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Leadership Lessons from the “Lone Survivor” Mission

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Former Army helicopter pilot Matthew Brady, founder and CEO of Pershing Barracks Capital, discusses his battlefield experience—and how it shaped his approach to business

In 2007, Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell wrote a book called Lone Survivor, recounting his experience during a 2005 mission in Northeastern Afghanistan that ultimately claimed the lives of 19 of his fellow soldiers. It was a best seller, and in 2014, became a major motion picture starring Mark Wahlberg.

Matt Brady lived this mission. As a pilot in an elite Army helicopter unit called the Night Stalkers, he was tasked with delivering Luttrell and three other soldiers to the drop point, and sticking around to make sure they found a good place to hide in the mountains. The next day, though, that team was attacked. And here, Brady tells a story of the last-minute decision that kept him from the subsequent ill-fated rescue mission, the difficult decisions he had to make that day, and the leadership lessons he took from the experience.

I want to talk to you about the Operation Red Wings mission in Afghanistan in 2005. Tell me about that mission and your role in it.

BRADY: Operation Red Wings came about one night after I'd been in Afghanistan for about three or four weeks. I was in the planning room one day when a US Navy SEAL walked in the door, and asked me if I've heard of Operation Red Wings. So we talked for a little bit, we opened up a map, and he pointed to a place in Northeastern Afghanistan called the Korengal Valley.

And he was telling me a little bit about the people that resided there and what life was like, but also about this man named Shah, who had raised a militia, and was really terrorizing that valley, and ruling it with an iron fist. And so our goal, our mission, was to fly helicopters into that valley, find him, and put a stop to what he was doing.

It was Brady's job to take four SEALs on his helicopter, drop them off at a spot overlooking the Korengal Valley, and stick around till they found a good place to hide. And he did that, and then headed back as the sun began to rise. Hours later, he was awoken with the news that those SEALs he dropped off were now in trouble, and fighting for their lives. And so Brady started to prepare his helicopter for a rescue mission.

BRADY: We got into the helicopters. There were going to be two helicopters filled with SEALs to go provide immediate reinforcements. And so we start the engines, we're getting ready to take off. And at that point, my boss, Major Stephen Reich, the guy who'd been mentoring me the whole time, gets on board and asks me about my plan.

And he said, OK, I like it, everything except the parts that involve you. So get off the helicopter, and take my place up at the operations center. To me, that was devastating. I like to say that's kind of like Tom Brady of New England Patriots getting ready to snap the ball on a crucial fourth down. And before he does that, Bill Belichick calling a time out, running onto the field, and saying, hey, Brady, I know you were about to snap the ball, but how about you just take a knee? Go on over to the sideline. I'll take the play, and you can just watch.





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About five minutes later, they took off, and they sped towards this crisis scenario. And I made my way to the Ops Center, and monitored the radios, monitored the maps, and listened as they got closer to the target area. When they got close, the second helicopter of the two called back with the radio call Turbine 33 is down.

Now, Turbine is the call sign of our helicopter, as in the turbine engine. And 33 designated which helicopter it was. So I knew immediately it was the first helicopter. And I was in disbelief. So I radioed back, and I said, do you mean that he's down for maintenance and will soon pick up again? And the answer was no. Turbine 33 was shot with a rocket-propelled grenade, and they have crashed.

And at that point, everything went into slow motion. If you have ever been in a car crash or you've ever been in a traumatic situation, and time seems to start to really change, and warp, and slow down, that's what started to happen all around me. I was still trying to process the words when one of my sergeants, one of my troops to my left, was looking at me and saying something.

And I didn't really know what it was. Finally, I turned to him and I asked him, what are you saying to me? And he said, sir, what do we do? And in my mind, I thought, what do you mean what do we do? I don't know what to do. I'm the newest guy in the unit. Why would you ask me?

And then as I'm asking these questions internally, I realize I'm now the Bravo Company commander, because the way it works in the army is as soon as the commander is killed in action, the next officer takes immediate command on the spot. And Bravo company is made up of two platoon leaders. I was the only one in country. The other one was back in the United States.

