

# Make Your Bed

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

After a storied 37-year special operations career, ADM William H. McRaven retired from the Navy in 2014, having served as a SEAL officer, rising to four-star rank to command the U.S. SOCOM (Special Operations Command). Among many notable achievements, he oversaw Operation NEPTUNE SPEAR, the 2011 SEAL mission that ended with the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

As he approached retirement, ADM McRaven gave a commencement speech at the University of Texas that instantly became a YouTube sensation. At the podium, in uniform, he issued a simple, startling proposition for his audience of new Longhorn graduates:

If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter.

He then proceeded to explain the “ten lessons [he] learned from basic SEAL training that hopefully will be of value.”

Three years later, the Admiral now targets a world audience in *Make Your Bed*, an expansion of his campus oration. Derived entirely from active duty experiences and recollections, he delivers his lesson across 10 short chapters. He shares moving and powerful factual anecdotes that bring to life qualities of excellence and success borne of character, courage, stamina, resilience, integrity, and grit.

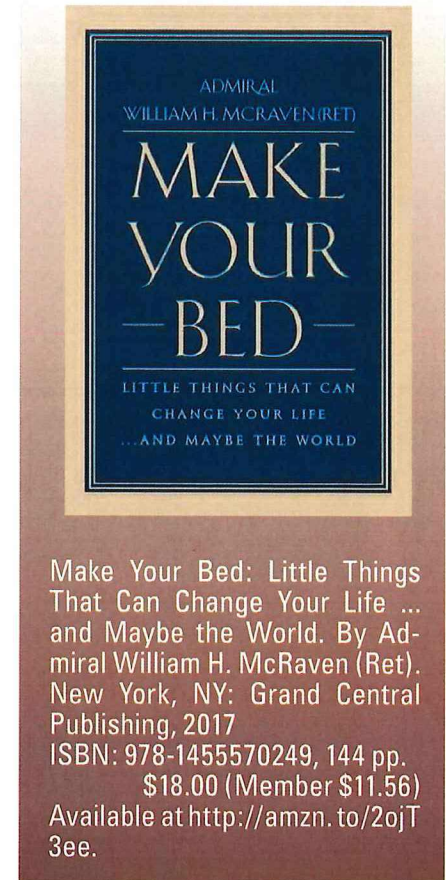
**>Col Chase, an attorney in private practice in New Jersey, served as an Infantry Platoon Commander in Vietnam. He retired from the Marine Corps Reserve in 1998 after more than 30 years of active and Reserve service.**

Each vignette is a story unto itself, gripping, suspenseful, and heroic. Yet the very different stories are hardly disconnected—they all portray stellar traits and actions of servicemembers that inspire admiration and respect.

ADM McRaven is substantive and persuasive; he illustrates his lessons as he depicts people making hard—often dangerous—choices and accepting risks, sometimes of death or grievous injury. After relating his account of a harrowing, but successful, hostage rescue mission he oversaw in Iraq in 2004, he summarizes that

[a]ssuming risks was typical of our special operations forces ... However, contrary to what outsiders saw, the risk was calculated, thoughtful, and well planned. Even if it was spontaneous, the operators knew their limits but believed in themselves enough to try.

The author’s compact and concise vignettes avoid tiresome platitudes that plague most “motivational” or “inspirational” writings, although he does employ an occasional truism (as in, “If you want to change the world, don’t back down from the sharks,” or, “Start singing when you’re up to your neck in mud”). But his brief, riveting narratives compel bottom-line conclusions that are fitting, not at all trite or tiresome. ADM McRaven mines the stirring realities



Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life ... and Maybe the World. By Admiral William H. McRaven (Ret). New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2017. ISBN: 978-1455570249, 144 pp. \$18.00 (Member \$11.56) Available at <http://amzn.to/2ojT3ee>.

of combat or training events alongside the heroic and dedicated people that personify the “lessons.” His literary strategy works. He knows how, in small capsules, to tell engrossing, suspenseful stories that happen to be true, and he teaches by example, not by preaching.

The first-person accounts excite, move, and often surprise the reader who will quickly identify with him and an extraordinary cast of characters. Some descriptions are poignantly sad, but also infused with hope, compassion, and dignity, as when ADM McRaven and then-LtGen John Kelly (now Secretary, Department of Homeland Security) comforted the families of 38 Navy SEALs and others who perished in a helicopter shot down in Afghanistan. LtGen Kelly, ADM McRaven recalls, had lost his Marine son, 1stLt Robert Kelly, who was killed in Afghanistan, and he was there to relate to grieving families in a way few others, if any, could.

