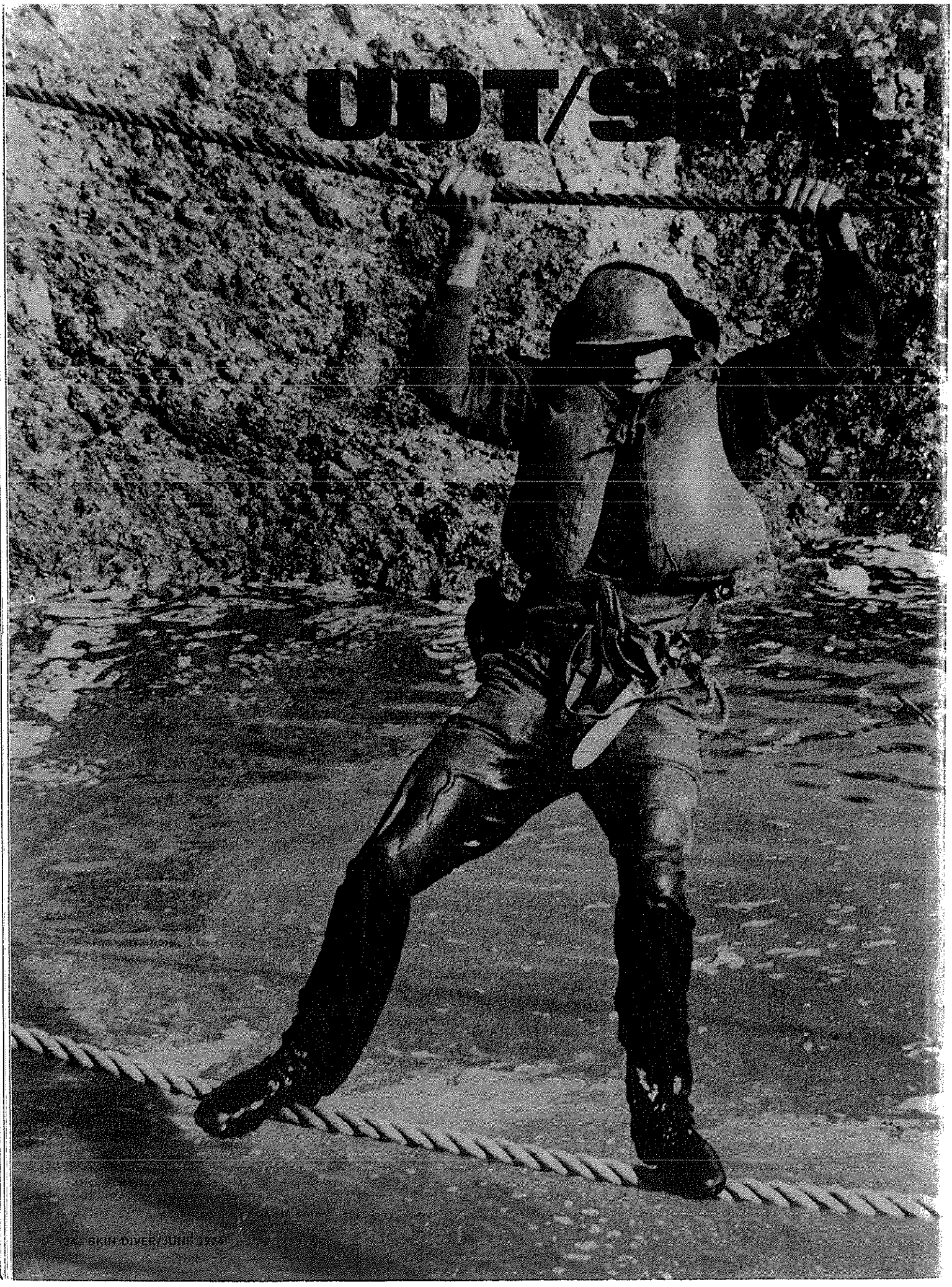

UDT/SEAL

A FIERCE DESIRE TO SUCCEED

tough, proud, and dedicated, these NAVY frogmen are second to none

By Ellsworth Boyd

The hardest part was making up my mind I could do it. Teetering on the edge of the deep end of the pool, my hands bound behind me, my ankles lashed together, at that moment I was the most frightened man on the U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, California.

