

OPERATION REDWING

“The Taliban fighters were...

Axelson (29) of Cupertino, California, and Danny Dietz (25) of Littleton, Colorado.

The team was inserted at night by helicopter into the heavily-forested and mountainous terrain east of the Asadabad, a village in the Afghanistan province of Kunar. Intelligence reported that a large group of armed men slipped through a pass in the mountains from Pakistan. The size of the force suggested that there was a valuable target in the area. This area was considered a “hornet’s nest,” a Taliban stronghold that Coalition Forces rarely ventured into. The inhabitants were goat herders and wood cutters, and the Taliban rewarded them for shooting U.S. forces or reporting on their locations.

The clouds were low and heavy rains poured down on the team. They had set up and began observing the area, but could not manage a clear line of sight on the target area. They moved in closer, taking a position about one mile from the village.

A couple of hours after relocating, three goat herders happened upon one of the well-camouflaged SEALs. Once the SEALs were compromised, they held the goat herders while they decided what their course of action would be. The goat herders refused to communicate with the Americans. It was clear that the herders were sympathetic to the Taliban.

The herders were unarmed, and although they represented a clear and present danger to the team, killing them would be a violation of the Rules Of Engagement (ROE.) If they were killed, the bodies would probably turn up on al Jazeera and their deaths would be linked to the team, resulting in prison time. Our enemies are aware of the loopholes in our ROE, and use them to their advantage.



Photo of Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) Lt. Michael P. Murphy, 29, taken in Afghanistan.

Lt. Michael Murphy, Gunner’s Mate
2nd Class (SEAL) Danny Dietz, Sonar Technician
2nd Class (SEAL) Matthew Axelson
2nd Class (SEAL) Marcus Luttrell Hospital Corpsman

On June 27, 2005, a four-man Navy SEAL sniper watch team set out to conduct a mission in some of the harshest terrain on earth - about 10,000 feet above sea level in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. Their mission was to locate and gather intelligence on Ahman Shah, a high-ranking Taliban official with known ties to Osama bin-Laden. Once they had eyes on the target, a larger force would then attack, capturing or killing Shah. According to their intelligence, the SEALs would be operating amongst as many as 200 enemy fighters. Lieutenant Michael Murphy (29) of Patchogue, New York was the officer-in-charge. His men were Marcus Luttrell (30) of Willis, Texas, Matthew

unloading on them with AK rifle fire, RPG's and mortars."

In special operations, the officer is in charge of the unit, but sometimes the team decides what actions to take. In this case, four heads were better than one. Since they were unable to reach the tactical operations center, the SEALs decided to take a vote. One voted to kill the herders, one voted to let them go, and one abstained. The deciding vote was left to Luttrell, the fire team leader. Luttrell decided to let them loose, most likely allowing them to report their location to the Taliban.

The SEALs watched the men run back to the village. At about 2 p.m., about a hundred Taliban launched a well-coordinated three-pronged attack down the mountain at the SEALs. The Taliban were familiar with the territory, and were attempting to pin down the commandos and seal off their escape route.

The SEALs were outmanned four to one, but they had the high ground. They fought the approaching horde from a grove of trees, but the numerically superior militia soon outmaneuvered them. Typically, the SEALs would rush the ambush, but the terrain and the unknown number of enemy fighters ruled out that option. The commandos were forced to fight off their attackers as they made their way down the ravine. They were falling down the ravine sometimes 20 to 30 feet at a time. The men maneuvered down the precipitous slope while Dietz, the communications man, remained at the top as he attempted in vain to contact the base.

Murphy and Luttrell tumbled about 150 feet down the ravine, while Axelson and Dietz moved to regroup. They moved about two miles down the side of the

mountain, a vertical height of about 5,000 feet. The Taliban fighters were unloading on them with AK rifle fire, RPG's and mortars. Murphy had been hit seven times. Axelson was hit at least 22 times. Dietz was hit 16 times. In addition to their gunshot wounds, all men had blunt injuries from tumbling down the ravine.

Dietz had been trying to make contact with Bagram AFB, which was about a 20 to 30 minute helicopter ride away. Dietz had been hit in the hand by a bullet, severing his thumb. He had taken several bullets, including one in his lung. Once they reached the bottom, they were running low on ammunition. Dietz was the first SEAL to go down. At this point, it was about 45 minutes into the firefight. Night was approaching and fog began rolling in.

