

# Life or Death: The Marcus Luttrell Story of “The Lone Survivor”<sup>1</sup>

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*Marcus Luttrell was raised in North Texas. His father, a patriotic Viet Nam veteran, taught him to love his country and work hard for what he believed. His father also told his two sons at an early age about a group of “elite warriors” and their courage, patriotism, strength and determination—their refusal to accept defeat. Marcus even asked a local retired Green Beret to train him when he was 14 years old, to prepare him for the day he would become a SEAL. While the other high school boys were involved with after-school activities and sports, Marcus was lifting weights, running, learning martial arts, and training under his Green Beret taskmaster. He molded Marcus into a determined man who could push through bodily pain to achieve his objective. After his brother became a Navy SEAL, there was never a doubt in Marcus’ mind that he would follow in his brother’s footsteps.*

*At 23 Marcus enlisted and headed off to U.S. Navy boot camp, immediately followed by BUD/S training (Basic Underwater Demolition/ SEALs). In the grueling SEAL training, almost 65 per cent of the original class dropped out. The motto “Never, never, ever quit” applied to the extraordinary remaining men, who refused to give in to pain and exhaustion. They had the concept of teamwork drilled into their heads until it became their nature to support their teammates through the worst hardships ever developed in human training.*

## **Afghanistan Missions**

After graduating from BUD/S and serving in Iraq for several tours, Marcus Luttrell was assigned to SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team ONE. Marcus Luttrell lived, trained, and fought alongside his SEAL teammates. In the SEALs, the lines between officer and enlisted are more informal as they develop close personal bonds during the intensity of training and combat. Marcus Luttrell, additionally, had been trained to be the team corpsman to render medical aid.

In March, 2005, he deployed with his unit to the U.S. Base in Bagram, Afghanistan. Similar to his Iraq missions, their job was to drop into areas behind enemy lines (although the lines were not clear) and gather intelligence on high-value Taliban. Their goal was to capture these high-value men and turn them over to the interrogators to get valuable information. In some cases, their mission was to kill specific enemy leaders. When going into dangerous regions, they moved by night with the most modern night-vision equipment available. During the day, they worked to remain undetected. As the SEALs like to say, they “own the night.” Since their unit numbers were small, they relied on camouflage, stealth, and quiet as their advantages over the larger Taliban forces. They would often fly into the

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<sup>1</sup> *Lone Survivor*, Marcus Luttrell, Little, Brown and Co., 2007.

Pashtun region of Afghanistan, a region near the Pakistani border that is primarily tribal and does not generally recognize any central government. The strong Muslim culture, shaped by centuries of fighting numerous conquerors, made this area a perfect haven for the Taliban to regroup, recruit, and launch attacks on the Afghan government and U.S. forces.

## Operation Redwing

After detailed planning, Operation Redwing was approved on June 28, 2005. Petty Officer Marcus Luttrell and his three SEAL teammates, LT Michael Murphy, PO Matthew Axelson, and PO Danny Dietz boarded a CH-47 to be inserted in the Hindu Kush Mountains in the Pashtun region to search for a Taliban leader named Ben Sharmak. It was believed that capturing him would provide information about other Taliban strongholds and bomb-makers; killing him might reduce the armed threat in the region.

During the preparation phase, LT Murphy and Marcus Luttrell were worried about the aerial photos of the mission area. The terrain they would be dropped into did not seem well-suited for camouflage and concealment. They also noted that their selected observation point (the side of a steep mountain) was several miles from the only flat area that could serve as a helo drop site.

In the darkest part of the moonless night, after several deceptive maneuvers (called “touch and goes” to confuse the enemy who may be watching), they were inserted into the drop zone. After a period of quiet, motionless listening, they believed they were alone on the high, flat field. They gathered their equipment and made their way up the mountain to their pre-selected area where they could observe the small town below. The hike in full battle gear was harder and took longer than they had anticipated—about seven hours. When they reached their observation area, it was almost dawn. As they settled into concealed positions, they realized that they could not see the town. So they left their concealed positions and found a spot with good observation potential, but less concealment. From their new position, they could see, but it would be hard to launch an offense or maintain a defense because the high ground above gave them little chance for escape. However, their mission was to observe the town and find Taliban Ben Sharmak, and this position would support that.

