

# A commando's tale: Sarasota native is Special Ops legend



Bob Keller began his military career as an Army Ranger. He later transferred to Special Forces and earned a Green Beret. But for the past 10 years, Keller has served in the Army's Special Operations. He and his teammates are making a HALO, or High Altitude Low Opening parachute jump. Photo via the Sarasota Herald -Tribune.

**SARASOTA, Fla. (AP)** Bob Keller is one of the most elite commandos this country has ever produced, and certainly one of the most experienced.

He's been deployed to dozens of foreign countries, surviving more gunfights than he can count.

A Sarasota native, Keller began his military career in a Ranger battalion, part of a storied regiment that's considered the best light-infantry unit in the world.

He later joined the U.S. Army Special Forces, earning a coveted Green Beret.

But for the past 10 years, Keller has been a member of the Army's most elite Special Operations unit.

After 9/11, Army Special Operations took on new missions and new roles. Much has been written about their exploits, which include hunting SCUD missiles in the deserts of Iraq, chasing down high-value targets in Baghdad, rescuing hostages held by terrorist groups, pulling Saddam Hussein out of a spider hole at a farm near Tikrit and, most recently, killing ISIS leaders in Syria.



Keller, 43, is prohibited from mentioning the name of the secretive unit in which he currently serves, much less where he's been deployed or what's he's done downrange.

But his former teammates, who have since retired, are able to add a little more detail.



Special Operations veteran John Schaible served with Keller “overseas.”

“We got into a lot of live-fire engagements with the enemy,” Schaible said. “People would ask if I shot anybody. The truth is, I shot at people who were probably already dead, because people like Bob got on the trigger faster. I did an okay job out there, but guys like Bob did a better job than me. Bob was absolutely on time in serious situations that required that split-second decision-making process that kept a lot of his buddies alive. I’ve seen it happen on numerous occasions.”

Read about Bob Keller’s training philosophy and what sets his training apart.

“The quality of training he’s capable of delivering is simply the best. If you think of it on an academic scale, Bob is at the PhD level in terms of tactics and shooting – even better than a PhD level. He goes above and beyond,” said retired Sgt. Major Jeremy Morton, who served with Keller in Special Operations. “His research and his thesis are based upon his own experiences.”

## GI Joe



Keller is a humble man.

He's plain spoken and becomes somewhat ill at ease when discussing his accomplishments.

He's exceedingly polite. He adores his parents, and they're extremely proud of his accomplishments, even though they don't know all the details of his deployments.

Keller is a proud husband and father.

"My wife and my family mean everything to me," he said.

His world view is shaped by potential threats – terrorist groups, foreign militaries, hostile militias.

He's got the bearing of a senior NCO, which he is, with none of the associated gruffness. After all, he's not serving in the "regular Army."

Keller handles weapons like surgeon. It's the kind of familiarity that only comes after decades of training and real-world experience.

He's an incredibly fast yet extremely accurate shot. He shoots smoothly with little wasted effort using either hand.

Watch Bob Keller deliver firearms training at the range.

In addition to SWAT teams, Keller teaches beginner and female students.

“The females work out best,” he said. “They don’t have preconceived notions and they listen.”

Like most special operators, Keller is in incredible physical shape.

His workout regimen is classified.

His former teammates say he’s a gifted athlete.

Now stateside, Keller lost the beard and long hair – the “modified grooming standards” that have become de rigueur for special operators serving overseas, so they blend in with the local populace.

He and his older sister were both born in Sarasota. Their father, Bob Keller Sr., also is a combat vet. He served as a helicopter door gunner during the Vietnam War.

After he was discharged, the elder Keller worked as a golf pro at the Palm Aire Country Club, until he also was hired by a country club in Minnesota.

“For years, we were doing summers in Minnesota and winters in Sarasota, until us kids got involved in sports,” his son said. “Then we stayed in Minnesota.”

Their family home was outside of Duluth – a five-acre wooded lot surrounded by hundreds of acres of pine forest.

The younger Keller has lost all traces of his Minnesota accent.

“I pretty much played any and all sports,” he said. “If I wasn’t playing sports, I’d be hunting, camping or screwing off in the woods.”

Keller turned his private preserve into his own mini “Ranger School.”

“I had bunkers I’d dug out. I had forts all over the woods – tree forts. I had obstacle courses, three wheelers, dirt bikes,” he said. “Even at a young age I practiced doing Army stuff.”

In high school, Keller focused on hockey and golf. After he graduated, he returned to Sarasota and started playing golf full-time.

“At 22, I turned pro,” he said. “I played on the Hooter’s Tour. I played on all the mini tours around Sarasota, Tampa and into Georgia.”

Despite his professional status, the money just wasn’t there.

“I earned enough to survive and some sponsors were paying my travel,” he said. “Basically, I learned a lot of valuable lessons.”

A week after he missed the cut for a tournament in Louisiana, Keller quit golf and enlisted in the Army.

“All my golf friends were like ‘What the hell?’” he said. “It really just came down to this — I knew what I wanted to do. Running around the woods playing GI Joe, forcing myself to sleep outside – that was my passion.”

