

## Navy steps up search for new SEALs

Changes to special-warfare recruiting, training practices show promise for growing unit

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Posted : Monday Apr 9, 2007 11:03:37 EDT

**CORONADO, Calif.** — In the past year, Naval Special Warfare Command and Big Navy kicked off a full-court press in the quest to expand the force of Navy SEALs.

They beefed up recruiting, assigning SEAL commandos at each recruiting district, and targeted a larger pool of young athletes and achievers. They're growing a mentorship program for prospective SEAL recruits to help them along at boot camp.

Recently, with the help of a hired consultant and a high-level board of senior officials, they began experimenting with new concepts, including a recruit division at Recruit Training Command dedicated to SEAL candidates to foster teamwork, expand physical training and improve performance so more recruits would successfully complete entry-level training on their way to becoming naval special warfare operators, or SEALs.

An initial glance may show the first step toward success.



*The Navy has found initial success with stepped-up efforts to find potential SEAL recruits, with two of the most recent BUD/S classes drawing a higher than average number of students.*

On March 30, 46 men — the last men standing of the 144 original students of Class 263 — marked their completion of the six-month month Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL course.

Their graduation produced a 32 percent completion rate — an increase from the BUD/S historical rate of 26 percent, according to Naval Special Warfare Command officials.

And Class 264, which completed “Hell Week” April 6, marked the first time that Naval Special Warfare Center here convened a BUD/S class at the school’s maximum capacity of 190 students.

Over the years, BUD/S classes often included 80 or fewer students on Training Day 1 as the Navy struggled to recruit and train young sailors in sufficient numbers to fill vacant SEAL billets.

Those efforts butted against high attrition rates that kept the naval commando force undermanned.

But with Navy SEALs in demand in the war on terrorism, Naval Special Warfare Command officials are facing with mandates to expand. Its force of 2,270 SEALs, undermanned by about 12 percent, is supposed to grow to 3,038 SEALs by 2011, according to official figures.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chief of naval operations, has made that growth one of his top priorities.

### **A LONG, THOROUGH REVIEW**

Top officials know that getting there isn’t just a matter of getting more enlisted contracts or more boots onto the grinder, however.

They are taking a hard-nosed look at every step of the process of producing Navy SEALs, starting with finding young men interested in joining the Navy who are fit and ready for tougher standards of SEAL selection and rigorous entry-level training.

“If we’re successful in recruiting the right people and we’re successful in making them competent sailors at the level that we need them to be at to get into our program to serve the nation, that’s what the whole process is about,” Naval Special Warfare Command’s Force Master Chief (SEAL) Andy Tafelski said.

Command officials believe they're on track to recruit nearly 1,400 enlisted accessions this fiscal year.

While recruits are the biggest source of new SEALs, special warfare officials also count on sailors in the fleet to help grow the force.

It's tough for some sailors to get physically prepared for BUD/S while managing full-time duty, but "if you can get a fleet sailor into the program, that's of great value," Kernan said. "They already have some great skills, and they help mentor the young kids who have only been a sailor for four or five months," he said, noting that "all the training they get to be a sailor obviously is critically important for the success of our community just as well."

While they often are older and have more experience and maturity, prior-service SEAL candidates traditionally have had a higher attrition rate at BUD/S, officials said. But they said those sailors in other rates who don't complete BUD/S still will have a place in the Navy.

"There can't be a stigma attached to it," Kernan said. "They've already shown a lot of effort and motivation to get into the program."

"It's great for us if we can bring in folks from off the street," said Rear Adm. Joseph Kilkenney, commander of Navy Recruiting Command in Millington, Tenn. "There ought to be job opportunity within our own Navy." With war on terrorism-related ratings such as corpsman, explosive ordnance technician and diver in very high demand across the Navy, he said, "we've got to provide the opportunity, the avenue, for those folks," he added.

### **'BUILDING WARRIORS'**

Time is critical. Many enlisted SEALs have chalked up eight or nine combat tours, officials said, and the demand isn't waning.

