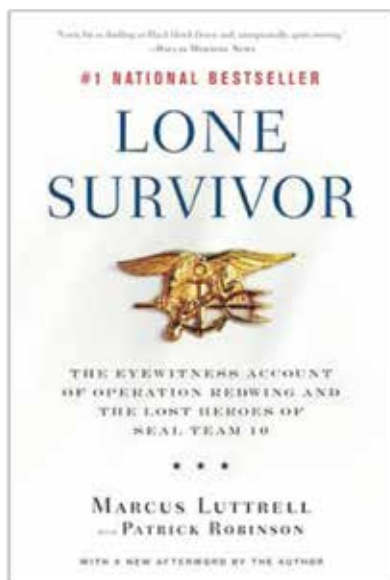


Book Review



Marcus Luttrell & Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company), 2008, 464 pages

By **Joshua Foo**

INTRODUCTION

Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10 by Marcus Luttrell tells the harrowing story of a soldier and his elite team out on a mission in Afghanistan. In this gripping non-fiction, four United States (US) Navy SEALs (Sea Air & Land) embarked on a reconnaissance mission in the mountainous terrain of the Afghan-Pakistan border. They had only one objective—to gather essential information on an Al Qaeda member believed to be close to Osama Bin Laden in a Taliban-controlled zone. Sadly, only one SEAL survived.

Born and raised in Texas, Marcus Luttrell was drilled into facing the harsh realities of life with his twin brother since a tender age. His father always dreamt of them being Navy SEALs. Prior to his enlistment into the Navy, he trained under a retired Green Beret sergeant, Billy Shelton. Following

months of determined training and countless tests, he survived the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training and finally earned the coveted SEAL trident. After recovering from injuries and successfully graduating from BUD/S Class of 228, Luttrell continued his training as a Special Operations Combat Medic. He was then deployed to Afghanistan in 2005, when the tragedy happened. Luttrell was discharged from the Navy, having served with the elite SEALs, survived one of the deadliest battles in Afghanistan and earned a Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism in combat.¹

TARGETED AUDIENCE

Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10 is targeted at those seeking a true story that showcases American heroism, Afghan humanity and threat-to-terrorise all in one. This thrilling book which is insightful and revealing, promises to be an exciting read.

THE BUILD UP

Luttrell described his experiences from the rigours of SEAL training, where he and his fellow SEALs discovered what it took to join the most elite of America's famed special forces, to a fight in the desolate hills of Afghanistan for which they could never have been prepared. His first-person account of his comrades' heroism shows an experience that is both terrifying and uplifting at the same time. In this uncompromising tale of unflinching courage and noble sacrifice, honour and unabashed patriotism, Marcus Luttrell delivers a powerful story of modern war.

The story unfolds as his elite unit infiltrates into enemy territory. The mission is foreseen to be tough due to the mountainous terrain, lack of intelligence and potentially overwhelming numbers of Taliban fighters. With their advanced training, they were sent to one of the most problematic regions of Afghanistan to stop the Taliban from inflicting further terror attacks.

SEAL fire team leader Marcus Luttrell led Operation Red Wings, the extraordinary exchange of fire that led to the largest loss of life in the US Navy SEAL history. As the only one still alive to tell the story, he constantly commends his team mates who fought valiantly beside him throughout the battle. Over the next four days, as the bulk of the story unfolds, he describes how a Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG)

blasted him into an area where the enemy forces could not locate him. Terribly injured, he was presumed to be dead. He endured his grave injuries and thirst and crawled for miles through the mountains.²

The SEALs fought long and hard, with Luttrell illustrating their determination and grit, but the four soldiers on the ground were fighting nearly 100 Taliban fighters with no backup. Losing their equipment and being massively outnumbered, three of the four-man team lost their lives. As a last-ditch effort for survival, one used a satellite phone that betrayed their location. A rescue team quickly responded but was shot down, causing even more lives to be lost.³

As this true and deeply saddening story unfolds, readers will find themselves more and more deeply immersed and grimacing for the loss of the many elite soldiers who died.

THE SURVIVAL

Luttrell credits his survival to sympathetic villagers who risked their lives to take him in and keep him safe from Taliban insurgents. With Luttrell injured and alone in enemy territory struggling for survival, Afghan villagers found him and decided to protect him at all costs. Together, they plotted to evade the Taliban and to make known to the US military his whereabouts. Meanwhile, Luttrell's family back in Texas already knew

he was missing in action, with friends and comrades all praying for his survival.⁴ He had close encounters where Taliban used the knowledge of the local terrain to their advantage to hunt him down. However, the villagers refused to accede to the Taliban's requests and continued to protect him. When the much awaited rescue finally came, he was given the best medical attention and commended by many of his senior commanders.

Luttrell was the only one of four men to survive after a running battle with dozens of Taliban rebels. Eight members of the Navy SEALs and eight Army Special Operations Aviators who came by helicopter to rescue the original team were shot down, and all were killed. The book, revolving around his survival, both in training and during the battle, was also filled with unabashed patriotism and blamed the 'liberal media' for its role in sustaining military Rules of Engagement (ROE) that prevent soldiers from killing unarmed civilians, who may also be scouts or informers for hostiles.⁵

OPERATION RED WINGS

On the night of 27th June 2005, two MH-47 Special Operations Aircraft of the Army Special Operations Command's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) approached Sawtalo Sar, Afghanistan. Luttrell describes the clear night as one of the helicopters performed decoy landings to confuse the enemy on the ground,

while the other inserted Luttrell and his team. The four-man SEAL team landed via fastrope between Sawtalo Sar and Gatigal Sar. The team included team leader Navy Lieutenant Michael P. Murphy of SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team 1; Petty Officer Second Class Danny P. Dietz from SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team 2; Petty Officer Second Class Matthew G. Axelson; and Luttrell himself. After moving to a pre-planned position where they could perform their surveillance, the team was discovered by local goat herds. After determining that they were civilians and thus not combatants, Lieutenant Murphy had them released, according to the ROE which Luttrell persistently criticises.