## Life or Death

After a short time of waiting and watching, an unusual thing happened. Marcus looked up and saw an Afghan man approaching. Marcus stood and pointed his rifle; the man stopped. Even stranger, about a hundred goats soon surrounded the four SEALs and the goatherd they had just confronted. Two more Afghans joined them—a boy of 14 and another man.

The SEALs asked the men if they were Taliban, and they immediately said, “No Taliban. No Taliban.” Marcus noted that the men glared and scowled at him with obvious dislike.

The SEALs spent the next hour or so discussing among themselves what to do with the three Afghan goatherds. First, they discussed the Geneva Convention, which protects unarmed civilians. They also seemed to agree that the strictly tactical military decision would be to kill them. There was no way to determine if the men were associated with the Taliban, but the glares and scowls indicated that they were not friendly to the American cause. The worst-case scenario for the SEALs’ mission would be for them to be detected. They did not have rope or duct tape to bind the men, and they reasoned that even if they did, someone would come looking for them—and the goatherds’ location would be obvious from the hundred goats that would remain in their vicinity. They quickly rejected the option of binding them.

PO Axelson thought they should kill the men, telling his boss LT Murphy, “Just give me the word.” LT Murphy reasoned that if they killed the men, someone would find the bodies (because of the goats), and the Taliban would play this to the Arab media. Once the press had the story, the SEALs would be tried for murder back in the United States. Initially, Marcus Luttrell thought from the military view it made no sense to let the goatherds go and allow the team to be discovered. Knowing that they were outnumbered by Sharmak’s army 140 to 4, they would be killed if their location was compromised.

The team agreed to get some guidance from headquarters. Things went from bad to worse as their radio inexplicably would not connect with HQ.

At this point, LT Murphy outlined their three options:

1. Kill the goatherds quietly with knives and throw them off the cliff.
2. Kill them right where they were and cover up the bodies.
3. Turn them loose and “get the hell out of here.”

LT Murphy pointed out that with option 1 or 2 they would all have to remain silent forever so they would not be tried for murder in the United States.

PO Axelson insisted, “We’re not murderers. No matter what we do. We’re on active duty behind the enemy lines, sent here by our superior commanders. We have the right to do everything we can to save our own lives. The military decision is obvious. To turn them loose would be wrong.”

At this point, LT Murphy took a vote. Axelson quickly voted to kill them. LT Murphy favored letting them go. Danny Dietz basically abstained from the vote by just saying, “I don’t [care] what we decide, just tell me what to do.”

Then they asked Marcus Luttrell what he thought. He fully understood his comrades’ arguments, but as he said later, “My Christian soul was whispering something in the back of my mind. It would be wrong to execute these unarmed men in cold blood. And the idea of doing that and then covering our tracks and slinking away like criminals, denying everything, would make it worse.”

Finally, Marcus Luttrell cast the tie-breaking vote by saying, “We gotta let them go.” They motioned to the three men to leave. Although the SEALs and their captives did not share a common language, the Afghan men knew what they had been discussing—their fate—life or death.

## After the Decision

After watching the goatherds walk out of site, Marcus immediately said to himself, “We must be crazy. Let’s get out of here!”

The SEALs quickly re-positioned to a different site. About 10 minutes after they had settled in, *their worse fear came true*. They looked up to the ridge and saw 80 to 100 well-armed Taliban fighters coming down the ridge toward them. This was serious, and they now knew they would be fighting for their lives, just as they recently discussed. The problem was that their firing position was not good, neither defensively or offensively. To get away from the overwhelming enemy, they would have to go down the mountain, and in some cases, off the cliffs.

