

The Incredible Story of
Operation Red Wings

Alone With The Taliban

How One Navy SEAL Fended Off Waves of Mujahedeen...

Four Navy SEAL commandos risked their lives and entered the lion's den in Afghanistan to hunt down a long-sought-after terror leader. When the soldiers were discovered, it was a fight to the finish. Although the SEALs fought heroically, it was an impossible situation, facing as they were scores of armed Islamic fighters. When the surviving SEAL found himself all alone, stranded in the perilous mountains of Afghanistan and surrounded by a sea of Taliban militants, the only question was who would reach him first: the Taliban or the rescue squad sent to get him?

Shimon Rosenberg



June 28, 2005. A Chinook helicopter flies over the Hindu-Kush Mountains of north-eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistani border. Inside the helicopter, a team of four Navy SEALs is on its way to a top-secret mission. Their destination is a remote mountain known as Sawtalo Sar, which is under control of the ousted Taliban.

The SEALs prepare for the infiltration. First, the pilot makes a few “decoy drops,” at intervals of several miles. Each time, the helicopter descends almost to the ground and then lifts off again after a short while. If any Afghan enemies are following the helicopter, they would likely be confused by these maneuvers, and the actual landing site—if indeed there was one—would remain unknown.

After a while the helicopter reaches its true landing zone. A voice calls over the radio: “Operation Red Wings is a go!”

A ramp opens at the rear of the Chinook and a soldier stations himself at the door with a powerful M-60 machine gun trained outward. If anyone dares attack the SEALs while they are descending there will be consequences. It is pitch black around them.

In a split second, a rope is lowered 20 feet to the ground. Not a word is spoken. The SEALs line up behind each other, with their weapons and other equipment all packed up. Danny Dietz goes first, disappearing into the darkness of the night. Marcus Luttrell follows, and then the team’s commander, Lieutenant Michael Murphy. Last one out is Matthew Axelson. They all wear heat-resistant gloves to facilitate their fastrope descent while protecting their hands from rope burns.

As soon as the four touch down, they spread apart spontaneously and then lie flat on the ground. Although nobody had attacked during the descent, their most vulnerable moment, there is no way of knowing whether any Afghans have spotted them and are lying in wait to attack. The four commandos listen as the noise of the helicopter’s motors grows stronger and then fades into the distance as the Chinook lifts and draws away, leaving them alone in the remote and dangerous region.

The SEALs remain motionless on the ground for 15 minutes. A deathly silence blankets the mountain, a quiet that can only be found in the high altitudes of the lonely hills. A mile away they can see two fires burning. Hopefully, those are nothing more than some shepherds settling in for the night. The 15 minutes pass uneventfully. Next, they crawl on all fours up the mountainside toward their target.

Eventually, the four men stand up. As Luttrell does so, he is dismayed to notice the thick rope they had used to descend from the helicopter lying nearby on the ground. In a tremendous departure from procedure, the rope had been cut and tossed from the helicopter. This was a gross error. The helicopter crew was supposed to take back the rope with them, not leave it lying around as a dead giveaway that special operations forces had landed there. Luttrell is glad he has found it before the Taliban does.

The SEALs are not equipped with a shovel to bury the rope. Instead, Murphy and Axelson hide it beneath a pile of trees, branches and thorns. While they are doing this, Lieutenant Murphy makes radio contact with an EC-130 airplane flying somewhere high overhead:

“Sniper 2-1, we are in position and preparing to depart.”

“Roger that.”

The Long Sought-After Terror Leader

Navy SEALs are elite fighters, extremely fast, with extraordinary training and armed with a variety of special weapons. They are experts at fighting with such stealth that no one will hear them. They are also masters of military strategy and qualified marksmen. Their name is an acronym, meaning they are prepared to fight at Sea, Air or Land (see *Zman* 16 and 38).

Their present mission was not at sea. In fact, it was 10,000 feet above sea level in the bare mountains above the tree line. They had just been inserted deep into enemy territory in order to scout for the location of Ahmad

Shah, who had proven to be a tremendous headache for the Allied military commanders in Afghanistan.

Shah was not part of the Taliban but had a strong alliance with them, rising to power in the region with a loyal band of heavily armed fighters. From his mountain base he dispatched his operators on regular missions into Afghan villages to interfere with the Allied campaign. Shah was directly responsible for several deadly attacks against US Marines.

Shah never traveled anywhere without a contingent of armed bodyguards. He was well trained in military tactics and was very friendly with Osama bin Laden. Careful never to stay in one place for long, Shah constantly shuffled from one location to another, assisted by friendly local Pashtun tribes who provided him and his men with food, drink and places to sleep.

Just days before, the military had received a credible intelligence report regarding Shah and his present location. The commander of the SEALs station at Bagram Air Force Base, Dan Healy, decided it was time to carry out a long-planned operation named Red Wings. For this mission, he chose four commandos from the Alpha Team: Lieutenant Michael Murphy, Marcus Luttrell (who was also a medic), Matthew Axelson and Danny Dietz.

Their objective was not to eliminate Shah. The odds of such a small team succeeding against a man surrounded by dozens of armed guards were virtually nil. Instead, their goal was to gather intelligence on Shah by finding a good hiding place and spying on Shah’s forces from long distance through binoculars.

The SEALs were told to pinpoint the exact location of Shah’s refuge and estimate how many soldiers he had with him. This information would be relayed to the aerial forces at the Coalition’s disposal, who would launch missiles at the enemy. Of course, if the opportunity presented itself to finish off Shah with a well-aimed bullet from a safe distance, so much the better.

Axelson and Luttrell were to serve as the unit’s snipers, while Murphy and Dietz were



Soldiers set out on a mission in Afghanistan in a Chinook helicopter.



Navy SEAL rappels from a Chinook helicopter.



American soldiers ride in a Chinook transport helicopter.

the two surveillance men. The remaining tasks were split among the four. Murphy was commander, Dietz and Luttrell dealt with communications, etc.

The plan called for inserting the men by a helicopter that would place them