NPS alumnus Adm. William McRaven has made quite an impact on our nation’s most critical special operations, but it was his studies at NPS — and his pen — that may have made his mightiest.

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In his office at USSOCOM headquarters in Florida, Adm. William McRaven stands next to a few keepsakes collected throughout his career, vestiges that have left a lasting mark on his own motivations. A framed photograph pictures McRaven with, from right, President Barack Obama, retired Army General and current Director of the Central Intelligence Agency David Petraeus, and U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Frank Helmick, current Commanding General of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, and a fellow graduate of NPS. Perched tall over his shoulder stands a statue of General William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan. Tapped by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 to lead what would become the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Donovan’s leadership of this organization would cement his stature as the “Father of American Intelligence.” The OSS was the essential precursor to today’s Central Intelligence Agency, and set a path for the U.S. military’s inclusion of special operations forces. And finally, also on this mantle rests a relic from the South Tower of the World Trade Center, upon which is scribed, “The Deed is all, not the glory.”
While he has been widely applauded for planning the May 2011 raid in Abbotabad that nabbed public enemy #1, NPS graduate and now Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command Adm. William McRaven’s greatest contribution to Special Ops, and to American national security, may have actually been created by his pen nearly 20 years prior.

If Mother Nature set out with a task of creating the perfect Special Operator, she’d likely end up with Admiral William McRaven.

McRaven has reluctantly become a celebrity of sorts, both within and beyond Department of Defense circles. It was his voice on the other end of the line briefing Commander in Chief Barack Obama and a spectrum of U.S. senior leadership when his plan to get Osama bin Laden, Operation Neptune Spear, was carried out by his team of elite commandos. He was runner-up for “TIME” magazine’s annual “Person of the Year” bestowment. And were it not for a devastating 2001 parachuting accident, he’d likely still be out in the field, performing all those tactics that captured the public’s awe in “Act of Valor.”

But for all that he has accomplished in his lengthy Naval career, it was an opportunity to head to Monterey where he would perhaps end up making his most indelible mark on the forces he now commands, and on the nation. “The Boss,” as he’s widely known around the U.S. Special Operations Command, or USSOCOM, headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., used no silent helos, no guns, no dead-of-night surprise attacks in this operation.

Rather, it was an exercise of his mind, and his pen, that would result in the single most sought after and utilized handbook on the science of special operations, and it introduced the world to concepts like the “inverted pyramid” and “relative superiority.”

“Special Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice” as it was aptly titled when finally published, was born from McRaven’s voluminous 612-page thesis, completed for his dual degree in 1993 from the Naval Postgraduate School. And it was an opportunity that McRaven freely credits as one of the most effective experiences of his career.

“I think my time at the postgraduate school was invaluable, because it gave me the opportunity to think. The military trains you well, but rarely do you have time as an officer to do that critical thinking … to not be constrained by the pressures of a day-to-day job,” he said. “I am a strong believer that we need to teach our officers how to think critically, in a wide range of topics.”

“You have to know your profession, and you have to be tactically and operationally sound and proficient,” he continued. “But as you get more senior, you have to have an education that teaches you critical thinking. You are going to use those skills more often as an officer than anything else.”

With that backdrop, then Cmdr. McRaven arrived on campus in 1991 as one of the more senior officers on campus, and says that he had nearly missed his opportunity to attend NPS.

“I was actually one of the older students at the school at that time as a Navy O-5,” McRaven said, who finally got to NPS on his fifth set of orders. He was in the operational pipeline, his first three sets of orders to the university would be canceled by the Navy, and the fourth by himself as he was “out for Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield,” he noted.

“But they set me up again, I came in fairly senior, and I was on my way after this tour to command,” he says. “I knew what I wanted to do when I got to PG school. Here was an opportunity to study, which I hadn’t had in my career at the time and I was looking forward to it.”

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“To study,” as he puts it, would be something of an understatement for the overachiever that is McRaven, who by many accounts did indeed know exactly what he wanted to do during his two years at NPS, and it was more than study and reflection.

“He definitely knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish while he was here, particularly in regard to his research,” said longtime Defense Analysis Professor Gordon McCormick, who served as second reader on McRaven’s well-known thesis.

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McRaven examined these examples in great detail. "As I looked at each case study, it required a very detailed examination of the planning, the preparation, and the execution of each mission. As I was writing each one of the chapters, the theories began to manifest themselves in my mind."

"Essentially, what I was trying to determine were the principles of special operations," he continued. "I had felt very strongly going into this that the principles of special operations were different than the principles of war."

"Then Cmdr. McRaven focused on direct action operations very closely and in great detail," noted current Defense Analysis department Chair Dr. John Arquilla. "He discussed how this small force, through acting swiftly and accurately … with speed, surprise, careful organization and planning, can create a relative superiority over an adversary, and he developed theory about this."

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McRaven would end up analyzing only eight of those operations in the development of that theory. "I never got to the final two case studies, I just ran out of time. Had I done them, my thesis would have been 800 pages," he noted with a laugh. "But I was doing it really just to educate myself. I wanted to do a good job, and I thought it was a valuable topic. But I just assumed that when I finished my thesis, it would simply sit on a shelf somewhere and collect dust."

