

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 472-018**  
**Interviewee: Roy Savage**  
**Interviewer: Christian Newby**  
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Christian Newby: All right, we are live.

Hi, my name is Christian Newby, I'm here with Roy Savage. He served in the U.S. Navy as an operation specialist and ships rescue swimmer with the USS Independence Battle Group out of San Diego, California.

Would you care to elaborate on that all, Roy?

Roy Savage: Yeah. Thanks for having me. I really appreciate you inviting me to do this. I took the class last semester, and this is really kind of cool to turn the tide around and help another student out. But yeah. So I was stationed in San Diego. I went to basic training in Orlando, Florida, July of '89. And when I got out of basic training, got stationed in San Diego on a guided missile cruiser called the USS Jouett, J-o-u-e-t-t, CG 29. And it was a part of the bigger battle group, which was the Independence Battle Group Station on North Island. And we just happened to be part of that particular battle group.

CN: Gotcha. Okay, awesome. Thank you for the background there. I just wanted to open up with a pretty broad question to start. I think you graduated from Sentinel [High School, Missoula, Montana] in 1989. Right?

RS: Correct, yep.

CN: Coming up to, you know, graduating from high school is a pretty big event. It's a start of a rite of passage for a lot of people. It's an end of a rite of passage for a lot of people. Coming up to that event, did you...had you...did you plan on going into the military? Was it a thought for a while? You know, how long before was this thought about?

RS: [laughs] I knew what I wanted to do when I was in eighth grade. I just happened to come across...I was playing sports at a friend of mine that was on the football team, mentioned something about an uncle of his that was in the military. And we got to talking, and I think we were playing—not paintball, but laser tag or something. And he mentioned Navy SEALs. And I was really interested because I was a swimmer, loved playing sports, being competitive, just loved traveling, and doing something where I wanted to travel. So I looked into it, and I was like, wow, this could be the best of both worlds because I could be infantry, but do it in the military in the Navy where I can be in the water. So I knew from that point on, and that's literally what I set my focus on. I talked to a recruiter that summer and told him exactly what I

wanted to do. And he said...he laid out my entire high school year as far as like what grades I had to do, what kind of sports, what afterschool activities.

CN: And that was still in the eighth grade?

RS: That was the summer between eighth grade and freshman year, yeah. And then he...at the...or at the time, there was an enlisted Navy SEAL that was here local doing something for the Navy recruiter. And he gave me a workout program, and for my personal training, Fort Missoula was my training grounds for my conditioning: for pullups, for the pushups, for the running. It was a...on an offseason, it was like my religion was to go out and...because I knew I had to do to get me there. But fortune didn't pervade (?) that way because my eyesight wasn't good enough to get in. So I went in regardless and ended up becoming an operations specialist, which basically you work in combat information, you track ships, you contact and communicate with other ships, other aircraft, things like that. And then I also got trained as a ship's rescue swimmer, what they call a United States Naval Service search and rescue swimmer. So there's combat rescue swimmers that are in the helicopters predominantly. And then there's the rescue or the fleet rescue swimmers that are predominantly stationed on a ship. So I just happened to be in the right place and the right time. They needed rescue swimmers, so they sent myself and another guy to the school, we graduated and went back, and then we just went on deployment shortly thereafter.

CN: Okay. I guess I'm wondering in a philosophical sense...Obviously you had a plan for a lot of practical reasons why you wanted to go into the military. And, you know, and a big part of it seemed like you knew that you would enjoy it, and you know, it fit a lot of, you know, physical interests—a lot of stuff like that. Is there anything that you were thinking? Big picture, you know. You know what you wanted to get out of it for yourself as a human being? Was there...Besides, you know, your thought of being able to enjoy it and it's something that you think you would excel in, was there a thought of, you know, for honor, for duty, you know, for your country? I know people, you know, soldiers can think differently about those things because for a lot of people, it can be a career. It can be because they're good at it or a lot of...a lot of people also—

RS: [unintelligible].

