

Coronado, California 04/07/09 Sunny 76 degrees

I am looking into the BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/ SEAL) training center and at the same time out onto the Pacific Ocean. The aura of such a famous place is palpable. This is where men come to find out if they really have what it takes to be one of the greatest warriors the world has ever known, or to find out that the commitment is far too much to ask of themselves.

I've been here before and understand what continually takes place here, but today I will develop an even better appreciation – one that I vow to never forget. I was led to this location in preparation for writing my book titled, *Play Great Pool*. Discipline is a core aspect of greatness in any undertaking including pool, and who has more discipline than U.S. Navy SEALs?

It is 5:30 a.m. and I am excited at the prospect of the day before me. Several weeks back I had contacted "Frogman 80," whose real name is Amir Pishdad. Amir is a 53 year old retired Navy SEAL who is often called "Pish" by his teammates. Through several communications, Pish agreed to get me an up close and personal BUD/S tour. Tours do exist for civilians, but they are usually reserved for special groups and are conducted by a public relations officer; not by your own personal real SEAL who grew up on this very base. His credentials are extensive and impressive; he is known throughout the SEAL community at least by his reputation. The Naval Special Warfare community is very small and an extremely tight family. Pish is friends with Marcus Luttrell, the "Lone Survivor" of Operation Redwing, and with Rudy Boesch (another famous SEAL who became popular with his appearance on the television reality show "Survivor"). World famous SEAL Dick Marcinko (also known as "Demo Dick" or "Rogue Warrior") personally sought out Pish to serve in his unit.

I certainly did not want to be late for our scheduled 9:00a.m. breakfast meeting at the Nite and Day Café, a 24 hour diner on Coronado Island. I arrived over an hour early and went to the beach next to the BUD/S compound just to look on and set the mood for this eagerly anticipated day. Activity was everywhere on the beach with both SEAL candidates and full fledged SEALs running in the sand. I then return to the Café so as to be early by 15 minutes; out of respect for Pish taking the time for me. Punctuality is a universal trait of SEALs; active or retired.

Pish had parked his truck and was already there when I returned; early, much as I had suspected. I have never seen him before and only know his name and age; 53 years old, the same as myself. I observe a man that has a thick upper body; and arms and legs are stark evidence of serious strength training. I ask if he is Amir, and he immediately engages me as a long time friend. We go into the restaurant and with a very outgoing personality he speaks to everyone in a positive

and friendly manner, despite not knowing them. We sit together at the counter of this very small diner and drink coffee. The female cook takes our order and also converses with the five or six customers. Soon she makes it known that her husband is leaving for his fourth SEAL deployment of six months or longer; his destination a secret from her. Pish asks her a couple of questions and she then knows he also was a SEAL. She is not amused or smitten with her husband's profession and gives off an air of resignation and jaded attitude of indifference. She appears to be someone whose emotions have been cauterized by several years of taking second place to her husband's job.

I find out that Pish was a graduate of class 80 (thus his handle of "Frogman 80"), and was in the ONLY "no bell" hellweek class (which means that 19 candidates began the hell week training and nobody dropped out!). This was the only class ever to have no dropouts, and today we are to observe class 276!

The very affable and positive Pish then introduces himself to the cook, Amanda, and she seems startled. She then confirms his identity and reports that many of the BUD/S trainees mention his name during her work day. Now, I am highly amused to find that my new friend is legendary. We finish breakfast and jump into the truck and off we go. Pish produces his military I.D. and the sentry passes us through with a crisp salute. We drive around several buildings, including the SEAL Headquarters.

As we drive, we pass the trainee barracks. Several of the doors to the rooms are open and one has a trainee sloppily standing at attention alone. Pish slows and surveys for a moment and says, "this looks good, maybe room inspection," then quickly parks the truck and says, "c'mon." I follow with some trepidation and this bigger than life SEAL bounds up to the trainee standing at the door looking straight ahead. Pish says "what's your name son?" and the trainee responds, "Jacobs sir" as he seems to recognize authority despite the civilian clothes (and it is obvious that I am a clear misfit in these parts). "Get your shoulders back and chest out!" Pish states as he demonstrates to the young trainee the proper way to stand at attention. The recruit immediately abided, as he was informed of the importance of detail. Pish then looked past him and into the room, "hey look in here Mark," and indirectly asked why all of that gear is on the bunk? Then almost out of nowhere, from several rooms away, comes a full-on BUD/S instructor. I am face to face, on his turf, and it appears that he is never in a joking mood. The instructor has an extremely serious demeanor that causes me thoughts of preparing to come to attention myself, drop and push em out, or get wet and sandy for even being here on a lark, without his consent or knowledge.