I had come to write about BUD/S—Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) training, whose graduates are better known as "frogmen." Before I embarked on my assignment the editor suggested that I "try to get involved." I got involved all right, my first day at the pool, with five instructors and a group of trainees eyeballing my decision.

"Remember," Chief Estok instructed, "keep your chin on your chest. Your body will sink eight to ten inches, then you'll bob back up. As you feel the top of your head break the surface, exhale, lift your chin, take a short breath, then resume your original position. Bob and breathe for awhile, then use the dolphin kick I showed you to get back to poolside." "And if it doesn't work?" I questioned. "Then we'll just have to send for another writer," he replied, without a trace of a smile.

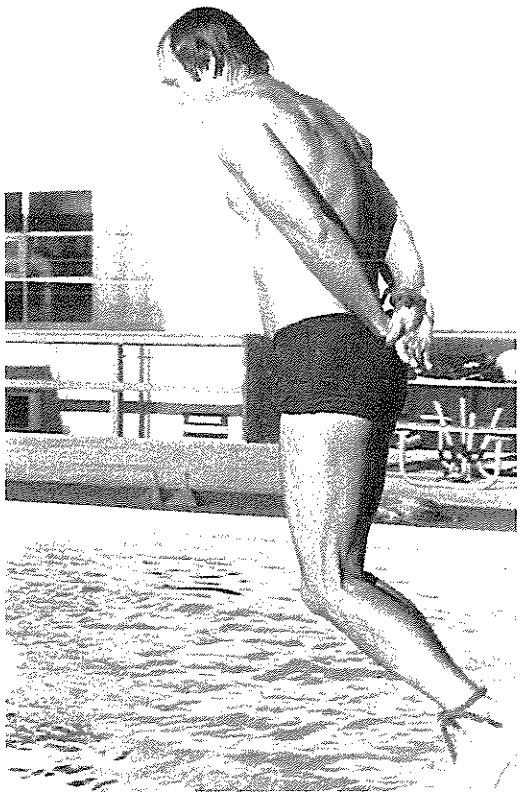
As the water closed over me, the ropes tightened and the eight to ten inch descent felt more like eight to ten feet! But sure enough, just like the Chief said, I bobbed right up. After bobbing and breathing a few moments, I used the dolphin kick and returned to the side of the pool. "Good!" the Chief lauded. "You've got the idea."

The "idea" is called "drownproofing," the frogmen's method for water survival, originated by Fred Lanoue of Georgia Tech. So skilled are frogmen in this technique, they would starve to death before drowning. Being tied up evolved from the war in Vietnam. Sometimes POWs were transported at night in sampans. If the prisoner could quietly roll out of the boat, he would utilize drownproofing to reach shore and make good his escape. The enemy assumed that the POW had no chance to survive because his hands and feet were bound.

But drownproofing is just one of literally hundreds of training subjects, tactics and techniques that the volunteer "tadpoles" undergo in 23 grueling weeks at BUD/S. These are broken into three "phases" of five, nine and nine weeks, taught by 30 of the best instructors in the fleet.

During the initial five weeks the trainees live "on the run," building up for two timed jaunts, one four miles, the other fourteen. The latter must be completed within two hours. They break out at 5 a.m. with a two mile run, followed by 30 minutes of "PT." This daily physical training covers 20 exercises, with cringing nomenclatures like groin stretcher, trunk stretcher, side twisters and wind mills.

