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— Admiral —
William H. McRaven

(U.S. Navy Retired)

— THE —
HERO
CODE

LESSONS LEARNED FROM
LIVES WELL LIVED

ADMIRAL
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I dedicate this book to all the remarkable men and women who battled and continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic—the scientists, the health care professionals, those who provide and deliver our goods and services, those who teach our children, and those who protect our streets. If ever there were people worthy of the title Hero, it is you. Thank you for all you have done for the nation and the world!

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“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

—ANNE FRANK

INTRODUCTION

In 1960, when I was five years old, my father, an Air Force officer, was stationed in Fontainebleau, France. He was assigned to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). We lived in an old three-story home in a remote area called Bella Woods. With few modern amenities in the house and no television, I grew up devouring American comic books: Batman, Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, the Hulk, Thor, and Aquaman. But there was one hero who really captured my imagination. He was all-American. His costume was red, white, and blue. He hailed from a small town in Kansas and he had amazing powers. Faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, he was always rescuing women, children, and men in distress. He was “the champion of the helpless and oppressed.” During the war, my hero fought the Nazis, the Fascists, the Imperial warlords, and the fifth columnists. Partnering with American soldiers and sailors, he “ventured forth in a gigantic battle for the future of Democracy,” and he won. He was Action Comics Man of Steel, Superman!

I so wanted to be like Superman. There was not a towel in the house that at one point wasn’t a cape. I would jump from chairs, couches, tables, anything to emulate my hero. Someday when the world was in trouble again, I knew that Superman would come to the rescue. Maybe he and I could team up. Batman had Robin; why couldn’t Superman have a sidekick?

In 1963, my father received orders back to the States. My family and I traveled to Calais, France, boarded the ocean liner SS *United States*, and after a four-day trip pulled portside in New York City. No sooner had we checked in to the hotel than I turned on the television. There in amazing black and white was my hero, leaping from building to building, bullets bouncing off him, saving Lois Lane—and all this was happening in the city of Metropolis. Metropolis, New York City. I was here in Metropolis. If I was here, then maybe, just maybe, Superman was here as well.

Over the course of the next few days, my father and I explored the city.

We went everywhere—the Empire State Building, the World's Fair, Times Square. But as we ventured through the canyons of skyscrapers I was constantly looking upward, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Man of Steel. My father would stop occasionally and ask me if everything was all right. *Sure, sure, everything's fine.* I mean, I was eight years old, way too old to really believe in Superman. In my mind, I knew he was just a comic book character, but in my heart, oh in my heart, I truly hoped that he was real. *Because, if Superman was real, then he could solve all of the world's problems.* Nothing was too difficult for Superman. The Nazis couldn't stop him. Aliens couldn't hurt him. No criminal was too smart to outwit my hero.

Finally, my father stopped me and asked, "Bill, what's wrong?" I was embarrassed to tell him, but after some fatherly prodding, I finally said, "Well, New York City is Metropolis and I..." I hesitated. "I was hoping to see Superman." Dad smiled, put his arm around me, pointed to a New York police officer, and said, "Son, that's the man that protects New York City."

If you can have an epiphany at eight years old, well then, this was mine. If Superman wasn't real, then who was going to save the world? If Superman or Batman or Spider-Man weren't coming, then how would we stop the criminals, the Nazis, the Soviets, the aliens from outer space, and all the violence and destruction? The answer was clear. *It was up to us.*

Over time I became fixated on real-world heroes: astronauts striving to reach the moon, doctors creating vaccines to save millions: Civic leaders marching for the rights of the underrepresented. Political leaders forming new governments where the people had a voice. Decorated soldiers returning from Korea and then Vietnam. Sports figures who transcended the color barrier. Adventurers who were climbing higher, diving deeper, sailing farther, and exploring the unknown. Visionaries who were trying to clean the air, save the oceans, and protect the fragile ecosystems. I marveled at each of these remarkable men and women, but in the back of my mind, I knew that I was nothing like them. They were smarter, stronger, braver. They had all the attributes I lacked. They had superpowers that I just didn't possess. That's why they were heroes, and that's why they were the only people who could save the world.

But I was wrong.

In 1977, I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and joined the Navy SEALS. Over the course of the next thirty-seven years, I traveled the

world. I saw the worst of humanity: war and destruction, disease and poverty, cruelty and indifference. The world was full of problems, seemingly intractable, unsolvable, impossible problems! But also in those thirty-seven years I saw the very best of mankind. Men and women who sought peace, who rebuilt nations, who cured disease and lifted the poor from poverty. Men and women whose compassion was so deep that it made the cruelty and indifference of others pale in comparison; men and women who were from all walks of life, from every socioeconomic background, from every race, every creed, and every gender and orientation.

I came to realize that there is a hero in all of us. There is an innate code that has been there since the birth of mankind. It is written in our DNA. It is what drove the great expansion of humanity out of Africa. It summoned the explorers to cross the deserts and the seas. It helped create the great faiths. It emboldened the early scientists and philosophers. It nurtured the ill and infirm. It spoke truth to the masses. It brought order to chaos and hope to the desperate. This code is not a cipher, or a cryptograph, or a puzzle to be solved. It is a moral code, an internal code of conduct that drives the human race to explore, to nurture, to comfort, to inspire, and to laugh so that societies can flourish.

This book is about heroes and the virtues they possess. You may wonder whether you can ever be as courageous or as compassionate or as humble as the men and women in these stories. *Trust me, you can!* For some, living the Hero Code comes more naturally. But for most of us, we must learn how to bring forth these virtues. We need to see them in the lives of others and try to mirror them in ourselves. We need to build those qualities through small steps that eventually become the foundation of our character.

I hope that you will find the stories in this book and these lessons of character to be of value as you build your own life, worthy of the respect of others. The hard truth is that Superman is not coming to save the day. Each of us will have to do our part. Each of us will have to find the hero inside and bring it forth. So, grab a towel, hop on a chair, and let's take that leap!

CHAPTER ONE

Courage



“Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees all the rest.”

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

As I walked into the large command center at my Special Operations headquarters in Tampa, a sergeant dressed in his camouflage uniform called the soldiers to attention. Everyone rose from their desks and stood tall until I sat at the head table.

“Take seats,” I announced.

It was the daily command briefing, and over one hundred soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and civilians were situated around the room, all prepared to provide me, the four-star admiral, some insights into the events of the previous night.

On the thirty-foot-high wall in front of me was an array of seventy-inch flat panel displays, each with vital information from our special operations around the world. In the center of the wall was a massive ten-foot-square bank of cameras and microphones that provided a videoconference capability with my commanders.

Beside me sat one of my senior enlisted soldiers. As I turned to greet him, I could tell something was wrong. He was quiet and returned my greeting with a simple nod.

At the front of the command center, a young officer began to brief the results of last night’s missions. He rattled off a few Ranger and SEAL operations from Afghanistan, talked about some training programs in Africa, and then came to the casualty report. I quietly said a prayer as the officer began to talk.

“Sir, last night in Kandahar province we had three soldiers killed: PFC Christopher Horns, Sergeant First Class Kris Domeij, and...” He paused. “Lieutenant Ashley White from the Cultural Support Team.”

I took a deep breath.

“What happened?” I asked solemnly.

“Sir, the Rangers were conducting a routine mission in Kandahar and the Taliban compound was booby-trapped. The two Rangers and Lieutenant White stepped on a pressure plate mine and it exploded. The Rangers were killed instantly.” The young officer paused again, struggling with the next sentence.