



U.S.Navy Seawolves: The Elite HAL-3 Helicopter Squadron in Vietnam

By Daniel E. Kelly

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They put their lives on the line—every time.**

In the Viet Cong-infested Mekong Delta, where small SEAL teams were always outgunned and outnumbered, discovery brought swift, deadly consequences—and a radio call for backup from the United States Navy's very best: the Seawolves. The whir of approaching rotor blades signaled their arrival as they tore through the jungle at treetop level, gunners hanging off the skids, shooting M-60s, raining down their lethal mix of high explosives and incendiary death.

Seawolf Dan Kelly describes the origins of this extraordinary outfit. Put through a training program unlike any other, these men emerged to perform unparalleled feats of courage. The stories of these elite warriors capture America's real heroes in all their guts and glory, and demonstrate why the Seawolves are known as the most successful and most decorated unit in the Vietnam War.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Daniel E. Kelly lives with his wife, Belle, in McKinney, Texas. After leaving the navy, he earned a B.A. from the University of Northern Iowa. Despite the loss of a leg four inches above the knee, he holds a deputy's commission with the Dallas County sheriff's department. He has worked with the Dallas Tactical Team and gone undercover for BATF. He likes horseback riding and Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

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Monsoon season. The night is covered with a blanket of humid air you could cut with a knife. It is perfectly still. The only evidence of movement is a lone, olive drab, thirty-one-foot-long fiberglass patrol boat drifting in the river. On board is a U.S. Navy SEAL Team frozen in time, sweat trickling down camouflaged faces with watchful eyes. Seven men wait silently around the twin .50s--two .50 caliber machine guns--on the front of the PBR (Patrol Boat, River) manned by one of the River Rat sailors. Another River Rat is at a single .50 caliber gun at the rear of the vessel. They watch for any sign that their position has been detected.

There's an old chief petty officer at the wheel, using all his experience to guide the PBR with its two diesel engines and jet pumps to its destination without making a sound. By nursing the throttles ever so gently and using the current, he navigates the river to get the SEAL Team where it wants to go. You can't hear the motors at idle speed because of the foam built around them to kill the noise.

Total darkness. With the thick cloud cover brought on by the approaching monsoon, you can't tell where the river stops and the jungle starts. That's where the fourth River Rat comes in. He's got his sweat-dripping face pushed into a large black rubber cup that has a radar screen inside it. It's the only way he can see the shoreline. A slight breeze begins to blow across the bow, signaling that the rain will start at any moment.

By whispering directions and using a combination of hand signals to the chief, the two of them maneuver the PBR in to the muddy bottom of the shallow water, which is the bank, as careful as a mother handling a newborn babe.

As the boat drifts to a complete stop on the bank, the Seals slither over the side without making a sound, like a school of water snakes eager to get back home. As the last one leaves the PBR, the entire squad disappears from sight of the River Rats. They have been swallowed up once again by South Vietnam's insect-infested

mangrove swamp in the Delta region.

Tom Moloney, the point man, is the first one to penetrate the dark jungle edge after leaving the muddy bank. A twenty-eight-year-old first class petty officer from Tennessee, the five-foot-nine Moloney is wearing tiger-striped fatigues and an olive drab rag, which used to be a T-shirt, stretched over the top of his head and tied in the back like a pirate's. Camo paint covers his face.

Moloney moves slowly, almost on his hands and knees in the mud, looking and feeling for booby traps. You don't move in a hurry in this swamp, doing what he's doing, unless you want to get sent home in a bag.

He carries a Stoner (a belt-fed M-16), with a 100-round drum of .223 ammo attached underneath, as with an old-fashioned tommy gun. He also has 800 rounds of belted ammo strapped around him, adding to the pirate image. Six V-40 grenades (each about the size of a golf ball), one concussion grenade, one gas grenade, two pop flares, and a directional flashlight with colored lens hang from his web gear. His first aid supplies consist of a waist pack with a can of serum albumin, two morphine syrettes, and battle dressing. Attached to his upper chest on his web gear is a Gerber Mk-1 knife with a Smith & Wesson model 22 and silencer in a shoulder holster. Last but not least, a LAAW rocket is strapped to his back.

Following in Moloney's tracks is twenty-two-year-old Fritz Heitjan. He carries an M-60 machine gun and enough ammo to bring a water buffalo to its knees. His face is painted light green, dark green, and black, like a confused zebra. A K-bar knife is taped to his shoulder, along with a directional flashlight with colored lens.