The SEALs had killed dozens of Taliban militia, but they were surrounded and taking casualties. The severely wounded Murphy decided to use his satellite



Navy SEALs in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. From left to right: Sonar Technician -- Surface 2nd Class (SEAL) Matthew G. Axelson, 29, of Cupertino, Calif.; Information Systems Technician Senior Chief (SEAL) Daniel R. Healy, 36, of Exeter, N.H.; Quartermaster 2nd Class (SEAL) James Suh, 28, of Deerfield Beach, Fla.; Hospital Corpsman Second Class (SEAL) Marcus Luttrell; Machinist Mate 2nd Class (SEAL) Eric S. Patton, 22, of Boulder City, Nev.; LT (SEAL) Michael P. Murphy, 29, of Patchogue, N.Y.



Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) Lt. Michael P. Murphy, 29, from Patchogue, NY and Sonar Technician -- Surface 2nd Class (SEAL) Matthew G. Axelson, 29, of Cupertino, Calif, taken in Afghanistan. Both assigned to SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team ONE, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Murphy and Axelson were killed by enemy forces during a reconnaissance mission, Operation Redwing, June 28, 2005.

phone to summon a Quick Reaction Force. The QRF would bring air support and reinforcements to the embattled SEALs. In order to use the phone, Murphy had to move to the highest point he could get to. This put him in extreme danger, but the call had to be made. Murphy took at least one round in his back to go with the bullets he took in the stomach and chest earlier, but he carried on and completed the call. After the call, Murphy moved into a firing position, but was soon overrun by the enemy.

While the QRF mobilized, a Predator reconnaissance drone was sent to the area to find the SEALs. The infrared footage relayed to the base confirmed that the unit was about to be overrun.

Axelson and Luttrell were the only two left. While they took cover behind a log, Axelson was giving himself medical care where he had taken a round to the head. A RPG round hit their position, killing Axelson and throwing Luttrell over a ridge and knocking him unconscious.

The QRF was flying to the scene at treetop level at about 150 mph. The MH-47 Chinook helicopters were better suited for the high altitude conditions of Afghanistan than the

“Luttrell pulled a pin...

heavily-armed attack helicopters. The gunships were slowing down the Chinook, so a decision had to be made. They could slow down and let the attack helicopters catch up, or they could take their chances and race ahead to try unloading the reserve force without protection.

The decision was made that the endangered SEALs needed the help right away, so the transport flew on. The crew could have set the helicopter down in a safer area of the battlefield, but the SEALs were in grave danger. The Chinook flew into the landing zone, looking for a safe spot to set the helicopter down in the rugged terrain. Another Taliban force was waiting for the QRF, and as the

pilot attempted to set down on a ledge, a RPG hit the helicopter, sending it out of control. It slid down the mountain, and crashed, killing all 16 men on board.

When Luttrell regained consciousness, he was paralyzed from the waist down, his pants had been blown off, and he had large pieces of shrapnel from the RPG sticking out of his legs with heavy bleeding. Unable to remove the shrapnel, he packed his wounds with mud to control the bleeding, and then crawled to the side of the mountain. Once there, he buried himself up to his waist with rocks. The enemy was on the hunt for him, and was very close. The sound of gunfire was all around as they tried to recon by fire. After several hours, Luttrell began to hear aircraft that were looking for him. He activated his emergency beacon, but he was unable to contact the pilots since his tongue was stuck due to dehydration and the dirt in his mouth from the long battle.

The enemy was all around him, and soon he saw a fighter move into his kill zone. He shot the Taliban, and two more fighters moved in. He had a suppressed weapon, and the canyon made it unable to pinpoint Luttrell's location. Since the two didn't know where the shot came from, they took cover behind the wrong side of a rock. Luttrell dropped them as well.

out of his grenade. If this was a trick, they would all die”

He had no compass or GPS, so he relied on shadows to determine direction. Only able to move 20 yards at a time due to his injuries and at times was blacking out, Luttrell was slowly making his way back to the base. He fell several more times down the sides of mountains, one time falling about 2,000 feet after being shot again.

Luttrell was in incredible pain, and was unable to walk. He had a broken wrist, a broken nose, and three cracked vertebrae. The Taliban were still tracking him, so he moved to higher ground. He engaged and killed three more fighters. He allowed two more to come to within ten feet of his position. He put a grenade between them and took off. Luttrell crawled four more miles before reaching water.

After sliding down another mountain into the pool of water, he refreshed himself. Before he could take off, some villagers approached him. The first villager had his hands in the air and was saying, “Okay. Okay. American. American.”

Luttrell was very wary, and pulled a pin out of his grenade. If this was a trick, they would all die. Two more villagers ran up to him, these men were armed, but their AK’s were slung behind their backs. The villagers soon surrounded Luttrell.

He asked the villagers if they were Taliban, and they said no. They had seen him slide down the mountain. They looked at his wounds and carried him 200 yards down the mountain to their village, Sabari-Minah.

