a highlight loop streamed on repeat. I grew up beat down and abused, filtered uneducated through a system that rejected me at every turn, until I took ownership and started to change. Since then I’d been obese. I was married and divorced. I had two heart surgeries, taught myself to swim, and learned to run on broken legs. I was terrified of heights, then took up high altitude sky diving. Water scared the life out of me, yet I became a technical diver and underwater navigator, which is several degrees of difficulty beyond scuba diving. I competed in more than sixty ultra distance races, winning several, and set a pull-up record. I stuttered through my early years in primary school and grew up to become the Navy SEALs’ most trusted public speaker. I’d served my country on the battlefield. Along the way I became driven to make sure that I could not be defined by the abuse I was born into or the bullying that I grew up with. I wouldn’t be defined by talent either, I didn’t have much, or my own fears and weaknesses.

I was the sum total of the obstacles I’d overcome. And even though I’d told my story to students all over the country, I never stopped long enough to appreciate the tale I told or the life I’d built. In my mind, I didn’t have the time to waste. I never hit snooze on my life clock because there was always something else to do. If I worked a twenty-hour day, I’d work out for an hour and sleep for three, but I made sure to get that in. My brain wasn’t wired to appreciate, it was programmed to do work, scan the horizon, ask what’s next, and get it done. That’s why I piled up so many rare feats. I was always on the hunt for the next big thing, but as I lay there in bed, my body taut with tension and throbbing with pain, I had a clear idea what was next

for me. The cemetery. After years of abuse, I'd finally shredded my physical body beyond repair.

I was dying.

For weeks and months, I searched for a cure to my medical mystery, but in that moment of catharsis I didn't feel sad and I didn't feel cheated. I was only thirty-eight years old, but I'd lived ten lives and experienced more than most eighty-year-olds. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. It made sense that at some point the toll would come due. I spent hours reflecting back on my journey. This time, I wasn't sifting through the Cookie Jar while in the heat of battle hoping to find a ticket to victory. I wasn't leveraging my life assets toward some new end. No, I was done fighting, and all I felt was gratitude.

I wasn't meant to be this person! I had to fight myself at every turn, and my destroyed body was my biggest trophy. In that moment I knew it didn't matter if I ever ran again, if I couldn't operate anymore, or if I lived or died, and with that acceptance came deep appreciation.

My eyes welled with tears. Not because I was afraid, but because at my lowest point I found clarity. The kid I always judged so harshly didn't lie and cheat to hurt anyone's feelings. He did it for acceptance. He broke the rules because he didn't have the tools to compete and was ashamed for being dumb. He did it because he needed friends. I was afraid to tell the teachers I couldn't read. I was terrified of the stigma associated with special education, and instead of coming down on that kid for one more second, instead of chastising my younger self, I understood him for the first time.

It was a lonely journey from there to here. I missed out on so much. I didn't have a lot of fun. Happiness wasn't my cocktail of choice. My brain had me on constant blast. I lived in fear and doubt, terrified of being a nobody and contributing nothing. I'd judged myself constantly and I'd judged everyone else around me, too.

Rage is a powerful thing. For years I'd raged at the world, channeled all my pain from my past and used it as fuel to propel me into the stratosphere, but I couldn't always control the blast radius. Sometimes my rage scorched people who weren't as strong as I'd become, or didn't work as hard, and I

didn’t swallow my tongue or hide my judgment. I let them know, and that hurt some of the people around me, and it allowed people who didn’t like me to affect my military career. But lying in bed on that Chicago morning in the fall of 2014, I let all that judgment go.

I released myself and everyone I ever knew from any and all guilt and bitterness. The long list of haters, doubters, racists, and abusers that populated my past, I just couldn’t hate them anymore. I appreciated them because they helped create me. And as that feeling stretched out, my mind quieted down. I’d been fighting a war for thirty-eight years, and now, at what looked and felt like the very end, I found peace.