The instructor was the perfect model of what a BUD/S instructor should be; totally together and totally in control. Pish immediately introduces himself and as always it is "Amir Pishdad class 80" and the instructor looking us straight in the eye introduces himself to Amir, who then introduces me and we shake hands firmly. I had been very uncertain about our being there but

gained some minor immunity for being with Amir of Class 80 - it was not any problem for the moment. Amir asked if this is a room inspection. The instructor said this had been a surprise inspection and that the recruit Jacobs is holding an item that is not allowed. It appeared to be a small bolt cutter that I had not noticed beforehand. The instructor firmly said, "you are not supposed to have these, are you Jacobs?" "Negative, sir" he responded and the instructor went on to talk about where these trainees are at, which is termed Indoc (indoctrination which is preparation for the real training to begin in two weeks) .

The instructor asked us, "did Jacobs tell you why he is wearing sun glasses?" He informed us that Jacobs had eye surgery and the medical officers allowed them. The unspoken point of detail is that he is not training sun bathers or grade school teachers but warriors, and did not want us to think that he was lax and allows free expression. Jacobs spoke up to clarify something that was said. Another mistake for him by entering the conversation unasked and he heard about it immediately. He continued to stand at attention, looking straight ahead while being talked about without further interrupting. The instructor said that this was a SWCC class being formed (Special Warfare Combat Craft) and the full fledged training would be under way in two weeks. In a loud voice that Jacobs can hear, the instructor speculates that given the attention Jacobs is already drawing he will certainly be gone from the program very shortly. Amir tells the instructor that I am a SEAL supporter and had donated to the foundation, which seems to gain me some minor credit with my newest acquaintance.

Soon another serious instructor is upon us with the same squared away serious look of someone that totally applies themselves to a life of stern responsibility. As we depart, Pish gives Jacobs a final pep talk and Jacobs gave him a strong "Hooyah sir" and we leave. What a great scene to play out live and I love it. We then head south, stopping at the Phillip H Bucklew Naval Special Warfare Center, Coronado, California where BUD/S is conducted. We pass under a huge sign with the name of the center, and a huge eight foot gold SEAL Trident; and then through the doors and onto the quarterdeck. Amir explains to the desk the nature of our visit and as a member of the team is welcomed aboard.

On the wall to our right are mounted plaques honoring the Medal of Honor winners from within this command. Five plaques describe their heroics and several were awarded posthumously. Also the SEAL code and many of the SEAL mottos are on display, along with big photographs of the training process. We then step out the aft doors and onto the "Grinder", which is the famous location of killer PT (physical training) sessions. This I really wanted to see. Next to me was the famous statue of the "Creature from the Black Lagoon," that was a gift that one class left behind, and has now become symbolic here at the Center. Looking to the right is the famous "ring out bell." Beside the bell is a row of helmet liners, each stenciled with the class number 276. Each liner represents a man that has dropped out of this training class, and is a stark reminder to the candidates of the difficulty of graduating. The grinder is ringed with instructor offices, class rooms, and pull up bars.

Amir sees a Master Chief he knows lifting weights with another guy on the far end of The Grinder. He points out that they are lifting over two hundred pounds and both are competitive as SEALs are trained to be. We approach them under the midday bright sun and are warmly received. The Master Chief is large for a SEAL, standing at 6'6" and built like Hercules or a Greek God. After some small talk he is interested in my pool playing and I give him a business card for him to find my web site. He sends us into a main classroom to look around; the walls are filled with SEAL history. I am so impressed to get to see all of the inner workings without much restriction. This is a great experience and even better than I had dreamed. I have seen pictures of some of this, but they could never compare to the reality of being here.

