

“Don’t let the truth ruin a good story.” – Origin unknown

OVERVIEW:

The events of OPERATION RED WINGS, which spiraled into disaster shortly after the insert of a four-man Naval Special Operations Forces (NAVSOFF) reconnaissance and surveillance team (R and S team) during the opening phase of the operation, present warfighters (and those covering military operations) with a broad array of vital contemporary case studies relevant to those functioning at the battalion staff, company, platoon, and squad levels. These include studies in deconfliction between conventional and special operations forces, the paramount necessity of unity of command / effort, communication in complex mountainous terrain, mountain ambush tactics, and the importance of comprehensive, detailed planning, among others. Despite these lessons (the knowledge of which will arguably save lives in future operations), little has been discussed in professional military papers about OPERATION RED WINGS. However, much has been written and discussed about RED WINGS in general media (which is often referenced by warfighters for their ongoing professional military education), and much of this, including the content of two books on the topic, is rife with misinformation.

BACKGROUND, KEY POINTS, AND AFTERMATH OF OPERATION RED WINGS:

In November, 2004, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines (3/3) arrived in RC-East (Regional Command – East, Afghanistan) and assumed responsibility of their area of operations (AO), which included the restive Kunar Province. 3/3’s overarching goal was to continue to increase stability in the region with Afghanistan’s 18 September 2005 National Parliamentary Elections on the horizon.

3/3 deployed not as part of a MAGTF (Marine Air Ground Task Force), but as an infantry battalion to be integrated into a combined joint task force. 3/3’s staff identified deconfliction issues with SOF (Special Operations Forces) units working in the same geographic areas that 3/3’s AO covered. However, 3/3’s staff also identified force multiplicative opportunities they felt working with SOF would avail to the battalion. 3/3 developed a novel model that allowed for operational integration, deconfliction, and de facto OPCON (operational control) of SOF ground units and SOF support assets not normally available to conventional forces.

One of the culminating achievements of 3/3’s tour in RC-East was the forced surrender of a regional HVT (High Value Target) anticoalition militia (ACM) leader named Najmudeen, whom conventional and SOF units had sought for years. Subsequent to Najmudeen’s surrender, which occurred just after OPERATION SPURS, 3/3 conducted OPERATION MAVERICKS and then OPERATION CELTICS. All three of these operations incorporated SOF in their opening phases. In May and June of 2005, during the RIP/TOA (Relief-in-Place / Transfer of Authority) with 2d Battalion, 3d Marines

(2/3), 3/3’s staff began planning OPERATION STARS, which was to focus on ACM activity in the Korangal Valley region, to the west of Asadabad, the Kunar’s provincial capital. Due to a decline in actionable intelligence feed, however, STARS had to be delayed, and ultimately 3/3 handed what at that point was a “shell” of an operation to 2/3. 2/3’s staff took the operational shell, renamed it RED WINGS, and through analysis of intelligence identified a relatively small (less than 20 ACM), little-known cell and its leader, Ahmad Shah, as the focus for RED WINGS (Shah was attempting to fill the regional ACM power void after Najmudeen’s surrender to 3/3). Shah based his operations high on the slopes of Sawtalo Sar mountain, which sits between the Korangal Valley and the Shuryek Valley. The purpose of RED WINGS, in continuance of 3/3’s operations, was to disrupt ACM activity (with Shah as the focus) prior to the 18 September 2005 National Elections.