The four men fought a horrific gun battle that lasted most of the day. They fought like American warriors, like Navy SEALs, like teammates, and like close friends. As the Taliban sprayed a high volume of inaccurate AK47 fire and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), the SEALs took sharp aim, conserved ammo, and used teamwork. As they continued to fight and retreat down the mountain, they fell several hundred feet down steep cliffs. The volume of Taliban firepower was relentless, wounding the SEAL team.

LT Murphy was shot in the stomach and the back, but continued to fight as he bled to death. PO Axelson continued to fight with several body wounds. After killing about 40 to 50 of the enemy and with three of the SEALs mortally wounded, they tried to make a last stand. In an extraordinary act of heroism, LT Murphy took out his cell phone to call HQ. To get reception, he had to stand up on a bluff in the open. In his call, he explained the desperate situation. His final words on the phone were, “Roger that, Sir. Thank you.”—professional up to the end. Shortly after, he was fatally shot in the chest.

As Marcus watched his best friend die, there was little he could do to help, even though he was the corpsman of the team. He was shot in the leg, bleeding from both entry and exit wounds. He had broken some vertebrae in his back during one of the falls and could not stand up on both feet. Then he watched as his other two best friends and teammates, Axelson and Dietz, were killed by relentless enemy fire. He was the lone survivor of the SEAL team. To get away from the AK-47s and RPGs, he jumped down steep cliffs, falling hundreds of feet at a time.

Marcus Luttrell didn’t know until later, but the Special Forces put together a quick response to LT Murphy’s cell phone call for help. Seven SEALs and seven Rangers, along with commanding officer LCDR Kristensen, immediately volunteered to save their fellow Americans and boarded an MH-47. As they were landing in the drop zone near the firefight, an enemy RPG was fired into the back of the helo, causing an explosion that killed everyone aboard.

## Pashtun Hospitality

Bleeding, thirsty, and numb, Marcus Luttrell crawled on his hands and knees for hours, looking for water. Some local Pashtun tribesmen, apparently not Taliban, found him. In an unusual tribal custom, the town elders not only took him into their houses to heal his wounds and feed him, but they also invoked a tribal custom (unique to that area) called "lokhay." Lokhay literally means "put on a pot," and this goes far beyond normal hospitality. Since the Pashtun region is remote and tribal, recognizing no central government, the people have maintained this extraordinary "all or nothing" custom when encountering strangers for hundreds of years. If they vote to let you go, you are on your own. But if they extend this ultimate hospitality of lokhay, you have essentially become part of their "family" and will be protected even if they have to fight to *their* deaths. The village that was sheltering Marcus was surrounded by Taliban for days during his recovery. His hosts made good on their promise to protect him, as they moved him from house to house.

After days of recovery with food and medicine, Marcus was able to put together a makeshift battery arrangement for his distress radio. He sent a one-way message asking for rescue. After dodging the Taliban for a few more days, he was rescued by Army Rangers.

## Aftermath

After returning to the United States and receiving medical attention, he was awarded the Navy Cross by the president in the Oval Office. His three teammates also received the Navy's highest honors posthumously, including the Congressional Medal of Honor for LT Murphy.

He then fulfilled his final promise to his three best friends. He traveled to San Diego, Long Island, and Las Vegas to tell the families of his fallen teammates that they all died heroically, serving the country they loved.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Did the Navy SEALs make the right decision to let the Afghan goat herders go free? Why or why not?
  - a. Do you agree with PO Axelson's statement? "We're not murderers. No matter what we do. We're on active duty behind the enemy lines, sent here by our superior commanders. We have the right to do everything we can to save our own lives. The military decision is obvious. To turn them loose would be wrong."
  - b. Does this allow military fighters to do anything to defend themselves?
  - c. Should there be a consequence short of trial for murder for this kind of situation?
2. Should they have taken a vote, or should the lieutenant have made the decision?
3. Is there any way to avoid these kinds of situations?