In this life there are countless trails to self-realization, though most demand intense discipline, so very few take them. In southern Africa, the San people dance for thirty hours straight as a way to commune with the divine. In Tibet, pilgrims rise, kneel, then stretch out face down on the ground before rising again, in a ritual of prostration for weeks and months, as they cover thousands of miles before arriving at a sacred temple and folding into deep meditation. In Japan there’s a sect of Zen monks that run 1,000 marathons in 1,000 days in a quest to find enlightenment through pain and suffering. I don’t know if you could call what I felt on that bed “enlightenment,” but I do know that pain unlocks a secret doorway in the mind. One that leads to both peak performance and beautiful silence.

At first, when you push beyond your perceived capability your mind won’t shut up about it. It wants you to stop so it sends you into a spin cycle of panic and doubt, which only amplifies your self-torture. But when you persist past that to the point that pain fully saturates the mind, you become single-pointed. The external world zeroes out. Boundaries dissolve and you feel connected to yourself, and to all things, in the depth of your soul. That’s what I was after. Those moments of total connection and power, which came through me again in an even deeper way as I reflected on where I’d come from and all I’d put myself through.

For hours, I floated in that tranquil space, surrounded by light, feeling as much gratitude as pain, as much appreciation as there was discomfort. At some point the reverie broke like a fever. I smiled, placed my palms over my watery eyes and rubbed the top and then the back of my head. At the base of

my neck, I felt a familiar knot. It bulged bigger than ever. I threw off the covers and examined the knots above my hip flexors next. Those had grown too.

Could it be that basic? Could my suffering be linked to those knots? I flashed back to a session with an expert in stretching and advanced physical and mental training methods the SEALs brought to our base in Coronado in 2010 named Joe Hippensteel. Joe was an undersized decathlete in college, driven to make the Olympic team. But when you're a 5'8" guy going up against world-class decathletes who average 6'3" that isn't easy. He decided to build up his lower body so he could override his genetics to jump higher and run faster than his bigger, stronger opponents. At one point he was squatting twice his own body weight for ten sets of ten reps in one session, but with that increase in muscle mass came a lot of tension, and tension invited injury. The harder he trained, the more injuries he developed and the more physical therapists he visited. When he was told he tore his hamstring before the trials, his Olympic dream died, and he realized he needed to change the way he trained his body. He began balancing his strength work with extensive stretching and noticed whenever he reached a certain range of motion in a given muscle group or joint, whatever pain lingered, vanished.

He became his own guinea pig and developed optimal ranges of motion for every muscle and joint in the human body. He never went to the doctor or physical therapists again because he found his own methodologies much more effective. If an injury cropped up, he treated himself with a stretching regimen. Over the years he built up a clientele and reputation among elite athletes in the area, and in 2010, was introduced to some Navy SEALs. Word spread at Naval Special Warfare Command and he was eventually invited to introduce his range of motion routine to about two dozen SEALs. I was one of them.

As he lectured, he examined and stretched us out. The problem with most of the guys, he said, was our overuse of muscles without the appropriate balance of flexibility, and those issues traced back to Hell Week, when we were asked to do thousands of flutter kicks, then lie back in cold water with waves washing over us. He estimated it would take twenty hours of intensive stretching using his protocol to get most of us back to a normal range of motion in the hips, which can then be maintained, he said, with just twenty

minutes of stretching every day. Optimal range of motion required a larger commitment. When he got to me he took a good look and shook his head. As you know, I'd tasted three Hell Weeks. He started to stretch me out, and said I was so locked up it was like trying to stretch steel cables.

"You're gonna need hundreds of hours," he said.

At the time, I didn't pay him any mind because I had no plans to take up stretching. I was obsessed with strength and power, and everything I'd read suggested that an increase in flexibility meant an equal and opposite decrease in speed and force. The view from my death bed altered my perspective.