The third man to break the edge of the swamp is their leader, twenty-five-year-old lieutenant junior grade Richard Benedict from Wisconsin. At six feet two inches and 185 pounds, he projects a commanding presence. His weapon of choice is a CAR-15 (a stumpy-looking M-16). There are six magazines of ammo mounted on his web gear across the front of his chest, plus three more taped together in his gun, and on his back hangs a Starlight Scope.

Kane Kennedy, the radioman, is next in line. He's twenty-six years old, out of Georgia, five-ten and 160 pounds of dynamite. Kennedy's got a PRC-25 radio strapped to his back, with a computer card that keeps people from listening in. It scrambles the signal somehow. His weapon of choice is an M-203 (an M-16 with an M-79 grenade launcher mounted under the barrel).

Next is Richard Oliver, the twenty-five-year-old corpsman. Along with the medical gear and copper sulfate, he carries an M-60 belt-fed machine gun with 400 rounds and the weight that comes with it. He's burly, at six-one and 195 pounds, and ready to kill as well as save.

Third class petty officer Vernon Barker comes right behind. The twenty-one-year-old has a Stoner in hand and a LAAW rocket strapped to his back, as well as a silenced Smith & Wesson under his arm, a K-bar knife on his shoulder, numerous grenades, and a first aid pouch with a canteen of water.

Twenty-two-year-old Texan Mo Marvin brings up the rear. He carries an M-60 and the responsibility of ensuring that Charlie doesn't sneak up on them from behind. Like Vernon, Mo is black, and at six-three and 215 pounds, even bigger than the Louisianan.

It's another body snatch mission, and the men look the part, in tiger stripes, camo green faces, and loaded down with enough killing tools for World War Three. The LT, Benedict, takes it as his responsibility to bring everyone back home alive. He's studied martial arts since he was a kid, put in four years at the Naval Academy, and has a degree in engineering. Yet here he is, getting eaten alive by unknown kinds of bugs in a

faraway land, hunting and killing under the worst possible conditions, and for poverty wages. God, he loves it!

A slight breeze starts to blow through the jungle on this hot, humid night. There's no moon out, which is as it should be--the darker, the better.

The men are moving through the mangroves at a snail's pace, at times on their hands and knees. There's about four or five inches of water with mud underneath and a tangled mess of mangrove roots twisting and winding through, on top, and under the water, which makes it easy to trip and fall. And this is one place no one wants to fall. It contains everything from pungy sticks to trip wires with 81mm mortar shells attached to them. That'll ruin your day!

Benedict can see Heitjan out in front of him, moving along with his eyes fixed on Moloney in front of him and at the same time watching for movement to his right. Benedict is scanning to the left in sync with his CAR-15. Kennedy, the radioman, just behind him, is focused on his right, and so on, back to Mo, the rear guard, who's covering 180 degrees behind.

As they keep moving forward, it seems a contest to see who can be the quietest. You get extra points for being the first to see something in your assigned area. It's like trying to sneak up on a deer with your bow and arrow back home. Now, that takes some talent--just trying to see the deer before he sees you. And this jungle is thick.

Benedict's feet inside his boots are already soaked with the swamp water that's worked its way down and around his socks. The rest of him is a sweaty mess, with his tiger stripe fatigues sticking to his body. He thinks: Boy, is it hot.

The mosquitoes are terrible. He's already got welts coming up on his face and hands where he's been bit, and the mission's just getting started.

Wow! Look out! Heitjan just squatted way down, holding up one clenched fist. Moloney had heard or seen something ahead. Benedict signals too, so Kennedy and the rest will stop as well. All of them become part of the jungle, not a single muscle moving.

After what seems an eternity, but is just a couple of seconds, they find out what the deal was. There's something in the jungle moving rapidly toward them. It sounds like a bunch of people running their way. A cool breeze blows ahead of it. Then a curtain of water moves straight through the jungle, sweeping over the squad and on toward the river behind.

It's a monsoon storm, and as it approaches, it makes an eerie sound, bouncing off all the leaves in the jungle, working its way down through the three levels of canopy above. These rains, when they come, are like a wall of water walking across the Delta. Not much wind, just rain coming straight down. And in contrast and relief to the heat, it's wonderfully refreshing.

It is unnerving, though, since it can't be seen approaching. All you can hear is movement, from all that water hitting the jungle undergrowth.