## **Ranger**

After basic training, infantry school and Airborne training, Keller was assigned to the 1st Ranger Battalion in Savannah, Georgia.

He was 24 and “non-tabbed,” since he’d yet to attend Ranger School and earn the distinctive shoulder patch.

Life for a non-tabbed Private First Class was difficult. They’re on the low end of the pecking order and are often fodder for work details and other duties.

“I was 24 when I got there,” he said. “I was older than most squad leaders. It wasn’t fun to be non-tabbed.”

Ranger School soon followed. It has been described as the most arduous training the Army has to offer.

“It’s a great course for finding out what your body can take – no sleep, little food and constantly walking with heavy weights,” he said. “It’s supposed to be a leadership school, but it tells you how much your body can actually take. I went in at 195 pounds. I was 155 when I graduated. I looked like Skeletor.”

Keller's class went through Ranger School in the winter, which added its own set of challenges, especially when patrolling through freezing Florida swamps at night.

"It was cold. You're constantly miserable. I was walking through this swamp carrying the big gun in freezing water up to my neck," he recalled. "I thought to myself that at least my head was dry – at least I had one dry spot. About the time I thought it couldn't get any worse, I hit a tree root and fully submerged."

After he returned to his battalion, the unit deployed several times overseas.

It was pre-9/11. The related wars hadn't started yet.

Keller learned what soldiering was all about as a young Ranger.

"Rangers are a great group of guys who you knew always had your back," he said. "They're hard-charging kids that wouldn't ever quit."

### **Green Beret**

When his enlistment ended, Keller left active duty, transferred to the National Guard and went back to school.

He earned an associate degree in criminal justice from Manatee Community College, now State College of Florida.

He had thoughts of becoming a cop, but the Army still beckoned.

He was selected by the 20th Special Forces Group, which is one of two Army National Guard SF units with battalions in several states.

His battalion sent him to the Special Forces qualification course – known as the "Q-Course."

It's a bit more cerebral than Ranger training, but still a difficult course.

Keller became an "18-Charlie" – a Special Forces engineer sergeant – a specialist with extensive knowledge of construction, demolition and explosives.

“During one phase of the Q-Course, I jumped in with a toilet seat so we’d have some comfort. Since I was the engineer sergeant, I knew I’d be responsible for building the pooper,” he said.

After he was “tabbed SF” and returned to his unit, he and several teammates provided surveillance support to federal law enforcement agencies in “counter-drug” operations.

Then they deployed to Iraq.

“We did regular SF missions. I got lucky being able to deploy with those guys. We were very active working over there,” he said. “Our mission tempo was very heavy. We were gone all the time doing stuff.”

Citing “operational security,” Keller declined to describe specific missions.

“Obviously, you work with the host nation. We were doing actual missions with host-nation guys – traditional SF-type s—,” he said. “I came back, worked at the counter-drug stuff again, but not for too long, and then I went to the other selection.”

Alex – who, for security reasons, did not want his last name used in this story – served with Keller in Special Forces and later in Special Operations.

“As a soldier, one thing sticks out about Bob. Before we went (Special Operations) and were on the SF team, there was a certain ‘good-enough’ mentality,” Alex said. “Bob was always the guy who said we gotta train harder. The good-enough mindset was not the mindset we needed to have, he’d say. That encapsulates Bobby.”

It’s typical of Special Operations personnel, Alex said, to “without any qualms run into harm’s way.”

“That’s Bobby. When things go bad, there’s never a question. He’s running toward the gunfire and using a gun to accomplish his mission,” Alex said. “It’s hard to quantify and put into words. It’s not bravado. It’s a selfless desire to do what’s right, regardless of the personal outcome.”



Within the close confines of the Special Operations community, everyone knew their teammates' foibles as well as their accomplishments, Alex said.

"All I heard about was Bob's bravery," he said.

## **Uncommon valor**

Just getting chosen for selection is an arduous process, much less making it through the course, said retired Sgt. Major Jeremy Morton, another soldier who served with Keller in Special Operations.

"There's a certain personality type and character that people are looking for in an operator," Morton said. "Because people were chosen for these traits, they can be trusted. They can function at a high level during periods of extreme stress of long duration, and operate morally, legally and ethically. If resources are made available, great, but a lot of time they find their own resources. If a guy gets selected, he's already gone through a lot in his career."

The actual selection course, which some have said is far more difficult than Ranger School, has an attrition rate of around 90 percent. Many of those who fail come from elite units themselves, such as Ranger battalions and Special Forces teams.

Even if a candidate is successful and passes the course, the challenges are not over. Months of training, testing and personal evaluations lie ahead. They claim an additional 10-20 percent.

"Selection is really an ongoing process no matter where they are in their life as an operator," Morton explained. "From start to finish, selection is an ongoing process. They can't rest on their laurels. They have to perform today. Everyone is subject to peer pressure and performance-based goals."

Keller won't talk about his time in Special Operations.

His teammates are proud to talk about it.

