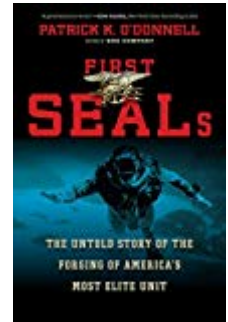


Patrick K. O'Donnell. *First SEALs: The Untold Story of the Forging of America's Most Elite Unit.* Boston: Da Capo, 2014. xi + 290 pp. Ill. \$25.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82172-1.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In his latest exploration of oft-forgotten history, Patrick K. O'Donnell tells the story of the creation of the Office of Strategic Services' Maritime Unit (OSS MU)—an early forerunner of the modern US Navy SEALs. *First SEALs: The Untold Story of the Forging of America's Most Elite Unit* takes the reader on a journey from the MU's uncertain beginnings at a swanky Washington, DC hotel through its training along the Potomac, in California, and in the Bahamas and finally to its baptism by fire in the Mediterranean Sea during World War II. The author of ten previous books, O'Donnell has had two of them, *Give Me Tomorrow*, and *We Were One*, featured on the Commandant of the Marine Corps's professional reading list.

The Italian frogman unit Decima MAS's exploits against the British warships in Alexandria harbor in Egypt provided the necessary impetus for like-minded Americans. Allied commanders recognized a need for units able to operate in secret from the ocean and behind enemy lines. Thus, in the summer of 1942, the fledgling OSS began the search for the sort of brilliant daredevils who

could impress with both brains and brawn—a “Ph.D. who could win a bar fight” (p. 12). The OSS and its leader proved adept at finding and managing talent, preferring to recruit and train Olympic-level swimmers rather than bring over experienced Navy divers. Recruiting outsiders turned out to be a unique choice that had a direct impact on the evolution of the MU's laid-back culture—imbued with the best traits of that era's stereotypical California surfer lifestyle.

Given the MU's unique mission and culture, it comes as no surprise that William Donovan was responsible for connecting such dynamic personalities as H. G. A. Woolley, Jack Taylor, and Christian Lambertsen to test Lambertsen's underwater breathing devices in the pool of the DC hotel. O'Donnell describes the nuance that went into developing this device, uncovering how Lambertsen learned about oxygen and carbon dioxide through being forced to experience hypoxia and hypercapnia. Lambertsen's experience led to the creation of his rebreather, the Lambertsen Amphibious Respiratory Unit (LARU), which outperformed and re-

placed earlier attempts at an artificial underwater “lung” and ushered in a new era of underwater warfare. O’Donnell then describes the training of three distinct combat swimmer groups, including a fascinating mission to penetrate Guantanamo Bay. The most captivating story in the book revolves around Taylor’s final mission into Austria and his subsequent capture and harrowing experience at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, where he endured brutal treatment by Nazi camp officers. Taylor avoided execution and became the star witness at subsequent trials of Nazi officials.

The focus on Taylor makes the book read like a biography of the former dentist. Also, while the author describes Woolley as a dynamic and visionary leader, he does a poor job supporting that description, as Woolley virtually disappears after the first section of the book, which presents no evidence of the World War I hero’s hand in crafting the unit’s culture. Furthermore, O’Donnell misses an opportunity to expound on swimming groups sent to the Pacific theater, devoting a mere fourteen pages to their exploits. His omission of their exploits is perhaps because those groups deployed to the Pacific were forced to conduct operations like their Underwater Demolition Team counterparts rather than the specialized proto-SEALs of the Mediterranean. O’Donnell’s work would benefit from a comparative framework depicting how these two theaters, the environment, their commanders, and their cultures created different versions of the OSS MU.

The author combines archival research with thousands of oral history interviews over a decade that earned him the special trust and friendship of many of his subjects. This personal touch offers the reader a unique view into the Maritime Units Mediterranean exploits directly from the men involved. The book also includes an epilogue and summary of its subjects’ postwar careers, which adds to the personal feel. While he relies mostly on the oral histories, O’Donnell does well to extract as much as possible from the institutional sources—

especially the “miscategorized, sometimes misfiled, and extremely complex” Record Group 226 at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland (p. 254).

Throughout this book, O’Donnell presents a vivid history of the OSS MU from its inception through the war’s termination, albeit focused on the Mediterranean theater. The books’ chapters are concise and digestible but often leave the reader clamoring for more. Regardless, this is an engaging book that places the reader in the thick of the action. Ideal for any layperson looking to increase their knowledge of the Office of Strategic Services and its Maritime Unit, this is an entertaining, insider’s look into the early days of special operations. O’Donnell has crafted a compelling, well-researched, and concise book that will appeal to enthusiasts of special operations history.

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