



AND THEY'RE OFF – The Sound Rowers Open Water Rowing and Paddling Club opened its 2022 race season the first Saturday of February in La Conner, as it always does. The paddlers went out in two rounds, 9:45 a.m. and 10 a.m., captured here. Over 100 people raced.

– Photo by Ken Stern

Counterterror novel reflects Kyle Hiller's military career

By Bill Reynolds

Kyle Hiller feels fortunate to have grown up in La Conner during the 1970s and '80s when it emerged from an extended slumber to become a popular tourist haven.

Hiller has more mixed memories of where he later spent much of his adult life places such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Azerbaijan and Tunisia, few of which one would consider prime tourism destinations.

Now the 1985 La Conner High grad has drawn upon his vast experiences in counterterrorism and law enforcement to write his first novel, "The Spotted Owl," a suspenseful adventure story that follows veteran special operations officer Derek Riley and anthropologist Susan Parker as they go on the run after being framed for a murder they did not commit.

The book is available in hard cover, paperback and as an e-book at Amazon, Barnes & Noble and various on-line outlets. "I've always thought about writing a book," Hiller told the Weekly News, "but never really had the time. When I first started writing it was more as a mental exercise and a way to decompress and relax."

There has, in fact, been much to decompress as Hiller has fought in two wars and traveled to 50-plus nations on five continents – often at the behest of the government. Hiller spent time on a joint terrorism task force following the 9/11 attacks, was assigned to a government entity that performed mock attacks against numerous military installations and while in law enforcement served with a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team.

"Each new position," said Hiller, "presented me with different opportunities, adventures and

numerous stories."

Other than drafting thousands of police reports, Hiller said his primary formal training as a writer came under the tutelage of retired English teacher Kathy Shoop.

"She was my English teacher throughout high school," Hiller said. "Though I was not a particularly good student, I would say that the lessons she taught did follow me well into my career, whether I was writing official investigative reports or intelligence briefings. Eventually, when I decided to travel down this road, the creative writing skills she once taught me, I began to use in earnest."

Shoop recalls Hiller as having been a positive presence in her classroom.

"He had a really strong sense of who he was," Shoop recalled. "He was a good guy with a great love of country and a wonderful sense of humor."

"When I assigned a project," she added, "and Kyle was part of the group working on the project, I felt very confident about that project."

She wasn't surprised when Hiller opted for careers in the military and law enforcement. "Our country," she stressed, "is safer with Kyle in it."

"Though I can point to many reasons, my primary interest in both the military and law enforcement as careers comes down to two key points," Hiller said. "First is my belief in there being an absolute need for people to protect those unable to stand up for themselves. The second reason I sought this career path was simply a boyhood desire for adventure. I have had more than my fair share. Even people who know me have a hard time wrapping their heads around all the craziness I have been involved in over the years. I could probably do a few books on this alone."

When he began developing his story line and required initial editing for "The Spotted Owl: A Derek Riley Novel," Hiller consulted his brother, Ryan, and sister-in-law, Beth Clothier, both of whom are La Conner faculty members.

"The story was all Kyle," Clothier said, "but there were a few moments in the early drafts where Ryan or I asked questions or suggested things that might add clarity."

"Kyle's always been a good teller of stories," she said, "so for me, reading his book was like any family gathering, listening to him and his brothers theorize about where they might camp and find Bigfoot."

"Reading his book," said Clothier, "was a fun way to get to experience variations on the stories I've heard over the years. It tied some of his actual experiences together with some great fictionalized additions. I love seeing Kyle share this creative side with a wider audience."

Hiller said that as he began composing and words formed on pages, he started to see the story of Derek and Susan unfold.

"Before I knew it," he said, "I had completed my book."

Ryan Hiller said his brother's in-depth knowledge of and familiarity with military special ops, law enforcement, SWAT units and the inner workings of government agencies lends authenticity to the novel.

"The protagonist in the book comes from a similar background as Kyle," said Ryan Hiller, "so it's fun seeing some stories in the book that clearly are inspired by events Kyle was involved in."

"Much of my book," the author confirmed, "is based on things I know or have experienced. I infused that reality with the stuff I have always enjoyed speculating about with my friends and family – blending the truth with fantasy, so to speak."

"I figure it's sort of how a person should buy gifts," he said. "If you purchase something you would enjoy, most likely the person you bought it for will also."

Hiller said his wife, Shannon, was the model for his develop-

Wilt Chamberlain slept here

By Bill Reynolds

Completing the opening of the Country Inn saga.

Built on the former site of the misspelled "Town Getto," the stylish La Conner Country Inn has hosted and provided lodging for some of the country's biggest names.

None bigger, of course, than the late basketball legend turned actor Wilt Chamberlain.

Rick Thompson, an original Country Inn partner, remembers Chamberlain's stay here quite well.