Asked if Keller was brave, Morton said: "Bravery is moving to the sounds of gunfire, not moving away. We're a group of people with uncommon valor, who

march to the sound of a different drum – gunfire. The psychology behind what is brave is doing your job. Bob did his job very well, despite the risk out there.

“We try to mitigate the risk as much as we can. We try to put yourself aside and move forward with the mission, putting others above self, the unit above self, country above self and your brothers on your right and left above yourself by moving through direct fire to save a buddy who’s been shot. Is Bob brave? Yes, he’s brave,” Morton said.

Alex concurred.

“It’s impressive when you see men who literally, without any qualms, will run into harm’s way. That’s Bobby,” he said.

Schaible, the veteran who served with Keller “overseas,” pointed out the unique nature of the extreme over-achievers who comprise Special Operations.

“Over there, at that building, generally speaking, it’s really hard just to be average. Bob didn’t have to work real hard. He’s a gifted athlete. I almost hated him because he’s so good,” Schaible joked. “As an operator, he’s totally competent. A lot of people had to try real hard to be good. Bob was better than most people around the building. He was really good, and only had to work at it a little bit to get even better.”

## **Philanthropist**

The fast-paced, real-world mission tempo of Special Operations can take a toll.

“Most guys do at least a decade in Special Operations,” Morton said. “You just can’t do that type of work and not have some kind of residual effects. You may not have PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), but there are definitely issues, physiological and emotional. Bob’s part of a core group of guys who collect money through fundraising events and distribute it for certain needs, marriage counseling, helping out someone with a TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) or PTSD. That’s the kind of work Bob’s doing on the philanthropy side of the house. He’s made it a priority to give back and help out the guys who need it.”

“The Special Operations Care Fund (SOCF) fills the gaps that lie between some of the bigger charities and the smaller ones,” Keller said. “One-hundred percent – every single penny – goes to charity. No one has a salary. They host events for guys with brain injuries, buy fake eyeballs for guys who’ve lost eyes, pay for special brain treatments.”

The Fund’s stated mission is to “connect people to the Special Operations community via events and engagements. Funds generated from the events will be donated to the best charitable organizations that support the Special Operations Community.”

“It’s the best charity I’ve ever been around or even seen,” Keller said. “Their events are great. There are SF guys, my guys, Navy guys, Air Force, anyone in Special Ops who either got help from them or who donate time to meet donors.”



Keller is founder and CEO of Gamut Resolutions, a shooting and tactical training firm for the public, corporate groups and law enforcement agencies.

But individual cops he’ll train for free.

Listen to Bob Keller discuss his charities.

Keller also created his own charity, Operation Blue, a year ago based on the SOCF model, after he learned how little time police actually get to spend at the range. He doesn’t draw a salary from the training he provides to these officers.

“I get them to the range, get them shooting their guns, get them more familiar with them. It’s ridiculous how these police departments only shoot once a year for their qualifications,” he said. “After hearing that, I set up a program where they can spend two full days with me at the range shooting.”

Sometimes some “industry guys” will pay Keller’s travel costs, which usually means he’ll break even.

“My ultimate goal is to have smarter, safer, more confident shooters,” he said.

Scott Puckett, a sheriff’s deputy in South Carolina, first met Keller at one of his Operation Blue courses.

“Bob Keller – wow! He is a very humble individual with a great deal of been-there, done-that experience,” Puckett said. “What he brings to us in law enforcement is tactical training that teaches control, restraint and precision. What he brings and what he teaches is not theory. He’s teaching real-world applications. He’s coming out of a unit – a group of individuals who have no limitations on training and sharpening the saw.”

Keller, Puckett said, provided the finest firearm training he has ever received during his 22-year law enforcement career.

“Now is a very volatile time for law enforcement. You’ve seen the ebb and flow of the microscope we operate under,” Puckett said. “People need to understand that a guy like Bob Keller – he helps keep America safer by teaching cops how to better use their firearms. That round – once it leaves your barrel you cannot get it back. I want to expose as many guys as I can to his training. I want people in my county to know we’re getting the best training. Law enforcement leaders need to seek out guys like Bob!”

## **Operator**

“Operator” is a title claimed by several elite military units.

According to Keller it can mean a “multitude of things and people. Everyone is different and brings different things to the table. There are hard-charging guys who might not be as book smart as others, and then you have others who are

nothing but book smart. It's a mix of everyone coming together. There is really no one answer. Everyone brings something different to the table. That's the best part about it, the diversity on your team."

Morton said it's a title Keller truly deserves.

"Bob's a solid man, a man of principle who I'd describe as a good, red-blooded American. He's conservative in nature, politically and personally, and a man of his word you can depend on. As an operator, everything he did was based on moral, legal and ethical obligations — exactly what you'd expect from Bob. He's a solid, senior non-commissioned officer — a real operator who was always doing the right thing at the right time."

Watch an interview with Bob Keller.

Keller said the commitment required for Special Operations is "total."

Often, operators are gone 10 months of the year.

"It takes a huge toll on families, wives and children," he said. "We're going 150 mph, 100 percent of the time. Why did I do it? I am American. I am 100 percent for this country."