



Worth Dying For: A Navy Seal's Call to a Nation

By Rorke Denver, Ellis Henican

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In a fast-paced and action-packed narrative, Navy SEAL commander Rorke Denver tackles the questions that have emerged about America's past decade at war—from what makes a hero to why we fight and what it does to us.

Heroes are not always the guys who jump on grenades. Sometimes, they are the snipers who decide to hold their fire, the wounded operators who find fresh ways to contribute, or the wives who keep the families together back home. Even a SEAL commander—especially a SEAL commander—knows that. But what's a hero, really? What do we have a right to expect from our heroes? How should we hold them accountable? Amid all the loose talk of heroes, these questions are seldom asked.

As a SEAL commander, Rorke Denver is uniquely qualified to answer questions about what makes a hero or a leader, why men kill, how best to serve your country, how battlefield experiences can elevate us, and most important, why we fight and what it does for and to us. And in *Worth Dying For*, Denver shares his personal experiences from the forefront of war today.

Denver applies some of his SEAL sense to nine big-picture, news-driven questions of war and peace, in a way that appeals to all sides of the public conversation. By broadening the issues, sharing his insights, and achieving what civilian political leaders have been utterly unable to, Denver eloquently shares answers to America's most burning questions about war, heroism, and what it all means for America's future.

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Editorial Review

Review

Rorke Denver isn't just a fierce American warrior. He's a first rate thinker, too. Keeping America safe requires both those talents now." (BRIAN KILMEADE, New York Times bestselling author)

Worth Dying For is simply essential for those making key decisions about their lives, in and out of uniform, but especially all of those thinking about the special forces at the tip of the American spear. (Hugh Hewitt, Nationally Syndicated Talk Show Host, panelist at 4 GOP Presidential Debates in 2015 16)

An inspiring, MUST READ . . . should be mandatory for anyone looking for the guidelines to becoming a better human being. (John Cena, 15 time WWE World Heavyweight Champion)

Along with General Stanley McCrystal's *Team of Teams*, Rorke Denver's *Worth Dying For* will be on order for years by every would be warrior and all of their families and friends. At least it ought to be. It brings clarity as only Commander Denver can, given where he has been and what he has done as a SEAL and what he has learned to do after his time in the Teams. "Why we fight is a personal decision," writes Denver. "Where we fight and when we fight those calls are inevitably made far above our pay grade."

It is the "**why**" that young would be warriors and their families need to know, need to grasp, internalize and commit to. There is no secret handshake, no code that has to be broken, only a shared set of values and understandings about sacrifice, effort, courage and fear, and ultimately duty that makes up the "**why**." Many fine books by many fine indeed extraordinary SEALs have been written, one of them *Damn Few* by Rorke already. *Worth Dying For* is simply essential for those making key decisions about their lives, in and out of uniform, but especially all of those thinking about the special forces at the tip of the American spear. Who are they and why are they that way? And you seek to join them or at least emulate them? You will know the answers at the conclusion of this riveting, powerful book. (Hugh Hewitt, Nationally Syndicated Talk Show Host, panelist at 4 GOP Presidential Debates in 2015 16)

About the Author

Rorke Denver

Rorke Denver is a Navy SEAL commander, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Damn Few*, and star of the hit film *Act of Valor*. Denver was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for valorous action in combat. He is an honor graduate of the United States Army Ranger School and holds a BA from Syracuse University, where he was an All-American lacrosse player and captain of the varsity lacrosse team. Denver earned his master's degree in Global Business Leadership from the University of San Diego .

Ellis Henican

Ellis Henican is a newspaper columnist, a television commentator, and the coauthor of five *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Damn Few*.

CHAPTER 1

SEND ME A HERO

Not long ago, I was the guest speaker at a middle school in Texas. The teachers and students couldn't have been more welcoming—when I walked into the auditorium, half a dozen American flags were lined up on the stage. The entire school, it seemed, had come to hear me. The school's principal, a friendly man in a plaid sport coat, announced that "a real war hero has come to share his experiences with us today." I couldn't help myself. When he said that, I glanced over my shoulder to get a look at this hero he was referring to.