"This is not about BUD/S," said Rear Adm. Joseph Maguire, commander of Naval Special Warfare Command.

"Our nation is at war ... and this war is clearly on our shoulders. So what we're doing is here is building warriors to defend the homeland. And that's what this is all about."

Maguire spoke with Navy Times at his office during a half-hour roundtable discussion April 4 with several key members of the SEAL Production Process Improvement program's board of directors. He oversees the massive review of the SEAL recruitment and training pipeline assisted by the Thomas Group, a consulting firm hired by the Navy.

The group includes Maguire, Tafelski and several senior officers, including Kilkenney and Rear Adm. Arnold Lotring, commander of Naval Service Training Command at Naval Station Great Lakes, Ill.

The group is split into three "cross-functional" teams "to take a good look at what we are doing," Maguire said.

Already, the teams are identifying and changing so-called "barriers" they believe have stopped some prospective recruits from getting through the process, such as the administering and timing of the physical screening test.

"What we found was that we had no consistency of effort across in what is the standard we need at BUD/S," Kilkenney said. By ensuring that recruiters and motivators know the PST standard, "we're making people ... successful before they actually do get to boot camp."

In March 2006, a new policy took effect that required recruits who wanted to be SEAL candidates to pass the SEAL physical screening test before they signed the enlistment contract. Before the change, only 28 percent passed. Now, it's in "the high 70s," said Cmdr. Greg Geisen, NSW Command spokesman.

"It's really [about] finding some diamonds in the rough that you can bring in and make them successful," Kilkenney noted.

At boot camp, prospective SEAL recruits with recruit training divisions muster together each morning for extra physical conditioning, a requirement that can conflict with other training demands on the schedule.

Recently, training officials experimented with a separate SEAL division, the first of its kind.

“Now we have them as a group. It makes their scheduling better and more efficient as an organization,” Lotring said.

“They’ve got a very special task to see if we can move this many men forward as a division [and] build their esprit de corps early,” he said. The men share a barracks and get extra organized physical conditioning and mentoring.

NTC officials are establishing a new holding unit for prospective SEALs who graduated boot camp but are waiting to attend the BUD/S course. While there, Lotring said, they’ll be mentored and will keep fit and conditioned for BUD/S.

“This is about improving the processes that we have, not only so we can produce not only a better SEAL, but more, faster, better,” he said.

Officials also are weighing psychological or mental tests to help identify characteristics of those who successfully navigate the training pipeline.

“We want to get people through the program, but that’s a means to an end. We want a guy to be a successful SEAL,” Kernan said. “That requires physical and, probably more important in this day and age, mental agility — the mental toughness, the motivation, all those things that going along with it.”

As they review all training and curricula, NSW officials also want to diversify the force and instill a sense of ethos and morals. But SEAL standards won’t change.

“We’re training [him] so we don’t injure him. We’re training him in a way that allows him to be successful,” Kernan said.

## **BEATING THE ODDS**

Using data from the past year, Naval Special Warfare Command and other Navy officials established a “baseline” year to use as a reference point to gauge success rates at every key step in the recruitment and training pipeline as they continue to revise and reshape the process of producing SEALs. In general, drop-out rates fall as recruits go through the training.

Of those men who contacted a Navy recruiter with the intent to become a SEAL candidate, those who:

- \* Signed an enlisted contract: 79 percent.
- \* Graduated recruit training: 58 percent.
- \* Completed SEAL pre-indoctrination program: 90 percent.
- \* Completed SEAL indoctrination: 85 percent.
- \* Completed BUD/S phase 1 (includes “Hell Week”): 33 percent.
- \* Completed BUD/S phase 2: 87 percent.
- \* Completed BUD/S phase 3: 96 percent.
- \* Graduated from Airborne School: 100 percent.
- \* Completed SEAL Qualification Training: 99 percent.

Source: Naval Special Warfare Command