I pulled myself up, staggered to the bathroom mirror, turned, and examined the knot on my head. I stood as tall as I could. It looked like I'd lost not one, but nearly two inches in height. My range of motion had never been worse. What if Joe was right?

What if?

One of my mottos these days is *peaceful but never satisfied*. It was one thing to enjoy the peace of self-acceptance, and my acceptance of the world as it is, but that didn't mean I was going to lie down and wait to die without at least trying to save myself. It didn't mean then, and it doesn't mean now, that I will accept the imperfect or just plain wrong without fighting to change things for the better. I'd tried accessing the mainstream mind to find healing, but the doctors and their drugs didn't do anything except make me feel a whole lot worse. I had no other cards to play. All I could do was try to stretch myself back to health.

The first posture was simple. I sat on the ground and tried to cross my legs, Indian style, but my hips were so tight, my knees were up around my ears. I lost my balance and rolled onto my back. It took all my strength to right myself and try again. I stayed in position for ten seconds, maybe fifteen, before straightening my legs because it was too painful.

Cramps squeezed and pinched every muscle in my lower body. Sweat oozed from my pores, but after a short rest, I folded up my legs and took more

pain. I cycled through that same stretch on and off for an hour and slowly, my body started to open. I did a simple quad stretch next. The one we all learn to do in middle school. Standing on my left leg, I bent my right and grabbed my foot with my right hand. Joe was right. My quads were so bulky and tight it *was* like stretching steel cables. Again, I stayed in the posture until the pain was a seven out of ten. Then I took a short break and hit the other side.

That standing posture helped to release my quad and stretch out my psoas. The psoas is the only muscle connecting our spine to our lower legs. It wraps around the back of the pelvis, governs the hips, and is known as the fight or flight muscle. As you know, my whole life was fight or flight. As a young kid drowning in toxic stress, I worked that muscle overtime. Ditto during my three Hell Weeks, Ranger School, and Delta Selection. Not to mention war. Yet I never did anything to loosen it up, and as an athlete I continued to tap my sympathetic nervous system and had been grinding so hard my psoas continued to stiffen. Especially on long runs, where sleep deprivation and cold weather came into play. Now, it was trying to choke me from the inside out. I'd learn later that it had tilted my pelvis, compressed my spine, and wrapped my connective tissue tight. It shaved two inches off my height. I spoke to Joe about it recently.

"What was happening to you is an extreme case of what happens to 90 percent of the population," he said. "Your muscles were so locked up that your blood wasn't circulating very well. They were like a frozen steak. You can't inject blood into a frozen steak, and that's why you were shutting down."

And it wouldn't let go without a fight. Each stretch plunged me into the fire. I had so much inflammation and internal stiffness, the slightest movement hurt, say nothing of long hold poses meant to isolate my quad and psoas. When I sat down and did the butterfly stretch next, the torture intensified.

I stretched for two hours that day, woke up sore, and got back after it. On day two I stretched for six full hours. I did the same three poses over and over, then tried to sit on my heels, in a double quad stretch that was pure agony. I worked a calf stretch in too. Each session started off rough, but after an hour or two my body released enough for the pain to ease up.

Before long I was folded into stretches for upwards of twelve hours a day. I woke up at 6 a.m., stretched until 9 a.m., and then stretched on and off while at the desk at work, especially when I was on the phone. I'd stretch out during my lunch hour and then after I got home at 5 p.m., I'd stretch until I hit the sack.

I came up with a routine, starting at my neck and shoulders before moving into the hips, psoas, glutes, quads, hamstrings, and calves. Stretching became my new obsession. I bought a massage ball to tenderize my psoas. I propped a board up against a closed door at a seventy-degree angle and used it to stretch out my calf. I'd been suffering for the better part of two years, and after several months of continual stretching, I noticed the bump at the base of my skull had started to shrink, along with the knots around my hip flexors, and my overall health and energy level improved. I wasn't anywhere close to flexible yet, and I wasn't completely back to myself, but I was off all but my thyroid medication, and the more I stretched the more my condition improved. I kept at it for at least six hours a day for weeks. Then months and years. I'm still doing it.