Our culture craves heroes. Often I hear people say, "There aren't enough heroes anymore," and I understand the sentiment. We all need someone to admire. Someone to measure ourselves against. Someone who exhibits qualities the rest of us can emulate. It certainly feels to me like we could all use a few more of those. But heroic isn't how I see myself or how my SEAL teammates see themselves. To us, applying that word to ourselves is almost like claiming an undeserved prize. It might look shiny at first, but it's hard to imagine ever really enjoying it. In the minds of most warriors, the heroes are the ones who didn't make it home, the ones who gave that last, full measure of themselves and never returned from the battlefield. Those are the people we hold in our hearts as heroes. The rest of us are just doing our jobs.

SEALs never use the word heroic as we head out on a mission. We're much too focused on the last-minute, practical things. "Are the trucks fueled up?" "Do we have a solid navigation plan?" "Have we built in the right contingencies?" If anything, I have wondered, "Will today be the day that my bravery is tested profoundly?" knowing I can never predict what might arrive or when.

I'm not reaching for false humility here. Most of the time, war is just dirty, ugly work. The day-to-day stuff is straight labor—dangerous labor, maybe, but labor nonetheless. Prepping our gear. Loading the vehicles. Getting from here to there. Stopping to kick in a door, set up an ambush, or find suitable terrain for a fight. I wouldn't call it heroic. I wouldn't even call it brave. I would call it a tough and important job that in certain, rare moments can lead toward heroism or be deemed heroic by others. But mostly, we get in. We get it done. We get out—all of us, if we've done our jobs effectively—alive. Day in and day out, that's what war is.

I have won awards including a high-ranking one, the Bronze Star with "V" for valorous action in combat. I appreciated the honor, but when someone looks at me, or someone else in the military, and uses that heavyweight word, it feels awkward. My first reaction is almost always the one I had in that middle school auditorium, some version of "There must be someone in the room with shinier medals or who has lived a more exemplary life than I have."

When good people say, "Thank you for your service," I understand it comes from a place of appreciation and respect. So "thank you" is what I told that principal as I launched into my talk that day—and left it at that.

With that simple, polite exchange, I was reminded that we are stuck with outmoded archetypes of who even qualifies to be called a hero. It's easy to say the hero is the guy who hit the home run in the ninth inning to win the World Series or did something dramatic on the battlefield that won him a Silver Star. Yes, every first responder at 9/11 can be called a hero for passing the personal-sacrifice test, running toward the dust and tragedy of the collapsing towers to help those in need. All these acts are good and deserving of our praise. But so is whispering just the right words into the ear of a child at exactly the right moment. We need to be

more discerning and broaden our understanding of what a hero is. Hardly anyone ever calls a mailman, truck driver, schoolteacher, or stay-at-home mom a hero. Maybe we should. Without a doubt, some of them deserve it.

There is something terribly out of whack today about the way we pick our heroes. We get fixated on high-profile stars, athletes, and people who work in a handful of supposedly heroic professions—soldiers and police officers, firefighters and trauma surgeons—and we pretty much leave it at that. In truth, athletes worth emulating are few and far between. Heroic billionaires and business tycoons are certainly rare. Actors play heroes, but how many of today’s celebrities truly behave heroically? Who among the current crop of stars has dropped out of that glitzy lifestyle to go serve—and I don’t just mean militarily. Which one of them has sacrificed anything? As far as I can tell, almost all of their charitable works are accompanied by press releases and paparazzi photo ops. There was once an era when athletes and the Hollywood elite actually said, “I’m going to pick up a gun in one of the world wars,” or “I’m putting my film career on hold and returning to Ohio to care for my aged mother.” It’s been a while.

