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## MARCUS LUTTRELL'S INTERPRETATION OF THE EVENTS OF OPERATION "RED WINGS": A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

**Abstract:** This article examines the interpretation of the events of Operation "Red Wing" by U.S. Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell and compares his version of events with alternative sources, including journalistic investigations, veteran testimonies, and historical analyses. The study argues that many elements of Luttrell's memoir *Lone Survivor* were exaggerated or distorted, particularly regarding the number of Taliban fighters, the conduct of the battle, and the operational circumstances. The article also analyzes the planning failures and command decisions that contributed to the tragedy and subsequent mythologization of the operation. Special attention is devoted to the impact of these distortions on historical memory, military ethics, and the perception of the fallen servicemen.

**Keywords:** GWOT, Operation "Red Wings", Marcus Luttrell, Lone Survivor, Navy SEALs.

Following the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies as part of the Global War on Terror, the Taliban was removed from power, and hostilities transformed into a guerrilla war, a development greatly facilitated by the country's terrain. In addition to conventional operations conducted by the United States and coalition partners, there were also targeted missions, typically carried out by special operations forces. The operation described herein, known as "Red Wings," constitutes an example of such a targeted elimination mission; its objective was the neutralization of the field commander Ahmad Shah, who had been involved in the kidnapping and killing of a Turkish citizen at the end of 2004. By the time of the operation, he had carried out a series of attacks in Kunar Province, primarily against U.S. Marines stationed there. One of the participants in this operation-and ultimately the sole survivor-was Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell. He was born in Texas, began preparing for a military career at an early age, and in 1999 commenced service in the United States Navy (Jenkins, 2014).

The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that, during wartime, information is often distorted either deliberately or due to the absence of accessible sources. In the case of Marcus Luttrell, we are dealing with deliberate distortion and falsehoods, which is unacceptable and gives rise to entirely misleading narratives about the engagement.

Sources presenting a version different from that described by Marcus include analyses of the operation published by Politico and Newsweek (Schneiderman, Darack, 2026; Schneiderman, 2016); an examination of the operation by Ed Darack, a journalist who wrote for the Marine Corps (Darack, 2009); testimonies of veterans who personally knew Marcus and the fallen servicemen and had encountered them during various assignments; as well as comments by individuals

connected to the operation on specialized forums and in professional communities (Sniper's Hide Forum, 2025; Jenkins, 2014).

At the very initial stage of the operation's description, discrepancies emerge between the actual situation and Luttrell's account in his memoir. Marcus wrote: "Suffice it to say, he was a major leader of Taliban forces, a grim mountain warrior, known for organizing attacks on towns and for bearing direct responsibility for several lethal attacks on U.S. Marines using explosives. He was about forty years old and was a rather grim figure. He commanded 140–150 armed fighters, but he was an educated man who understood military tactics and could also speak five languages. Sharmak was known as one of Osama bin Laden's closest associates" (Luttrell, Robinson, 2007: 255). This does not fully correspond to reality. Ahmad commanded a group of 12–15 militants in that area, was not a principal actor, and certainly was not a close associate of bin Laden, as Marcus asserted. Initially, the operation was to be conducted by U.S. Marines and with significantly larger forces than were ultimately employed (Schneiderman, Darack, 2026).

The operation commenced on 27 June 2005 with the insertion of four U.S. Navy special operations personnel from Team 10 into the area of operations. The team consisted of Marcus Luttrell, Danny Dietz, Matthew Axelson, and team leader Michael Murphy. On the morning of 28 June, they were detected by local shepherds. In his memoir, Marcus wrote that, due to the decision to release the civilians, they reported to the Taliban in a nearby village, after which the team was tracked down. In reality, Ahmad Shah's militants had heard the insertion of the special operations team by helicopter and were preparing an ambush, while the claim that local shepherds passed information to the Taliban has not been substantiated (Schneiderman, 2016).

Approximately one hour after the encounter with the shepherds, the group fell into an ambush organized by the Taliban. Ahmad Shah's force involved in the engagement consisted of 8–10 individuals, as can be seen in a video released by the Taliban. They occupied elevated positions surrounding the low ground through which the SEALs were moving, and used RPGs (rocket propelled grenade), PKM machine guns, and assault rifles to fire upon the special operations personnel. In his memoirs, Marcus writes about a battle with Taliban forces numbering between 80 and 200 individuals, which did not occur (Downrange Film, 2019).