CN: Yeah. [unintelligible] an old military family and everything like that. But did you go in seeking a sense of higher purpose or anything like that?

RS: Kind of. Initially the big thing was, you know, played G.I. Joe growing up, you know—camo and shooting each other with B.B. guns and, you know, doing that kind of thing and being...wanting to be in the military. Obviously, learning about the SEALs really boosted it. But then I didn't have any grandiose sense of duty or honor other than I knew that, like, I wanted to be the best of the best—in the best of the best. And what I did was going through basic training and being in service, you learn all that stuff. You know, duty, honor, respect—

CN: Kind of got branded into you in a way.

RS: Yeah. And there's an absolute purpose for it. I think it's, you know, that kind of discipline, self-improvement—those kind of things are absolutely necessary in life in general. But in a military setting, when something that you could do could kill yourself or somebody else, even if it's an accident, you know, that intention of duty and following a code, but you build the brotherhood, you build those friendships and that camaraderie, going through the training and being in the mud. They say, you know, same mud, same blood. And experiencing that entirely with other people that you become friends with. You know, it's...I still have guys that I, I would say on a good dozen guys from my ship that I knew that I still have intermittent or consistent contact with through social media.

CN: Kind of rolling off of that and sense of brotherhood and having to be excelling on a level that you don't get you or yourself or, you know, or others killed, could you give me a taste of the...one of a...a difficult moment that you had to get through that physical and mental training through military? You know, it aided you and helped you succeed in getting through that while you were serving?

RS: Oh, man.

CN: Not necessarily after, you know, what you know, anything that's haunted you afterwards or anything. But while you were serving, you know, an example of military training and brotherhood and everything like that.

RS: Yeah, definitely. You know, I went in...I went in pretty well prepared. So basic training to me was...was a cake walk. It was actually enjoyable. I liked the early morning workouts, the discipline, I just naturally was attracted to it. Plus, I was so gung-ho mindset of like, this is what I'm going to do. But going through SAR school [search and rescue], obviously a lot of the conditioning that you do, such as, you know—you're not only doing pushups, you're doing a variety of pushups and you're doing hundreds of them at a single time. The physical fitness—the level that they push you to, like, it's ridiculous, you know. And it's got the second highest attrition rate next to BUD/S [Basic Underwater Demolition / SEAL] as far as in the Navy goes. Particularly for me, it was always pullups. Pullups still to this day are my bane of fitness exercise, like, so I've been working really hard on them, but I still—my size and stature—I've never been able to effectively do pushups...pullups consistently. Pushups, situps, everything else—swimming—excel at. Fucking pullups are the bane of my existence.

But then teamwork. So I was allowed one team member, one hand, and one foot as long as I would do 30 pullups every time I did it with that one hand, one assist. I could use one leg to get myself up. And I learned, you know, self-sacrifice. I learned pushing yourself beyond the limits, like when you feel like you are just done, you're not. There's so...like, in theory, we are 20 times more capable of doing anything in our life than we currently think we are. And that instilled in

me, and I still think about that all the time. You know, just when you get, you know...philosophy is like when the going gets tough, that's just when it's started. And that's when the...To get to the next level, that's what you need to go through the grit, the grind, the hustle, whatever.

CN: And especially pushing through something when it's not what you excel at—

RS: Absolutely.

CN: —and then taking...Okay. Yeah, I like that.

RS: Yeah.

CN: Can you tell me, before military, political views that you had before—how those political views were shaped during service and how they've come out afterwards? There's this idea that the, you know, the military is supposed to technically not be political and stay out of politics. It's incredibly hard to do because it's run by human beings obviously.

RS: Exactly. And people have beliefs.

CN: Exactly. And they have agendas, and they have everything like that. So I would be curious to see...to hear you tell what your background was politically and belief in our country's systems and everything like that. What it turned into or didn't do—I mean, if you didn't change—and where it's at now, because of your service.

