

‘Inspiration has the Ability to Change Lives’

Retired Navy SEAL David Goggins, recipient of the 2018 VFW Americanism Award and world-renowned endurance athlete, is a motivational speaker who shared his remarkable story about his difficult journey

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As retired Navy SEAL David Goggins took the stage at the VFW National Convention’s Joint Opening in July to accept the VFW Americanism Award, he was warmly welcomed by hundreds of his fellow VFW members from around the world.

“I’m very humbled to be up here talking to all of you today,” said Goggins, a member of the VFW Department of Tennessee. “I want to thank VFW very much for giving me this award. It means more to me than anything I have received in my entire life.”

Goggins thanked his late grandfather, Air Force Master Sgt. Jack Gardner — saying it would be the “happiest day” of the World War II veteran’s life if he were still alive. Goggins then went on to thank his mother, who was on stage with him.

“I want to thank my mom up here, who...,” Goggins paused.

He tried to compose himself, but he was unable to speak. As he stood in front of his fellow war veterans, Goggins put his head down and started crying.

After about a minute of silence, with the crowd applauding Goggins twice, he collected his thoughts and said, “[My mom] never picked me up when I fell. She taught me how to get up when I was knocked down.”

That “no excuses” attitude has been Goggins’ modus operandi his entire life.

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A HARD UPBRINGING

While many people see him as a tough endurance machine mostly known for completing many 100-mile-or-longer ultramarathons, Goggins said for the first half of his life he had low self-esteem. As a child, he grew up in the small Indiana town of Brazil after relocating from Buffalo, N.Y., where he was born.

He said that while there were many “great people” in Brazil, there were “a lot of people that didn’t like blacks.”

“I was called [the N-word] a lot,” Goggins said, using the racially offensive word. “The [Ku-Klux-Klan] marched down our town’s main street on Independence Day in 1995.”

Goggins said at that time in his life, all he saw was hatred and that his upbringing was “just built that way.”

“I didn’t like the person I was,” Goggins said. “I wanted to be a man. But I wasn’t that — I was afraid. Growing up with that foundation and to overcome that, I thought the military would be a good way to do that.”

FAILURE IN THE AIR FORCE

As a 19-year-old, Goggins enlisted in the Air Force to become a pararescueman, or PJ. He said he went “pretty far” into the special operations training — there were about 25 men, including himself, left out of 150. But he was struggling to keep up.

“I discovered that I had the sickle cell trait,” he said. “Around that time, there were four [soldiers] in Ranger school that died from sickle cell trait.”

Because of Goggins’ condition, doctors put him on medical hold and pulled him out of training. During this time, he said he wasn’t going to the pool, where PJs trained extensively. He was not a good swimmer or good at holding his breath underwater.

He said during training he was used to being “uncomfortable” in the water, but when he wasn’t in the water, he got “comfortable” with not being in the water.

“Once you get comfortable, you don’t want to go back to being uncomfortable again,” Goggins said.

After a week, Goggins was admitted back in to training, but there was a catch — he had to start from “day one.”

“Right there, I thought, ‘How in the hell can I get out of here without quitting?’” Goggins said. “I told my [commanding officer] I was worried about my sickle cell issue. But, I was really scared of the water.”

After dropping out of PJ school, Goggins worked as a tactical air control party specialist, what he called “a great” job.

“It was special forces, but there was no water,” he said. “It was my way out.”

But the failure of not becoming a PJ “bothered” and “haunted” him. He left the Air Force after his enlistment and got a job as an exterminator in Indianapolis. At the time, Goggins also was an almost 300-pound powerlifter. He said he was “out of shape.”

NEGATIVITY BECOMES ‘DYNAMITE’

After coming home from work one night, Goggins turned on his TV and watched a program that featured men going through Navy Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) Training.

“It made me feel less of a man,” Goggins said of not being involved. “I was used to feeling that way my whole life I was tired of it. I had to make a stand.”

Inspired to become a SEAL, Goggins started visiting recruiters to find out how to become one of the Navy’s elite. But he was ignored because of his physical shape.

“It felt horrible,” Goggins said. “At the same time, I finally made my mind up to not quit anymore or to lie and find a way out of my own pain. All the negativity started becoming dynamite.”