My personal feeling is that I have not earned the right to be here, nor do I deserve to be here, but I certainly do respect what goes on here. I really did not know what to expect today and I was filled with uncertainty. The majesty of the physical location, white sand, blue water, and the importance of the Naval Special Warfare Command Center is a bit overwhelming, yet the most awe inspiring part of the experience is the people I have met. These are not movie characters but the real live men that make it happen without excuses. They do not have the modern day "prima donna pampered athlete attitude" despite being world class athletes. They are quiet professionals that seek not glory or money, but to be great teammates continually striving to become better. It would be an understatement to say that they are inspired, motivated, and highly disciplined – they have those attributes in a supply that is well beyond normal comprehension.

Next we pass the buildings that house Teams 7,5,1, and finally 3 next to the "O Course." This is the famous obstacle course where we chat a bit about the training and specific challenges. Then we go across the highway and onto the amphibious base where other training was taking place. We arrive at the CTT, combat training tank, where proper swimming and diving techniques are taught. This would appear to be an Olympic sized swimming pool but is called the CTT so as not to infer that this is a place to work on your tan and relax, rather it is the place where serious and sometimes dangerous training takes place.

We pull up to the gate of a chain link fence which has a wind and vision guard woven through the mesh of the fence. The gate is locked but just to our left is a flat bed truck with four students handling the many dive tanks that are being used for the day. These students are dressed in BDU's complete with boots, and a couple of them are dripping wet and standing in the warm midday sun as we approach. One of the students is dripping wet, shivering with cold, has arms folded across his chest, and has visible goose bumps. When you strive to become a SEAL you will spend much of your time cold and wet. Amir greets these guys with his typical enthusiasm and they energetically respond. They do not know who he is, but are all respectful and attentive to his words. He looks at the shivering trainee and says, "you can't be cold; where else can you get paid to be out in the sun in this beautiful location;" which while true did not account for the obvious hypothermia and goose bumps – he was clearly not some kind of slacker. Trainees are NOT coddled in any way; and physical discomfort is routinely ignored. Amir continues asking some questions about how they are doing and what makes them want this so bad, and describes his life in the teams and what a great trip it has been. He then gives a little pep talk to inspire them, and relates that he looks forward to seeing them graduate. They all respond in the traditional SEAL affirmative, with a big hooyah sir after Pish's motivating speech.

At this stage of training more than half of Class 276 has already dropped out, as this is deep into phase two training and well beyond “hell week.” The dropouts were very exceptional to even be admitted to training and get the opportunity to fail - these guys remaining are really something special. Each one gives off a special energy - bright eyes, alert, and anticipating the next task. It is very uplifting and contagious to be surrounded by such obvious excellence. Each trainee is extremely fit with a prideful posture; they represent the true “All-American” boy in every case. Each test and evolution during training earns them the title and respect of being accepted into the Teams. One of the men voluntarily unlocks the coded gate lock into the CTT and we enter.

Activity abounds with about thirty trainees, twenty instructors, and the Dive Doc (required at all dangerous evolutions). We move front and center to observe from close to the pool edge. We are unchallenged as to why we are here, but definitely noticed. Everyone is busy and focused, as we have arrived on a big day when the dive competency test is being administered. This is a pass or fail evolution - you will be allowed a couple of chances today, but if you do not pass you are done with training and sent to a review board (which is the precursor to , "haze gray and underway" which is navyspeak for sent back to the fleet).

Standing poolside is “Doc” with his arms folded across his chest and intently observing the multitude of activities being conducted. He takes note of our presence and voluntarily explains what we are seeing and everyone’s job; all while several instructors per student administer the test. We are noticed by the students and instructors alike but they are too consumed to challenge our reason to be here. What a scene, full of proper procedures followed in detail to include the dive buddy walking his teammate to the edge of the pool with his hand on the tanks until an instructor takes control and the candidate then enters the water with proper attention to detail, one long step forward and splash he is in the shark tank. The test for each trainee lasts about twenty minutes each, as they are put through possible scenarios of staying underwater during many types of equipment malfunctions. Each type of malfunction requires a unique series of proper responses conducted under duress. Often the specific malfunction results in the trainee not getting any oxygen for an extended period of time, perhaps as long as one to two minutes, while being tested and harassed by the observing instructors. If you forget a procedure or have to surface for air you are failed.

