



Navy SEALs parachute onto Sunset Boulevard at the premiere of Relativity Media's *Act Of Valor* held at ArcLight Cinemas on 13 February 2012 in Hollywood, CA. Photo by Jason Merritt/Getty Images for Relativity Media

Act of Valor The Story Behind the Feature Film

By Captain George Galdorisi '70, USN (Ret.)

ACT OF VALOR, A BANDITO BROTHERS/RELATIVITY MEDIA PRODUCTION, WAS RELEASED FOR WIDE THEATRICAL DISTRIBUTION THIS FEBRUARY. STARRING ACTIVE DUTY NAVY SEALs, THE FILM IS A FICTIONALIZED ACCOUNT OF REAL LIFE OPERATIONS. BUT IT IS THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY ABOUT HOW THE FILM CAME TO BE MADE THAT IS AS INTRIGUING AS THE MOVIE AND SUBSEQUENT NOVELIZATION.

Like many things that still profoundly influence us today, it started on 11 September 2001, a day that is riveted into the consciousness of all Americans. Within the Department of Defense

(DoD) 9-11 caused a national catharsis, one that inspired civilian and military leaders to rethink how to deal with threats to the nation in the 21st century. As this re-evaluation began to take shape,

one aspect became immediately apparent—the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) would have a vastly more prominent role in dealing with 21st century threats to the United States.

To enable SOCOM to deal with these threats, more Special Operations Forces (SOF) would be necessary. In 2005, in support of national security policy, a decision was made within DoD to increase SOCOM by several thousand special operators over a five year period. That meant that the various service components of SOCOM would each have to recruit and train their share of additional special operators. Specifically, U.S. Navy SEALs would have to have 500 more enlisted SEALs serving in SEAL teams within five years. But as all Special Operations professionals know, one of the SOF truths is that you cannot create special operators overnight. With the stroke of a pen, the U.S. Navy SEALs received an incredibly tough assignment.

There are dramatically declining numbers of young Americans who are qualified for military service. Further limiting the pool is the fact that the U.S. Navy SEALs are all male, and the rigors of SEAL training results in an attrition rate of more than 75 percent of highly-qualified and thoroughly-screened candidates for this training. Given these facts, the U.S. Navy SEAL community recognized that it was facing a daunting challenge because a critical and unwavering criteria is that the quality of the individuals completing SEAL training cannot be compromised.

At that point in 2005, achieving any significant measure of growth in the Navy SEAL community seemed impossible. The average net growth of the SEAL force for the previous decade had been fewer than five newly-qualified SEALs

each year, far short of the 100 new SEALs required annually for five consecutive years in order to reach the DoD goal for additional SEALs. To address this challenge, in December 2005, the head of the Navy Special Warfare Command, Rear Admiral Joseph Maguire, reinvigorated the Naval Special Warfare Recruiting Directorate and charged it with accelerating its efforts to tell the Naval Special Warfare story. As part of this effort, the Directorate reached out to the civilian media community.

The Navy moved forward deliberately because previous efforts in the first half of the decade to tell the SEAL story while relatively successful, had been fraught with post-production review, funding and other issues. In November 2006, the Navy and the Naval Special Warfare community invited production companies to submit proposals for projects where the Navy would grant access to Naval Special Warfare training sites for projects that would support SEAL recruiting. As part of this agreement, all costs needed to be funded by the production company.

The Bandito Brothers entered the mix. In August 2007, the Navy Recruiting Command, through the Navy's advertising agency, Campbell-Ewald, engaged Bandito Brothers to produce a recruiting film for the Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewmen (SWCC) community. The SWCCs, while not Navy SEALs, work closely with SEALs in combat missions, providing their surface mobility support with fast, stealthy boats. For Navy SEALs, the SWCCs are their closest brothers-in-arms. The Bandito Brothers video was an important element in enhancing SWCC recruiting and overcoming a longstanding SWCC manning shortfall.

With the successful SWCC project behind them, the Navy and the Naval Special Warfare community decided an optimal way to enhance SEAL recruiting was to create a new production to tell the SEAL story and invited media companies to submit proposals to create this product. The production was designed to inspire young men, primarily in the 19 to 24 year-old age group, to consider service in Naval Special Warfare, to demonstrate to taxpayers the capabilities of Naval Special Warfare and to provide a legacy for Naval Special Warfare warriors who had fallen in combat since 9-11.

Several respected production companies expressed interest in the project and submitted proposals. As the Navy evaluated the merits of each production company, the Bandito Brothers' outstanding sports cinematography and previous award-winning sports documentaries, *Step into Liquid* and *Dust to Glory*, quickly vaulted their production company to a consensus to undertake this project. In April 2008, the Navy sent a letter to Scott Waugh and Mike McCoy of Bandito Brothers approving the project.