After years of thinking about this, I have come to understand that heroism lives in many forms and in many different kinds of people. It extends beyond dying on the battlefield, the definition my teammates and I find reflexive refuge in. Nor can the concept of what constitutes a hero be limited to the familiar categories. I live in one of those categories, and I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that the pool of potential heroes is a whole lot deeper than the people who are running back an interception for a touchdown or walking a red carpet or killing a bunch of bad guys in a war zone. Dead can’t be the only defining characteristic of heroism. Nor can fame. Nor can money. Nor can the number of Facebook followers someone has.

We need to step back for a minute and think this through. What exactly is a hero? What is it that makes someone’s service, someone’s sacrifice, someone’s bravery, stand out heroically? Most people don’t have a clue where to start looking, much less an understanding of what really makes a hero. I’ve had the privilege to know many true heroes—people who served their country in the military—and people who didn’t. While those who deserve to be called “hero” don’t all possess the same precise mix of traits, my experience has taught me that true heroes do share a few core characteristics in common. Let me tell you what I think they are.

HEROES PUT OTHERS FIRST

Personal sacrifice is at the very heart of heroism, a willingness to put the needs of others first, even at extraordinary personal cost. That’s why Pat Tillman stood out for so many. A future superstar in the NFL, he had always exceeded his potential. He wasn’t physically big enough to play football, and yet he played spectacularly. He had a huge career ahead of him when he did something remarkable. In 2002, eight months after 9/11 and four days after Memorial Day, he left his promising life as an NFL player to join the Army Rangers. He went to Afghanistan and was tragically killed in action. For someone like Pat, just being there—when he had so many reasons not to be—was heroic.

Malala Yousafzai was this kind of hero. I’ve never met her, though I’d like to one day. Malala was born in Pakistan into a family that believed deeply in education—for girls as well as boys. When she was old enough, she began attending a school her father had founded just as the strict Taliban government had begun tightening its brutal grip on Pakistan. The Taliban staunchly opposed the education of girls.

Malala could have said nothing and continued her schooling in secret at her father’s school. But remaining silent would not have helped her classmates and the many thousands of other girls who wanted to learn but didn’t have access to education.

At age eleven, Malala took up their cause in a risky and public way. She gave a speech entitled “How Dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education.” Four months later, Malala started blogging for the BBC about the Taliban’s efforts to prohibit females from obtaining education. Three years after her first speech, she was nominated for the International Children’s Peace Prize. The Taliban’s response: issue a death threat against Malala.

When she was fourteen, a man with a gun boarded her school bus and demanded to know which of the students was Malala. Glances in Malala’s direction gave her away. The man fired, shooting her in the side of her head. After being flown to England to undergo multiple operations, she recovered from her injuries and refused to be silent. She continued to speak out on behalf of universal education, even taking her cause to the United Nations in New York.

She’s one tough young woman and an inspiration to me, as brave as anyone I have ever known or heard about. Standing defiantly for the rights of others, suffering the consequences, and still pressing on—clearly she is someone worth emulating and looking up to. She absolutely deserved the Nobel Peace Prize she won at age seventeen, and I don’t believe she’s remotely done.

Without ever picking up a gun, Malala is fighting the same enemies those of us in the military have been fighting, the same force of darkness and oppression in the same part of the world. And frankly, she’s been able to achieve results that far exceed what we’ve done with all our weapons and tactics. That’s undeniably heroic.

HEROES DO THE RIGHT THINGS FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

To me, the people who most deserve to be called heroes are everyday folks who do everyday things extraordinarily well. I make this point when I talk to youth groups and to corporate audiences. Consider the schoolteacher who uses her own money to buy supplies for her classroom. She doesn’t do it to end up on the front page of a magazine or the star of a YouTube video. What about the nurse who stays a few minutes after her shift is over to spend time with an elderly patient who has no family. These everyday heroes don’t receive a lot of praise for what they do, but they get the job done. Simple acts can qualify as heroism. I see it happen every day.

My parents split when I was young. My mom was a single mother living in the Silicon Valley of Northern California in a very expensive part of the world—maxing out credit cards, doing whatever was necessary to provide for my brother and me. This was no small feat. Still, we were able to take awesome trips. While my friends were flying off to Europe with their families on spring vacation, my mom, my brother, and I were driving across America in a beat-up Subaru. My mom always found a way, making her someone I consider a hero. Whatever realm they’re operating in, that’s what a certain kind of hero does. Facing the mundane difficulties of day-to-day life, they just keep going.