Doc invites us to go below deck and watch the test through glass windows which seem like looking at a SEAL aquarium. A red-haired trainee enters the water with one giant step and moves to the bottom of the pool where the instructor immediately “surf rolls” him, and removes his mask as if he is being bounced around by some big waves. The cool trainee must then regain his balance and sort himself out while standing on his knees (if you stand up that indicates panic and results in a failure). Then he places his hands behind his head while one instructor cuts off his air supply by crimping a hose or turning the valve, and the trainee must go through the standard procedures to regain his air supply; all the time being evaluated and strictly observed by the critical instructor cadre. Once the malfunction is fixed the instructor allows the trainee a bite of the air and then creates another disaster for the would-be frogman to deal with, again and again for the duration of the test. Finally the instructor gets the hoses so tangled that after following the procedures the trainee must then remove the 60 pound tanks, pull them over his head, and visually un-restrict the hose air supply that is knotted - all of this with very little oxygen during the lengthy procedure. The candidate is unwilling to concede but while hefting the heavy tank over head, with little strength from oxygen deprivation, he starts to move very

slowly, but without giving up. The attentive instructor swims behind him and forcefully slaps him on the back of the head, jamming his head forward and the trainee snaps his head back upright to let the instructor know that he was not unconscious. Some students will not give up despite oxygen deprivation and these men must be monitored closely to eliminate a tragedy. This student untangles the hoses and follows strict procedure before allowing himself the now much needed air, then he re-stations the tanks on his back and sets the straps perfectly.

A couple more breaths of air and the instructor ties the hoses in such a way so as to be impossible to recover. The student initiates the standard procedures and after 30-40 seconds realizes that he must again take off the tanks and untangle the hoses, turn the air on, and begin to breath again. He is kneeling with the weight belt across the back of his legs, removes the tanks. He is oxygen starved and the veins on his forehead are bulging, crying for air. He discovers that the tied up hoses are unrecoverable and recognizes that he will have to surface. He requests to surface from the instructor with hand signals and must wait for permission. The instructor swims in front of him and grabs his hands and the trainee must exhale air on the slow ascent to the surface. The instructor guides his trainee to insure that he does not ascend too fast and risk death from the expanding air in his lungs. The instructor passes the trainee but not without some further instruction and another major hurdle has been conquered in his quest for a Trident.

We then go and look at some of the Special Operations watercraft and chat about our day. This concludes my tour, and the generous amount of time that Pish has granted me, and I really sincerely appreciate this as I had so looked forward to this opportunity. This has been one of the most inspiring, motivating, and spirit lifting, experiences of my life.

Amir is not just a legend and real hero, but also a real guy who is not consumed with his own greatness. He is a hard charging, hard working, positive minded SEAL that has learned that everyone is capable of so much more than they think. He dispenses motivation to all that he meets. He leads by example and does not make excuses. He showed me what I was curious about and personally wanted to see. He made me realize that what I really wanted to see is not a place, but the discipline that only a dedicated professional can produce. This is not a job or something to try for personal glory or accolades... to succeed at BUD/S it must be your lifestyle.

I am so impressed and proud of what I was allowed to witness. Each one of these trainees represents the best of America, and I would be so proud to have each of them as my own son. Respectful, honorable, motivated, enthusiastic, athletic beyond all description, and an erect and proud posture - I had forgotten that this is even possible when I usually see young people with their pants sagging, full of body piercings, slumping shoulders, head down, and sloppy. With all they have been given and taught here, these candidates are well on their way to fulfilling a successful life, no matter their field of endeavor. Thank you Amir, as I now walk taller everyday from being swept up in what your life has been about, and for taking me under your wing and showing me for that one day. You have made me a better person for life.

Hooyah, Mark Wilson

This unforgettable experience became the basis of Part III in the book "Play Great Pool." The process of learning to play pool at a high level is quite difficult; and the techniques used by Navy SEALs to master their craft should help motivated pool players master theirs. I want to inspire pool players with the same spirit that allows the SEALs to excel at their supremely difficult lifestyle.

Several hours after this piece was written and posted on the NavySEALs.com forums it was removed by the U.S. Navy. I was under investigation and both Pish and myself reprimanded sternly for an unauthorized visit and report. I am the only pool player that has ever been investigated by the U.S.Navy for gaining unauthorized access to the Naval Special Warfare Training Center.....but it was worth it .