* * *

I retired from the military as a Chief in the Navy, in November 2015, the only military man ever to be part of Air Force TAC-P, three Navy SEAL Hell Weeks in one year (completing two of them), and graduate BUD/S and Army Ranger School. It was a bittersweet moment because the military was a big part of my identity. It helped shape me and make me a better man, and I gave it everything I had.

By then Bill Brown had moved on too. He grew up marginalized like me, wasn't supposed to amount to much, and even got bounced from his first BUD/S class by instructors who questioned his intelligence. Today, he is a lawyer at a major firm in Philadelphia. Freak Brown proved and continues to prove himself.

Sledge is still in the SEAL Teams. When I met him he was a big time boozer, but after our workouts his mentality changed. He went from never running at all to running marathons. From not owning a bicycle to becoming one of the

fastest cyclists in San Diego. He's finished multiple Ironman triathlons. They say iron sharpens iron, and we proved that.

Shawn Dobbs never became a SEAL, but he did become an Officer. He's a Lieutenant Commander these days, and he's still a great athlete. He's an Ironman, an accomplished cyclist, was honor man in the Navy's Advanced Dive School, and later earned a graduate degree. One reason for all of his success is because he's come to own his failure in Hell Week, which means it no longer owns him.

SBG is still in the Navy too, but he's not messing with BUD/S candidates anymore. He analyzes data to make sure Naval Special Warfare continues to become smarter, stronger, and more effective than ever. He's an egghead now. An egghead with an edge. But I was with him when he was at his physical peak, and he was a stud.

Since our dark days in Buffalo and Brazil, my mother has also completely transformed her life. She earned a master's degree in education and serves as a volunteer on a domestic violence task force, when she's not working as a senior associate vice president at a Nashville medical school.

As for me, stretching helped me get my powers back. As my time in the military wound down, while I was still in the rehab zone, I studied to recertify as an EMT. Once again, I utilized my long-hand memorization skills I'd been honing since high school to finish at the top of my class. I also attended TEEX Fire Training Academy, where I graduated Top Honor Man in my class. Eventually, I started running again, this time with zero side effects, and when I got back into decent enough shape, I entered a few ultras and returned to the top spot in several including the Strolling Jim 40-Miler in Tennessee, and Infinitus 88k in Vermont, both in 2016. But that wasn't enough, so I became a wildland firefighter in Montana.

After wrapping up my first season on the fire lines in the summer of 2015, I stopped by my mother's place in Nashville for a visit. At midnight her phone rang. My mother is like me in the sense that she doesn't have a wide circle of friends and doesn't get many phone calls during decent hours, so this was either a wrong number or an emergency.

I could hear Trunnis Jr. on the other end of the line. I hadn't seen or spoken to him in over fifteen years. Our relationship broke down the moment he chose to stay with our father rather than tough it out with us. For most of my life I found his decision impossible to forgive or accept, but like I said, I'd changed. Through the years, my mother kept me updated on the basics. He'd eventually stepped away from our father and his shady businesses, earned a PhD, and became a college administrator. He is also a great father to his kids.

I could tell by my mom's voice that something was wrong. All I remember hearing was my mom asking, "Are you sure it's Kayla?" When she hung up, she explained that Kayla, his eighteen-year-old daughter, had been hanging with friends in Indianapolis. At some point looser acquaintances rolled up, bad blood boiled, a gun was pulled, shots rang out, and a stray bullet found one of the teenagers.

When his ex-wife called him, in panic mode, he drove to the crime scene, but when he arrived he was held outside the yellow tape and kept in the dark. He could see Kayla's car and a body under a tarp, but nobody would tell him if his daughter was alive or dead.