RS: My beliefs in, you know, freedom and the founding—like, what the principles of this country were founded on have been consistent all my entire life. I don't know exactly what instilled that. You know, because I didn't have a dad growing up, so I definitely didn't have a father figure instill in me, you know, a sense of duty and honor and stuff like that. But as far back as I can remember, it was always about protecting others and, you know, defending others and standing up for what is right and speaking out when things are not right. Never have I ever fallen to a particular party or belief because I personally believe the system is so corrupt, I don't trust it. I don't trust anybody that's in it. If you put “politician” front, back, around your name in any shape or form, if you open your mouth to me, you're lying because look at the state of our country. You know, they are not serving us anymore. And it's been that way for a long time. And I don't want to go down that rabbit hole because you don't have that time.

CN: Well, just quickly, not serving the people or serving the military?

RS: Not serving the people, including the military.

CN: Okay, so that's included.

RS: Through various ways, but mostly serving the people. You know, it's—

CN: Which is obviously as a serviceman, what you did—

RS: Pisses me off the most. You know, because particularly when I got in and serving and seeing the things that's going on and having friendships that you go through these kind of things was, you know, we were...So my battle group was first battle group on station after Kuwait was invaded. Seven days later, we were there setting up Operation Desert Shield. You know, there was...It wasn't like the heated combat like there was, but there was...there was fire exercises, there was close calls. There was, one time, a ship got hit by a mine, so then that changed the entire action that we had to take as the fleet, you know, so everybody was up on your high toes. You trained for chemical, biological, radiological warfare on the way up there, thinking the worst of the worse, you know. So you're always very high alert. Necessary, but then obviously that can also have a downside effect to it.

But politically, it just...it never changed. If anything, it reinforced the fact that for me, first and foremost, it's the people of the Republic of the United States—the people in the country. When it comes to the upper establishment, I don't trust them. Never will.

CN: But you have a...but you do like where the heart of the country is at and essentially—

RS: I love the people. I love the blue-collar, redneck, working every day because, you know, we got we...were the...let's make this...you know, we're the blood of this country was what makes it go around. It's not the money.

CN: Were you happy with leadership that, you know, you were given in the military, and with, you know...Were you happy with orders that you were given, happy to follow most orders? And I'm basing that off of that political branch that we just threw out there, you know?

RS: Yeah.

CN: Because even these leaders, you know, they'll still follow an agenda. Were you...were you happy with the way that leadership was held? Did it...did you have any moral qualms with a lot of it or a little of it or anything like that?

RS: No, actually, I was...You know, specifically what really got me behind what we were doing over there was the fact that it was a NATO task. It was the National Armed Treaty Organization got together and said, enforce. We are not putting up with this; we're gonna go liberate Kuwait. Staying after there, after that, after we did that...it just...it snowballed and went downhill from there. You know, there's no reason we should have stayed over there. But overall commands—no, there was nothing that I thought was crossing the line if we lived to that humanitarian effort: protect, serve. You know, first, and if it need be, we have the capabilities that we will defend us and ourselves and our country and people.

CN: Yeah. Well, I do like...I do like hearing that, you know, you definitely can hear sometimes...And you know what I've been learning in this class, you know of what can happen. But—

RS: Yeah, there's both sides of the spectrum, absolutely.

CN: Yeah, exactly. And I do know that most people's hearts are trying to be in the right place, but so that is nice to hear. You know, coming out after the military, obviously, you served 4 years total—

RS: Four years, yeah. Through 1993.

CN: Can you explain to me why you decided not to pursue, you know, the 20-year retirement goal that a lot of people try to make that cut?

RS: Yeah, simply for the fact that I couldn't get into the BUD/S training. That was the...that was the only thing I had any interest in [unintelligible] doing. You know, by chance got to do the training that I did just because they needed it, and I fit the bill—and I was smart enough to fit the bill, or so capable enough physically to fit the bill. It's the training. But I was, you know...I had some inkling that maybe joining the National Guard, but then talking with some guys, it was just like it wasn't...it just still wasn't my cup of tea. It wasn't what I wanted to do. I was dead set. One thing and one thing only. I mean, I...even when I was in, like the guys that I made friends with were the guys that wanted to be BUD/S Special Forces.