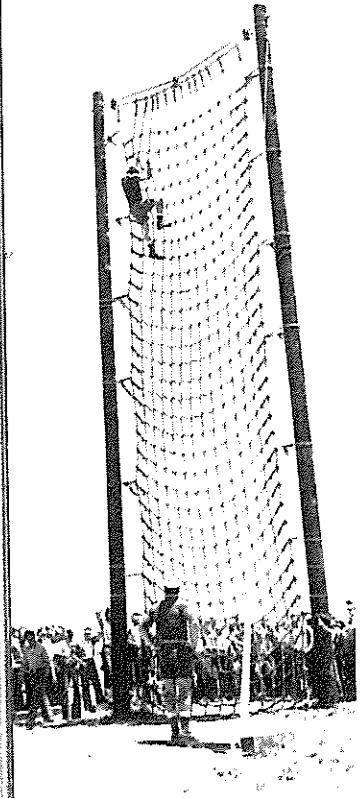
To supplement PT the trainees run the big "O" course. A series of 24 punishing obstacles that one trainee calls, "a fresh air torture chamber," it pits man against time.



photographs by Dave Dennehy

During Hell Week, all UDT trainees have to cross the chemical filled "black lagoon" via two ropes stretched across the 20 by 30 yard pit. To get involved in this story, author Boyd jumped into pool with hands and feet bound for drownproofing test. Chief Estok supervised.

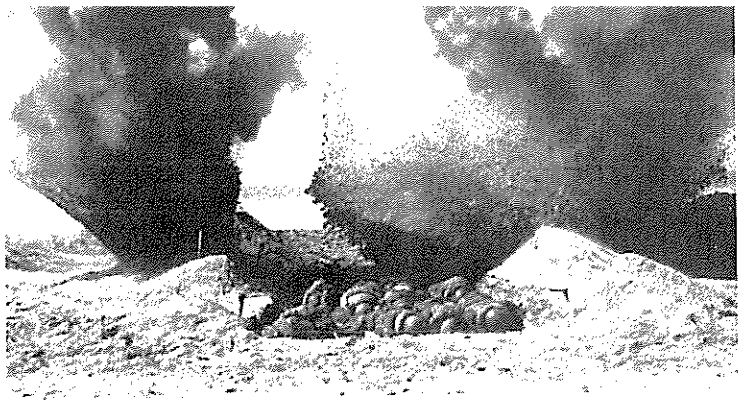
photograph by Tom Ryals



official U.S. Navy photograph

A 50 foot cargo net is one of 24 obstacles on the "O" course. During another Hell Week drill, the mud flats teach men to overcome the natural aversion to being wet and dirty. Charges of TNT blow skyward in a beach landing drill at the demo pits. A 300 pound watersoaked log is beached, pressed, squatted and curled during the "Log PT."

photograph by Tom Ryals



photograph by Dave Dennehy

photograph by Author

A volunteer must make it in 18 minutes or less by his third time through. As the program progresses he must do it in 15 minutes or less. At this point a good class will average nine to ten minutes per man. The record is six minutes flat!

Trainees scramble over a three story tower; climb up one side and down the other of a 50 foot cargo net; ascend a 40 foot scaffold called "slide for life," where they descend by a rope; do "low crawls" on their stomachs and backs, beneath fixed barbed wire; and go whole hog on 19 other obstacles with monikers like belly buster, belly robber, and dirty name.

Accenting the concept of staunch physical endurance, first phase incorporates long distance swims, hand-to-hand combat, drownproofing and log PT. The latter accommodates six to eight men hoisting a 300 pound log around as if it were a sapling. Just like weightlifting, the log is pressed, benched, curled and squatted. But unlike weightlifting, it's team effort that counts.

As the physical demands grow progressively arduous, volunteers get the picture that compared to BUD/S, all previous training was peaches and cream. If a guy can't hack it and wants out, there's a bell hanging in the muster area. All he has to do is ring it three times to instantly volunteer out.

IBS training and cast and recovery drills are included in first phase. IBS stands for "Inflatable Boat, Small," the rugged little seven man craft that trainees take over the sea AND the land. In cast and recovery the men are dropped, then retrieved by a speeding boat in an exercise that demands strength, coordination and perfect timing.

