

Here is feedback I sent around on 08/14/07 on the Joel-Cryer-inspired piece on Rules of Engagement in Afghanistan (re: Marcus Luttrell, *Lone Survivor*)

RESPONSES TO MY COMMENTARY:

From: "Frank Enbody" <Signographics@grayce.net>

To: <tpalaima@mail.utexas.edu>

Subject: August 13 diatribe

Date: Mon, 13 Aug 2007 19:31:35 -0500

After reviewing your extensive "biography", I fail to find any background that would, in my humble opinion, qualify you to assail the thinking, words, actions or opinions of an honorable American veteran (Navy Seal) whose life was most probably spent in danger most of the time he spent in any "combat" or other zone. Too bad he didn't have the moral courage to unite in Austin with the enemies of the the horrific perpetrators of the Abu Ghraib "abuses". Wonder what your opinion is about "anyone" who does harm to "possible innocents" (ala 9-11-01). Certainly we could have done the perpetrators no harm prior to the "incidents" since they were "possible innocents". I think your diatribe explains & represents your views. I have no doubt as to your non-motivation or reluctance to server in the military, which might have imparted some minute measure of credence to your "commentary"

From: David Admin <D5480@aol.com>

Subject: Austin American Statesman

Date: Mon, 13 Aug 2007 16:44:36 -0500

Dr. Palaima, World War 2 was concluded with the use of nuclear weapons. Truman believed that thousand of Americans soldiers would be saved by this action even though thousands of innocent Japanese would die. How can the behavior of one soldier in protecting his own life be immoral while this country and every other country during war does this routinely on a much larger scale? David DeVault

***Professor Palaima,***

***Good article in the Statesman today, I just finished LONE SURVIVOR last night. My wife surprised me with the book because I served as a Navy Corpsman with the FMF, Pacific, Airwing, 13 month tour in South East Asia during the sixties. I did water rescues for individuals in the water, on ships and land from an H-34 helicopter. These were exciting times but try being dropped off with six marines and the H-34 flies away.***

***When I started the book I came across the "great G.W. Bush part and I gagged, more so when he talks about Rumsfeld. Bush's military experience was served state side in a posh fortunate son guard unit, never to be deployed outside the U.S. (Texas or Alabama for that matter). Cheney's combat expertise is knowing how to fill out draft deferments.***

***That being said, I finished the book and will donate it to the West Bank Community Library, where my wife works one day a week and where Laura Bush will attend the dedication tomorrow (my wife, Pamela, in attendance--no ! I'll (deleted) pass).***

***To say the invasion of Iraq was a mistake at this point in time is ridiculous. It was, and as General Zini said to Bush, "don't do it" but he did it anyway. I firmly believe in what Congressman Charles Rangel says about the draft, "if we had the draft the war would end very soon".***

***Luttrell is a unique guy, raised in red neck religious bible thumping east Texas and completing the SEAL program.***

***The Afghan war is the most difficult war to fight and the rules of engagement are far left behind in a protected base camp.***

***The liberal press hasn't done enough to engage the President, Senators or Congressmen.***

***As for me, I don't think I'll ever vote for another Republican again.***

**And this from a Vietnam vet I know well:**

The ROE are essential to any operation among civilians. I could go on about this, but you are eloquent enough. This is not a liberal idea. It's an idea that saves both our consciences and our missions. Kill civilians and lose the war for hearts and minds. To say nothing of the damage to our own souls.

### **And from another vet;**

A very timely column. I have increasingly worried about the ROE, and the apparently inability on the part of most Americans to see our forces as the true foreigners in a foreign land. We've watched too many war movies where Americans are always coming to the rescue.

To hear conservative talkies (all of whom never spent a minute in uniform) like Newt Gingrich tell us that we overcame Germany, Japan, etc., and we have the capacity to overcome the "insurgents" if we'll just show "the will to do so," totally ignores the differences in those two engagements, and the true historical perspective. This is a different war.

We're not wanted, welcomed, and will always be seen as "invaders" rather than as "liberators," which we were in WWII. Where are the great epic battles of this "war?" Where do we take on the second Panzer division? Where do we defeat the Japanese thirteenth combat regiment? Who will sign the treaty documents for the "insurgents?"

We've just killed the tyrannical watchdog who controlled the tribes.