"In the summer of 1980, I think, but could have been 1981," Thompson related, "it was a beautiful June morning when I received a call from our front desk that Wilt Chamberlain had spent the night and needed a ride to the marina. He was headed with friends with a boat to the San Juans to look at property. So, I jumped into my trusty 1974 Ford Maverick and drove over to the Inn."

"As I arrived," said Thompson, "Wilt was standing outside the front door enjoying the sunny morning. At 7'-2", he was quite an imposing figure and not easily missed on the streets of La Conner. As I drove up, a friend drove down Second Street in the opposite direction. He saw Wilt standing there and immediately put on the brakes. He leaned out of the car and in a very loud stage whisper, asked: 'Hey, Rick, is that Bill Russell?' Wilt seemed to take that in stride."

Russell, of course, was the former head coach of the Seattle Supersonics, a resident of Mercer Island and Chamberlain's chief NBA rival during the 1960s.

"I parked and then introduced myself to Wilt," Thompson said. "I told him I would drive him to the marina but that the vehicle involved was a Ford Maverick."

Chamberlain, who had previously appeared in commercials and print ads for the Volkswagen Beetle, was more than understanding, said Thompson.

"He was very gracious and fine with that," Thompson said. "He also complimented us on our doors. The doors in the Inn are eight feet. He mentioned that he did not often stay in rooms where he did not have to duck."

ment of Susan Parker.

"Obviously," he said, "I had my main character figured out, but I knew I also wanted a strong female protagonist as well. So, I based her off my wife, one of the strongest women I know."

The book isn't entirely autobiographical even though Derek is Hiller's actual middle name. While Derek Riley, said Shoop, is comparable to the mysterious man-of-action Jack Reacher, famously portrayed on screen by Tom Cruise, Kyle Hiller is a man of much greater depth.

"Kyle," insisted Clothier, "would probably not like me to publicize that despite his gruff, taciturn persona, he's really a sweet, kind-hearted, warm person who would never want to actually harm or capture a Bigfoot but would be over the moon to actually see one."

"However," quipped Thompson, "how he dealt with the standard double bed in his room, he did not say and I did not ask."

"I pulled up in the Maverick," Thompson said, "and loaded his luggage. He opened the passenger door, turned sideways, sat down with his legs outside the car, then swiveled his way into the car. His legs were literally directly under his chin. But the marina isn't far and he was quite grateful for the ride."

Chamberlain had already made his presence elsewhere in town. He earlier shopped at the former Food Center grocery store across from Town Square, a block west of the Country Inn.

La Conner native David Bretvick, then a Food Center employee, remembers it well.

"I actually wasn't working that night but went to the Food Center to buy some water as I was on my way to play basketball with the Swinomish," Bretvick said. "My friend, Maria Guzman, was working the register. As I walked in, she exclaimed, 'Dave, guess who's in the store!' She said it was Wilt Chamberlain. I said: 'No way!' But then I saw the top of his head above the shelves. He approached me and asked: 'Excuse me, sir, do you know where they keep the Vienna Sausage?' I said: 'Yes, I do,' and escorted him to the proper location. He thanked me and I followed him to the checkout line as he purchased a few other items."

"I probably should've asked him if he might have been interested in a game of pickup basketball at Swinomish," Bretvick, who had played high school basketball, added. "Wouldn't that have been cool?"

Other celebrities would also sign the Country Inn guest register. Actors Jim Davis (Jock Ewing on the TV series "Dallas") and Adam West (who portrayed Batman on television), former Washington Gov. John Spellman, Seattle Mayor Charles Royer and popular Northwest media celebrity Chris Wedes, better known regionally as J.P. Patches, Thompson cited.

None, though, likely made a bigger impression than the sports icon fondly referred to as The Big Dipper.



Moments in time

THE HISTORY CHANNEL

• On Feb. 27, 1860, President Abraham Lincoln poses for the first of several portraits by noted Civil War-era photographer Mathew Brady. A relatively new art form, the photograph (or daguerreotype) showed a beardless Lincoln just moments before he delivered an address at Cooper Union.

• On Feb. 23, 1885, a 19-year-old man named John Lee is sent to the gallows in Exeter, England, for the murder of a rich, older woman. However, the gallows equipment malfunctioned three times and Lee was not dropped. He was then sent back to prison.

• On Feb. 25, 1890, Vlacheslav Skryabin, foreign minister for the Soviet Union who took the revolutionary name Molotov, is born in Russia. Molotov advocated the use of throwing bottles filled with flammable liquid and stuffed with a lit rag, and the famous "Molotov cocktail" was born.

• On Feb. 26, 1903, Alexander Winton, driving his Winton Bullet, sets the first speed record ever achieved at Daytona Beach, Florida. Built in 1902 the "Bullet Number 1" drove a measured mile at over 65 mph.

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