

HERBAL MEDIC

**A GREEN BERET'S GUIDE
TO EMERGENCY
MEDICAL PREPAREDNESS
AND NATURAL FIRST AID**

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*I wrote this book in memory of my father,
who taught me to appreciate our natural world,
and my mother, who with her passion for gardening
taught me to talk to plants at a very early age.*

*And I dedicate it to all of my students—past, present, and future.
I hope it serves you well.*

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PREFACE

I remember hearing the sound of my bone breaking as I hit the ground, hands outstretched. It hadn't been a very impressive jump, but my mountain bike hit a patch of sand as I landed and over the handlebars I went. The resulting collision pulled a piece of bone away from the base of the thumb on my left hand in a classic avulsion fracture.

I had arrived at Fort Bragg a few days earlier, having made it through the Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS, or "Sore Feet and Shoulders," as we called it) and Airborne School of the qualification course for the US Special Forces. After 8 months at Fort Sam Houston in Texas training as a battlefield medic, I was facing "med lab"—a whole new level of training and experience.

This program was designed to produce the best austere medics in the military—and to wash out anyone who could not handle the pressure. ("Austere" here means operating with limited supplies and support.) More than half of my original class was already gone. This second phase would be worse. And here I was in the middle of the woods, with a broken thumb less than a week before starting the most arduous training I would ever undergo.

After several hours of denial, I went over to the med lab compound and X-rayed the thumb myself. Sure enough, I had a prominent avulsion fracture, with several millimeters of

separation between the bone and the large piece that had been separated from it. At this point I realized that I needed to see a doctor, so I went to the post's hospital, where the orthopedist told me I needed surgery and would have to postpone the hands-on training. I stubbornly insisted that he just put a cast on it, because my son's third birthday was coming up and delaying my training would mean missing more time with him.

After some arguing and against the surgeon's better judgment, he agreed to put on a cast. I went back to the barracks, where I promptly cut the cast off and got a ride into town where I'd noticed a store that carried bulk herbs. I bought a pound each of comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) and horsetail (*Equisetum* spp.).

Using big gauze pads held in place by an elastic wrap bandage, I soaked my thumb with a wet poultice of both herbs almost 24/7. When I reported for the first session of goat lab (so called because we worked on live animals), I was relieved to find myself assigned to the half of the class that was learning lab techniques rather than practicing treatment of trauma. This meant that I had a 3-week reprieve before I would have to use my broken thumb in daily trauma scenarios.

The instructors knew that I had a broken thumb and were undoubtedly just waiting to see what would happen,

but I was convinced that I could make it if the thumb would heal enough to allow me some grip strength. During trauma training, we worked with goats who were fully anesthetized and then given life-threatening injuries, from blocked airways to fully eviscerated intestines spurting arterial blood. These scenarios ran all day, every day, and my thumb would ache for hours after, for example, using kung-fu grip strength with my left hand to align and expose the trachea for the scalpel in my right hand.

Thanks to the amazing tissue proliferation brought on by the comfrey and horsetail, my thumb had healed rapidly, and I continued the poultices for another month into the course. By the time I was getting ready for the next phase, I had full grip strength back and only minor pain when stretching my thumb in certain directions. To this day, I have no arthritis or pain or difference in grip strength between my right and left hands.

That injury was my rite of passage into herbal medicine. I had been interested in medicinal herbs prior to my Special Forces training, and I had studied just enough to know that comfrey and horsetail were reputed to be extremely effective in healing a broken bone. However, experiencing rapid healing myself, in a situation of very high stress, gave me a whole new level of appreciation for and trust in herbs as medicine. I continued to study herbal medicine, and it balanced all of the

orthodox medicine I was learning as a Special Forces medic.

I love medicine for many reasons, but one of the biggest is the way it challenges you to keep learning. When you study medicine—whether you are in medical school or teaching yourself herbal medicine from books or anywhere in between—you are on a path that will never end for as long as you choose to follow it. More importantly, you can choose the direction you want to travel. Nobody has all the answers in the world of medicine, and you will never learn all there is to learn on this subject.

When I began to study herbal medicine in earnest, my own ways of thinking about how the body heals began to expand. My ideas about the physiology and pathophysiology of the body as it relates to herbal medicine have evolved over the years, and I work with doctors who put my ideas to the test every single day. The more they work with herbal medicine, the more they keep returning because it is so effective. Herbal medicine provides some wonderful backstops to many of the holes that exist in conventional medicine today—and these are holes not only in the actual medicine itself, but also in regard to its availability in a health care system that is filled with flaws.

Whether you read this book from cover to cover or use it as a reference by chapter, I hope that my own experiences in the world of herbal medicine over the past 30 years will prove useful.