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Marcus Luttrell, with Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10*. New York: Little, Brown, 2007. Pp. 390. ISBN 978-0-316-06760-7.

Review by Grant W. Jones, Kansas State University (grantj@ksu.edu)

The purpose of Operation Redwing was to insert a four-man Navy SEAL sniper team into a remote region of the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. The still undisclosed target of Redwing was a high-level al-Qaeda/Taliban figure. Upon arriving in the target area, the team encountered the terrain's lack of cover and was quickly discovered by sympathizers of the local Jihad guerrilla band. The resulting firefight between the four SEALs and over a hundred mujahedeen left Markus Luttrell as the sole survivor of the sniper team. His comrades, Lieutenant Michael Murphy, Petty Officer Matthew Axelson, and Petty Officer Danny Dietz were killed by the mujahedeen. While attempting to locate and rescue the SEAL team, a U.S. Army helicopter was shot down with a loss of eight soldiers and eight SEALs. This disaster makes 28 June 2005 the worst single day in the history of American Special Forces.

Lone Survivor is Luttrell's firsthand account of what happened that bloody day. It is also an absorbing tale of how and why Luttrell came to be on that mountain, how he survived, and the men he proudly served with. This fast-paced narrative should appeal to those interested in Special Operations, the War on Terror in Afghanistan, or a cracking good yarn.

As befits an autobiographical work, *Lone Survivor* does not have a thesis *per se*. However, the narrative is knitted together by three interrelated themes, which may be summed up with reference to their emotional essence. First, there is Luttrell's sincerity or seriousness of purpose. The man is 100% committed to his country, comrades, and mission. This accounts for the complete absence of cynicism in his story. Second, there is Luttrell's deep patriotism and his belief in the justice of America's ongoing campaigns against Islamic Jihad. Last, there is Luttrell's anger directed at the mainstream media and "liberals." He blames "liberal" policies, attitudes, and reporting for contributing to the deaths of his comrades. The emotional intensity of his book helps the reader understand what motivates brave young men to endure the extreme rigors of SEAL training and combat with a merciless enemy.

A large section of the book is devoted to describing in detail the severity of the legendary seven-month SEAL training course at the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado, California. Luttrell concentrates on the first seven-week phase of training, which emphasizes physical conditioning and endurance, teamwork, and mental toughness. "Teamwork. They slam that word at you every other minute. *Teamwork. Teamwork. Teamwork.*" (81). This training culminates in what is accurately called Hell Week. The U.S. Navy's official website notes that during Hell Week a trainee can expect no more than four hours of sleep.¹ The

¹ See *Navy SEALs* <www.miwsr.com/rd/0813.htm>.

purpose of Hell Week is to push the prospective SEALs to the very limits of physical and mental endurance. “Some of the guys really were hallucinating now I cannot explain how tired we were” (144). Of 164 men in Luttrell’s class, only thirty-three made it through Hell Week. This brutal training accounts for Luttrell’s survival, the courage and skill of his comrades, and their ability to hold off hundreds of the enemy:

Those instructors have watched men drop, watched them fail, watched them quit, and watched them quietly, with ice-cold, expressionless faces. That’s not heartless; it’s because they were only interested in the others, the ones who did not crack or quit. The ones who would rather die than quit. The ones with no quit in them (83).

Such was, among others, Medal of Honor recipient Lt. Michael Murphy. The four SEALs attempted to retreat to better, more level terrain by literally jumping and falling down a series of steep escarpments. All had been either wounded or injured in the falls; the situation could not have been more desperate. “Fuck surrender,” Lt. Murphy exclaimed, “Remember, bro, we’re never out of it” (235). Throughout the battle, he had been trying to acquire communication with the forward American base at Asadabad, Afghanistan. Since the mountainous landscape rendered his efforts unsuccessful, Murphy, realizing that without immediate relief his men were dead, moved onto open ground, where he was able to gain contact with Asadabad:

I could hear him talking. “My men are taking heavy fire ... we’re getting picked apart. My guys are dying out here ... we need help.” And right then Mikey took a bullet straight in the back. I saw the blood spurt from his chest. He slumped forward, dropping his phone and his rifle. But then he braced himself, grabbed them both, sat upright again, and once more put the phone to his ear. I heard him speak again. “Roger that, sir. Thank you.” Then he stood up and staggered out to our bad position, the one guarding our left, and Mikey just started fighting again, firing at the enemy (237).