There is also combat medicine and weapons qualification, pistol and M-16, in this initial training period. But it's the fifth week that provides the climax of first phase in one of the most punishing ordeals a human can experience. It pits man against pain and the elements, in a week long trial of mind over body.

"It's a fierce desire to succeed," Commander Thomas N. Tarbox revealed, "and an inner force or motivation that drives our men on." A 17 year Navyman, whose entire career has been in the UDT/SEAL Department or related jobs, the soft-spoken leader explained the frogman philosophy.

"It boils down to two things—the body and the mind. The body is capable of enduring physical hardships far beyond the realm of belief. The mind is the controlling factor. When the mind tells the body to slow down and quit, it usually does so. We teach our men to overcome this—to ignore this message from the mind and to push on. We teach them that the body CAN do it, that it MUST do it if they are to endure and survive.

"We teach them about the pain barrier. I read once about the long distance runner and how his pain barrier is something he must conquer in order to become a champion. That's exactly what we're talking about here. The pain barrier is in the man's mind, not his body. As he approaches what he thinks is the limit of his capability, he surmounts the pain barrier and becomes capable of doing virtually anything.

"Call it what you will: desire, motivation, stubbornness, guts—whatever it is, our men must have it in order to get through this training. We subscribe to an old Marine Corps motto: 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war,' and believe me, we sweat at BUD/S."

I asked the commander about Hell Week and if it was really as tough as I had heard. "Hell Week is our big watershed," he disclosed. "Very few quit after this week. If a man makes it through Hell Week and keeps trying to the utmost of his capability, he most likely will graduate from this program. Most, however, quit before Hell Week.

"We had 29 men begin BUD/S training four weeks ago. Only 11 made it to Hell Week, which started last night. Today there are eight left. You're lucky—you'll get to see Hell Week." Maybe I was lucky, but I know eight men who could have used a basketful of horseshoes, four-leaf clovers and rabbits' feet to endure this man-made hell.

The "devil's disciples" are 12 tough Vietnam combat veterans, most with 10 to 20 years of naval service behind them. All are grads of BUD/S. Their "inferno" is the jagged rock jetty on the Coronado Beach; the unpre-

dictable surf and outlying depths of the Pacific; the swampy stench of the mud flats; and the deep, foot-slogging sand of the Coronado Strand. Stoking the flames of desperation and despair, the instructors goad, discipline and test the volunteers in a series of training techniques that make them wish the earth would swallow them up.

But the angel of mercy hovers and smiles down upon them Friday night. By Saturday morning she is plucking them from the fires of Hades. One thing for sure—in the beginning, nobody imagined that "Hell" could be so cold!

"Haul ass!" Chief Wayne Jones yelled. "This ain't no picnic!" A 20 year veteran, and combat hardened former boxer, he stood atop a jagged rock on the Coronado Beach, bellowing directions through a megaphone. The faint silhouette of a new moon did little to penetrate the chill, pitch blackness as I stumbled across the menacing rock jetty to where the surf was swirling around like soapsuds in a giant washing machine. I joined Chief Jones and Commander Tarbox.

"It's a good night for rock portage," the Chief mused. "High surf, no light and the water temperature matches the air—a brisk 50 degrees." What a paradox. Behind us, no more than a couple of hundred yards away, were the luxurious high rise hotels and condominiums of Coronado Beach. I could look back and see through the large, ocean-front picture windows, where people were watching TV, or entertaining friends in warm, comfortable rooms, oblivious to the drama that evolved on the beach below.

Two rubber boats, designed for crews of seven men, now trimmed to four each, stood offshore, awaiting the Chief's signal. Only the small waterproof flashlights, pinned to each man's kapok life jacket, were visible in the darkness. The Chief blinked his light three times and the first boat started its run. The coxswain had to follow the signal precisely to approach the jetty at its safest landing point. But even that "safe" point looked risky to me.

