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NCDU ON OMAHA BEACH, NORMANDY, FRANCE

Beyond the Teams



Class 98 SEALs Team Up for Fundraising Missions

By Mike Charbonnet, Class 98

It's an unlikely journey for the kid nicknamed "Fat Boy" by his instructors 40 years ago – leading the men he battled through SEAL training with 40 years ago on a 1,000-mile fundraising bike ride down the East Coast of the U.S.

That kid was me, and when I showed up for the first day of BUD/S Class 98 I was like any other wanna-be SEAL: both excited and wary about the challenges to come and more full of himself than he had a right to be. There's a truth only those of us who have lived through the rigors – OK, let's just call it what it is: the torment – of those 26 weeks of training know: You do not make friends from the first running or swimming evolution. You don't even necessarily bond during Hell Week, when all the usual difficulties of training for sea, air and land special warfare are dialed up a notch. Or five.

The reality is, friendships don't form unless, and until, you're one of the 20 percent or so left standing when the physical, emotional and psychological training is finally done. It's only after you haven't quit, like dozens of others do; or washed out, as dozens of others also do, that you begin to forge bonds with your classmates. So when I walked in – who am I kidding? Walking is not allowed in BUD/S – among my classmates in 1978, I had no idea that a handful of them would become lifelong friends. At the outset, they were just the other guys who had to get up with me at 4:30 a.m. and push our bodies and minds past what we thought were their breaking points. Week by week, those of us who stuck around got more familiar and comfortable with each other. I still got called "Fat Boy" by the instructors, and the guys layered with muscles still laughed when I did, but mutual respect slowly began to develop – and in some cases, true bonds of brotherhood. One of my closest friends to this day is Conrad Kress. He

was my swim buddy and in my boat crew during Hell Week – we still can't catch a glimpse of dark water – even 40 years later – without a shiver.

After graduation, my Class 98 classmates and I were stationed at various Teams on both coasts. After completing their careers in the Navy, they all gravitated to civilian employment that seemed to require the characteristic of service to others. Some were in law enforcement, firefighting, or paramedics; others volunteered with veterans' causes, mentored younger Team guys and their families; some helped organize overseas mission work, one was an ordained minister. I began to truly appreciate the imprint BUD/S training and serving in the Teams had on all of us.

We did things most people would never consider doing. I'm not talking about the details of the work or the missions so much – the tactical and dangerous nature of what we did. I'm talking about the opportunity to lay it all on the line to help others – to live a life dedicated to the service of their well-being.

That's the bond that continues to tie BUD/S Class 98 together. Sure, time had worn away some of the camaraderie we enjoyed, but when our 40th reunion rolled around last year it came back instantly. We swapped stories full of inside jokes, caught up on the marriages and children and grandchildren, discussed retirement, or post-retirement careers for those not ready to head out to pasture just yet. But we also talked a lot about the meaning our work gave to our lives. Even though we rarely knew whom we had helped, and they sure didn't know us given the secrecy of our service, we agreed to a man that there was nothing like the sense of purpose and accomplishment that comes with knowing what we had done benefitted others in profound ways.