CN: So that was the whole culture you were around [unintelligible] too? Gotcha.

RS: Yeah. Most of the time. Those are the guys that even though some of them weren't on my ship, I ended up meeting somehow somehow some...through somebody or bumping into somebody and seeing that they had a certain logo on or a patch or something. Going, hey, you know, strike up a conversation. Be like, you know, let's go for a run or let's go for a kayak or you know—a lot of times there was physical fitness stuff involved. But, you know, it's another way of developing the brotherhood and guys that were likeminded because those are the kind of guys you hung out with who were just, you know, that mentality of pushing you and bettering yourself and then competition. You know, rubbing elbows and, you know, effectively, chest bumping to see who had the bigger chest. You know, there's that demographic that's always in there. That's part of, you know...a lot...a big part of military service is that gung-ho, machismo, you know like, do or die. But you're doing it with his buddies.

CN: Yeah, and you're doing it...and you're doing it for a good cause, yeah.

RS: A good reason, yeah. Yeah.

CN: So you're out of the military, done with that. You know, what have you brought with you? What have you taken from that and applied to just civilian life that has helped you succeed? Things that you found difficult because you did that service. You know, can you kind of give me some insight into that?

RS: Oh, totally. On the plus side, you know, the discipline, the training and like, you know—you grow up pretty quick. You don't have a choice. Like, it is force fed into you, you know, through the training in basic training of discipline. I mean, like folding your bed sheets with a ruler. And they had to be precisely measured on the folds and the creases. And your underwear, your skivvies, your socks, your pants—everything is precisely folded. And if it's slightly off, you get reprimanded. And if you get too many reprimands, you get sent back to the next class, and you got to go through that week or whatever again. So, you know, the paying attention to detail is crucial, but it's vital, you know. And I think overall, like, military service as far as, like, teaching somebody teamwork and discipline and sense of honor and duty and things like that and wanting to contribute to society is huge. The readjustment coming back is hard—very hard for a lot of us.

Me, myself, personally, when I lived prior to coming back home...Well, I came home after the Navy, I tried school at the university; 3 semesters was all I could handle. My readjustment disorder or attachment disorders, early childhood traumas in this area were too much to handle. So I left after 3 semesters, went back down to San Diego, lived in San Diego for another 5 years and then moved to Hawaii. And during that span of time, never had any issues, but I was more in my element. More in my environment. Come back home in 2008. Things gradually started to deteriorate for myself. And in 2013, was...I was at the lowest of the low. I was actually suicidal. I had a plan. I was gonna go do it. I thought, you know, there's no place for me in this world. I can't keep a job. I was bouncing around from job to job to job, you know, just desperately trying to find something that I could connect with—

[telephone rings]

And so luckily, I ran into a flier called...or for a program called Yoga Warriors that led me connecting with Kathy Mangan, who runs the Red Willow Learning Center that led me getting classes in meditation and yoga, Taiichi, equine therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction. And in 8 weeks, it completely changed my life. Like profoundly changed my life. Put me on the course I'm at now where then after that, we opened up the Heroes Therapeutic Outreach Program. I teamed up with her. We've been in business since 2014. That led me to go into school back in 2016 at the university [University of Montana], getting my degrees in community health and a minor in nonprofit administration and graduating this past May. Running my program. I'm getting certified as a life coach; I'm going to have a health wellness mindset, motivation, life coaching business that I want to grow. Clothing line. So it's completely changed from the initial adjustments—the readjustment is really hard because you do—

CN: Gotcha.

RS: Yeah.

CN: So could you say that it is this sense of brotherhood instilled during service that allows programs like this to exist and be so effective? Because it is that brotherhood, that sisterhood that is still there and that that want to care for your fellow veterans and serve and that teamwork with them, everything like that?

RS: Oh yeah.