As the cool rain makes its way through Benedict's hair and over his bandanna, then continues on down his back, he can feel his body being recharged with the comfort of the liquid overtaking the sticky, hot, sweaty feeling of cloth stuck to him everywhere.

The team slowly moves forward again, toward its objective. They all hope that the rain lasts. It makes them even harder to detect. Of course, it makes it harder for them to see as well.

Benedict doesn't like the men moving through the dense undergrowth so close together, but they have to be able to communicate. Occasionally, he swings his Starlight Scope around from his shoulder and glances through it to scan the surrounding area. With the rain, and it being so dark, it's harder to see through the scope. It looks like a green TV screen with a lot of snow. All he can make out are silhouettes of his men and the jungle background.

They keep edging forward through the mangroves as if balancing on a tightrope over the Grand Canyon, with their lives depending on every planted foot. Which of course they do! At this rate it will take them about two hours to travel one klick from the river to the village, where they'll find the man they're after.

He's a province chief. The intelligence gathered by the Provincial Interrogation Command, MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam), and COMNAVFORV (Command Naval Forces Vietnam) says he's a major bad guy. There are pictures of him and how many guards he'll be traveling with, right down to the hooch where he'll be found within the village.

A flyover by Army chopper the day before will help locate the specific hooch. It will make the job much easier. Plus, the men spotted the perfect extraction point about two klicks north of the village, which had been the scene of a B-52 strike leveling that part of the jungle. The Army helicopter could come in and pick them up there.

The report went on to say that now was the time to grab the province chief because of the updated knowledge he had.

Shit! Benedict stops short. There goes Heitjan again! He dissolves down into the slush they're maneuvering through, his arm raised, his fist clinched, signaling that there's a problem. Moloney has stumbled onto something.

Between a combination of hand signals and lip reading, the message is passed back through the squad. Moloney came up on a trip wire. It's probably attached to an 81mm mortar round somewhere close by. The point man will mark the spot and then move on, stepping gingerly over the wire like a cat avoiding water. The mark is usually a twig or a leaf of some kind. After Heitjan goes over it, it's Benedict's turn, and he discovers that the mark is a stripped-off piece of bark.

Never, never be in a hurry! The LT knows this. If nothing else, he's going to come out of this with the patience of Job.

When he's over it, it's Kennedy's turn. Benedict points out the piece of bark that marks the spot, as Heitjan did for him. The LT wants to watch him but can't. He has to keep his focus on his job, which is the left side of the jungle and any movement that might signal an ambush. He knows the drill: never assume anything and be ready for everything!

Glancing back, he can tell that his radioman has made his move past the danger spot.

Next is Oliver. Benedict can't see him in all the rain and darkness, but as Kennedy continues moving forward, the LT knows that all is well with the rest of the squad behind.

Moving along at their slow, consistent pace, Benedict can feel his fingers on the CAR-15 getting that prunelike feeling from being wet so long. Like back home in his swimming pool, which he would just about live in during summer vacation. His toes in his boots are getting that same feeling. Water running down past his bandanna, across his forehead, and into and around his eyes makes him blink constantly. An eyelash every once in a while gets flushed into his eye. He hates it when that happens.

He knows you have to keep your focus and ignore the little things in life. An eyelash in the eye won't kill you, but an AK-47 round will definitely change the expression on your face.

The rain is steady, just like the dark, as they keep moving like a snake winding through its own backyard, slowly and cautiously looking for that next meal. Nobody's in a hurry. They're all just concentrating on consistency in exact movements, and they focus on the job at hand.

As Benedict's feet, carefully, one at a time, slide through the four or five inches of water and down into the mud beneath, he feels the mangrove roots twisting and winding across the swamp, seemingly trying everything they can to trip him up. Finding that trip wire means there's going to be more ahead, and in this shit they're literally climbing through, it's going to be hard finding other traps. One thing about this job, it sure makes you stretch.

About thirty minutes later the rain starts to let up a little. Just in time for the baseball fanatic to alert them again. Way to go, Mr. Baseball! Keep up the good work! Benedict thinks. Another trip wire.

After marking it, he moves on. The rest of the men follow suit, taking their turns levitating over the stretched-tight fishing line blocking their path. Moloney must have some Indian in him somewhere, Benedict muses. He doesn't know how he seems to find these things in all this mess, but he's sure glad he does.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jonathan Nelson:

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