The entire subsequent description of the battle in the memoirs raises serious doubts, since, if one refers to the same video, it can be heard that the team commander, Michael Murphy, is shouting at Marcus to return, as he had left his comrades and begun running down the slope. This battle clearly ended in tragedy: all three of Marcus's comrades were killed in action, and their radios were not functioning. Because of this, Michael Murphy had to move into an open clearing and use a phone to call for support and report the engagement, whereupon he was killed by the Taliban. For his bravery, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor (Schneiderman, Darack, 2026).

Even the official citation text for the award indicates a militant force of 30 to 40 individuals, which still does not correspond even remotely to Marcus's descriptions. When command headquarters received the report of the engagement, a quick reaction force was deployed, consisting of two helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (MH-47), a UH-60, and two AH-64 Apache helicopters from Army aviation. This entire group flew to the area of contact between the SEALs and the militants (Darack, 2009).

The Chinook, carrying both personnel from the regiment and SEALs, was shot down by an RPG. Following this, the quick reaction force returned to base. All 16 operators aboard the downed

Chinook were killed, including the commander of SEAL Team 10, Erik Kristensen. This represents the largest single-day loss for the special operations forces (Eric C., 2014).

At the same time, Marcus slid down the slope, already being approximately one kilometer away from the site of the battle. The following morning, he was found there by a local resident, Gulab, who, according to the Pashtun code, took him to his village and assisted in treating his wounds, which were not fatal, although Marcus claimed otherwise in his recollections. Taliban fighters arrived in the village, but the locals were well armed and refused to surrender the American, after which Marcus soon activated a radio beacon and the Rangers evacuated him together with Gulab to a U.S. base (Schneiderman, 2016).

Subsequent events developed rapidly, but several key points should be emphasized. Due to the fact that Marcus had escaped and did not participate in the battle, he was unable to assist the Green Berets in locating the bodies of his comrades; his statements were vague and inconsistent (it should also be noted that even prior to the operation Marcus was disliked by adjacent units, as he behaved arrogantly, placing himself above others, as recalled by the Green Berets (Sniper's Hide Forum, 2025; Jenkins, 2014)). Consequently, he provided no useful assistance in the recovery of the fallen personnel. For his assistance, Gulab's home was destroyed by the Taliban, all his property was destroyed, and his brother was killed. Gulab went into hiding across the country and only later made his way to the United States (Schneiderman, 2016).

The Taliban also captured, as trophies, the SEALs' weapons and the laptop containing classified information that Murphy had with him. Upon returning to the United States, Marcus was awarded the Navy Cross for his account of the events, and subsequently, in co-authorship with Patrick Robinson, he began to be used for recruitment and advertising for the SEALs. Patrick Robinson was merely a writer who was to co-author with Marcus a "correct" version of events under the supervision of legal advisors from the Department of Defense, and in practice military lawyers produced a revised version of the events of the operation, which was successfully promoted. Subsequently, a film was produced that moved even further away from reality and distorted the portrayal of Marcus's fallen comrades (Jenkins, 2014).

It is also necessary to add several details that contributed to the failure of the operation and the subsequent mythologization of the events by the military establishment. First and foremost, it was an inherently flawed decision to deploy only four special operations personnel for such a mission. Initially, this task was intended to be carried out by the Marine Corps. They possessed superior familiarity with the area and the operational environment. Moreover, the insertion of the special operations team by helicopter approximately two kilometers from the village where the Taliban and Ahmad Shah were located effectively alerted all insurgent forces to their presence. Another mistake was that the SEALs did not carry reliable radio equipment that would have ensured stable communication with the base (Darack, 2009).

Thus, a chain of errors led to a catastrophic outcome and the loss of life. As a result, an alternative version of events had to be presented, since the operation was fundamentally flawed from the earliest stages of planning, and the heroization of Marcus—who reportedly did not even return fire (he was later found with full magazines of ammunition)—should be regarded as a disregard for the fallen operators. Among them were Michael Murphy, who sacrificed his life to establish communication with the base; Matthew Axelson, who lost his vision as a result of his injuries yet continued to return fire; and Danny Dietz, who was wounded multiple times at the very beginning of the engagement but continued to fight. Also included were operators from the 160th

Aviation Regiment, the “Night Stalkers,” as well as SEALs from Team 10, together with the commander who flew in to assist them and was also killed.

Thus, Marcus Luttrell’s interpretation of the events of Operation “Red Wings” served a specific purpose of distortion and disinformation, aimed at justifying incorrect and failed command decisions during the planning phase, as well as operational mistakes made by personnel during the mission itself. Such actions are destructive to the armed forces, the families of the fallen, and historical record.

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