

## Q&amp;A

# An Elite Command

Rear Admiral Sean Pybus '79 takes command of the Navy SEALs.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

THE UNITED STATES NAVY'S SEA, AIR, AND land teams—known as SEALs—are among the most elite members of the military service, with a training regimen the SEALs themselves sum up with the saying, “The only easy day was yesterday.”

Established by President John F. Kennedy in 1962 as a maritime force trained to handle any type of unconventional warfare, the SEALs have made headlines twice in the past several months.

In May, a team of 25 SEALs broke into the compound of Osama Bin Laden and killed the leader of al Qaeda, who had been the United States' most hunted terrorist since even before the September 11, 2001, attacks.

In August, 22 SEALs were among the 38 American and Afghan service members killed when their helicopter was shot down en route to a battle against insurgents.

In between those two events, Rear Admiral Sean Pybus '79, a career SEAL who studied economics while at the University on an NROTC scholarship, took charge of the Naval Special Warfare Command, where he now oversees the Navy SEALs as well as special warfare combatant-craft crewmen. He corresponded with us by email in July.

## When did you decide on a military career?

As a high school senior, I applied to ROTC programs with the Army and Navy in hopes of getting a scholarship to pay for college. The Navy gave me a scholarship, so that was my early motivation for military service. I assumed I would do my obligatory time in the service after college and then join the civilian workforce. But the ever-challenging work, frequent travel, esprit de corps, and quality people within the SEAL community were strong draws. And it remains that way today.

## When did you become a SEAL, and what can you tell us about the infamous training regimen?

As soon as I graduated from Rochester, I



**COMMANDING ROLE:** Rear Admiral Sean Pybus '79 (center) is sworn in as the commander of Naval Special Warfare, where he oversees the Navy's sea, air, and land teams—the SEALs—and combatant-craft crewmen.

went to SEAL training, which is the famous Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training course, known as BUD/S, with an attrition rate of between 65 to 75 percent.

In 1979, almost all of our instructors were Vietnam veterans. The lessons and instruction they imparted to us many years ago still apply and inform how we operate to-

day, and I'm thankful for that. In my years as a SEAL since BUD/S, I have never been more cold, wet, and miserable as when going through BUD/S in 1979. Doing military special operations in, under, or from the sea is our forte, so most of our selection and training is water-oriented.

A BUD/S student spends much of his

time wet, sandy, and cold. Going to college in Rochester, however, prepared me well to deal with the cold and wet! By Christmas 1979, I graduated BUD/S training and was on my way to my first SEAL assignment in Virginia.

#### Is SEAL training similar today?

The basic training regime today is remarkably similar to years past. BUD/S has been proven to produce SEALs with remarkable toughness, unconventional thought, and a never-quit attitude.

We're very careful about making adjustments to this program. With regard to advanced training that prepares SEALs for the specific work we do around the world today, it's exponentially better resourced than in years past.


Naval Special Warfare is the maritime component of U.S. Special Operations Command, and we draw a high level of training, equipment, and other resources from it to maintain a high level of capability and preparedness. We also dedicate time working with our sister special operations forces in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps. The real strength of special operations is our ability to work as a team. Most of the successes our nation has had within special operations result from a team effort across the services.

#### In what ways did your liberal arts education prepare you for a military career?

Personally, as a student and young man, Rochester's tough academic regimen forced me to become more disciplined and goal-focused, traits that served me well in the military.

The breadth of Rochester's curriculum has also been an advantage, because naval officers well-versed in subjects from English to engineering have an advantage over specialists, in the long run. Most importantly, I think Rochester has always been committed to helping students learn how to think, not necessarily what to think.

For planning and executing special operations in the military, knowing how to think is invaluable. As the commander of the Navy's special warfare community, I want a diverse officer and enlisted corps, including men and women with a liberal arts background.

We're looking for people with high levels of mental, physical, and moral fitness. They'll come from many different places, and I think that's exactly what we need. 

## In the News

### THEOFANIDIS OPERA COMMEMORATES 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

**Christopher Theofanidis** '92E (MM) has composed *Heart of a Soldier*, commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and to be premiered by the opera on Saturday evening, September 10. *Heart of a Soldier* is based on the book by James Stewart that chronicles the life of Rick Rescorla, a Vietnam veteran and Morgan Stanley's head of security, who died in the south tower of the World Trade Center after leading more than 2,000 people to safety. Theofanidis, who now teaches at Yale, was teaching at Juilliard, 50 blocks from the towers, at the time of the attacks.

### HOCKFIELD '73 TAPPED FOR PRESIDENTIAL RESEARCH GROUP

**Susan Hockfield** '73, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been selected by President Barack Obama to play a leadership role in the Advanced Research Partnership. The partnership, which Obama announced in June, enlists federal agencies, private businesses, and universities in an effort to improve American manufacturing by promoting research and development of emerging technologies. Hockfield will serve as cochair of the steering committee of the partnership, along with Andrew Liveris, the president, chairman, and CEO of the Dow Chemical Co.



Susan Hockfield '73

### GRADUATE TO HEAD NATIONAL DENTAL INSTITUTE

**Martha Somerman** '78M (Pdc), '80M (PhD) is the new director of the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, part of the National Institutes of Health near Washington, D.C. Somerman, who completed a periodontal residency at the Eastman Institute for Oral Health and a doctorate in pharmacology at the School of Medicine and Dentistry, was formerly the dean of the University of Washington School of Dentistry in Seattle. She's a recognized leader in research on the development, maintenance, and regeneration of oral-dental-craniofacial tissues.

### ROCHESTER ALUMNA IN HOT COFFEE

**Joanne Doroshov** '76, executive director of the civil justice research and advocacy organization Center for Justice & Democracy, based in New York City, makes several appearances in the HBO documentary *Hot Coffee*. The documentary, which premiered in June, centers on the 1995 New Mexico district court case *Liebeck v. McDonald's Restaurants*, in which a jury awarded significant damages to a plaintiff who had suffered third-degree burns when she spilled a cup of McDonald's coffee in her lap.

### LEVI '69 RECOGNIZED FOR CIVIC LEADERSHIP

**John Levi** '69, a partner in the Chicago office of the law firm Sidley Austin, was awarded the first Abner and Zoe Mikva Corporate Citizenship Award this spring. The award is given by Mikva Challenge, an organization that promotes the development of civic leaders among students in Chicago's public schools. Levi's accomplishments include his election in 2010 as board chairman of the Legal Services Corp., which funds civil legal assistance to low-income Americans, and his role in Sidley Austin's partnership with Chicago's Gerald Delgado Kanoon Magnet Elementary School, as well as in the firm's pro bono programs.