CN: And I guess I'm asking you, if our military wasn't set up in the way that it is, that it is voluntary and it is people wanting to go in and these relationships are voluntary and they're wanted and everything like that, you know, no one's being forced to go in or anything. But would you say that that the structure of even our military helps and even programs afterwards still keeping that brotherhood and that ability to help each other and serve each other?

RS: Yeah, absolutely. For me personally, the one reason...Because after I had that experience of going from suicide, like I knew I had the plan, I had the...I...it was...I was gonna go do it. I knew exactly what I was gonna to do. Having that experience, and then seeing the changes that I felt in myself and in putting me on this new path, I was like, I have to get this out. I have to help other veterans. This is like crucial because we don't have...At the time, we didn't have a very successful reintegration. You know, I was going to say earlier is like getting you training for military service is like going from a civilian. And then you go into basic training where they break you down, like break up your habits effectively and then reprogram you for military service. And then you go through your primary training, which is your military occupational specialty training, and then on to service. When they get out, when you get out, they don't reverse that. No successful reintegration. So our program literally is that bridge between getting out of the service, and if you get in with our program, it gives you all the necessary tools to successfully reintegrate.

CN: To kind of relearn the identity that you had stripped and come back to being. And so it's almost like a reverse [unintelligible]?

RS: Oh, and we think...there's so much we could go into talking about this, but I'll keep it really short and simple. And it comes down to resilience. We are no longer brought up from a very early age, like nine—seven, eight, nine—back in the day when it was tribes and warrior communities to be raised as an adult warrior, whatever. You know, in my particular ancestry, with the Norwegian side of my family, they went to battle, hoping to die. We don't go to battle hoping to die. We don't have all those years of experience of training and building up our resilience to pain and that pressure of going out and hunting or, you know, killing food or protecting your home from another invading party or going into another country and invading them. We don't have that training. So we get out of high school, six months later after training. you're in the military. You're in service, you're overseas and you're in combat. Your buddies are

dying. People are getting blown up. You're seeing all these travesties that you don't have the resilience to understand.

So aside from the general trauma of war or even just being in the military, then you're looking at what they call post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]. And we're specifically dealing with survivor's guilt and the moral conflict of war—of battle. Because Christians, Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans—all these people who have religious beliefs and not killing, chances are in certain branches and certain positions, you're going to have to. And those are the two huge ones that we're dealing with; the biggest one being the survivor's guilt. You know, if you're on the ground, boots, Army, Marines, Special Forces and seeing what you see every single day during deployment, it's not like you have a three...you know average is three traumatic events and a personal...and a person's experience in their life. You're dealing with this for 24 hours a day, you might have a downtime when you're on base, but then you go right back out the next day for 9, 12 months at a time.

CN: So can I ask you personally, I know you said, you know, you come out of the service and you kind of, you know, you had these things come up again. So was it the early childhood traumas that you had that going to the military helped you suffice those and then being out of it that came back up? Or was it a combination of those things and then military things that you experienced? Or was it, you know, was the military a really good way to distract you from things that, you know, maybe needed to be dealt with and now you didn't have that sense of purpose that you were in the military with, and it was easy to distract from that? Is that essentially what it was?

RS: Well, so for me, what it was, was I had early childhood trauma like around 6 to 9 years old. I figured out how to lock it away. Still wasn't, you know, 100 percent because I didn't... I went to, I think, maybe one counselor for one session and just couldn't handle it. I don't remember ever going back again. Somehow I figured out how to lock it up, or so I thought. Go into the military. Things, you know, disappointments happen, and then you automatically, as an individual, will revert back to your worst moments in life because you start to think ill of yourself, you know—our negative self-doubt. So I went down that rabbit hole for me personally—

CN: And then that let those things awaken again? The things that you had locked up?

RS: Yeah, yeah. Brought it back up. But...and then like I said, when I was in service, never had issues. But for some reason coming back to where it all happened here in Missoula, brought it back to the surface. And then the other part of the question was the readjustment for me is...I think because military service was so easy for me and I connected with it—the discipline and all that kind of stuff—not having it in the civilian world—

CN: And then coming out and realizing that you didn't adjust to this as well and didn't click with this way of life as well.