On the other end of that call for help was SEAL Team 10 leader Lieutenant Commander Erik Kristensen. Along with him, seven other SEALs volunteered without hesitation for an extremely dangerous daylight insertion into the hostile mountains of Afghanistan. The U.S. Army MH-47 Special Operations Aircraft (SOA, a helicopter) had a crew of eight men from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). The Chinook was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and all sixteen aboard were lost. As this tragedy was transpiring, Luttrell was literally blown off the face of the mountain by an RPG. His comrades were dead and he was without provisions, badly injured, and lost in hostile territory.

Besides his SEAL training, the values Luttrell learned growing up on an east Texas ranch sustained him during his ordeal. During the oil boom years of the 1980s, his parents did well in the breeding and selling of horses. When the boom ended, the Luttrell brothers learned more about perseverance and hard work as the family got back on its feet. Marcus and his brother Morgan (also a Navy SEAL) were out mending fences by the age of nine. These young men took in self-reliance, determination, and independence of mind with their mother’s milk: “Nothing just happens. You always have to strive” (33). From their father David they learned the core values of the U.S. Navy: honor, courage, and commitment. While still in high school, Luttrell sought out Billy Shelton, an ex-Green Beret, to

begin his training for the Special Forces. He was not the only young man who trained with Shelton. Reading the section on Luttrell's childhood, one feels nostalgic for a mostly by-gone American ethos. This is the first, but not last, instance of a "two Americas" theme running throughout the book.

Although he is neither a "political person" nor a war-lover, Luttrell's patriotism led him to join the SEALs to fight for his country and Texas (39), a professional warrior doing the job he was trained for. Luttrell argues that the men in the armed forces are America's best, and he hopes that someday the nation's government will learn to trust them (38).

In this vein, one is reminded of another combat veteran's memoirs. E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed* is usually remembered for its vivid descriptions of the horrendous battles of Peleliu and Okinawa, including stories of Marines using K-bars to extract gold-filled teeth from dead (and not yet dead) Japanese soldiers. Nevertheless, in his concluding remarks, Sledge notes that there are worse things than war: "Until the millennium arrives and countries cease trying to enslave others, it will be necessary to accept one's responsibilities . . ." ² He and his comrades are now counted members of the "greatest generation." The intelligence, academic accomplishments, patriotism, and dedication to values many now hold in disdain make Luttrell and his comrades the "greatest" of the current generation.

Luttrell and Sledge also share a common source of anger, though in the latter's case far less pronounced. In discussing the inability of some veterans to reintegrate into civilian life, Sledge observes that

We were unable to understand their attitudes until we ourselves returned home and tried to comprehend people who griped because America wasn't perfect, or their coffee wasn't hot enough, or they had to stand in line and wait for a train or bus . . . We just wished that people back home could understand how lucky they were and stop complaining about trivial inconveniences.³

Fortunately for Sledge, his comrades, and the nation, WWII vets did not also face a hostile press. By contrast, a recurring theme of *Lone Survivor* is Luttrell's justified anger as a warrior trying to defend his nation with one arm tied behind his back. This anger is directed at "liberals" in Washington, "where the human rights of terrorists are often given high priority" (37), and at the "liberal media," ignorant of military affairs and always willing to provide a megaphone for "the liberal part of the U.S.A.," for whom America and its military are bullies and murderers (36). Luttrell holds these two groups responsible for restrictive Rules-of-Engagement (ROE) that lead to the deaths of American soldiers on the battlefield: "they represent a danger to us . . . they make us concerned, disheartened, and sometimes hesitant" (38). Stern methods are required in counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare because "in the end, your enemy must ultimately fear you, understand your supremacy" (28).