Nevertheless, ROE are intended to protect the innocent. If our soldiers cannot observe them, get them out of there.

### **And from a WW II vet I know very well:**

As a veteran of two major U.S. conflicts, both fading into the distant past, I have at least anecdotal credibility for my comments on this painfully difficult issue. I agree that war morally ambivalent. I instinctively recognize such ambiguity from several isolated anecdotal incidences from W.W. II and Korea which still resonate after these many decades. One was P-47 pilot who laughingly spoke of the death of his wing mate. Another was overhearing in a chow line in Seoul Korea an airman bragging about machine gunning civilian "kooks" crossing a river. A third was a close boyhood friend back from the Pacific gleefully talking about killing "Jap" prisoners while transporting them back from the front lines; in his version they all "tried to escape."

In the present conflict the civilian/warrior demarcation is deliberately blurred. The U.S. is in a fight where the opposition makes no such distinction and uses moral ambiguity as a shield. So the U.S. is faced with not only the usual issue of the relative importance of "civilian lives" and the "success of the mission," where the mission is arbitrarily defined. An official ROE is of limited value in such a situation. Two of my anecdotes reveal the applicable ROE is frequently violated and infrequently enforced.

I have long concluded that one's moral stance is a purely personal matter. Of course some restraint may be felt from an ROE, laws, and religious persuasions but none are absolute, particularly in a sudden moment of life or death crisis.

What Marcus Luttrell seems to be advocating is a morality based exclusively on self preservation. His is hardly a case for improving the ROE.

**And this from my former student and former Marine (Centcom PAO), who is now works for Al Jazeera English:**

Tom, This is a great review and an excellent defense of one of the few remaining nobilities in war. If you do a follow-up, I hope you expand on what you mention in the preamble. For many the ROE are unfair because the other side, name any other side you want, never follows them. But if the ROE are regarded as a way of preserving our own troops' sanity, then maybe critics of the ROE will see their merit.

**And short and sweet:**

I really like the ending of this one, how you say "he is right" and then refer to Socrates.

**And my response to Enbody above:**

Dear Frank,

Thank you for your remarks. Here is my point of view laid out in more detail. I would be grateful if you read it and think about it.

What I wrote was not intended as and did not function as a diatribe. I wrote a piece questioning the reasoning of former Petty Officer Luttrell and its implications for the moral decision-making and well-being of our soldiers in combat.

I in no way questioned his bravery or his honor. I could never do what he did. But he does not have the intellectual training and the distance from, and perspective on, the events of Operation Redwing that I have from years of study.

Luttrell claimed in his book that present-day "liberal politicians in Washington" devised the ROE that our soldiers in combat follow.

This is wrong on several scores. These ROE in fact are devised by the branches of our military in cooperation with the DoD, which itself in 2005 called for more robust ROE in order to cope with the ambiguities and complexities of the theaters

in which our soldiers (and an almost equal number of contract soldiers) are now operating.

And these ROE are devised just as much to protect our brave soldiers as they are to protect innocent civilians.

And they go back to the mid-19th century,

Here a history from from the US Army War College:

<http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/05summer/lessard.htm>.

As for Luttrell's position that they should have killed the goatherds:

**1** There is no proof that those 3 goatherds betrayed the SEALs' position. This is supposition on Luttrell's part.

**2** As a veteran said to me, "Luttrell's story rings false in many ways. It presupposes that in an area with a large concentration of Taliban rebel forces and a major Taliban leader, there would be no lookouts posted or that those lookouts on an evening in the mountains would fail to hear or observe a US helicopter dropping off four SEALs."

**3** By Luttrell's own admission the position they took up for viewing the village was great for observation but left them virtually out in the open and observable. Again this is in an area of high concentration of Taliban armed and trained forces who have years experience of dealing with US special forces that are out to get them. Luttrell in his own account talks about what good tactics the Taliban fighters use both collectively and as individuals.

Are we to assume that their security is so lax that they do not hear choppers coming in nearby and do not observe commandos out on exposed ridges? Or that they do not have routine patrols out?

So, there is at least a reasonable possibility that the goatherds, like the later villagers who rescued Luttrell, were completely innocent and that the Taliban forces that eventually came upon the SEALs were out because of other reports about the SEALs or even on a routine patrol of the area.