"Coxswain! Keep that boat straight or you're going to kill some people!" the Chief screamed. Somehow the boat had turned parallel to the jetty. A six foot breaker that had built up behind threatened to sweep the craft and its occupants into the rocks. But luckily for the coxswain, his crew straightened the boat and it took off like a surfer's dream, riding the curl and ensuing break. But unlike the surfer, there was no way to "bail out."

The bow struck a huge flat rock, the exact point the Chief designated for a landing, and lifted the boat and crew almost high and dry. Unfortunately the stern slipped backward, completely flooding the rear compartment.

"Get out! Get out and tilt the boat, you knuckleheads," he barked. "You act like you've never done this before!" The boat now weighed well over 300 pounds. The rocks were slippery, the visibility zero and the breakers kept crashing in. Struggling, the crew finally drained the craft, lifted it overhead and portaged it to the high, dry rocks.

The second boat crew fared a little better, but still caught a tongue-lashing from the Chief. "If you don't like these boat drills," he hollered, "then pack up and get out of here! Now let's have a couple of songs to show me how happy you are to be here!"

The two crews stood at attention, singing and shivering in the 50 degree night air. They wore fatigues, combat boots, helmets and kapoks. I had on a sweatshirt, a ski jacket and a heavy Navy foul-weather coat and still felt cold. I turned to the Commander and innocently asked, "Why don't they wear rubber jackets?" He looked at me like I was crazy. "They don't wear rubber jackets during Hell Week," he affirmed.

"If they're wet most of the time, how can they stand the cold?" I questioned. "Their bodies are callous and rugged," he reminded. "They've had five weeks of intense physical training to ready themselves for this. Remember what I told you about the mind being the controlling factor. Their bodies should never succumb to the cold. Their minds must direct their bodies to go on."

And go on they did. As we crossed the highway, on our way to the Bay, Chief Jones laughed out loud. "One night," he said, "when we were all standing here waiting to cross the road, a little old lady came stormin' out of that high rise over there, gave me holy hell and threatened to call the police! She had been watching from her window and said I had no right to put those 'poor young boys' through such misery!"

On the Bayside the men launched their boats for a one mile paddle to Point Golf, where they were instructed to come in "low silhouette, no noise, no paddles banging together." From there the crews are given a second rendezvous point three miles down the bay. On this one they paddle close to shore while the instructors ride down and wait for them. As we rode to rendezvous point one, Chief Jones and Chief Lowell Gosser told me about some of the tricks the "tadpoles" try to pull.

One boat crew had a buddy waiting for them in a van. They loaded their boat into the vehicle and drove to within a quarter of a mile of the second rendezvous point. Then they unloaded it, hid in a sandpit and waited for the other boats. When they heard them coming, they launched theirs and paddled in first. But undiscovered, an instructor had taken a walk up the beach and spotted them, yet didn't let on that he knew about their little scheme. When the boat arrived, all instructors were standing there with watches in hand.

"Too soon," they announced. "You paddled too fast. You arrived too soon. The enemy would have blown you to bits if you had reached this rendezvous point so quickly. Now turn around and paddle back to the starting point. Then paddle down here again, only not so fast this time!" To this day that boat crew isn't sure whether they were spotted or whether that "too soon" bit was really true!

"Talking about the cold," Chief Jones continued, "we had a trainee a couple of years ago from Brazil. He was used to the tropics and that warm weather, so he took two T-shirts and sewed a shorty wet suit between them. When I checked the men out each day to see if they were wearing wet suit jackets under their fatigues, there was no way of detecting it. He showed it to me at graduation, where I admitted that it was the most ingenious scheme I had ever seen!"

I left the trainees at midnight as they headed down the Bay to their rendezvous point at Turner Field. They spent most of the night there practicing night landings and beach reconnaissance, and got what Chief Jones calls "a good night's sleep"—one and a half hours! They would get a total of eight hours sleep during the entire week!

When I hit the Coronado Beach at 8 a.m. the next morning, instructor Louis Boisvert was briefing the men on surf passage. Boisvert, sort of a legend at BUD/S, is a stalwart advocate of physical training. When he speaks, they listen intently. When he orders them to move, they charge out like horses from a starting gate. This time they were racing through the surf, challenging the breakers.