In describing both his experiences in Iraq in 2004 and his ludicrous court martial for murder, U.S. Marine Lieutenant Ilario Pantano, in his book *Warlord*, makes remarks similar to Luttrell's:

² E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1990) 315.

³ *Ibid.*, 267.

They should have feared us. But instead, the Muj apparently thought they could overwhelm our bases. That came from the stupidity of the proportional response. The fact that the insurgents could even consider massed assaults meant that we had not been sufficiently brutal ... we had become an “ineffective occupier” and not because of the number of troops, he [Paul Bremer] argued, but because of our overly restrictive Rules of Engagement and our discomfort with killing the guys that needed to be killed.⁴

This issue is central to what transpired in the Hindu Kush. Luttrell maintains that the death of his comrades was (at least partially) due to both the ROE and the resulting concern about being charged by zealous JAG (Judge Advocate General) officers and crucified by the media. The terrain around the village that Operation Redwing was focused upon was open and bereft of good concealment. The SEALs took the best position to observe the village. However, three goatherds, including a teenage boy, stumbled upon them and were captured. While the SEALs discussed what to do, the herders’ flock was milling about, bringing attention on their location. Luttrell states that the “correct military decision” in this situation would have been to kill the goatherds, who would surely divulge the Americans’ location to the Taliban, and that “to let these guys go on their way was military suicide” (202-3). But Lt. Murphy stressed that if they killed the herders, *they* would be charged with murder. Luttrell asserts that this concern and the fear that “the U.S. media [would] attack us without mercy” led him and Murphy to release the goatherds (206). Before the SEALs had time to shift to a new position, they were under attack by approximately 150 Taliban.

After being blown off the mountain, Luttrell managed to evade his pursuers for about a day. Then he had a great stroke of luck, becoming the beneficiary of a code of hospitality known as *lokhay warkawal*, literally “giving of the pot” (72, 285). He was found by two villagers who provided him with desperately needed water and first aid and eventually took him to their village to recuperate from his ordeal. According to the custom of *lokhay*, Luttrell had the protection of the entire village. Why the village elders decided not only to save Luttrell’s life, but also risk attack by the Taliban is not clear. An Associated Press story of 10 July 2008 reported that Afghan villagers killed two Taliban “militants” in defense of aid workers: “According to our culture, when the people invited the aid workers to dig a well they cannot allow the Taliban to kidnap and behead them They were guests, and we never give up our guests.”⁵

Under the protection of the villagers, Luttrell recovered from his wounds and was rescued a week later. The story of his stay in the Afghan village is most interesting. The mutual affection between him and the village children is especially endearing: “They never knocked, just came tumbling in, grabbing me and hugging me” (315). Luttrell notes the balance of power between the Taliban and the villagers. Without the support of the heavily-armed villagers, the Taliban could not operate. A stalemate ensued. The Taliban could huff and puff, but they dared not directly attack the village and earn the villagers’ enmity (339).

⁴ Ilario Pantano, with Malcolm McConnell, *Warlord: No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy* (NY: Threshold, 2006) 315.

⁵ Amir Shah, “2 Taliban Killed by Group of Afghan Villagers,” *Associated Press* (10 Jul 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0814.htm>.

Family loyalties are fundamental there, and the last thing the Taliban needed was a blood feud with the local people.

This fascinating book has already found a large, non-academic audience. Academics, especially those not interested in military affairs, will learn from it just what the military does and why. What Aristotle wrote over 2,300 years ago applies to Luttrell and his comrades: “The beauty of the soul shines out when a man bears with composure one heavy mischance after another, not because he does not feel them, but because he is a man of high and heroic temper.”⁶

Such men are always needed, as their values and virtues are never outdated.

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.10 (1100b30).