Of course, we love it when our heroes dazzle us. After all, we look to them to inspire us toward greatness. Chesley Sullenberger certainly did that. The celebrated US Airways captain landed a disabled Airbus A320 on the Hudson River, saving all 155 people aboard. Sully’s perfect water landing soon after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport took him from private to public hero in a matter of seconds, though I have the impression he is still very much the same man he always was.

But it wasn’t just Sully’s training or calm under pressure that made him a hero. It wasn’t even his awe-inspiring competence. What made him a hero was that he did his job superbly, and he didn’t view that as anything extraordinary. He was just discharging the obligation he undertook when he climbed into the

cockpit of a commercial jetliner with passengers aboard. After he performed his job that day, he didn't go around patting himself on the back for the next six months. Sully didn't feel a need to be on the front of a cereal box or star in a reality TV show.

Cal Ripkin Jr. was loaded with talent. A beloved infielder with the Baltimore Orioles, his stats included 3,184 hits, 431 home runs, and 1,695 runs batted in. He won two Golden Glove Awards, made the American League All-Star Team nineteen times, and was the league's Most Valuable Player twice. But that isn't what made Cal a hero to me or to most real baseball fans. There are a lot of talented ballplayers out there, but talent isn't the same as character. It was the oddball film director Woody Allen who once famously declared, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Cal Ripkin Jr. showed up. He showed up no matter what. He played in an astounding 2,632 games in a row, never once calling in sick, injured, or too hungover to play. In twenty-one seasons with the Orioles, the Hall of Fame infielder became one of the most productive players in baseball history. He broke Lou Gehrig's fifty-six-year-old record for consecutive games played. He behaved like a grown-up in a game of overgrown boys. Heroism is meeting your responsibilities, big or small, not for praise or money, but because it's the right thing to do.

HEROES SEE THE WORLD AS IT SHOULD BE

Heroes see beyond the place they are. Winston Churchill embodied this kind of hero, the visionary. He presciently saw the world around him. Well in advance of World War II, he predicted the growing evil in Germany that would have to be dealt with. Skillfully, he played the puzzle pieces on the board as he calculated how to get the American president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, into the fight and how he could make waves before Pearl Harbor was ever bombed. Churchill foresaw all of this. Not only that, he also understood before almost anyone else that an Iron Curtain was descending and the Soviet Union would be the next real problem. His understanding of the world was staggering—allowing him to make the heroic decisions that were necessary.

Our Founding Fathers were heroes because of their vision of what this country could be as much as for their prowess on the battlefield. Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, Franklin: think of how much these men achieved in their lives and how much effort they expended getting there. I like my heroes to be dogged and determined as they achieve great things. Working, studying, thinking, strategizing—when did they ever have time to rest? They were inventors, philosophers, and statesmen and, by the way, they also managed to create a brand-new country that became the greatest country on earth. Ben Franklin wasn't sitting around tweeting on social media for attention, I promise you that. He never got tired of improving the world around him. He was in his study or workshop, solving problems, designing things, and asking himself deep, philosophical questions. The full extent of what he and the others gave our country is mind-boggling.

The men who founded this country imagined a better way for people to govern themselves. And they put themselves on the line to achieve that vision. They said, in effect: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor to this vital cause." I ask, who today is willing to commit so much now? These heroes did it, fully recognizing the risks involved and with incredible vision of America's future.

HEROES ARE TOUGH ENOUGH TO SHOW HUMILITY

I take regular muster of my heroes, an exercise I would highly recommend everyone do. I reflect on what makes these people heroes to me, beyond a willingness to risk their lives. I ask myself: What characteristics do I most admire? Who has them in abundance? Whose life inspires mine?