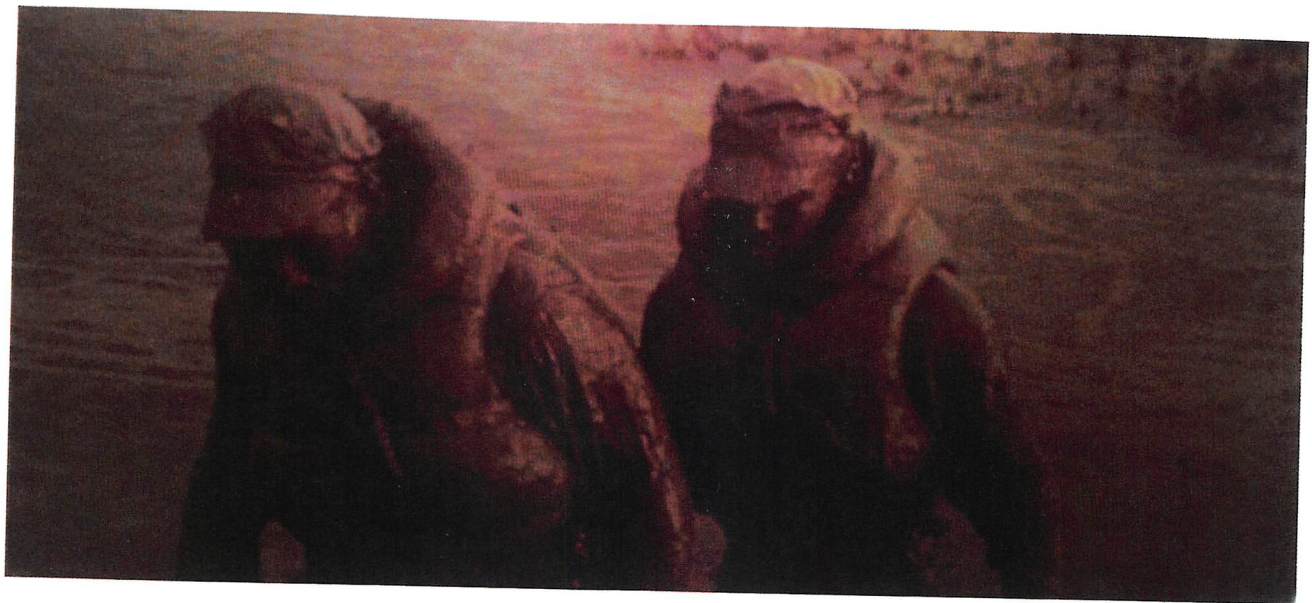
David Charbonnet, CEO of VIP and patient; author Mike Charbonnet; and one of the therapists demonstrating the Giger, a specialized asynchronous arm/leg cycle to promote neuropsychiatric.



Using the Rifton Tram, some patients have been able to take their first steps at VIP.



David on the Locomat, a high-tech treadmill-like machine that creates and monitors movement, moving a patient's legs while recording neural function and providing biofeedback to the brain that aids recovery.



We talked about it so much, in fact, we decided to do more than talk about it.

That's why eight of us have formed Beyond the Teams, pooling the mental and physical resources honed over 170 combined years of service in scores of countries to assist the unsung heroes facing physical disabilities, cultural disadvantages and practical needs going unmet because they are the "little guys." Our battlefield is no longer the theater of Special Warfare. It's the world of fundraising.

The idea for Beyond the Teams was birthed when I undertook a fundraising bike ride last August to benefit a deeply personal cause. My wife, Beth, and I have a son, David, a graduate of Class 278 who was assigned to SEAL Team ONE. In 2011, he broke his back parachuting, an accident that left him paralyzed below mid-abdomen. Two years later, he married his long-time girlfriend, Janet, and together they manage VIP NeuroRehabilitation Center in San Diego, where David is CEO and still a patient. My solo bike ride last summer from San Francisco to San Diego, was to raise money for VIP.