RS: Oh, yeah! Frustration—

CN: Not having the competition—

RS: You look at people, and you're like...yeah, there's just...you don't...you can't...It's really hard to reconnect with somebody who hasn't been in the military. And you can connect literally outside of the service, and even in the inside of the service, you have friends from other branches and we give each other a hard time and razz each other, but that's just half the fun. Sometimes people take it to extreme, but they're just stupid. You know, every orchard has bad apples. It's the same thing in the military. But, you know, part of why I did the outreach program was because I wanted to give any other veteran that experience of having the tools necessary to transition successfully because of all the experiences that I went through and trying to readjust. I was like, here's the key. So, you know, that camaraderie and the friendships and the feelings you get about your other servicemen and then your other veterans when you get out, yeah, is like...The common saying is IGY6. I got your 6; I got your back. Even though you're another branch, you might have served during a different time. We both are now in a veteran's status. For the most part, I'd say 99 point 9 percent of every veteran I've ever met, I get along with. There's a few [unintelligible], but you know, you don't get along with everyone. But still—

CN: Yeah, just from having that connection, just from—

RS: Yeah. That...that...But then the sense of, you know, being a veteran and knowing what they've been through, through the training and, you know, having been overseas—

CN: And having that baseline level of respect automatically because you know what they had to have the guts to go through and everything like that—

RS: Yeah, there's a rapport, sure.

CN: Okay, that makes sense.

RS: At least for me predominately. You know, there's other people who don't see it that way. There's even to the extreme of where veterans don't even want to acknowledge that they were even in, you know.

CN: Yeah. Awesome. I guess just I have one final question. You know, happy with the choice to serve, you know, would you do it all again? I guess, you know, could you recommend enough, you know, to most people that it's a life change for the better?

RS: Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't change it for anything. I mean, there was training I wanted that I didn't get. But overall, my experience in the places I got to go, the countries I got to see, the people I met, I mean, absolutely 100 percent across the board I would recommend it. And I've

actually talked to parents of children who are in high school—children, high schoolers—that are wanting to go in the military, and somehow they connected with me and I was able to talk with them first and then talk with them and their child. And I just lay it out straight. I say, you know, this is my experience, but I can give you a really broad understanding of what you're going to get into, what you can expect, and then you make up your mind from there. I said, but I wouldn't change it for the world. You know, again, with the experiences, the people I met, the training I got, the places I got to see, you know—across the board absolutely recommend it. I even think a lot of people...You know, I can't force anybody to do it, but two years through some really arduous self-improvement, you know. Because we get out of high school, you know, and you don't know your hole from...your head from a hole in the wall, you know. You just say, I'm out of school, man! Freedom!

CN: Looking to temper...to temper that raw iron that we—

RS: Yeah, and I don't always think that, you know, I mean...I, obviously I went to college at a much later date. I don't always think it's necessary to go to college right out of high school. And give yourself some experience; live life. And what better way to do that through military service where there's a pretty good, probably, chance that you're going to either get to see at least one other country, maybe learn another language, travel around, make friends, learn about adulthood at a really fast, very effective tempo, and have those kind of experiences. I wouldn't have not going in and, god, you know, I've to Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii multiple times. Obviously the Middle East. But even places there when we were there for the Gulf...or for Desert Shield, and we go on ports of call, like, people loved the American military back then. Loved us. So we were like heroes to everybody except for the people that we were fighting. Not the same so much anymore. But, yeah, I would absolutely, 100 percent unequivocally recommend it for anybody.

CN: Okay. Well, awesome. Roy, thank you.

RS: Yeah, man.

CN: I think that's...I think that's most of what I wanted to answer. I thought that went pretty smooth, actually.

RS: Cool.

CN: And I appreciate all your responses and the care you took in responding to them and fleshing them out and everything.

RS: I appreciate it, man. My pleasure. Glad I could help.

[End of Audio]