

# FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO THE BUSINESS WORLD

*Former Navy SEAL shares experience at Angus Convention.*

*by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor*

Anyone who has ever worked cattle with family knows this bit of wisdom from Navy SEAL commander Rorke Denver is true: “Calm is contagious.”

So is the opposite.

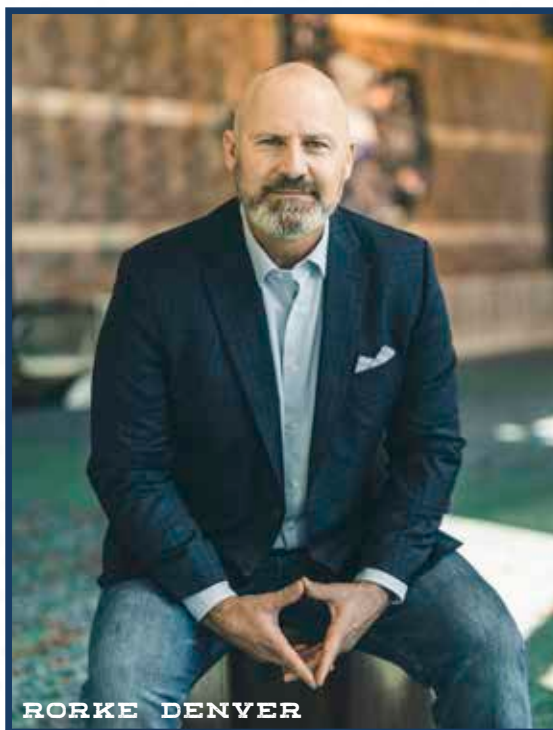
“If you lose it, I guarantee [your team] will lose it,” he said.

Denver, who served as a platoon commander before working in every level of training in the SEAL program, addressed breeders at the 2021 National Angus Convention and Trade Show in Fort Worth, Texas, in November. He shared leadership lessons as applicable in the meeting room and sorting pen as they are on the battlefield.

Being a SEAL is about mental toughness and physical strength, and their training centers around both. During a final exam, after being worn down and tested on San Clemente Island, a would-be commanding officer started to panic. They weren't going to meet their timeline and would fail the last test.

“My buddy was running around like the Tasmanian Devil, screaming his head off, trying to get us caught up on time,” Denver recalls.

That's when the instructor stopped the exercise to make a point.



**RORKE DENVER**

“As officers, the only thing we need you to do is lead. You're going to get to jump out of planes, blow things up, shoot over a mile. That ain't your job,” Denver remembers the instructor saying. “Your job is to set the standard, manage the chaos and lead by example. At a minimum, your team is going to mimic your behavior. What they're probably going to do based on their intensity is act as an amplifier.”

## **INCREMENTAL CHANGE**

Remaining calm when bullets are

flying, in the midst of unknowns or when cattle don't behave just like you expect — the ability to keep calm then is not about your genetic makeup, Denver said.

“What we discipline ourselves to, what we train to, that's what and who we become,” he said.

Discipline is the trait that helps high-performers “give an extra inch” or push just a little bit further, creating progress by consistent actions every day.

“I'm for the big idea. If you have a big idea that's going to change the industry, change your business, change the way you do things ... don't keep that to yourself,” Denver said. “Rarely though, have I seen a big idea be the thing that helps the team constantly improve. It's small measures of improvement.”

During a cross-training stint with the Army, Denver learned that lesson well. An officer commended him for taking a knee when they paused (“When the patrol stops, you don't want to be the tallest thing on the battlefield”), but he failed to notice a nearby tree that would have made better shelter. A few weeks later, same scenario, and Denver quickly ducked behind a tree. The commander berated him missing the granite embankment just beyond that.

Denver still remembers the



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commander’s words, “You did exactly what I told you to do, but you failed to learn the lesson. I said, ‘Constantly improve your position.’”

The lesson stuck. It’s one that applies to life outside a war zone, too, Denver said, whether that’s learning a new skill or investing in a new piece of equipment. There are always opportunities to improve your position.

### FOCUS

Some of that involves gaining a better perspective.

On a mission in Afghanistan, Denver’s team was assessing a mountainside to determine how insurgents were getting through to a supply road. As he and his team monitored the movement across the valley, one private kept locating targets while Denver saw nothing.

When they got back, Denver remembers turning to his report

and noting, “It’s a little annoying that we’re looking through the same power binoculars, and you’re seeing everything on this hillside, and I’m not seeing anything. It bothers me.”

Denver recalls the private asking the simple, but significant question, “Are you looking at the whole hillside?”

Denver confirmed he was.

“He said, ‘Boss, I’ll tell you this. If you look at less, you’ll see more,’” Denver retells.


Ever since, he’s seen that lesson in life, too.

“Whether that’s a corporation, a team or my family, I always had more on my plate than I’m going to get done at the end of the day. I’m always going to have more to do than I’ll ever get done,” Denver says. “What I’ve found is when I try to look at all of it, I get nothing.”

Centering on individual tasks or challenges allows him to tackle them one at a time.

### GRATITUDE

Strategy and focus were Denver’s training, but it was the travels to hotspots around world that revealed to him the privilege it was to call himself an American.

“I thank all of you for giving us something to fight for. I think I’ve been to basically every ugly part of the world that you can find and what we enjoy here, it is like no other place on planet Earth. I’m convinced of that,” he said. “I thank you for giving us something to get up in the morning to fight for.” 

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