



PKSOI Book Review

Review of LONE SURVIVOR - The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of Seal Team 10

by Marcus Luttrell with Patrick Robinson

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The careful reader can learn many lessons from LONE SURVIVOR about how to train warriors for combat and how to plan and conduct irregular warfare missions such as counter terrorism and stability operations

In the first five chapters, Marcus Luttrell recounts the tough training he went through to earn the title of NAVY SEAL. After rereading those first five chapters, I was not able to find any reference to training on the Geneva Convention or the law of armed conflict. I contrast this to my own experience over twenty years ago in Ranger School, where you could fail a patrol for “terminating with prejudice” an inconvenient prisoner. (In the scenario, our patrol leader was given a dossier on a known insurgent leader, *to include a clear, distinct photo*, so we had a positive identification of the target. Once we made the capture and called it into higher headquarters, we then received the illegal order.) Luttrell and Robinson parrot Breaker Moran’s “Rule 303” with this riff:

Faced with the murderous cutthroats of the Taliban, we are not fighting under the rules of Geneva IV Article 4. We are fighting under the rules of Article 223.556mm [sic] -that’s the caliber and bullet gauge [and sic] of our M4 rifle. And if those numbers don’t look good, try Article .762mm [and sic again], that’s what the stolen Russian Kalashnikovs fire at us, usually in deadly, heavy volleys.¹

Let us be clear that this book is not an official history of SEAL operations in Afghanistan. It is however, what Luttrell remembers, and Luttrell remembers going after specific targets without any chance of achieving a positive identification before he squeezed the trigger: "We had terrific intel on him, from both satellites and the FBI. We did not, however, have photographs."ⁱⁱ Specific to REDWING, Luttrell notes:

. . . Operation Redwing, which involved the capture or killing of this highly dangerous character. But he was always illusive. . . And the photos that were available were just head and shoulders, not great quality and very grainy. Still, we knew approximately what the son of a bitch looked like. "ⁱⁱⁱ . . . And so the days passed by, until on Monday morning, June 27, 2005, they located Sharmack again.

This time it looked really good. . . . We still didn't have a decent picture of Sharmack, just the same old head and shoulders, grainy, indistinct. But we had located other killers up here with a lot less, and there was no doubt this time. "Redwing is a go!"^{iv}

The timeline of REDWING is sketchy in Luttrell's narrative. It appears that SEAL Team 10 inserted four members four miles from their objective under cover of darkness the night of 27 June. The actual insertion, far enough from the objective so as not to alert the target with the sound of the helicopters, followed three false insertions. Shortly after insertion, they established radio contact with an AC130 gunship that was providing fire support for insertions that night. Luttrell notes that this initial contact with the gunship was the only radio contact they would have with friendly forces for the duration of the mission.

Around noon on June 28, three local Afghan goat herds and approximately 100 goats run into the SEALs in their position overlooking the village where the SEALs hoped to find Sharmak. ^v

The question was, What did we do now? They were obviously goatherds, farmers from the high country. Or, as it states in the pages of the Geneva Convention, unarmed civilians. The strictly correct military

decision would still be to kill them without further discussion, because we could not know their intentions. . . . The hard fact was, if these three Afghan scarecrows ran off to find Sharmak and his men, we were going to be in serious trouble, trapped out here on this mountain ridge. The military decision was clear: these guys could not leave here alive. . . . These guys did not like us. They showed no aggression, but neither did they offer or want the hand of friendship. ^{vi}

The SEALs debate their options. They can kill the three goatherds and bury their bodies, but they can't bury the one hundred goats, and the goats will attract Afghan villagers to the SEALs location. The murders will then be exploited by the Taliban in the media, and "Very shortly after that, we'll be charged with murder. The murder of innocent unarmed Afghan farmers." ^{vii/sup>}

They then attempt to reach higher headquarters for guidance, but could not raise anyone on their radio. The discussion continues, with one SEAL stating:

"We're not murderers. No matter what we do. We're on active duty behind enemy lines, sent here by our senior commanders. We have a right to do anything we can to save our own lives. The military decision is obvious. To turn them loose would be wrong." ^{viii}

The team leader turned to Luttrell and said "Marcus, I'll go with you. Call it." Luttrell makes the right call, saying "We gotta let 'em go." The SEAL team leader votes with Luttrell, one SEAL voted to kill the three and one SEAL abstained. The dissenting SEAL complains "We're not murderers. And we would not have been murders, whatever we'd done." His team leader replies "I know. . . I know, buddy. But we just took a vote." ^{ix}

Luttrell made the right call, a call he attributes to "My Christian soul." ^x He later regrets his vote, calling it the stupidest decision he ever made in his life.

