

David Rutherford interview

Veteran Voices

Co-authored by William Caragol and Connor Berman

May 22nd, 2024

William Caragol and Connor Berman had the honor of interviewing David Rutherford about his time as a SEAL.

Following his time at Penn State, David Rutherford decided to join the Marines in 1995 to pursue the SEAL teams as he felt a need to not only defend the United States of America but also maintain being a part of a, as he quotes, a “team-oriented environment” that he had felt a part of during his lacrosse career in college. In 2003, Rutherford ended his career as a SEAL. He then pursued a career in other avenues such as in a private military contractor company, called Blackwater, as well as traveling as a tactical trainer and security expert for the United States government.

During his time at Penn State, he met Tony Bronski who he lived next to in the freshman dorms. Rutherford says he was most influenced when Bronski gave him a book about Seals in Vietnam. Four years later, following his graduation from college, unsure about what he wanted to do with his life, he looked back at that book. The book allowed him to truly understand how the SEAL team operated and that it was all team-driven. Growing up as a kid he always had a passion for special operations but he credits this book with what truly motivated him to join.

In one of his earliest memories of enlisting, Rutherford details his experience signing in for BUDS. Entering the quarter house late at night and amped up to sign in, Rutherford had the student on watch duty wake up the Chief drill instructor. Unbeknownst to him, he was waking him up from his Sunday rest causing the Chief to display not only astonishment but also anger. Rutherford was then taken through a two-hour beatdown, where he even hit the surf zone and got covered in sand. All this before he even put his name on paper as an official BUDS student. Despite being shaken by the unexpected reaction and consequence,

Rutherford kept a level head and confidence as he went through and completed BUDS.

Going through this vigorous training and eventually combat led to what Rutherford refers to as his brotherhood. A bond between service members is forced through collaboration and shared experience within high-stress situations. He has lost many of his closest friends and combatants even after his time serving. This inspired him and some of his “brothers” to start a charity to help those who struggle with operator syndrome to help veterans properly return to civilian life. Along with helping in charity, Rutherford has done podcasts in order to spread awareness to others about the military and its veterans and also as a way to give veterans an outlet where they can connect to others who share similar experiences and troubles to their own.

Rutherford spoke about the dynamic within the SEAL teams. He notes, “Our officers go through training with us, and that is really what makes our program so unique, that there isn’t that separation”. Rutherford speaks on how that is believed to be the only way for an officer to gain the respect of those he commands. He also details how there is a certain standard held for SEALs and if that standard isn’t met those people are out of the program quickly. Rutherford describes the leadership dynamic within the SEALs to be all about respect and without it, leaders wouldn’t be able to emerge. Holding those around you accountable is what keeps everyone to the highest standards and allows them to be such a successful group of operators

SEALS are known for not only their individualistic skills but also their ability to maintain an extremely cohesive and cooperative unit. Rutherford details how this formation occurs and the answer to how this culture develops is to Rutherford stems from shared experience. Rutherford details the camaraderie that builds up, he says, “When you go into a platoon, you spend almost 18 months just working with that platoon getting ready to go to war. And so you're together all the time, you're training all the time, you live together, you eat together, you sleep together, and you party together. You just become this unbelievable unit to where if we're doing nighttime patrols and there's no light. I know exactly who's in front of me just by the way they move or if we're in a kill house with some dude I know the way he's gonna sweep. I can read who is who just off body movements. It becomes

an intuitive, intuitive connection. That's really what makes it so awesome, is that you develop those deep-rooted connections not only physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually."

Rutherford's most difficult part of his time in the military was what he calls the transition period or quick change from combat to civilian life. Rutherford describes the guilt and feeling of letting his combatants down due to his retirement. This gave him the motivation to start and support support groups for the special operations community. Being immersed in such an intense lifestyle can have detrimental effects. Support from not only those on the outside but also those who have served time with you can be of utmost importance in succeeding after serving.

David Rutherford has invested an incredible amount of time and effort into serving our country. Without veterans like him, our country's unique history would not be preserved.