Retired SEAL Senior Chief Leonard "Lenny" Waugh, NSW HALO and space program pioneer

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Leonard "Lenny" Waugh was 18 when he saw "The Frogmen," the 1951 film about U.S. Navy Underwater Demolition Teams during World War II. It was then he decided he wanted to be a frogman. UDT training, then called Underwater Demolition Team Replacement training, did not accept volunteers direct from boot camp so he enlisted in the Navy in December 1951. After service, schools, and time in the fleet, he was accepted in 1954 for UDTR training at the Naval Amphibious School in Little Creek, Virginia. After completing the training, Waugh graduated with Class 13 and was assigned to UDT-22, which years later was merged with UDT-21. In a career that spanned two decades, Waugh participated in routine tasks, wartime deployments, and development and testing of capabilities, many in use by U.S. Navy SEALs today.

As a frogman, Waugh was involved in several unique projects. He participated in the testing of a frogman's ability to successfully operate in the water without taking time to acclimate when going from a tropical environment directly to an arctic one. Another project involved the resupply of the Distant Early Warning Line, or DEW Line, the line of long-range radar stations in the far northern Arctic region intended to warn of approaching enemy aircraft or missiles. Frogmen, working in the frigid waters, used demolition to clear boulders from the beach so supplies could be brought ashore. Additionally, in a test of the Navy Dive Tables, Waugh and other volunteers got decompression sickness, or "the bends," and required treatment in a recompression chamber.

According to Waugh, his most unusual project was his participation as a test subject for NASA. In the early 1950s, as NASA began exploring the feasibility of space travel, it was not yet clear the qualities needed in astronauts. Should the characteristics be of a pilot, a physical giant, an engineer, or something else? Physical fitness and the ability to withstand physiological and psychological stress were recognized as key factors. Waugh believes UDT frogmen's excellent physical condition and familiarity with working in confined spaces, such as those involved in locking out of escape trunks on submarines, were considered in the selection process. Waugh and three other frogmen were chosen for testing on physical, psychological, and other parameters at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Later, two more groups of four frogmen each were tested by NASA. It is believed that the tests conducted on the frogmen were later used in selecting astronauts for Project Mercury.

In November 1958, Waugh attended parachute training at Fort Benning, Georgia, an event that had a profound effect on his career. He discovered he enjoyed static-line jumping. The following month he was one of the UDT men sent to the 82nd Airborne Jumpmaster School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he learned of the military freefall sport parachute clubs and decided he wanted to skydive. (Note, Army sport free fall parachuting, or skydiving, had begun the year before, 1957, when the Army contracted with two sport
skydivers to train Army skydivers.)

Back in Virginia, Waugh read a couple articles on how to skydive, bought the equipment for $150 and made his first jump out of fellow frogman Jim McGee’s airplane. Unsure of the altitude from which to jump, Waugh and McGee reasoned that if Fort Benning’s static-line jumps were from 1,250 feet, then Waugh should skydive from 1,500 feet. Waugh completed the jump, becoming the first east-coast, and possibly the west-coast, frogman to skydive. Following Waugh’s successful jump, other frogmen took up the sport.

At that time it cost Waugh about three dollars to jump from a civilian airplane in Virginia so he joined an XVIII Airborne Corps skydiving club at Fort Bragg, where military aircraft were used and he could jump for free. At Fort Bragg, Waugh ran into George “Ron” Brown, a member of the U.S. Army Parachute Team, then called the Strategic Army Corps (STRAC) Team. Waugh had met Brown earlier during scuba training at UDT. Brown introduced Waugh to Henry “Jim” Arender, considered a pioneer in Army freefall and who later in 1960 became the first U.S. citizen to win a gold medal at a world skydiving championship. Learning from Arender, Waugh advanced rapidly as a freefall parachutist. In three years he earned his United States Parachute Association D-license, number 128. Waugh also participated in demonstration jumps with the STRAC Team. Once on the ground, the Army jumpers would put on their berets while Waugh would don his Navy white hat. At that point in the demonstration the audience would be told that the Army taught the Navy to skydive.

In 1960, Waugh was selected as part of a team to evaluate the feasibility of UDTs conducting water jumps and how to safely do so. The team developed testing parameters and then examined the parachutes and equipment for wear and tear after water jumps. They also looked at the length of time needed for drying and repacking parachutes. Testing was conducted on parachuting in scuba gear and also on jumping with deflated rubber boats. The team determined that water jumps were a viable insertion means for UDTs and developed the initial standard operating procedures that were built upon as UDTs conducted more jumps. From those humble beginnings, those static-line UDT water jumps have evolved into the sophisticated personnel and boat water-drop insertion capabilities of SEAL and Special Boat Unit teams today.

In January 1962, the Navy formed the first two SEAL teams. Waugh was brought back early from a UDT-21 Mediterranean deployment to be one of the plank owners of SEAL Team Two. He believes his extensive jump experience and his Brown Belt in Judo were the skills that got him selected. After three months preparation, Waugh deployed to Vietnam in April 1962 on a combined SEAL Teams One and Two Mobile Training Team. He returned in October 1962 just in time to deploy on a submarine for the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In 1963, Waugh helped establish the first SEAL Team Two high-altitude low-opening (HALO) parachute training class, taught by the HALO Committee at Fort Bragg. Aircraft provided by the U.S. Navy included the Douglas A3D Skywarrior strategic bomber and P2V anti-submarine warfare aircraft. The HALO Committee, Waugh, and another experienced SEALskydiver conducted the initial jumps from the A3D to evaluate its use by the less experienced students, due to the A3D’s high speed and the 40,000 feet jump altitude.

In 1967 Waugh deployed to Vietnam as a Provincial Reconnaissance Unit advisor, earning two Bronze Stars for his service.

Waugh continued his jump career and participated in SEAL demonstration jumps between his many deployments. He won a trophy for style and accuracy in skydiving competition, but for the most part his heavy deployment schedule precluded his competing.

In 1972 Waugh conducted his final jump, number 1,129, before retiring from SEAL Team Two. As a UDT frogman and one of the original SEALs, Waugh left a legacy of innovation in Special Warfare capabilities that continues to this day.

Retired Senior Chief Petty Officer (SEAL) Leonard “Lenny” Waugh visited USSOCOM Dec 1. Waugh conducted 1,129 active-duty parachute jumps as a UDT Frogman and plank owner of SEAL Team 2. Photo by Mike Bottoms.