My mother and I hit the road immediately. I drove 80 mph through slanted rain for five hours straight to Indianapolis. We pulled into his driveway shortly after he returned from the crime scene where, while standing outside the yellow tape, he was asked to identify his daughter from a picture of her body taken on a detective's cell phone. He wasn't offered the dignity of privacy or time to pay respects. He had to do all that later. He opened the door, took a few steps toward us, and broke down crying. My mother got there first. Then I pulled my brother in for a hug and all of our issues no longer mattered.

* * *

The Buddha famously said that life is suffering. I'm not a Buddhist, but I know what he meant and so do you. To exist in this world, we must contend with humiliation, broken dreams, sadness, and loss. That's just nature. Each specific life comes with its own personalized portion of pain. It's coming for you. You can't stop it. And you know it.

In response, most of us are programmed to seek comfort as a way to numb it all out and cushion the blows. We carve out safe spaces. We consume media that confirms our beliefs, we take up hobbies aligned with our talents, we try to spend as little time as possible doing the tasks we loathe, and that makes us soft. We live a life defined by the limits we imagine and desire for ourselves because it's comfortable in that box. Not just for us, but for our closest family and friends. The limits we create and accept become the lens through which they see us. Through which they love and appreciate us.

But for some, those limits start to feel like bondage, and when we least expect it, our imagination jumps those walls and hunts down dreams that in the immediate aftermath feel attainable. Because most dreams are. We are inspired to make changes little by little, and it hurts. Breaking the shackles and stretching beyond our own perceived limits takes hard work—oftentimes physical work—and when you put yourself on the line, self-doubt and pain will greet you with a stinging combination that will buckle your knees.

Most people who are merely inspired or motivated will quit at that point, and upon their return, their cells will feel that much smaller, their shackles even tighter. The few who remain outside their walls will encounter even more pain and much more doubt, courtesy of those who we thought were our biggest fans. When it was time for me to lose 106 pounds in less than three months, everyone I talked to told me there was no way I could do it. "Don't expect too much," they all said. Their weak dialogue only fed my own self-doubt.

But it's not the external voice that will break you down. It's what you tell yourself that matters. The most important conversations you'll ever have are the ones you'll have with yourself. You wake up with them, you walk around with them, you go to bed with them, and eventually you act on them. Whether they be good or bad.

We are all our own worst haters and doubters because self-doubt is a natural reaction to any bold attempt to change your life for the better. You can't stop it from blooming in your brain, but you can neutralize it, and all the other external chatter by asking, *What if?*

What if is an exquisite response to anyone who has ever doubted your greatness or stood in your way. It silences negativity. It's a reminder that you don't really know what you're capable of until you put everything you've got on the line. It makes the impossible feel at least a little more possible. *What if* is the power and permission to face down your darkest demons, your very worst memories, and accept them as part of your history. If and when you do that, you will be able to use them as fuel to envision the most audacious, outrageous achievement and go get it.

We live in a world with a lot of insecure, jealous people. Some of them are our best friends. They are blood relatives. Failure terrifies them. So does our success. Because when we transcend what we once thought possible, push our limits, and become more, our light reflects off all the walls they've built up around them. Your light enables them to see the contours of their own prison, their own self-limitations. But if they are truly the great people you always believed them to be, their jealousy will evolve, and soon their imagination might hop its fence, and it will be their turn to change for the better.

I hope that's what this book has done for you. I hope that right now you are nose-to-concrete with your own limits you didn't even know were there. I hope you're willing to do the work to break them down. I hope you're willing to change. You'll feel pain, but if you accept it, endure it, and callous your mind, you'll reach a point where not even pain can hurt you. There is a catch, however. When you live this way, there is no end to it.

Thanks to all that stretching, I'm in better shape at forty-three than I was in my twenties. Back then I was always sick, wound tight, and stressed out. I never analyzed why I kept getting stress fractures. I just taped things up. No matter what ailed my body or my mind I had the same solution. Tape it up and move on. Now I'm smarter than I've ever been. And I'm still getting after it.