He tells of his own struggle with pain and anxiety in the aftermath of a parachute drop gone wrong. The accident that surely could have killed him broke his body in so many places that his career seemed over. A captain at the time, confined to his bed, “all [he] felt was self-pity,” but his steadfast wife, Georgeann, took over, and “reminded [him] of who [he] was.” She nursed him, and she saved him. Says ADM McRaven:

None of us are immune from life’s tragic moments. Like the small river boat we had in basic SEAL training, it takes a team of good people to get you to your destination in life. You cannot paddle the boat alone. Find someone to share your life with.

The author convincingly illustrates how highly motivated people can exceed all rational expectations. In a chapter entitled “Only the Size of Your Heart Matters,” he describes a man he happened to meet in a SEAL office during summer duty as an ROTC midshipman at Coronado. Upon first seeing him, because the

man was “slightly built, almost frail,” McRaven immediately assumed he was considering joining the SEALs, but would not “survive the rigors of being a SEAL.” The young McRaven felt sorry for the man (and also a little superior to him). He had not known what he was about to learn minutes later—that the unassuming man had already served heroically in Vietnam:

This seemingly frail, mop-haired man who I doubted could make it through training was Lieutenant Tom Norris. Tom Norris, who had served in Vietnam, had on successive nights gone behind enemy lines to rescue two downed airmen. This was Tom Norris who, on another mission, was shot in the face by North Vietnamese forces and left for dead ...

The SEAL lieutenant introducing this “almost frail” young man to McRaven commented, “Tommy was the last SEAL Medal of Honor Recipient from Vietnam.” ADM McRaven ends this chapter with the understatement that “that it’s not the size of your flippers that count, just the size of your

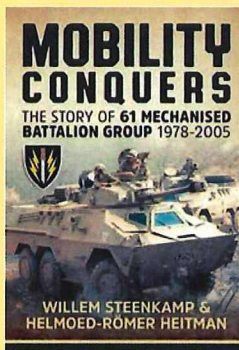
heart.” Lesson learned, along with his personal lesson in humility.

*Make Your Bed* describes people who far surpassed what was expected of them or of anyone. To be sure, special operators are the most highly trained, superbly conditioned, and uniquely motivated servicemembers in the U.S. military. Few human beings would be physically able to master the skills and tenacity of the personnel showcased by McRaven, including McRaven himself. Yet this is not a work of self-adulation or braggadocio. Indeed, ADM McRaven emerges as a man of humility and respect for others, with a goal to encourage those willing to hear him to grow from the experiences he shares.

*Make Your Bed* is clearly intended for the broadest of audiences, not just high achievers in special ops. His lessons show how far beyond perceived limits U.S. servicemen and their families can go. That is a lesson in motivation for everyone.



## For Further Reading



**MOBILITY CONQUERS: THE STORY OF 61 MECHANISED BATTALION GROUP, 1978-2005.** By Willem Steenkamp & Helmoed-Römer Heitmand. Reviewed by Dr. Abel Esterhuysen.

*Mobility Conquers: The Story of 61 Mechanised Battalion Group, 1978-2005* is probably the most comprehensive history ever written about a regular military unit in South Africa. 61 Mech, as it was commonly known, was an exceptional formation of the former SADF (South African Defence Force). It had its roots in the search for an organizational doctrine to optimize the available military technology in the unique operational challenges that confronted the South African military in the late 1970s. The uniqueness of the unit is also reflected in its name. As a composite battalion, the unit consisted of combat and combat support elements that were, unlike normal infantry, artillery, and armour regiments, permanently grouped together for purposes of training and operations.

61 Mech was often at the center of the Defence Force’s operation plans for high-mobility operations in Namibia and Angola. The unit was a key element of the SADF’s counterinsurgency effort against SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organization), especially in the disruption and destruction of SWAPO’s fighting and logistical capabilities through pre-emptive raiding operations in Angola. It was also the SADF’s impact player in operations in support of the UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) as part of the Angolan Civil War.

William Steenkamp and Helmoed-Römer Heitmand—the two most renowned writers on the Border War—joined forces in writing this book. The active involvement of veterans in the composition of the book gives a distinctive flavor to the text.

The lessons from the book are universal and not necessarily restricted to a specific period, defence force, or region. One key lesson is that technology, although important, is not the overriding factor for military success. Good leadership and a professional military ethos rooted in constructive training, good discipline, and small unit cohesion/comradeship have been vital elements of military success throughout the ages.

Solihull: Helion & Company, 2016.

ISBN: 978-1911096528, 1072 pp.

Price: \$99.95 (Member \$65.79)

To order, go to <http://amzn.to/2pBchgH>