Goggins finally met a recruiter who told him if he could lose 100 pounds in three months, he could try out for an upcoming BUD/S class.

He did just that — losing 106 pounds in less than three months.

“Whenever I sat down, my mind would say, ‘You’re not losing calories,’” Goggins said of his extreme weight loss. “I would sit down to try to relax after kicking myself in the ass, and my mind would tell me that I had to earn it. So, if I wanted to watch TV, I had to ride a stationary bike in the house to do it. My whole life was cardio. The only time I didn’t do cardio was when I was sleeping.”

After all his hard work, Goggins said he barely passed the requirements to go to BUD/S in 2000.

“I loved ‘Hell Week’ the most,” Goggins said, referring to the physically and mentally grueling week of continuous training during the beginning part of the special operations course. “I just wanted to be uncommon amongst uncommon men. I realized I had what it took.”

Because of injuries, Goggins had to restart BUD/S, including “Hell Week,” two more times before finally graduating with Class 235 in 2001. He was the 36th African-American man to become a Navy SEAL.

TRAGIC EVENT

By 2005, Goggins had put much of his weight back on from powerlifting. That all changed, again, in June 2005 when 19 service members, including many of Goggins’ friends, were killed during Operation Red Wings. (See sidebar.)

In their honor, Goggins wanted to raise money for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, an organization that provides scholarships and counseling for children of fallen special operators. The only way he knew how to do that was by making himself “uncomfortable.”

“I Google searched the 10 hardest events in the world,” Goggins said. “And what came up was a race called the Badwater 135.”

At the time, Goggins said he didn’t know anything about the “ultra world.” He thought the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile race from California’s Death Valley to Mount Whitney, was a stage race where participants ran 135 miles over a few days — not 48 hours. To participate, athletes must have completed at least one ultramarathon.

“I called the [Badwater] race director on a Wednesday and participated in the San Diego One Day that Saturday,” Goggins said. “He said if I could complete it in 24 hours, I was in.”

The San Diego One Day is a 100-mile ultramarathon. Goggins said, at the time, he had never even run a marathon. He said he was confident that his mind would let him finish the race, but he didn’t know how bad his body would “get destroyed.” During the 24-hour race, Goggins suffered broken metatarsals in both feet and shin splints. He said he was urinating blood at mile 70.

“I also shit on myself twice,” Goggins said. “It was a bad day.”

However, Goggins persevered and finished the race in about 19 hours.

‘MOTIVATION COMES AND GOES’

Competing in endurance challenges, including the Badwater Ultramarathon three times, has enabled Goggins to raise more than \$2 million for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. Goggins said he “stopped counting” how much money he has helped raise. This is part of the reason VFW recognized him at the 119th National Convention.

“It’s been a lot of hard work,” Goggins said. “To be recognized by such a huge organization with men and women who I truly respect will be the most important award I ever get in my

life.”

As an inspirational speaker, Goggins travels and speaks to sports teams. He has spoken to athletes from professional teams, including the Atlanta Hawks and the Seattle Seahawks, as well as collegiate athletes from the Alabama, Tennessee and Michigan university football programs.

“For a living, I speak to what the superficial world thinks are the best of the best — the athletes and the people who get called heroes,” Goggins said. “I don’t get nervous in front of them, because I know the difference between real heroes and the other ones.”

Goggins said “motivational speaker” is just his job title.

“Motivation comes and goes,” he said. “Inspiration has the ability to change lives. If I can inspire people, I can possibly change them.”

Speaking to the men and women of VFW during his acceptance speech, Goggins said it wasn’t the same as talking to athletes.

“When I walked in that room with all those men and women who served this country, I was nervous,” he said. “I know what it takes to do what they did. I know the amount of fear they had to overcome on a daily basis.”

Goggins said he is not sure what the future holds for him, but he said he will “keep grinding.”

“It has been a journey between me and God,” he said. “And, God didn’t give me the easy way out, and I thank God for that — it made a man out of me.”

This article is featured in the 2018 October issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), senior writer, VFW magazine. Photo courtesy of David Goggins.