And so now I was the new commander of this force that I had very little experience with, very little credibility with. And I now had to call the shots. And so that took a little while to sink in. Seemed like hours, it was probably minutes.

Why was it so hard to believe that, Matt? Was it just because it didn't seem possible?

BRADY: The Night Stalkers hadn't had a helicopter shot down, at that point, ever. I mean, certainly not since the wars had begun. Just the notion of someone using a rocket-propelled grenade, which is a very unsophisticated weapon, in the middle of the Hindu Kush mountains, where you can't get around easily. And so to be in the right place at the right time with that kind of a weapon system, it just wasn't making sense.

After the shock wore off, Brady was faced with a few critical decisions. First, the other helicopter on scene was not only taking fire from an emboldened local militia, but the SEALs on board, having just seen what happened to the fellow soldiers on the other helicopter, were demanding weapons drawn that the pilots put them on the ground. And Brady had to tell them that they couldn't land, and that in fact, they had to fly far away from the site to the closest US base. There were just too many unknowns, he says, to risk further lives. And then he needed to figure out what to do next, and who could help them do it.

BRADY: I had to find out truly who was ready to go, and who was just saying they were ready to go, because in the end, that was going to directly affect how successful we were. And number two, I had to figure out how do we respond. We've gotten an emboldened enemy on the ground. We've got a decrease in morale and a shock to the force right now. And the weather and the terrain are an increasingly dangerous factor. And so I had to make the very heart-wrenching decision to delay for 24 hours and let the sun rise again and set again before we attempted to rescue people that were potentially left on that mountain.

Matt, how was that decision received?



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BRADY: It was mixed. Some of the more experienced soldiers knew that this was a very risky endeavor, and that we had to be strategic about how we thought about this opportunity. And we didn't want to compound it with more losses, and make a bad situation worse. And then I had some of the newer guys.

These were friends. These were folks that they spent every hour with of every day in Afghanistan. And they weren't about to let their buddies stay up on that mountain without immediate help. It became very contentious. It was very emotional. Emotions were raw.

And we found a place to put additional troops in, and we did. We put in more Rangers, more SEALs, and came back down the mountain. Couldn't really see anything, but flew to base and waited. And right before we landed, I heard the lead SEAL team member who had gotten to the crash site after we'd put him on the ground. He'd arrived there, and he'd looked around, and he'd made that very ominous radio call that everyone in my command could hear, which was, we've located Turbine 33, and there are no survivors.

Then we knew that this was going to be purely a recovery mission. And our next order of business was to get back in there as soon as we could, and at least bring everyone home. And so that next night, we flew a single helicopter back into the crash site. We landed, and we brought the remains back to base, and transferred them into the unit that would then prepare them for their flight to Dover.

We transferred those caskets onto the plane that was getting ready to go to Dover. And right before we put the last few caskets on board, I was standing next to the US Navy SEAL leader in charge. And someone came running up to him with a handwritten note. And he said, 'sir, you've got to look at this'. And he looked at it. And the person that had given him that note said they found Marcus. Marcus Luttrell is alive, and he's in a neighboring village. So again, another emotional turn in this very complex and emotional journey. And now we knew another task was going to be to get this lone survivor, get this last Navy SEAL personnel back home.

Throughout this story, there are a series of critical choices that you had to make, and certainly one that your commanding officer Stephen Reich had to make as well. When you think about those critical choices that you had to make, what are the lessons that you gleaned from those choices?

BRADY: So I bucket those two choices that both he and I had to make in a couple different ways. One is Stephen Reich taught me many, many different things. The first one is that a leader is always at the decisive point of a battle. And if you're going to have any influence at all in the events, then that's where the leader needs to be. And selecting that place, knowing where that place is, is really a critical skill that a leader needs to develop. And he saw that as the decisive point.

And that's why he kicked you off the flight.

BRADY: And that's why he kicked me off the helicopter, because he was acting out what he truly, truly believed. And the second thing he taught me was, if you're going to ask people to do very dangerous and significant things that come at a cost, then you need to be willing to share that cost. For me, for my lessons learned, really, there are a few things.