My brother, Nate, always comes to mind. He is smart, creative, skilled, physically aggressive, tough, fit, and hard. Nate's a firefighter in Los Angeles, which is a high-pressure, high-risk, high-energy calling. And firefighters in L.A. do a lot more than fight fires; they are in the lifesaving business, responding to human emergencies of every imaginable sort. Nate doesn't brag, but if you ask him, he'll tell you harrowing stories about mangled bodies he's pulled from auto freeway accidents, flatlined cardiac patients he's brought back to life, and many people he's helped who were simply going through life when suddenly some great calamity befell them. In those moments, Nate can't wait to get into the action.

Three years my junior, he's monkey-gorilla strong and ambitious. He bought a house and fixed it up on his own. He'd never been trained to do this, but he did it exquisitely. He has a beautiful handmade wooden table in his living room. I came inside one day and asked, "Man, where did you get that table?"

"I built it," he said simply.

That's just Nate.

"I just fought a three-alarm fire . . . I pulled someone out of a burning car . . . I benched three hundred and ten pounds . . . I built an exquisite table with my own hands." Most people would be posting daily photos and weekly progress reports. Not Nate. He's done all those things and barely mentions them in conversation. It's just what he does and who he is.

John McCain, a true war hero, exemplifies humility under duress. When Donald Trump was campaigning to be the 2016 Republican nominee for president, the real-estate mogul and reality TV star made light of Senator John McCain's five years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. "He was a war hero because he was captured?" Trump scoffed during an appearance at the Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa. "I like people who weren't captured."

Veterans around the country erupted in outrage, but the former naval aviator McCain kept his cool. He didn't demand that Trump apologize to him. "I think he may owe an apology to the families of those who have sacrificed in conflict and those who have undergone the prison experience of serving their country," McCain said.

Then McCain said something interesting about heroism, something I could certainly hear a SEAL say. "I'm not a hero," he went on, "but those who were my senior ranking officers, people like Colonel Bud Day, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, and those that have inspired us to do things that we otherwise wouldn't have been capable of doing. Those are the people that I think he owes an apology to."

McCain knew. Heroes don't grab credit, even when there are political points to score. They don't take personal insult. They rise above the dumb and the trivial. And that's part of what inspires the rest of us to be better than we are.

THE CARE HEROES DESERVE

This hero business carries heavy burdens. Many of our heroes are imperfect people, once you get to know them, or their heroism is limited to just one part of their lives. Churchill drank too much. Some of the Founding Fathers owned slaves. Often, heroism is something that occurs during one extraordinary season, one unimaginable tour of duty, one single moment of action. Then it's back to regular life. That can be a tough adjustment. There's a reason many high school sports stars have tough middle-aged lives. There's also an explanation why many great warriors retell tales of their glory days for the next fifty years.

Heroes, people who have achieved phenomenally, often face difficulties when their moment of glory is done. Suddenly they are regular people again. And yet, as officially declared heroes, they are held to the wildly elevated standards of heroism. It's an uncomfortable situation to be in, often a huge psychological burden.

As a friend put it to me: "What I did turned into a heroic moment. Now I'm just trying to pay my cable bill and be a good father, brother, or son, and I might fail. It's a heavy expectation even if people really don't know what they're throwing on your shoulders." Going back to an ordinary life after war is a tough adjustment.

I have another friend—an undeniable war hero—who said to me: "I don't know what I'm supposed to be now. I didn't announce, 'I'm a hero.' I just happened to be in a place where three hundred bad guys charged my buddies, and I survived. If that same event happens again, there is no reason to think I'll be the one telling the tale. Yet people expect so much from me. I'm not sure that's who I am."

Many warriors I know who have won prestigious awards and survived dangerous events have found themselves saying, "Damn, did I get lucky! What now?"

Those are the voices of real-life heroes. These people carry the label, but they still aren't always sure it applies to them.

These heroes try to compartmentalize. They go back to their jobs and don't discuss their war experiences. Or they say as little as possible: "I was a Marine . . . I did what they asked me to . . . I was lucky to get home alive."