Again and again they did it, first through the surf, back to the beach, then through the surf again. Two hours later, "break time" finally arrived in the form of "beach camouflage." Digging individual sandpits, then pulling

beach debris in on top of themselves—seaweed, dead fish, driftwood, tar—they lay there motionless, relishing the 15 minute rest.

"Up! Up! Up! To your boats—follow me!" It was the voice of instructor Bill Fletcher. Like the Pied Piper, they followed him down the beach, toting the rubber boats on their heads, singing an old favorite, "A Frogman Am I Sir!" When they reached the "O" course Fletcher ran them through a few obstacles, only this time they had to drag their boats over and under the barriers, too! Next he put them through two hours of log PT! I never realized there were so many different ways to lift, shoulder, tote, press and cradle a 300 pound, water-soaked log!

I asked Fletcher, a spunky, spirited leader, about the underlying philosophy of Hell Week. "It's an esprit de corps, a close knitness," he explained. "It brings the men together as a fighting unit. Take away Hell Week and our training program would lose everything. It WAS taken out you know, during part of the Vietnam War when we had to turn the trainees out fast. But then the sad results started coming in. There were more casualties, while some men weren't meeting the rigid demands of the war zones. All this just proved the value of Hell Week."

The trainees spent the afternoon at the swimming pool with instructors Estok and Frisk, who supervised drown-proofing, underwater knot tying without swim masks, relay races and lifesaving. That night they prepared for a five hour ocean paddle to Border Field, 12 miles south of Coronado Beach. Here they would set up a base camp, practice infiltrating, reconnaissance, and undergo the rigors of the dreaded mud flats.

The mud flats were unbelievable. A small river ran inland from the ocean, cutting the prairie in half. To the south were the foothills of Tijuana and the mountainous regions deep within Mexico's Baja California. To the north were a few isolated ranches perched on the bleak flatlands covered with tumbleweeds and ice grass. As the tide went out the river formed small tributaries of knee-deep mud. Oozy, bubbling and slimy, it was an environment suitable only for clams, frogs or tadpoles. Here the BUD/S "tadpoles" learn to overcome the natural aversion to being wet and dirty. It takes plain old-fashioned guts to persevere under these conditions.

I didn't know there were so many kinds of relay races until I witnessed the "mud flat olympics!" Back and forth from bank to bank they sloshed — frontward, backward, crawling, tumbling, cartwheeling and leapfrogging. After two hours of relays, the winningest team was awarded five minutes rest! Wet and shivering they continued to sing through chattering teeth. Then a rubber boat was turned upside down, forming a perfect springboard for the main event — diving!

Points were awarded for the best dives. There were front-flips, back-flips, swans, twisters and the inevitable "sticker." Did you ever see a man dive head first into mud, head and shoulders completely engulfed, legs and feet sticking straight up in the air? I saw it and I still don't believe it!

"Hell Week proves to these men that they can perform unbelievable feats," explained Lt. Scotty Lyon, a 21 year career man who led a SEAL platoon on the first liberation of a POW camp in 1968. "Self-assurance and confidence are our bywords, with a never-give-up, stick-to-it spirit. There's camaraderie too, when they have to depend on each other in order to survive. Chances are they'll never face any obstacles in their lifetime as tough as those they're facing this week."

That night, working out of their base camp, the trainees mapped the coastline, then made plans for an assault upon the enemy. This reconnaissance took them from the beach, where they buried their boats, inland, across waist-deep and throat-deep streams, over the mud flats and back again.

At 3 a.m. they crawled into pup tents for a little rest, very little rest. Each man stood a rotating watch at one minute intervals. The first man stood watch for 60 seconds, then woke the next man. He stood watch for 60 seconds, then woke the next, etc. This continued for three hours until it was time to break camp and begin the five hour paddle back to Coronado.