**4** Luttrell's statement that he, and other, soldiers have an innate sixth sense that tells them who is a terrorist or a rebel or a Taliban or Al Qaeda sympathizer in disguise is fantastic in general. And in specific it is belied by Luttrell's own inability later on to decide whether the other villagers were there to help him or turn him in.

5. Furthermore, Luttrell says they voted against tying the goatherds up because people would come looking in the area the goatherds (and the goats) and the SEALs were in, if the goatherds did not come back when they were expected. And that the goats would not have gone away. This would have compromised the mission.

The same applies if the goatherds were dead. So the killing would be senseless, again by Luttrell's own reasoning.

6. As the Christian blog points out, Luttrell's argument assumes that the killing of the goatherds would have assured the success of the mission or that the SEALs would have survived.

Given where they were--on exposed terrain with anywhere from 120 to 200 trained and armed Taliban soldiers out prowling around--this is not a high probability. So the killings would not have had a definite morally good end.

Luttrell's (and the conservative and liberal media's) ill-reasoned and ill-informed take on what happened during Operation Redwing should not move us as a nation to less Christian and less-civilized ways of using force.

The Christian blog in fact points out that Luttrell and one other SEAL voted to do the morally right and Christian thing. And one other SEAL abstained. So 3 out of 4 highly trained SEALs understood at that moment that they were doing the right thing by their ROE and by their innate sense of Christian morality.

For Luttrell, after the fact, to second-guess this decision, in grief and without thinking it through clearly, does a disservice to the SEALs who died.

You seem to imply that because we were attacked by terrorists on 9/11, we have now a right to behave like them and take innocent lives.

That would not be good for our armed forces.

On the issues we are discussing, I do know more than former Petty Officer Luttrell and I have the advantage of being able to look at these things as an outsider to them and without the serious effects that Luttrell has clearly felt and continues to feel. In interviews he is still clearly troubled by both options, and in the interviews I have heard and read he draws back from advocating that he/they should have killed the goatherds and that soldiers should have *carte blanche* in combat to kill whoever seems to them suspicious.

As for your look at my biography, I have worked for many years on war writing, and with veterans, and with PTS-specialist psychiatrists, in and outside the VA, who are trying to help veterans get their shattered lives back together. Many are

ruined men because they have done just the kind of thing that Luttrell says that he and his seals should have done. I do not want that to happen to others. We cannot abandon our moral principles without losing some part of our very souls.

I hope that explains my position more fully. I don't expect you will agree, but please do understand that I did not intend disrespect of Former Petty Officer Luttrell's courage. But that does not mean I should sit quietly when he advocates, by implication, immoral actions that make us behave more like terrorists than like citizens of a free and moral nation.

AND FINALLY, A NICE EXCHANGE WITH Mr. DeVault above::

Dr. Palaima, My point was really very limited and was directed at your statement about the immorality of a soldier killing innocents to save his own life. Bush and the Senate created today's military situation in Afghanistan and Iraq by either their action or inaction. The morality of the war and past wars is primarily the responsibility of the US citizens and their elected leaders. I find it very difficult to call a soldier in battle immoral when trying to save his own or comrades lives.

Thank you very much for your response to my email. I enjoy what others have written also. David DeVault

David,

I find it very difficult, too, but unless one calls it what it is, conduct among people less inclined to be moral will be uncontrolled.

In Luttrell's case, given that, according to Luttrell's own description of the situation and the implications of his own partial reasoning, no clear moral good would have been assured, not even the success of SEAL's mission or the preservation of their lives, killing those goatherds would have been immoral. And Luttrell and one other SEAL saw that clearly at the time, and a third SEAL was at least conflicted enough about it to abstain in the decision-making.

One can use the same yardstick in other arenas. These Alabama boosters, as is reported in today's paper, who are using Katrina-related tax loopholes to build luxury sports condos for themselves and others to attend Bama football games. What do we call that?

Simply making the most out of what the government, unwisely, has created? Or does one say, especially the true conservatives, "Hey, I do not believe in government interfering with our lives except in extraordinary situations, like a natural disaster, and it certainly would be immoral to use funds, really not intended for my pleasures, in this way."

Unfortunately the answer is clear. Many people don't have social consciences. So we need more carefully worded laws and we need ROE.

At least that is how I see it. And that is why I wrote about Luttrell and Operation Redwing as I did.

Thank you for getting me to think through this and for the politeness with which you have expressed your thoughts.

Tom