Operation Red Wings was a joint military operation during the War in Afghanistan in the Pech District of Afghanistan's Kunar Province, on the slopes of Sawtalo Sar. Operation Red Wings intended to disrupt local anti-Coalition Militia activity, thus contributing to regional stability and helping to facilitate the Afghan Parliament elections which were scheduled for September 2005.⁶ At the time, anti-Coalition Militia activity in the region was carried out most notably by a small group led by Ahmad Shah, a local man from Nangarhar Province. His small group were among the primary targets of the operation.

Upon Luttrell and his team realising that letting the goat

herds go would compromise their positions, they retreated to a fallback position. Within the next hour, Shah and his men ambushed the SEAL team in the dark, over the slopes of Sawtalo Sar. They were heavily armed with RPK light machine guns, AK-47s, RPG-7 RPG, and 82mm mortars.⁷ The SEAL team was forced into the north-eastern gulch of the slopes due to the intense amount of fire they were bombarded with. Unable to contact their operations headquarters, the SEALs were unable to request for back up until a satellite phone was used. Three of the four team members were killed, and the only survivor, Marcus Luttrell, was left seriously injured with a number of fractures. He was subsequently rescued by local Pashtuns who ultimately saved his life, for in his current condition and without assistance, he would surely have been killed or captured by the Taliban.

DIFFERENT LEVELS

Lone Survivor's first layer is the surface plot: a Navy SEAL, after completing his torturous training, is sent to Afghanistan and then further deployed on a special operation to comb the mountains for an extremely dangerous Taliban leader. The closely-knit team of four were ambushed early in the mission, with three of them brutally killed in front of the author's eyes.⁸ This was painful, gripping and kept readers on the edge of their seats.

On the next level, Luttrell believes that the only reasons why he survived the ordeal were the superiority of the SEALs in terms of their physical skills, determination and his belief in God.

Exploring further, a deeper understanding in this book is the mention of politics. According to Luttrell, his team died in vain as a result of the liberal media and decision-makers in the government imposing restrictions and limitations with the ROE. This layer is filled with hatred and denunciation, understandably, in the defence of his fallen comrades. A good example is when they chose to set the harmless-looking goat herders free when they were conducting their reconnaissance early in the mission. Multiple references were made in the later parts of the book on this decision as it appeared that that the goat herders revealed their whereabouts and this led to their deaths. The decision to release the goat herders was in accordance to the ROE. Luttrell put it bluntly, "I can say from first hand experience that those Rules of Engagement cost the lives of three of the finest US Navy SEALs who have ever lived."⁹ An unintended irony was achieved when a Pashtun villager from a neutral tribe in the mountains of Afghanistan, saved his life.¹⁰ Luttrell would have shot the villagers (who protected him and saved his life) had he had the strength to. Not shooting civilians (the goat herders) may have caused

his team to land in an ambush, but not doing so also kept him alive.

Finally, there is the deepest and darkest layer, the last level of melancholy that looms over *Lone Survivor*. At times, the book reads as a psychological thriller, one that would end with, "I woke up drenched in cold sweat, palms clammy and heart racing. It was just a terrible nightmare."¹¹ Luttrell appears to be haunted by nightmares after he witnesses the horrific battlefield deaths of his three fellow SEALs, with him saying, "Again in my mind I heard that terrible, terrible scream, the same one that awakens me, bullying its way into my solitary dreams night after night, the confirmation of guilt."¹² Nobody but he knows exactly what happened during the Operation. No recordings and photos were taken. The story could have been fictitious and dramatized to a certain extent. Operation Red Wing's disaster began with the decision to let the goat herders go, due to the practice of ROE. The death of his fellow SEALs was blamed on the liberals, politicians and the media. This book is a story about Marcus Luttrell, torn by the deaths of his best friends and fellow SEALs, facing the inability to accept the loss. Indirectly, he blames liberal media, politicians, Al Qaeda and Islam.

That said, Luttrell and his comrades were Navy SEALs and were very proud of being one. They

were extraordinary soldiers; their training was more demanding, and they were often sent to the toughest areas of the world to fight in the name of global peace. The book was both gripping and extremely dark for readers. *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* gives us an insight into what the best soldiers put themselves up against. It also tells us exactly how dark some parts of the world still are. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. M. Luttrell, P. Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007),
2. *Ibid.*, 101.
3. *Ibid.*, 97.
4. *Ibid.*, 187.
5. *Ibid.*, 127.
6. E. Darack, *Victory Point: Operations Red Wings and Whalers – The Marine Corps' Battle for Freedom in Afghanistan* (New York, Penguin Group, 2010).
7. M. Luttrell, P. Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 199.
8. *Ibid.*, 210.
9. *Ibid.*, 255.
10. *Ibid.*, 236.
11. *Ibid.*, 268.
12. *Ibid.*, 269.