The irony of LONE SURVIOR is that Luttrell is rescued by Pashtun villagers that look exactly like the Taliban warriors that were pursuing him. These villagers risked life and limb to refuse Taliban requests that they release

Luttrell to them and risked one of their own, sending a volunteer overland to another village to notify coalition forces so they could recover him. There is no indication from the book that Luttrell actually knew that the three goatherds he voted to release contacted local the Taliban whom he fought later that day. It is totally plausible that the Taliban force that the SEALs met had been alerted by the sound of the MH47 the night before as it inserted the SEALs. It is also totally plausible that local Pashtun villages protected Luttrell against the Taliban because they knew that he and had spared the lives of the three goatherds.

Luttrell and his fellow SEALs, contrary to his feelings when he wrote LONE SURVIVOR, made the right military decision when they chose not to murder the three goatherds. As stated in FM3-24, "Counterinsurgents that use excessive force to limit short-term risk alienate the local populace. They deprive themselves of the support or tolerance of the people."Xi Though Luttrell bemoans his failure to vote to murder the three goatherds, he does not consider the failure of the SEALs to use their mobile phone to abort the mission and call for extraction prior to releasing the presumably guilty trio. They did not use their mobile phone until they had been in heavy contact and were all wounded. (Luttrell says they delayed using the phone because it would betray their location, but their location was compromised when the goatherds discovered them. It is not likely Taliban had the capability of triangulating an encrypted satellite phone anyway.) Had the MH47 Chinook, with Apache escort, flown to the SEALs location while they held the goatherds captive, the SEALs could have released the goatherds, the Chinook could have rescued the SEALs, and nineteen US servicemen and would have survived an ill-conceived mission.

A key lesson the careful reader can take from LONE SURVIVOR is that all warriors need to inculcate the law of armed conflict, to include the Geneva Conventions our government has ratified, and that they must make contingency plans to deal with their own goatherds when preparing for tactical operations. Pursuant to this lesson, the careful reader can contemplate the ethics and efficacy of killing targets in civilian clothing based on "grainy, indistinct" photographs.

LONE SURVIOR can also teach the critical reader is what not to do when planning and conducting counter insurgency and stability operations. This lesson is reinforced with recommendations such as one made recently by the Center for a New American Security that the U.S. led coalition in Afghanistan should “Adopt a truly population-centric counterinsurgency strategy that emphasizes protecting the population rather than controlling physical terrain or killing the Taliban and al Qaeda.”^{xii} In the race to notch our pistols during the course of a counterinsurgency, we inevitably kill quite a few genuine civilian non-combatants, spurring insurgent recruitment and creating instability rather than the safe and secure environment that is our end state.

i Luttrell and Robinson, LONE SURVIVOR – THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF OPERATION REDWING AND THE LOST HEROES OF SEAL TEAM 10, page 170

ii Page 165.

iii Page 179.

iv Page 184.

v Page 201.

vi Page 202.

vii Page 203.

viii Page 205.

ix Page 206, 207

x Page 206.

xi FM3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY, 15 DEC 06, page 7-5.

xii Andrew Exum, Nathaniel Fick, Ahmed Humayun, David Kilcullen, Triage: The Next Twelve Months in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Center for a New American Security, June, 2009, page 4.

Authors Biography

COL Bryan Groves became Chief, Civil-Military Integration at PKSOI in July, 2008. Bryan worked with United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and various UN agencies during two tours in Kosovo as a member of the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) Civil Affairs Staff and later as commander, 443rd Civil Affairs Battalion. He served in Iraq with the 304th Civil Affairs Brigade in support of the 1st Marine Division and the 82nd Airborne Division, where he worked

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