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COMMENTARY

Palaima: As a matter of honor, troops shouldn't bend rules of war

Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR
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My close friend Joel Cryer served in Air Force pararescue in Vietnam. The parajumpers are the only U.S. military unit "specifically organized, trained and equipped to conduct personnel recovery operations in hostile or denied areas as a primary mission." They train hard to uphold their motto "That Others May Live." They put their lives on the line every mission. On military matters, I give Joel my full attention.

Last week, Joel called me and said, "Tom, I'm leaving a book on your front porch, 'Lone Survivor,' about a Navy SEAL mission in Afghanistan. It is a New York Times bestseller. The author is from East Texas. Read it, but don't bother to return it. Just throw it out. It is jingoistic, simplistic and there is something not right about its narrative of what happened. It advocates killing civilians. Let me know what you think."

I read the book and many reviews and blogs about it. I have read interviews with the author, former Petty Officer Marcus Luttrell, including one by Edward Nowotka in the July 29 American-Statesman. I have found only one source, a Christian blog (www.danvado.com), that questions Luttrell's repeated assertion that U.S. military rules of engagement prohibiting firing upon unarmed civilians caused the deaths of the three other SEALs in Operation Redwing.

Luttrell, without historical understanding, blames "liberal politicians in Washington" for the rules of engagement that guide our soldiers in Iraq and elsewhere.

The four SEALs were searching for a Taliban leader. They choppered in and secured a position for observing a Pashtun mountain village. Three goatherds happened upon them. The SEALs faced an awful life-and-death dilemma. Killing these three might preserve the security of the mission. But they had no way of knowing whether the goatherds were pro-Taliban or not.

Luttrell claims that he could tell whether Afghans were friendly or hostile. He reports that although these goatherds said in English "No Taliban, No Taliban," their looks were cold and hateful, and they offered no signs of friendship. Ultimately, Luttrell cast the deciding vote to let them go free. He says the SEALs were afraid of what America's "liberal media" and the Al-Jazeera network would do if they discovered that four American soldiers had killed three "innocent civilians." One reviewer declares flatly, "Marcus Luttrell made the wrong decision. He was thinking like a liberal."

Later on, after three fellow SEALs have been killed by armed Taliban rebels, Luttrell is protected and given medical attention by Pashtun villagers. When these Afghans first approach, he is unsure whether they are friends or enemies. He holds an unpinned grenade as he is carried back to their village, ready to blow himself and them up if they were with the Taliban. He decides they are friendly, when they say, "No Taliban, no Taliban," the same words he earlier said he heard from the suspicious goatherds. But now he says he is "pretty sure" that the goatherds did not say the same words.

Luttrell's basic opinion has gained wide support in reviews and commentaries. American soldiers should be given freedom to decide in the field about killing people who look like unarmed civilians. Not doing so in Operation Redwing, in Luttrell's opinion, cost the lives of three brave SEALs and 16 other Americans in a rescue helicopter that crashed. For Luttrell, even our abuses in Abu Ghraib prison were nothing. Al Qaeda beheads innocent people. Why should we worry about mistreating prisoners?

The Christian blog alone points out that we have no proof that the position of the SEALs was betrayed by the three Pashtun goatherds, or that the mission would have been a success if the SEALs had killed them.

As for Luttrell's own fallible enemy Geiger counter, imagine three Texan ranchers walking out one morning to look at their cattle. They come upon four Afghani commandos armed with high power weapons. They are forced at gunpoint to sit immobile while the Afghani soldiers discuss in an unintelligible language what to do with them. Hardly the situation for friendly smiles and a warm Texas welcome.

Luttrell is right. War is full of moral ambiguities. But no moral person has the right to do harm to possible innocents to escape death.

This is not a liberal opinion. It is the opinion of an army veteran of three terrible campaigns. His name was Socrates. He died fearlessly in 399 B.C. rather than act against his own rules of engagement, as a soldier and as a human being.

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