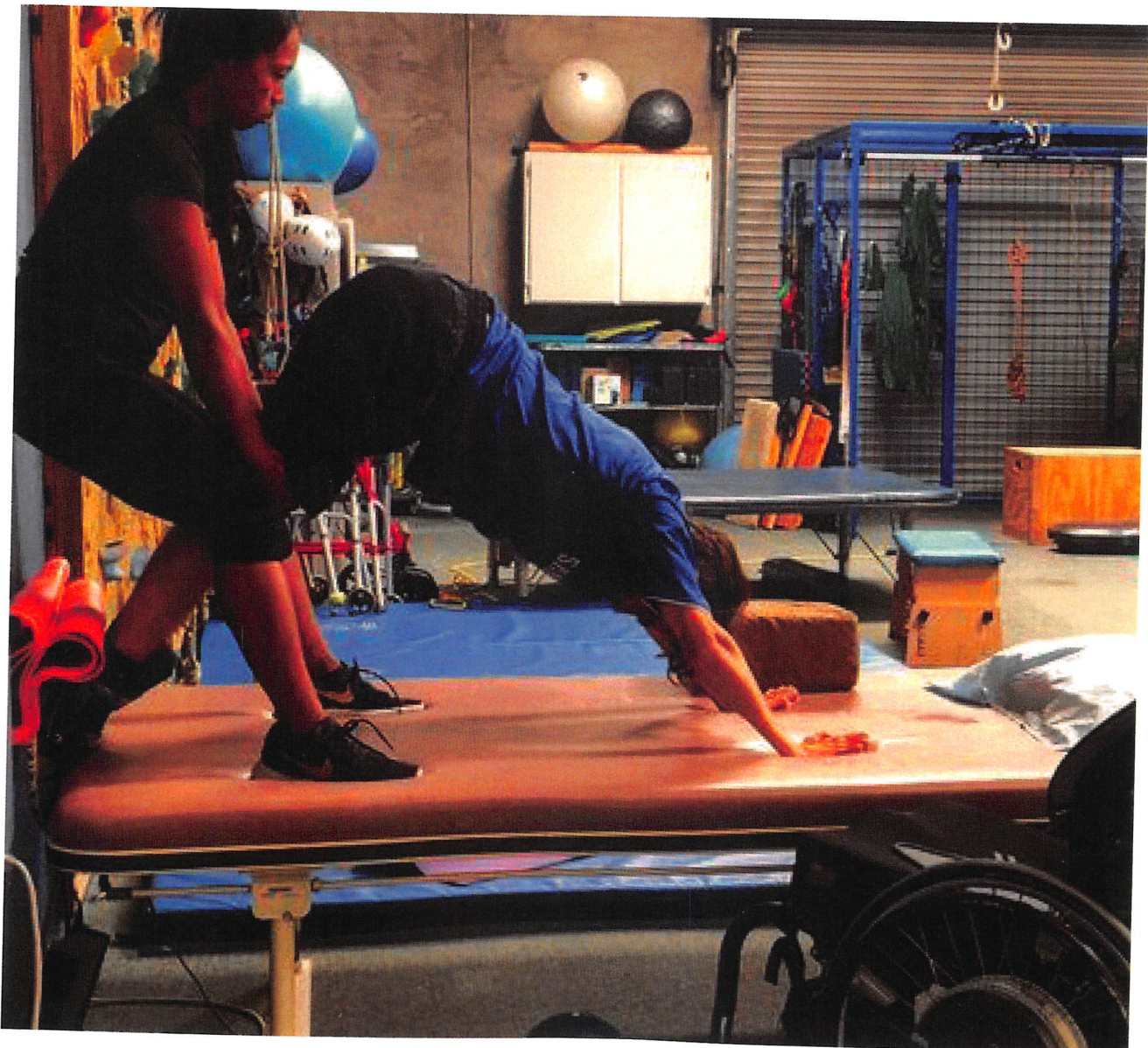
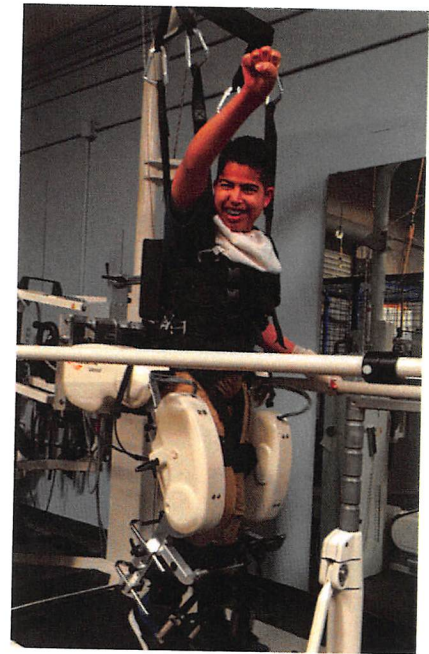
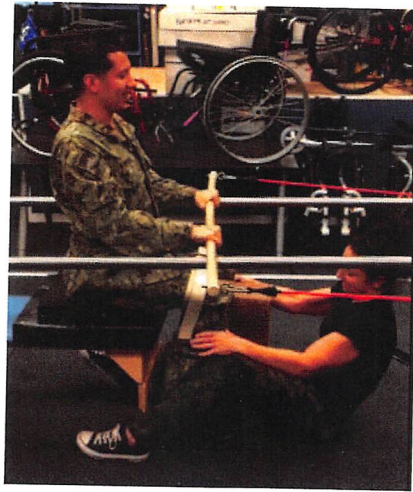
I talked at our reunion about how fun and fulfilling that bike ride was. The guys were intrigued, and one by one they started volunteering to join me in another. "We're not dead yet," one of them said. Together, we quickly realized our vision was bigger than just another one-off bike ride. We wanted to create a fundraising nonprofit because even though we are

a few years older, and a couple of steps slower, we still have something to offer to lift the quality of life of those who desperately need it. Our military training and service taught us we are stronger as a team than as individuals, so we pool our resources to serve. We hope our past work helps draw interest to our new work. Not to publicize ourselves, but to raise awareness of, and money for, those we serve.

