

Pastor says false Navy SEAL tale was an 'ego-builder'

by [Dan Miller](#)

May 12, 2011

HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) The Navy awards the gold Trident medal to those who have earned the right to be called a SEAL -- the same elite fighting squad that shot and killed al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

The same gold Trident can be bought at a military surplus store, and that's where the Rev. Jim Moats of Newville, Pa., got his.

Moats was never a Navy SEAL -- even though that's what he told The Patriot-News in a story after bin Laden was killed, and what Moats has allowed his congregation at Christian Bible Fellowship Church to believe for five years.

On Sunday (May 8), Moats acknowledged in an interview he never was offered SEALS training in the Navy and he never was accepted into the program, let alone completed it.

"I never was in a class, I never served as an actual SEAL. It was my dream. ... I don't even know if I would have met the qualifications. I never knew what the qualifications were," Moats said.

Several people contacted The Patriot-News about Moats' claim after the story was posted online.

Don Shipley, a retired SEAL who lives in Chesapeake, Va., said he is one of a few former SEALs who are entrusted by the Navy with maintaining the private database containing the names of all SEALs.

Moats was never a SEAL and never had set foot in Vietnam, Shipley said. He called Moats on Saturday night to confront him about the issue.

"We deal with these guys all the time, especially the clergy. It's amazing how many of the clergy are involved in those lies to build that flock up," Shipley said.

Shipley said Moats' story about being re-assigned to kitchen duty and about being waterboarded were lifted from the Steven Seagal movie "Under Siege." His reference to being hit by SEAL instructors was vintage "GI Jane."

In his mea culpa, Moats said he did serve in the Navy from his enlistment in October 1970 until his honorable discharge in July 1974 but did not serve in Vietnam as he had said.

The closest Moats got to Vietnam was in the Mediterranean Sea aboard the USS Independence, he said.

Moats had a plaque on his office wall that honors SEALs and other Navy special-operations units. Moats said his two sons, who were in the Army and served in Iraq together, made the plaque for him.

Moats' name doesn't appear on the plaque, but when church members got the impression Moats had been a SEAL, Moats didn't deny it. From there, the word spread, and Moats did nothing to correct the record.

"I have allowed people to assume that, and I have not corrected it. Probably at this church for the last five years do people assume that," Moats said.

Moats said his wife and his two sons, Jamie and Jonathan, knew he was never a SEAL. Moats said one of his sons called him after seeing the published story to ask why he would tell the world he was a SEAL when he wasn't.

Moats said he lived his own dream of being a SEAL vicariously through his sons, although he doesn't put the blame on them for the lies he told.

"It's an ego-builder, and it's just simply wrong. In that sense I've been living this lie for the past five years," he said.

Moats said he made a passing reference toward the end of Sunday's church service that he had "gotten caught up in moments and been untruthful." He said he plans to make a fuller explanation to the congregation.

Moats said he hopes his congregation will forgive him and stick with him. He knows people inside and outside his church will be angry over what he has done because he is a minister who is supposed to tell the truth.

"I bring a shame and a reproach upon the name of Christ, I bring a shame and a reproach upon my church, and I bring a shame and a reproach upon my family," Moats said.

Shipleigh said he deals with people like Moats all the time.

"He has mental problems, plain and simple. His wife and friends and flock believe it, and he starts believing it himself," Shipleigh said.

"That is not an excuse. The pastor is very aware of what he did."