The Marines planned to have a 6-man scout sniper team traverse a series of valleys and ridges under cover of darkness to a group of pre-determined observation points high on the slopes of Sawtalo Sar for the opening, or shaping phase, of RED WINGS. Once the scout / sniper team had positively identified Shah and his group, a larger force of Marines was to undertake the direct action phase, while a company-sized element of Marines functioned as outer cordon. For this second phase, 2/3 required assault support capable of low illumination infil / exfil. Not having an associated ACE (Air Combat Element), 2/3 staff requested support from the 160th SOAR(A) [Special Operations Air Regiment (Airborne)] from the CJSOTF-A (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan). RED WINGS was similar in design to operations conducted by 3/3, but 2/3 sought the integration of only a SOF aviation support element, not ground forces. The SOTF, (which had recently undergone a command change to one less amenable to SOF-CF integration), responded that 2/3 could be granted 160th support, but only if SOF ground personnel undertook the opening two phases of RED WINGS and were tasked as the lead, supported elements with full OPCON (inclusive of 2/3) for these phases. With no alternatives, battalion staff agreed. The ground force that agreed to undertake the supported first two phases of RED WINGS was a NAVSOF group, consisting of an assortment of U.S. Navy SEALs deployed to Afghanistan at that time. The NAVSOF element planned the specifics of these first two phases of RED WINGS with 2/3’s staff providing input, including briefing the SEALs with pre-selected 10-digit grid reference points on the target area for calls-for-fire from a 105mm artillery battery at FOB WRIGHT (outside of Asadabad), and a recommendation to augment the SEAL’s communications plan (to carry a more robust, albeit heavier, radio), among other points.

OPERATION RED WINGS began with an insertion of a four-man NAVSOF reconnaissance and surveillance team near the summit of Sawtalo Sar late in the night of 27 June 2005. As with the specifics of the planning of this phase, 2/3 played no direct role in command and control, as this was the “SOF supported” portion of the operation. The team was inserted by helicopter within one mile of a populated area—sparsely populated, but populated nonetheless. Late in the morning of 28 June 2005, unarmed

locals soft compromised the team. Within approximately one hour of the soft compromise, a group of between eight and ten of Shah’s men (including Ahmad Shah) ambushed the R and S team, utilizing AK47 fire, PK light machine gun fire, rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire, and possibly an 82mm mortar system. As the R and S team descended into the northeast gulch of Sawtalo Sar (on the Shuryek Valley side of the mountain) under the press of the ambush, Shah’s men engaged the team with coordinated plunging, interlocking fires from multiple superior topographic positions. The R and S team attempted to establish communication with their combat operation center via satellite through a PRC-148 radio, which failed, and then attempted communication with an Iridium satellite phone, which failed. Shah’s men killed three of the team within one hour. Hours later, a QRF (quick reaction force) was launched, consisting of members of NAVSOF and Marines, in separate aircraft. 2/3’s air officer requested that before any insert attempt be made by any aircraft, members of the QRF positively identify member(s) of the R and S team, either visually or by radio—the pilots agreed. No positive identification could be made. Despite this, aviators of one of two MH-47s of the 160th attempted to insert eight NAVSOF personnel near the summit of Sawtalo Sar. During this insert attempt, one of Ahmad Shah’s men shot the MH-47 out of the sky with an RPG, killing all sixteen personnel onboard.

Shah’s men recovered virtually all of the R and S team’s gear, including three M4s fitted with M203 40mm grenade launchers, rounds for the M4s and M203s, low illumination visualization equipment, an intact PRC-148 radio, a sniper spotting scope, and among many other items, a laptop computer with an intact hard drive containing classified material including detailed maps of the U.S. and British embassies in Kabul. Coalition forces could only presume that Shah would utilize what he and his men recovered from the SEALs in their future attacks against United States, coalition, and Afghan civilian and government personnel and facilities.

A massive search and recovery effort was launched in the wake of the ambush and subsequent MH-47 shutdown. A local villager who had befriended Marines at Camp Blessing, roughly 8 miles distant, had found and then protected the only survivor of the R and S Team; he sent another villager to Blessing with a note from the survivor. As the bodies of the special operations personnel were recovered and the survivor rescued, Shah and his men absconded into Pakistan, where they produced and distributed one of two videos they shot during the ambush for propoganda. While the massive coalition presence during the recovery effort achieved the desired end state of the operation (disruption of ACM activity), this was a short-lived and pyrrhic “victory.” Foreign fighters flowed in to join the emboldened Shah due to his overnight infamy (media had reported only a few facts of the operation, and the dramatic loss of so many U.S. troops was the lionized focus of this coverage). Within weeks, Shah’s attacks began anew, including an IED (improvised explosive device) strike on a convoy of Marines in late July 2005, and renewed mortar and rocket attacks on both military and civilian targets.