A doctor dressed his wounds, and the village dressed him in what Luttrell called “man jammies.” Soon, the Taliban surrounded the village. The villagers decided they would hide Luttrell and protect him from the Taliban. For thousands of years, the Pashtun tradition, or pashtunwali, has been to selflessly protect someone who you take in or asks for your protection. If they did not help the American, it would have been a great shame to the men. Every day, the Taliban would threaten the village to surrender the SEAL. They knew, however, that if they attacked Luttrell or the villagers, according to pashtunwali, the guerillas would themselves be attacked by the powerful Masaud clan. News that the SEAL was under the protection of the village, and that the Taliban had surrounded them reached the surrounding villages. Armed men began coming to the defense of the village and the American.

The Taliban repeatedly negotiated for Luttrell. Muhammed Gulab, a member of the Masaud clan and the villager who found Luttrell and was protecting him, kept himself between the American and the Taliban and refused their offers. Ahman Shah, the Taliban leader the team

Lt. Michael P. Murphy, taken in Afghanistan.





Basic Underwater Demolition/ SEAL (BUD/S) graduating class 236.
Lt. Michael P. Murphy, is pictured on the far left side of the back row..

was to capture or kill, sent a message to Gulab that if he turned over the American, he would be given 5 million Rupees (about \$80,000) and a house of his choosing in Peshawar, Pakistan. Had Gulab accepted the offer, his clan would have turned on him.

The Masaud decided their response for the Taliban: they would defend the SEAL until they were all dead. The Taliban told him to prepare for war; they were going to attack the house that night. The Masaud prepared for the assault while Gulab moved Luttrell to the forest. The attack thankfully never happened.

In the meantime, Gulab's family sent word to the American base at Asadabad that they had Luttrell, and that the Taliban had them surrounded and was preparing to assault the village. Luttrell wrote a note, and it was sewn into the hem of Gulab's brother-in-law's shirt.

Once Luttrell was healthy enough to leave, Gulab led him out where they met up with a patrol of U.S. Army Rangers and Operational Detachment Alpha soldiers who had been searching for Luttrell.

The team had been looking for the missing SEAL for several days, enduring heavy rain and freezing temperatures.

“They had been...”

They had been going on a day-and-a-half without food or water; some soldiers had lost about 20 or 30 pounds of body weight. Some of their feet were so beaten up that they could barely walk. Once Luttrell linked up with the rescuers, he assisted in calling in airstrikes on the Taliban.

11 Navy SEALs and 8 Army Task Force 160 aircrew died in the battle. Operation Redwing was the highest loss of life for the Naval Special Warfare Command since the D-Day invasion of Normandy in World War II. It was the bloodiest day of the war since the invasion in October 2001.

For their actions, Marcus Luttrell, Matt Axelson, and Danny Dietz each received the Navy Cross, the second-highest decoration in the military. Mike Murphy received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Following the battle, Luttrell was promoted to Hospitalman First Class. President Bush pinned Luttrell's Navy Cross in a special ceremony at the Oval Office. In July of 2006, he redeployed to Iraq. Marcus Luttrell is now out of the Navy. His twin brother is still in the SEALs, and their father is a retired SEAL. Marcus plans to take some time off, and then go into medical school. He has just published an account of the battle called “Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10.”

The U.S. government offered Gulab \$200,000 for saving Luttrell, but he refused. He said he did not do it for the reward. Instead, the military compensated his village by making improvements such as paving their road and providing a generator. Gulab was relocated due to continuing threats on his life from the Taliban. He was moved to Asadabad and awarded a construction contractor job on the base.

“The clouds were low and heavy rains poured down”

going on a day-and-a-half without food or water.”

The men who gave their lives on the helicopter are:

Staff Sgt. Shamus Goare, 29, Danville, Ohio.

Chief Warrant Officer Corey Goodnature, 35, Clarks Grove, Minnesota.

Sgt. Kip Jacoby, 21, Pompano Beach, Florida.

Sgt. 1st Class Marcus Muralles, 33, Shelbyville, Indiana.

Major Stephen Reich, 34, Washington Depot, Connecticut.

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Russell, 31, Stafford, Virginia.

Chief Warrant Officer Chris Scherkenbach, 40, Jacksonville.

Master Sgt, James Ponder III, 36, Franklin, Tennessee.

Chief Petty Officer Jacques Fontan, 36, New Orleans.

Lt. Cmdr. Erik Ristensen, 33, San Diego.

Petty Officer 1st Class Jeffrey Lucas, 33, Corbett, Oregon.

Lt. Michael McGreevy, Jr., 30, Portville, New York.

Petty Officer 1st Class Jeffery Taylor, 30, Midway, West Virginia.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Daniel Healy, 36, Exeter, New Hampshire.

Petty Officer 2nd Class James Suh, 28, Deerfield Beach, Florida.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Eric Patton, 22, Boulder City, Nevada.



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