"They get real 'dingie' at this point," explained Lt. Tom Richards, burly Navy heavyweight wrestling champ and prime Olympic prospect. "That's our term for dopey or punchy. They do things they'll never remember doing. When I went through I was so dingie I checked in at a non-existent gate. They say I even held a conversation with the gate guard!"

"Hallucinogenic phenomenon," is what Doc DeGrief calls it. "On long paddles, with the lights from the shoreline reflecting on the water, you see strange things, like locomotives steaming by! Swim buoys look like mines. One guy thought his paddle was a snake and threw it overboard."

On Thursday the trainees competed in marathon foot races around the Coronado Strand area, capped off by swimming competition in the base pool. By Friday I thought the toughest parts of Hell Week were over, but Navy photographer Dave Dennehy bantered, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" Photographer Tom Ryals smiled. He knew where we were headed—to the dreaded "demo pits."

When the trainees reach the demo pits they have indeed entered a "living hell" of smoke, fire and explosives! Paddling in from the sea, the crews carefully watched Lt. Lyon, standing atop a dune giving specific landing directions. They had to follow his directions to the letter or get blown up! Lyon gave the signal to Lt. Commander Richard Brereton in the tower, then all hell broke loose!

Two charges of TNT, set in the surf, erupted one right after another on either side of the rubber boats, bellowing sprays 200 feet high. "Boats in! Hit it! Hit it!" the Lieutenant barked, as the men dragged their boats ashore and hit the beach face first. "Everybody face down!" he instructed. "Bunch up, head to heels, bunch up!" Another signal, then half pound charges blew sand and stones 50 feet skyward. The charges were going off three feet from them! Face down in the sand, they had to keep their mouths open to prevent their eardrums from bursting.

Lyon steered the group into a gap between two dunes, then ordered them to "hit it" again. Six more ear-splitting blasts echoed across the beach. That's when the lieutenant and the instructors in the towers started yelling, "So Solly!"

Crawling under 20 yards of barbed wire, the demo still going full blast, they inched along behind the dunes. I was 30 yards away and steadily back-pedaling. By watching the signals I knew exactly when the charges were going off, but they still scared me stiff! I'd jump a foot off the ground on the first explosion and six inches on each successive one. Lt. Lyon looked over, grinned and yelled, "Soooo Solleeeeee!"

The blasting finally subsided and the men mustered 50 yards down the beach to negotiate permission to cross the "black lagoon pass." A four foot deep, 20 by 30 yard pit, the "lagoon" was filled with exploded chemicals, and covered by a thin, gray scum. The objective was to cross the vile pit via two ropes stretched from one side to the

other. One rope was for the hands, the other for the feet. The trainees didn't know it, but nobody *ever* makes it across the "black lagoon."

The hand-over-hand rope is attached to a pick-up truck, which Chief Estok artfully maneuvers both forward and backward. The top rope draws up as high as 20 feet above the water, then deposits the "tadpole"—in whiplash fashion, right smack in the middle of the lagoon! Trainees go in head first, seat first, groin first, doing front flips, back flips, belly flops and other assorted entries.

Saturday morning finally arrived, as volunteers Miller, McCracken, Flannigan, Olson, Linse, Hatfield, Long and Addlesberger hustled one more time to the muster area. Here they were "secured." Hell Week was over.

They gathered around the drop-out bell, eyeing the 21 empty helmets beneath it. Tired but proud, only eight from the original group of 29 had made it. Before they left I asked, "What made you stick it out?" One said, "I didn't have nerve enough to ring that bell." Another said, "I saw the others doing it and I told myself, 'If they can do it so can I!"