RED WINGS was an incredible tragedy for the families, friends, and associates of those lost. From a tactical / operational standpoint, and from an analysis of its influence on furthering security in the region (the operation’s purpose), the opening phase of RED WINGS was an unmitigated monumental disaster—one of the greatest, if not the greatest, in recent military history. Because so many resources were pushed to aid the recovery effort (the search and recovery was called RED WINGS II), other planned operations (not just in that part of the AO, but throughout Afghanistan), had to be delayed and many cancelled altogether. Ahmad Shah, a once unknown local Taliban aspirant, gained instant global fame and saw his ranks, finances, and armaments (including those taken from the SEALs) burgeon, enabling him to renew his attacks with greater intensity and frequency.

MARINE CORPS ETHOS, THE MEDIA, AND THE TRUTH

In the spring of 2005, when I first embedded with 2/3, Major Robert Scott and Major Thomas Wood, respectively the executive officer and operations officer of the battalion, discussed how information on military operations is often unfortunately skewed in one form or another. One of their key points was that just as painting a military operation or unit in an unfairly negative light hurts the overall war effort through erosion of public support, exaggeration and omission to deflect responsibility or to “glorify” a unit or event with excessive grandiose aggrandizing will, in the long run, prove just as injurious (if not more) to the military as a whole. An inaccurate ‘narrative’ will only prove to erode the public’s faith and confidence in the military once the public realizes the extent of that narrative’s inaccuracies, especially if the public perceives that the misinformation can be traced to the military itself. Military stories should be told comprehensively and honestly, inclusive of the good, the boring, the bad, the funny, and even the embarrassing. The idea of America having a Marine Corps because the citizenry *wants* and not needs a Marine Corps falls in line with having the Marine Corps story told accurately.

THE OPERATION RED WINGS MISINFORMATION TRAIL

Like coverage of most disasters, military or otherwise, media outlets raced to gather any detail of RED WINGS they could uncover. Outside of the helicopter shutdown and American military deaths, however, CJTF-76 (Combined Joint Task Force–76, the lead military command in Afghanistan at the time, the core of which was comprised of the Army’s Southern European Task Force, SETAF) public affairs released little. Since no media had been embedded with relevant units during RED WINGS, news gatherers could only rely primarily on daily public affairs briefings for their information.

Within two weeks of the ambush and shutdown, a number of articles attempting to provide in-depth coverage of RED WINGS emerged. While correct on certain aspects of the tragedy, such as only one member of the R and S team surviving and the number of SOF personnel killed, nothing was reported on the background, development, and purpose of the operation. Furthermore, basic facts of RED WINGS—even its name (most articles referenced it as “REDWING”)—were misreported, usually grossly. Media

accounts also omitted Marine Corps involvement in the operation’s background, design, as well as in the recovery effort of RED WINGS II.

This dissemination of inaccurate information reached a whirlwind pace in June of 2007 with the publication of the book *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10*, about the only surviving member of the R and S team. While the survivor, Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell, was given authorship credit, the book was actually written in its entirety by a British writer, Patrick Robinson, who penned primarily military fiction titles. In an article written by Robinson in February of 2010, he states that the Navy chose him to be the ghost writer of *Lone Survivor* based on his series of novels involving SEALs. Shortly after Luttrell and Robinson met, just weeks after RED WINGS drew to a close, the two secured a book deal and then a movie deal. Robinson began writing the manuscript as Luttrell returned to active duty. The Navy reviewed and approved the manuscript, endorsing it as accurate. Shortly after RED WINGS, a number of Marines of 2/3 carefully reviewed Luttrell’s after action report (AAR) and the R and S team’s gear manifest to learn of any recent changes in enemy TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures), and more importantly, to ascertain what additional threats they might face during operations and patrols due to Shah acquiring the SEAL team’s gear. In the AAR, Luttrell stated that the team was attacked by 20-35 ACM (analysis of two videos made by Shah, as well as other intel, indicated eight to ten total, a common ACM team size for this area). 20 was the number initially released by CJTF-76 public affairs. In *Lone Survivor*, however (which was released the same week Luttrell retired from the Navy), Robinson writes that the team faced hundreds and that Ahmad Shah was one of the top lieutenants to Osama bin Laden. During the battle, according to *Lone Survivor*, the SEALs killed dozens of “Taliban.” Robinson does not discuss Marine involvement in RED WINGS in *Lone Survivor*, or the prior operations after which RED WINGS was based, or the purpose of the operation, or the development of the operation, or any of the command relationships during RED WINGS. The (very gripping, yet extraordinarily unrealistic) narrative of a small special operations team inserted on a lonely mountain to not just surveil, but to take down the operations of one of Osama bin Laden’s top men—who had hundreds of fighters with him—continued to propagate throughout the media.

