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Armed with Faith

Cory Cathcart served as chaplain to SEAL Team 6.

Story by Erik Potter

Photos courtesy of Cory Cathcart

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Hollywood will have another chance to portray Navy SEALs this week with the limited Dec. 19 release of *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film about the manhunt and killing of Osama Bin Laden.

But what movies never capture, says Cory Cathcart, BS '89, who was embedded with the SEALs for four years as their chaplain, are the men's quiet, brave, intelligent, never-give-up attitude.



Cmdr. Cory Cathcart, BS '89, is the theatre deputy command chaplain for U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, the second-highest ranked military chaplain in Afghanistan. From 2005-09 he served as chaplain to several Navy SEAL teams, including SEAL Team 6, which conducted the mission into Pakistan that killed Osama Bin Laden in May 2011.

“Film cannot capture the true essence of what they do,” Cathcart says. “When you see it up close in person, it forever changes you. I have been around athletes my entire life and been around academics my entire life, and I’ve never seen anyone blend those two [better].”

They’re impressive in and out of uniform with their ability to endure anything on the battlefield and also be good husbands, fathers and sons at home, he says. “If you’re the father of a son, these guys are who you want your boy to look up to.”

Cathcart had moved on to a new post when he heard the news about the killing of Bin Laden in May 2011 by SEAL Team 6.

Cathcart has talked to a couple of the men who were on the mission, and although he can’t describe it in detail, he says it was “very routine.”

“Just knowing them, it doesn’t surprise me one bit that they were successful,” he says.

SEAL Team 6 members have become national heroes, but “the people I’ve spoken with don’t really talk about it too much,” Cathcart says. “Not to minimize it, but they don’t dwell on it. For them, it’s always, ‘What’s next?’ ”

Cathcart is currently the theater deputy command chaplain for U.S. Forces–Afghanistan, the second-highest ranked military chaplain in Afghanistan. He is stationed in a command compound in Kabul, the capital.

Looking back on his time with the SEALs, he knew he was where he was supposed to be.

“It was the right place and right time in my life. I was young enough to keep up physically but old enough to be a little wiser and help them navigate things they were going through,” he says. “Overall, it was just a kinship. I totally resonated with the guys there. I was a part of that unit. To be embedded in a team is something I hold near and dear to my heart.”

His path to the Navy was not straight.



A human environmental sciences major in college, Cathcart mostly focused on football, where he lettered for three seasons. His dream of an NFL career nearly came true: He landed tryouts with the New York Giants, Dallas Cowboys and Miami Dolphins; played in several preseason games; and one year survived to the final

Cathcart was a three-year letter winner for Mizzou from 1984–86 on the defensive line and at linebacker. He earned tryouts with the New York Giants, Dallas Cowboys and Miami Dolphins and played in several preseason games.

roster cut before the regular season began. The game took its toll on his body and his passion for playing. So Cathcart decided to take a job in health care administration, then gerontology. He cared for end-of-

life patients and had many deathbed conversations, finding meaning in the work.

It stoked a passion for ministry, and he enrolled at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Mo., earning a master's degree in theology with an emphasis in gerontology in 1993.

Around that time, Cathcart reconnected with old football friends who had joined the Marines, and they encouraged him to join the service as a chaplain. The idea appealed to him. A military chaplain combined the brotherhood of his football days with the meaning of the ministry. He signed up before he even finished seminary.

As a chaplain he served in several posts, including one in Washington, D.C., that placed him at the Pentagon on 9/11. In 2004, he earned a master's degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, and in 2005, he was transferred to work with several of the SEAL teams, including SEAL Team 6.

Cathcart worked with the SEALs until 2009, but says his connection to the men and their families continues.

“When I was with the [SEAL] teams, I buried 28 of my friends,” Cathcart remembers. As time went on, the funerals became harder. “I knew these guys, called them friends,” he says. “It seemed every other month I was doing a funeral for one of them — or two or three. I became close with the families —the wives, children or parents. It became exponentially more difficult the longer I was with them.

“Not a day goes by, from those days to today, that I don’t think about the guys we lost.”

Cathcart says his best preparation for helping soldiers came not from seminary, officer training or football. “It was working with people in the gerontology field, in a circumstance I didn’t want to be in, talking to people as they were coming to the end of their lives,” Cathcart says. “In many ways it was a blessing in disguise because it caused me to re-evaluate where my life was going at that time and how



Cathcart was part of a unit that visited an orphanage near Kabul, Afghanistan. He is pictured with a child who was orphaned by the Taliban.

I was living it. That's where I saw death for the first time.”

Cathcart plans to return home to his wife and 11-year-old daughter in Virginia in February.

Zero Dark Thirty will open in Columbia and nationwide on Jan. 11.

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