I asked what benefits, if any, they had derived from Hell Week. One trainee replied, "I know myself now, both physically and mentally. I feel dedicated to something and I think I can endure anything. Before this I didn't have much—I wasn't sure where life was taking me. Now I've got something that means a lot. I'm achieving and understanding life better. I've discovered a whole new world."

photograph by Dave Dennehy

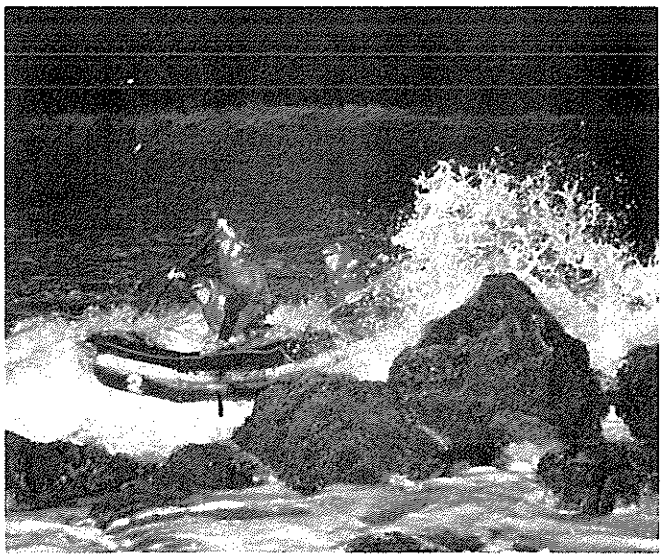
Most of them would sleep the whole weekend to be ready for second phase early Monday morning. Four major areas would be covered in these nine weeks: beach reconnaissance, including intelligence gathering raids and patrol action; planting demolitions—both land and sea; land warfare, stressing guerrilla tactics; and training with heavy weapons and grenades.

It's not until the third phase, the last nine weeks, that the frogmen undergo extensive diver training. In the beginning they work in the impressive new diver training tower. Forty-six feet deep, 20 feet in diameter, this 105,600 gallon fresh water tank houses a submarine escape trunk, a diving bell and a recompression chamber. Instructors use a Helle Hydrophone Communication System to instruct trainees as they work underwater.

Utilizing the tower, the pool and the ocean, trainees will take over 40 dives breathing mixed gas as well as compressed air. One descent is a 150 foot bounce dive in the ocean using the Mark VI. On another plunge they free dive 30 feet without fins, tying knots to a trunk line on the bottom.

"They're thoroughly water oriented by the time they come to us," explained diving officer Tom Richards. "Most of them learn the diving easily, but soon discover there's more to it than meets the eye. Their diving work day is 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., plus one or two night dives per week. On other nights they have plenty to study. We teach diving anatomy and physiology. In addition, they have to be thoroughly familiar with air diving tables, partial pressures, formulas for mixed gas, and the complete physics of diving. They must successfully complete compass swims and underwater modes of attack. Nobody said it was easy."

The diving locker is the finest I've ever seen. Forty sets of bottles can be charged at one time! In addition to the training tower, there's a complete divers' supply and repair shop; classrooms with closed circuit TV; conference rooms; a sick bay; sauna and whirlpool baths; a universal gym and an armory. A 168 man barrack houses four men to a room, with adjoining study and recreational areas. The facility is three years old and Commander Tarbox said, "We went 'first-cabin' on this and we're quite proud of it."



photograph by Bill Van Der Hoeff

The base at Little Creek, Virginia, no longer trains frogmen. UDT/SEAL teams are stationed there, but the Coronado facility is the citadel of basic training for everybody now. Upon graduation from BUD/S, the men take three weeks of airborne training at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

In the beginning, the volunteers come to BUD/S straight from basic training or from the fleet. But first they must pass a "screen test." This includes a 300 yard swim in seven and a half minutes or less, using a breast stroke and/or side stroke; a one mile run in seven and a half minutes or less; 30 push-ups within two minutes; 30 sit-ups within two minutes; 30 squat-thrusts within two minutes; and six pull-ups.

As I left BUD/S I couldn't help thinking of what Admiral Byrd said about his men, trying to describe their fortitude and determination in treking through the Arctic wastelands. Proudly he proclaimed, "By God, they'll find a way or MAKE one!" That's exactly what the UDT/SEAL Teams do . . . in the surf, under the water, across the desert and over the beach. Through sea, air and land they've established themselves as tough, proud and confident Naval units, second to none.