Roughly three years after the release of *Lone Survivor*, a third book covering RED WINGS was released. Published by a prominent military publisher, this book focuses on the commander of the R and S team, Lieutenant Michael Murphy. Although highlighting Murphy the individual, the book nevertheless provides a narrative of RED WINGS, a narrative again riddled with misinformation. The author explained, based presumably on information from his sources, the precipitating event and the genesis of OPERATION RED WINGS:

"On June 3, 2005, Shah's forces ambushed and killed three Marines from Company C, 1st Battalion (Airborne) near Forward Operating Base (FOB) Orgun-E, located outside the town of Orgune in the Paktika province in southwestern Afghanistan

along the Pakistani border. Killed were Captain Charles D. Robinson and Staff Sergeant Leroy E. Alexander. Seriously burned was Staff Sergeant Christopher N. Piper, who subsequently died of his wounds. The Marines approached CJSOTF-A's commanders and requested the capture or elimination of Shah."

While Paktika province lies in eastern Afghanistan (not southwestern Afghanistan as the author states), no Marines operated in Paktika at any time near the planning or execution of RED WINGS. Of course, there is no such unit in the whole of the Marine Corps as “Company C, 1st Battalion (Airborne).” Robinson, Alexander, and Piper were all members of 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group – which fell under the command of CJSOTF-A while in Afghanistan.

The Marines never approached CJSOTF-A's commanders to request anything but the low illumination assault support capability of the 160th SOAR(A); what they received in return was a mandate, rooted in strict adherence to USSOCOM doctrine, to integrate SOF ground forces for the opening two phases of the operation and to designate those forces as the supported, lead component of RED WINGS if 2/3 was to receive 160th support.

CONCLUSION

The full story of OPERATION RED WINGS yields invaluable information not just for warfighters of all services as well as civilian journalists covering military operations. An accurate, comprehensive account of the planning, the area of operation, the enemy, NAVSOF involvement, execution, breakdown of C3 (command, control, and communication), all that went awry on Sawtalo Sar, and the aftermath provides volumes in lessons learned. But if public affairs officials, authors, reporters, and editors, either through gross incompetence, or by intentionally chipping the story into a custom-honed narrative—regardless of how noble they believe their motives may be— allow these lessons to be drowned in a morass of misinformation, then they are lessons doomed to be learned again, and again.

The sentiments Majors Scott and Wood articulated to me in 2005 remain relevant and vital now more than ever. A healthy democracy with a civilian controlled military requires a high level of transparency of the military. This is an important concept deeply rooted in the Marine Corps' culture of fidelity to the nation's citizenry. The many Marines I've worked with over the years on media projects continue to not just preach it, they prove it. It's one of the reasons why so many of us civilians continue to want a Marine Corps.

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Cooling, Lieutenant Colonel Norman L. (Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines)

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Kinser, 1st Lieutenant Patrick E. (Platoon commander, 1st Platoon, Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines)

Long, 1st Lieutenant Robert (Assistant Operations Officer / Sniper Platoon Commander, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines)

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Naval Special Warfare Public Affairs – No Response

Priddy, Major Andrew (Operations Officer, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines)

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