It's their way of lowering expectations, cutting short the dicey conversations, and easing more gently into civilian life. It's a survival mechanism, and it is fully their right to say, "Now I'm back in Oklahoma, and I'm going to go back to the farm." War heroes are just as likely to be humble, even uncertain of their own heroism. Most, I have found, would be very happy to avoid any limelight at all.

The returning war veteran, the retired sports star, the firefighter whose firefighting days are done—hardly anyone is a hero always and everywhere. That's an awful lot to ask. We are free to pick and choose the characteristics in individuals we admire and try to learn from—and sometimes even ignore things that some might say detract from the good. We are inspired by their bravery and achievements. We seek to emulate the extraordinary things they have done. We are reminded by their selfless choices of the values that we ourselves try to hold. But they are not cartoon superheroes; they are complex people trying to get by.

Don't forget this. We owe our heroes space. The space to be themselves. The space not to be heroes every day. The space, outside of their heroism, to live real lives. In return, we get inspiration—not perfection—from them. We should be grateful when we get that much.

FINDING YOUR INNER HERO

Many heroes never consciously prepare themselves for the acts that define them as heroes. Whatever their special fuel was—boldness, selflessness, religious faith, personal bravery—it must have been present inside them already. Like a shooting star in the darkness, it seemed to ignite almost on its own. But this doesn't mean heroism doesn't reside within all of us. On August 21, 2015, three young vacationing Americans—Spencer Stone, Alek Skarlatos, and Anthony Sadler—were on a high-speed train from Paris to Amsterdam. Five hundred and fifty-one other passengers were also aboard that day. Outside Brussels, a twenty-five-year-old Moroccan terrorist stepped out of a restroom armed with an AKM assault rifle, a 9mm

Luger pistol, a box cutter, and a bottle of gasoline. There was no time to think or make a plan or call for help. All three Americans jumped up to tackle the man. Spencer Stone, who serves in the U.S. Air Force, later said, “You can’t live your life in a cocoon or in fear. You have to act when you need to act. I thought when I ran toward him, I would be mowed down before I got to him—but maybe Alek could get to him or Anthony.”

He acted anyway. Heroes act anyway.

“When I heard the click of the gun to the back of my head, I thought this is it,” Stone said. But the gun didn’t fire. “I thought when he slashed me with the box cutter, he would slice my artery. But none of that happened. God was there with us.”

These three young friends foiled that attack not because of what they knew or how they planned. They foiled the attack because they had heroism inside them.

Truly, in this hair-trigger world of ours, there are endless opportunities for heroism. Three months after the attempted train attack, on November 13, 2015, terrorists struck successfully in Paris, killing 130 people and injuring another 368. Sadly, no one had a chance to overwhelm the perpetrators, but there were heroes nonetheless. They were the ones who rushed in without concern for their own safety and provided medical care. In one memorable case, these heroes rescued a pregnant woman who was left hanging on the side of a building trying to escape the carnage. Again, the heroes acted not just because of what they saw. They acted because of who they are. Across our long history, such heroes turn up everywhere.

Joshua Chamberlain understood what it means to be a hero. He was a professor at Bowdoin College in Maine with no military training of any sort, who volunteered to fight with the Union Army in the Civil War. Though he had never studied military strategy, he rose to the rank of brigadier general and earned a Medal of Honor for extraordinary personal bravery at Gettysburg. So beloved was he by his men, he was given the honor of commanding the Union troops at Robert E. Lee’s surrender at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia. After the war, Chamberlain went back home and was elected governor of Maine before settling in as Bowdoin’s president.

From personal experience, he knew that almost anyone can rise to be a hero, and such people often can’t even explain why. “Heroism is latent in every human soul . . . however humble and unknown,” he said in a moving Memorial Day address in 1897, speaking of his fellow war veterans living and dead.

These are words to live by. Just open your eyes. You will find your own heroes—around the corner and around the world. Follow the examples they set. Make them your own. Before you know it, people will be looking to you as a hero.

TRIDENT TAKEAWAYS



Heroes turn up in unexpected places.



Heroes are never perfect—allow for that.



Choose your own heroes by the qualities you admire.

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