



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE FREID-PERENCHIO

“SEAL: The Unspoken Sacrifice,” opening May 15 at Chicago’s Pritzker Military Museum & Library, features photos, including the image above, by Stephanie Freid-Perenchio.

World of SEALs revealed

Photographer captures the special operations force over 8 years across the globe



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

Many years ago, when she was relatively new to the world of photography — to the world, actually, since she was only 7 years old — Stephanie Freid-Perenchio went on a family vacation to Yosemite National Park and, oh, let’s tell her the story: “We would go there every June, and that year I brought my Brownie camera and just started shooting. I wound up with 10, or maybe it was 12, rolls of film, and after getting them developed, my father was so mad at me.”

He was mad because all of the photos — all of them — were of squirrels.

“But Dad,” the little girl said. “These are all different squirrels. Each one is different.” Thus was formed an everything-is-unique philosophy that has steered much of her life.

Though she kept taking photos into adulthood, she described herself as an “avid amateur” and devoted most of her energies to working as a stylist for television, fashion designers and print media before becoming a talent/music agent.



Freid-Perenchio

But now, at 52, she is a professional photographer, and the fruits of her work will be on stunning, revelatory and emotionally potent display when the Pritzker Military Museum & Library features more than 80 of her photos in a show titled “SEAL: The Unspoken Sacrifice.”

That is SEAL as in the U.S. Navy’s Sea, Air, Land teams, the Navy’s principal special operations force, aka the guys who got bin Laden. Founded in 1962, the SEALs have become part of our cultural landscape. Featured fictionally in video games, Tom Clancy novels and films — most recently in “Captain Phillips,” starring Tom Hanks, and “Lone Survivor,” with Mark Wahlberg — the real world of the SEALs has long been a closed society.

But not to Freid-Perenchio. More than 15 years ago, she found herself in a dinner party conversation with Vice Admiral Robert S. Harward. Intrigued by his experience as a SEAL, she asked him frankly, “How do you kill someone in the morning and then go home and play with your wife and children?”

That potentially incendiary comment the admiral took as genuine curiosity, and the two stayed in touch. In the wake of 9/11, she contacted him, and he paved the way for her and her childhood friend, writer Jennifer Walton, to gain unprecedented access to pursue a project originally conceived as “A Day in the Life of a SEAL.”

It grew to be much more. “I did no research beforehand because I didn’t want to go into this with any preconceived ideas, like the Hollywood myths of the military,” she said from her studio near Sun Valley, Idaho, where the Los Angeles-born and -bred photographer has lived for five years with her husband, who owns a record label and a bicycle shop. “The idea was to get an intimate look at these people’s lives and not to sensationalize any-



One of the SEAL homecoming photos shot by Freid-Perenchio is of a small boy waiting for the father he hasn’t seen since he was a few months old.



Unprecedented access allowed Freid-Perenchio to snap revelatory shots of the SEALs’ lives. Many of the photographs were published in a 2009 book.

thing.”

Over eight years, the women traveled across the globe. They captured SEAL training in Alaska, California and other places, and spent months at a time in Afghanistan. They jumped from planes and learned to shoot guns. They were able to win the trust of the soldiers and their families, documenting deployments, homecomings and memorial services.

Much of this work was published in a 2009 book, “SEAL: The Unspoken

Sacrifice.” After its publication, Freid-Perenchio received a letter from the sister of a SEAL who was killed in action. It read: “I didn’t even realize what his deal was when he was a SEAL because he never spoke about it. My family never really knew anything. Thank you because (of) his death and now this book I feel like his friends and family can truly understand what a great man my brother was.”

“We followed our hearts,” said Freid-Perenchio. “We began the project with

open minds and worked hard to earn the respect and the trust of the men and their families. We were not journalists, and I think that helped us in this endeavor. Our presence was not threatening, and we always knew when to back off and respect boundaries.”

The photo exhibition, which opens May 15, has been nearly two years in the planning.

“This grew out of being introduced to Stephanie by a mutual friend. Her work was so powerful that it compelled us to expand the exhibit,” said Kenneth Clarke, the PMM&L’s president and CEO. “Her work goes to the heart of what it means to be a SEAL, that tension that exists between service and family, between service and community. It is, for lack of a better phrase, the real thing.”

The show will be embellished by artifacts on loan from the Navy SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce, Fla., including uniforms, equipment and keepsakes; a newly published history of the outfit; and more photos of SEALs who were killed in action, supplied by north suburban Naval Station Great Lakes, the first stop in SEAL training.

If you have never visited the Pritzker, at 104 S. Michigan Ave., prepare to

“We always knew when to back off and respect boundaries.”

— Stephanie Freid-Perenchio

be pleasantly overwhelmed and enlightened. It was created in 2003 by James (now Jennifer) Pritzker, a former Army colonel and a billionaire member of the notable, and notably philanthropic, Chicago family. Its collection — which includes thousands of books and photos in addition to diaries, letters and journals of soldiers; coins, medals and stamps; and other materials — is invaluable to researchers and fascinating to the rest of us. There is also a lively schedule of public programs (pritzkermilitary.org).

The great war photographer Robert Capa once said, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough.” It is that sort of intimacy that informs all of Freid-Perenchio’s work. She features Capa’s quote prominently on her website (stephaniefreidperenchio.com).

She has also used her camera to explore endangered wildlife of Africa, as well as women and children in Afghanistan and the effect war has had on their lives. She has spent time capturing the vanishing culture of cowboys, and exploring the lives of wolves and country-rock performers. She is also involved in various causes, co-founding the Pacific Council/Sun Valley Global Affairs Forum, which sponsors lectures and events on global issues, and founding Women Under the Radar, a group focusing on issues affecting women and children around the world. She also co-chairs the yearly “The Family of Woman Film Festival” in Sun Valley.

“The experiences I had with the SEALs changed forever the course of my work,” she said, pausing for a moment before adding: “It changed forever the course of my life.”

“After Hours With Rick Kogan” airs 9-11 p.m. Sundays on WGN-AM 720.

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