It won't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is. "It is going to take a lot of strength and suffering, since each new day we have to get up, get back on the bike and just get through the day," Beyond the Teams member Carl Flanagan says. "What will drive us on, as it did in training, will be to look at each other and quietly say to ourselves, 'If he can do it, I can do it.'"

For our first mission, we are again supporting VIP NeuroRehabilitation Center (www.VIPNeuroRehab.org) – with a 1,000-mile ride down the East Coast of the U.S. from Oct. 29 to Nov. 9. My boy, David, will take part piloting a hand cycle. The other Beyond the Teams members riding are Conrad and Carl, as well as Rick Bernard, Patrick Shelton, Greg Parratt, Diedrick Snelling and Francis Fay.

VIP is a nonprofit center that provides physical therapy and education regarding neurological conditions while, supplying resources about nutrition, stress reduction and the benefits of exercise to patients and their families. It's a leader in neurorehabilitation therapy, challenging patients 4 years old and up physically in a





supportive and caring environment. Its mission is to bring top quality outpatient neuro-rehabilitation care to disabled military, veterans, children and to all who are in need, focusing on those who have difficulty moving due to stroke, multiple sclerosis, brain injury, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury or multiple traumas. The money we raise will be used for patient scholarships and state-of-the-art equipment to help with the clinic's life-changing work. Many people don't realize insurance only covers a limited number of visits for those who need the care the center offers, and treatment and rehabilitation can cost up to \$125 an hour. Dozens of patients need ongoing therapy – and insurance is no longer an option for them.

Even many veterans needing the specialized therapy VIP provides are not covered and need to rely on patient scholarships for their treatment. The nature of VIP's treatments is critical to veterans in particular. The VA's approach to treatment is to help patients with neuromuscular diseases and injuries adapt to life in a wheelchair. VIP's aim is to treat them to recoup lost function and to live more independently.

So, the "little" improvements VIP delivers make radical changes in patients' lives – everything from increased grip strength to increased flexibility and mobility. Many of these improvements come courtesy of life-changing equipment like the LocoMat, state-of-the-art both in terms of creating and monitoring movement, the machine – think high-tech treadmill that moves a patient's legs and records neural function – while providing biofeedback to the brain that aids recovery. VIP

has one LocoMat but could use a second. No other equipment offers the rehabilitation benefits of the LocoMat, and for that reason time on it is at a premium. A second machine would allow twice as many sessions for the patients most in need of the therapy and its benefits.

Our hope for our bike ride is to raise the money for a second LocoMat, and pay the costs of patients in need. During the ride, we will commemorate Naval Special Warfare and highlight the contribution to America's security made by Frogmen from each era of its history. Our plans – the route is still being finalized – are to start from the epicenter of Naval Special Warfare in Virginia Beach, Va., and finish at the birthplace of Navy Frogmen/SEALs in Ft. Pierce, Fla. at the Navy SEAL Museum. Along the way, we'll go to Plymouth, N.C.; Cherry Point, N.C.; Wilmington, N.C.; Myrtle Beach, S.C.; Charleston, S.C.; Savannah, Ga.; Brunswick, Ga.; Jacksonville, Fla.; and Daytona Beach, Fla. The longest leg will be 105 miles, the shortest just under 53 – our last one. Here's hoping "Fat Boy" makes it to the finish line. You can learn more about the Beyond the Teams, our bike ride for VIP and how your donation will change the lives of its patients by visiting our web site: beyondtheteams.org

About the Author:

Mike Charbonnet graduated as the Leading Petty Officer of BUD/S Class 98 (last hard class). He served in UDT-11, ST-5 and SDVT-1. He retired in 1996 following the discovery of a brain tumor. He lives with Beth, his wife of 35 years, in San Diego. He is a minister for Beachhead Ministries.

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