

SEALs Mean Business for Jesus

Some of the U.S. Navy's toughest tough guys are turning to Jesus thanks to a tenacious San Diego pastor

Danger loomed as Lt. John MacDonald parachuted into San Francisco's 3Com Park last fall as part of the entertainment before a 49ers football game. As he and his partner flew their steerable chutes, they got entangled at 4,000 feet.

The lower jumper cut away, deployed his reserve and landed safely. Meanwhile, MacDonald tried steering free, then cutting the other chute away. The interference was speeding his descent.

Though neither maneuver worked, a strange calm filled him. He shrugged, "You know what? If this is it, then OK. I'm saved."

After a quick prayer, he suddenly had an idea. Peeling off a shoe, he kicked at a bracket on his ankle. Breaking a buckle, he released it—and the other chute. He landed safely.

Still, that brush with calamity isn't the most important thing God has done in his life the last year. The Navy officer calls his acceptance of Christ astonishing.

"I'm 31 years old, and I was pretty set in my ways," said MacDonald, who became convinced of Christ's reality after hearing pro football lineman Tony Boselli share his testimony in San Diego. "I used to say: 'I don't need church. That's for

people who are weak.'”

Now stationed near Virginia Beach, Va., the Naval Academy graduate is just one of several dozen highly trained warriors who have joined the church in the last two years.

That is just a fraction of the 800 SEALs on duty at Coronado Island, Calif. But the charismatic pastor who has played a key role in this spiritual awakening calls it amazing because of their rugged training and self-reliance.

SEAL—Sea, Air, Land—teams perform risky aquatic missions, including hostage and prisoner rescue. New trainees must endure a six-month underwater demolition course, known as BUD/S, that weeds out three-quarters of the applicants.

Greg Wark, founding pastor of Morningstar Church in LaJolla, Calif., sees this regimen as perfect preparation for Christianity. A born-again SEALs’ concept of commitment, Wark said, is better than the average believer’s.

“They say, ‘I’m going all the way with Christ,’” Wark said. “They almost have the mentality of Old Testament martyrs. In terms of discipleship they view a relationship with God as vitally important.”

Ironically, when Wark helped start the church, his mind wasn’t on Navy enlistees. Meeting near the University of California at San Diego, the Morningstar church’s initial goal was reaching college students.

But soon after coming to the area, a friend invited him to a

SEAL-related filming session. Riding in a pickup truck, Wark asked a SEAL how he shed the memories of grueling field encounters after coming home.

Shooting him a condescending smirk, the soldier grunted, "All I need is a beer and a buddy."

"I said, 'Lord, give me these men,'" the pastor recalled. "I went along with my business and soon began seeing BUD/S students in church."

He encountered others on the outside. When he met Jeff Bramstedt at a local gym, he shared a supernatural insight: God was going to place him in front of many people who would revere his words.

"Cool," he replied as he turned back to the weights. "Anything else?"

That touched off several months of weekly phone calls. Bramstedt resisted the overtures, but after setbacks in his personal life he summoned the pastor. Soon after, the sky diver accepted Christ at a coffee shop.

Wark's word of knowledge came true last December at a juvenile-detention facility. After the SEAL spoke, 17 inmates raised their hands to signal a desire to accept Christ.

Steve Decker, a 14-year veteran who received the gift of tongues a month after getting baptized in a swimming pool, has been overcome several times by the awesome nature of Christ's sacrifice for his sins. Decker felt bad about his disobedience

but could sense the Lord saying, "I forgive you and still love you."

"It was like the Lord was saying, 'This is intimacy with Me, and it's just beginning,'" he said. "I've felt a closeness with God. That's the most amazing thing He's done."

These reborn soldiers are preparing to share their faith publicly. While the starting date isn't set, Wark and several men are planning outreaches soon to public schools.

A three-man team will parachute onto school property, talk about making positive choices and invite students to an evening meeting where they will give their testimonies.

"Because of their stature, kids want to hear what they have to say," Wark said. "I've asked God to raise these men up as leaders."