First, it's OK to show vulnerability at times. It's OK to show people that you don't know everything. But at some point, you have to make a decision and you have to show that you have the willingness, the ability, and the capacity to make tough decisions, and you're going to make those tough decisions and not shy away from that responsibility.





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Another thing I learned was there are very few opportunities. And sometimes we have to create those opportunities where we can really get a glimpse into people's true character. And when faced with this sort of situation, I really was able to see who is going to be up to the task, and whose head just wasn't going to be in the game. And some of them just weren't ready. They weren't ready to commit, they just weren't there mentally, they were not going to be an asset in that situation to no fault of their own.

And so that gave me a unique opportunity to really get to see and to test who's going to be in this situation and are going to be able to achieve what we need to achieve with the highest probability. And then finally, I'd say the last thing is the troops at this time had an overriding desire to save and help their buddies. And oftentimes, that transcends national objectives. It transcends why we're there in the first place. The goods and bads, pros and cons of the war were irrelevant at that point.

It was about saving their brothers in arms, getting them back home, and doing whatever they could for them. And that purpose will drive you into extremely dangerous situations, sometimes make you lose your own life. And there were men who were willing to do that that day. And it was a tremendous testament to their values, and their courage, and what they hold dear.

And that was their reason why that day.

How much of these lessons did you process in real time or in the near term, and how much of it came after some space and time for reflection?

BRADY: I'd say 90% of these lessons came after the fact. Sure, there were the lessons I had to learn very, very quickly to be effective in the moment. But learning those skills later on in life on how to reflect, on how to really parse what I was feeling and thinking at that time, and not only what it means to me, but what it means to *other* leaders, that only came through time to reflect and allow myself to truly think about what happened.

I remember in 2010, I was on my way to a school called the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I was driving there from Savannah, Georgia, and I got to St. Louis. And I stopped for dinner. My wife and kids were still in Savannah. They'd come later.

But I stopped for dinner at a Ruth's Chris in St. Louis, and I sat down, and ordered a meal and a beer. And I thought, man, what happened? What was that all about? And 2010 is when I started thinking about 2005. And maybe that's just when trauma strikes. Sometimes we lock it away. At some point, you have to think about it, you got to deal with it.

And, I think as I matured, and especially when I got to my section in the Harvard Business School, you start really learning about how other people process these types of events, and the tools that you can use to really dig into, what were *you* thinking as the protagonist? What were you valuing at the time? Where were your blind spots? And really being clinical about it helps process these past experiences, and helps you learn from them. Unfortunately, sometimes people don't do that at all.

So now you have your *own* company—Pershing Barracks Capital—and you have these tools, you have these lessons. How do they guide you today?

BRADY: I understand a little bit more about what it means to be methodical, how to be systematic, how to understand and recognize my emotion in situations, but use that to help me make the decision, as opposed to blocking those good decisions that I need to make. The last thing I want to do is become so unfeeling that I'm not able to get in touch with that side of me.





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But I've got to use that emotion for purpose, and for advantage, and for good decision making, as opposed to letting it override what I'm thinking and the options that are in front of me. When I deal with employees, it helps me to seek out who's just *saying* that they're ready versus who's *actually* ready, how to really make sure that when people say, put me in, that they're actually ready to do the things I ask them to do.

And it's also given me a tremendous amount of perspective. Crises, to me, are few and far between. And there's no amount of really loss of capital or loss of time that's going to throw me into despair, or into a tizzy. And luckily, I've had these experiences—and this is one of them that I've had in my life—to where I can really give things the fair treatment and the value they deserve, and understand that it's not the end of the world. People aren't dying. People aren't losing their lives.

This is something that we can accomplish through some blood, sweat, and tears, and rolling up our sleeves. But at the end of the day, we're all going to go home to our families. And there is going to be another day tomorrow. And so I think it's given me a sort of patience that I bring to our decision making. And it just allows me to see things in a much different light.

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