In 2018 I went back to the mountains to become a wildland firefighter again. I hadn't been in the field for three years, and since then I'd gotten used to training in nice gyms and living in comfort. Some might call it luxury. I was in a plush hotel room in Vegas when the 416 fire sparked and I got the call. What started as a 2,000-acre grass fire in the San Juan Range of Colorado's

Rocky Mountains was growing into a record-breaking, 55,000-acre monster. I hung up and caught a prop plane to Grand Junction, loaded up in a U.S. Forest Service truck, and drove three hours to the outskirts of Durango, Colorado, where I suited up in my green Nomex pants and yellow, long-sleeved button down, my hard hat, field glasses, and gloves, and grabbed my super Pulaski—a wildland fire fighter's most trusted weapon. I can dig for hours with that thing, and that's what we do. We don't spray water. We specialize in containment, and that means digging lines and clearing brush so there's no fuel in the path of an inferno. We dig and run, run and dig, until every muscle is spent. Then we do it all over again.

On our first day and night we dug fire lines around vulnerable homes as walls of flames marched forward from less than a mile away. We glimpsed the burn through the trees and felt the heat in the drought-stricken forest. From there we were deployed to 10,000 feet and worked on a forty-five-degree slope, digging as deep as possible, trying to get to the mineral soil that won't burn. At one point a tree fell and missed hitting one of my teammates by eight inches. It would have killed him. We could smell smoke in the air. Our sawyers—the chainsaw experts—kept cutting dead and dying trees. We hauled that brush out beyond a creek bed. Piles were scattered every fifty feet for over three miles. Each one measured roughly seven to eight feet tall.

We worked like that for a week of eighteen-hour shifts at $12 an hour, before taxes. It was eighty degrees during the day and thirty-six degrees at night. When the shift was over we laid out our mats and slept in the open wherever we were. Then woke up and got back after it. I didn't change my clothes for six days. Most of the people on my crew were at least fifteen years younger than me. All of them were hard as nails and among the very hardest working people I've ever met. Including and especially the women. None of them ever complained. When we were done we'd cleared a line 3.2 miles long, wide enough to stop a monster from burning down a mountain.

At forty-three, my wildland firefighting career is just getting started. I love being part of a team of hard working people like them, and my ultra career is about to be born again too. I'm just young enough to still get out there and get after it. I'm running faster now than I ever have, and I don't need any tape or props for my feet. When I was thirty-three I ran at an 8:35 per mile

pace. Now I’m running 7:15 per mile very comfortably. I’m still getting used to this new, flexible, fully functioning body, and getting accustomed to my new self.

My passion still burns, but to be honest, it takes a bit longer to channel my rage. It’s not camped out on my home screen anymore, a single unconscious twitch from overwhelming my heart and head. Now I have to access it consciously. But when I do, I can still feel all the challenges and obstacles, the heartbreak and hard work, like it happened yesterday. That’s why you can feel my passion on podcasts and videos. It’s all still there, seared into my brain like scar tissue. Tailing me like a shadow that’s trying to chase me down and swallow me whole, but always drives me forward.

Whatever failures and accomplishments pile up in the years to come, and there will be plenty of both I’m sure, I know I’ll continue to give it my all and set goals that seem impossible to most. And when naysayers say so, I’ll look them dead in the eye and respond with one simple question.

What if?

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DAVID GOGGINS is a retired Navy SEAL and the only member of the U.S. Armed Forces ever to complete SEAL training, U.S. Army Ranger School, and Air Force Tactical Air Controller training. Goggins has competed in more than sixty ultra-marathons, triathlons, and ultra-triathlons, setting new course records and regularly placing in the top five. A former Guinness World Record holder for completing 4,030 pull-ups in seventeen hours, he's a much-sought-after public speaker who's shared his story with the staffs of *Fortune* 500 companies, professional sports teams, and hundreds of thousands of students across the country.