Certainly that would not be the case for McRaven’s work, not immediately after it was completed, and not for the foreseeable future either. "For many decades to come, his thesis and the book that was born from it, will be the handbook for this type of special operations," added Arquilla. "It’s had a profound impact … it’s pretty clear, the lessons to be drawn from this work are appreciated around the world."

In spite of the impact of McRaven’s thesis, it is not the only mark he would leave on the Naval Postgraduate School. While he realized quickly there was a void in special operations theory, he also recognized a void in the education offered both to and about the craft he devoted his career to.

“I came to NPS in the National Security Affairs (NSA) curriculum, fantastic program … But we really didn’t have any classes on special operations,” he said. "I had just come off 10 months in Desert Storm/Desert Shield, and I felt very strongly that we should educate our conventional force of officers coming through the Naval Postgraduate School, and our own SOF (Special Operations Forces) officers as well, on what special operations was all about … So I went to Tom Bruneau, and he was interested.”

Distinguished Professor Tom Bruneau,
Adm. William H. McRaven, commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, shakes the hand of a Ranger from the 1/75 Ranger Regiment, awarded a Silver Star for gallantry during an awards ceremony at Hunter Army Airfield, March 16, 2012. One hundred four medals were presented to 80 Rangers for their bravery and heroism in 908 classified missions.

Adm. William McRaven, right, is pictured with Army Gen. James Thurman, left, and Marine Corps Gen. John Allen, center, during the senior officers’ meeting with the Senate Armed Services Committee for approval of their then new appointments, June 28, 2011. McRaven would be appointed Commander of USSOCOM, while Thurman would assume command of U.S. Forces Korea, and Allen would take over for Gen. David Petraeus as Commander of the International Security Assistance Force – Afghanistan.

still actively teaching in the NSA department at NPS, remembers McRaven well. “When he first got here, he was quite senior, and knew very well how the bureaucracy worked, how to get something done within the system. And he saw a real need for a program tailored to his community,” said Bruneau, NSA Chair when McRaven pursued establishing the Special Operation Low Intensity Conflict, or SOLIC, curriculum. “In the end, he created something that would be of great benefit to all special operations forces.”

McRaven not only developed the SOLIC course outline required to graduate, he described in detail what the courses should entail, pitched the program to senior Naval leadership to get funding, and recruited top thinkers in the field to help make it happen. “We reached out to the RAND Corporation and Gordon McCormick, a very charismatic, wonderful teacher who was very interested in the same things I was. He agreed to help us,” McRaven said. McCormick would go on to Chair the SOLIC curriculum, and the subsequent Defense Analysis department upon its creation in 2001 until Arquilla took over in 2011.

As current defense strategies have placed a concerted emphasis on the role of special operations, it would seem the lasting effects of McRaven’s work — the Defense Analysis programs — are well positioned for the future. “We’ve grown more than ten-fold since the early days of the curriculum,” noted Arquilla. “Since then, the demand for our educational product has skyrocketed.

“At the beginning, in the 90s, our program put irregular warfare on the map for the Department of Defense. In the 2000s, we added to that an improved awareness of information operations and how it played not only in irregular warfare, but in military operations in general,” Arquilla added. “Now, in this decade, we are going to put network warfare, network analysis and how to fight to the dark networks that are threatening our national and global security on the map. But it certainly all began with then Cmdr. McRaven’s interest in ensuring there was education in this field.”

Off campus, those same programs are also equally well positioned to have a noted impact on current and future conflict. “Today there are two dozen wars going on around the world, and not a one of them can be characterized by what we would call conventional warfare. They are all irregular,” Arquilla continued.

“The 21st century is very clearly one in which what we used to call irregular wars have become the norm. The ideas, theories, practices coming out of special operations are going to become of intense interest to many militar-ies, including to the more conventional forces,” Arquilla said. “What Admiral McRaven began as a small, specialty program is going to become something that diffuses throughout the DOD and hopefully throughout our international allies as well.”

The increasingly strategic role of special operations in modern conflict was both welcomed, and perhaps foreshadowed, in the eyes of William McRaven. “The recognition of SOF’s role in this war, and frankly how we will engage countries in the future, whether it is a hostile engagement, or a peaceful engagement … I know the President, the Secretary [of Defense] and others appreciate what special operations bring to that.”

While McRaven’s mark on NPS, and his mark on the theory of special operations, is unquestioned, what about the mark these have made on him? Does he actually use what he had learned some two decades ago? Did he use it to plan and execute that May ’11 Operation Neptune Spear over the dimly lit skies of Abbobbatbad? Did the act of education have an impact on nature’s perfect creation?

“Every day … From the time I left the school, it didn’t take me long to realize that what I had been taught — the concepts, the ways of examining problems — has been exceedingly valuable to me,” McRaven stated emphatically. “And as we look at the number of tactical operations I have had the good fortune to run, over the last three years in particular, I applied the theory many times, and the theory proved out every single time — most notably in May.”