The project, originally entitled *I Am That Man*, a term taken directly from the SEAL ethos, was given the green light by the Navy in April 2009 and a production agreement was drafted to define roles and responsibilities between the Navy and Bandito Brothers. Once the agreement was signed, filming began immediately. While the Navy and the Naval Special Warfare community would provide unprecedented access to SEAL training sites, there were constraints to the project. Since no taxpayer money could be used in the film production, Bandito Brothers' film crews were granted access to already scheduled Navy training evolutions, as the Navy did not get under way or

airborne just to support the filming. As a result, the filming took several years due to the timing and coordination of SEAL training.

Part of the success of this project stemmed from the unique synergy between the Bandito Brothers directors, who were champion athletes in their own right, and the Naval Special Warfare community. Additionally, Bandito Brothers had a strong background in military films, having made nine films for the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. This synergy helped keep the project on track where previous efforts earlier in the decade had crashed on the rocks and shoals which challenge projects of this kind.

Filming took place in a variety of locations where SEAL and other special operations training is conducted including Key West, FL; Fort Campbell, KY; Stennis, MI; El Centro, CA; and San Clemente Island, CA. It also included filming aboard U.S. Navy ships and submarines, including BONHOMME RICHARD (LHD-6) and FLORIDA (SSGN-728). Because everyone in uniform on screen is either a U.S. Navy SEAL or U.S. Navy SWCC, the true stars of this film effort were all active duty military personnel at the time of filming.

But the making of *Act of Valor* involved far more than just gathering riveting and never-before-seen film footage. The Navy and Bandito Brothers

had to create and agree upon a high concept story line, a believable plot, some background and a “family story line” for the SEALs in the film. While this was familiar turf for Bandito Brothers, it was brand new territory for most of the Navy professionals involved in the project and necessitated moving away from what they had done for past projects such as recruiting videos and documentaries.

In coordination with the Navy, Bandito Brothers and their writers created a compelling story line. This did not occur immediately, but rather after considerable due diligence on the part of Bandito Brothers, including internalizing the SEAL and SWCC ethos, interviewing scores of Navy SEALs and SWCCs and

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touring military facilities across the force. Ultimately, the Bandito Brothers engaged screenwriter Kurt Johnstad to write a screenplay that became the basis for the movie and the novelization.

In order to undertake a substantial project of this nature, Bandito Brothers secured funding from a number of private equity investors including Legendary Pictures, producer of films that include *300*, *Batman*, *The Dark Knight*, *the Hangover* and *The Town*. By early 2010, more than 1,500 hours of film footage had been shot, and the Navy undertook a detailed tactics, techniques and procedures scrub of this footage to ensure that nothing would be seen that compromised security in any way. Also, in early 2010, the name of the project was changed from *I Am That Man* to *Act of Valor*.

By early 2011, Bandito Brothers had *Act of Valor* essentially complete and the company was in the process of editing the film footage. Bandito Brothers showed the film to numerous focus groups with tremendous positive feedback and scores that enabled them to market the project to top studios as a feature film presentation. In June 2011, Relativity Media, known for such films as *The Fighter*, *The Social Network*, *Robin Hood*, *Repo Man*, *The Green Zone*, *The Taking of Pelham 123* and many others, secured worldwide rights. Recently, after viewing a pre-release version of the movie and being impressed by both the action and the message of the film, Tom Clancy became attached to the movie.

In the summer of 2011, Captain Dick Couch '67, USNR (Ret.), and Captain George Galdorisi '70, USN (Ret.), embarked on a novelization of *Act of Valor*. Working with the Kurt Johnstad script and a pre-release DVD of the movie, Couch and Galdorisi created a back story of all the major characters; the Navy



A SEAL participant from the film displays the cameras that filmed first-person perspective during missions. Photo courtesy Relativity Media

SEALs of the Bandito Platoon (the informal name of the SEALs who starred in the movie), SEAL family members, the villains the SEALs needed to defeat, as well as other characters, major and minor. While the movie implicitly addressed core values such as honor, courage, commitment, character, nobility, sacrifice, family values and others, for the novelization, they needed to walk the reader through these characteristics explicitly and illustrate how the success of the U.S. Navy SEALs in missions throughout their history has been dependent on these core values.

The production of the manuscript for *Tom Clancy Presents: Act of Valor* was on an accelerated timeline in order to get the paperback version into production for a 10 January 2012 release date. It took several fast-paced months to complete

the book and shepherd through time-critical rounds of editing, re-editing and copy-editing. It was a privilege to turn celluloid film into prose and tell this story with the granularity to enable the reader to internalize what he or she might have missed in an action-packed, 100-minute movie.

Tom Clancy wrote a short foreword to the book that includes information on the Navy SEAL Foundation. Finally, the SEAL and SWCC community continue to endeavor to recruit “the best of the best”—that is, after all, what ultimately led to the book and the movie—and anyone interested in learning more about becoming a part of the SEAL and SWCC communities should go to the official Navy SEAL + SWCC website at sealswcc.com.✚

See the *Act of Valor* preview and behind the scenes footage at: www.actofvalor.com. Learn more about becoming part of the SEAL and SWCC communities at: www.sealswcc.com. For information on the Navy SEAL Foundation, visit <http://www.nswfoundation.org>.