

MARCUS LUTTRELL'S SAVIOR, MOHAMMAD GULAB, CLAIMS 'LONE SURVIVOR' GOT IT WRONG

R.M. SCHNEIDERMAN - 5-11-2016 - [BRON](#)

A photo of former Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell dressed in traditional Afghan attire during his stay in the village of Sabray during the summer of 2005. For days, Mohammad Gulab and his fellow villagers protected him from a Taliban-linked militia in northeastern Afghanistan. Luttrell went on to write the best-selling memoir, *Lone Survivor*.
GULAB FAMILY

They tried to kill him in the morning. They tried to kill him at night. They tried as he bumped over the road in a silver sedan, killing his nephew with a bullet to the brain. They tried with a sniper. They tried with a bomb. They tried with a grenade outside his daughter's bedroom, the blast hurling shrapnel into her leg. In a rural valley, along a desolate trail, in the doorway of his modest home—in all these places the Taliban tried to kill Mohammad Gulab. But somehow he survived every ambush, every assault.

Gulab's troubles began in northeastern Afghanistan in June 2005, after he saved a Navy SEAL from a Taliban-linked militia. The SEAL, Marcus Luttrell, went on to write a best-selling memoir, *Lone Survivor*, which later became a hit film. And his newfound fame proved to be lucrative. The Afghan timber worker didn't fare so well. With a Taliban bounty on his head, he had to leave his village, and he's spent the past decade on the run, while trying to protect his family.

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The most frightening attack came on a hot night in the fall of 2014. Gulab was asleep in his room when a bomb exploded by the front gate of his home. The blast woke his children, who ran to a neighbor's house for safety while Gulab and his wife grabbed their Kalashnikovs and climbed onto their roof. Under a canopy of stars, they squatted behind a barricade and fired toward

the gate, their bullets sparking in the darkness when they hit stones. The Taliban returned fire, but Gulab and his wife had the high ground. The standoff lasted for hours until, with daylight approaching, the militants retreated and Gulab and his wife climbed down, still terrified.

Gulab decided he had to flee Afghanistan, go to Europe or America. But how? Paying smugglers was too dangerous and expensive. He had friends in the States and contacts in Kabul, but no one seemed able to help. So as he stood in his yard, watching the sun slowly rise, Gulab finally lost something the Taliban hadn't been able to take from him in nearly a decade of attacks—he lost hope. Gulab had saved the life of a Navy SEAL, but no one, he felt, would ever come to his rescue.



Gulab, in his apartment in Fort Worth, Texas, holds a photo of Luttrell taken during their confrontation with a Taliban-linked militia.

R.M. SCHNEIDERMAN FOR
NEWSWEEK

To Be a Friend Is Fatal

In his book, *To Be a Friend Is Fatal*, Kirk Johnson, a former U.S. Agency for International Development worker in Fallujah, describes the wishful thinking and twisted logic that left so many U.S. allies stranded in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the mid-2000s, as insurgents stepped up their attacks against “collaborators,” Johnson began compiling a list of at-risk Iraqis. America, he felt, had a moral obligation to bring them to the States, so he started a nonprofit and began working with lawmakers. In 2008, in a rare display of bipartisanship, Congress created a system to bring over Iraqi and Afghan translators, office workers and other American allies. In the next five years, the Special Immigrant Visa program created tens of thousands of slots for Afghans and Iraqis, but bureaucratic bottlenecks, among other things, have left many of those slots unfilled. With the rise of the Islamic State group, the program has seen massive backlogs. The U.S has stopped accepting Iraqi applications, and Afghans now face stiffer requirements. “This is the most rigorous review on the face of the planet,” Johnson says. “We are looking for ways to say no to them. No one wants their signature on the next 9/11 hijacker’s visa papers.... People are dying waiting in line. History,” Johnson adds, “will not judge us very kindly.”

Gulab is among the fortunate few. Last fall, the 40-something villager from Sabray sought refuge through the U.N. and finally arrived in Texas with his wife and seven children. But it wasn’t Luttrell who saved him from the Taliban; the two had a falling out over money, respect and what really happened to the SEALs on that tragic day. Instead, Gulab’s saviors were a handful of strangers and acquaintances, Afghans and Americans, doctors, lawyers and government officials—some of whom put themselves in danger and broke rules to keep him safe.

Today, as Gulab struggles to adjust to life in America, his harrowing journey—from the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush to the drab strip malls of Fort Worth—is an inspiring story of hope and survival and a grim tale of betrayal and despair.

‘My Heart Dropped’

On the night of June 27, 2005, with a sense of dread creeping over him, Luttrell and his fellow SEALs—Michael Murphy, Matthew Axelson and Danny Dietz—headed out for a recon mission in a dangerous part of Kunar

province near the Pakistani border. A sniper and a medic, Luttrell packed a scoped military assault rifle and 11 magazines—three more than usual, he wrote in *Lone Survivor*. The SEALs were dropped in the “bad and barren” mountains to hunt for a Taliban leader “known to be one of Osama bin Laden’s closest associates,” Luttrell wrote. “He was also the kind of terrorist who would like nothing better than to mastermind a new attack on the U.S. mainland.”



Navy SEALs Michael Murphy left, and Matthew Axelson were killed during Operation Red Wings; Luttrell was the only man in his team who survived.U.S. NAVY

PHOTO/REUTERS

The next day, their mission unraveled. Around noon, as the Americans hid among rocks and fallen trees, a goat herder stumbled across Luttrell as two other herders, one of them a teenage boy, trailed behind with roughly 100 goats. The Americans were in a deadly bind. They had no rope to tie up the men, but letting them go might be a fatal mistake; the Afghans could alert

the Taliban. “The main problem,” Luttrell recalled Murphy, the team leader, arguing, “is the goats. Because they can’t be hidden.” Killing the men would be a problem too—the SEALs, Luttrell wrote, worried they’d be charged with murder if the media found out.

The way Luttrell tells it in his book, his team tried to contact headquarters but couldn’t get through, so Murphy decided to take a vote: Axelson wanted to kill the herders, Dietz abstained, and Murphy deferred to Luttrell, who decided to let them go. “It was the stupidest, most southern-fried, lame-brained decision I ever made in my life,” he wrote.

More than an hour and a half later, the SEALs spotted about 80 to 200 heavily armed militants above them. “My heart dropped directly into my stomach,” Luttrell wrote. “And I cursed those fucking goatherds to hell.”

Luttrell fired at one “hook-nosed Taliban warrior” and “blew his head off.” The militants responded with a barrage of bullets. The Americans again tried to contact headquarters but couldn’t get through. As gunfire rained down on them, the SEALs blasted back before tumbling down the mountain, as their attackers followed, firing rocket propelled grenades.

The battle raged for quite some time. The Americans were badly injured, Luttrell wrote, but continued to fight back, killing as many Taliban as they could, until they were nearly out of ammunition. “We must have killed 50 or more of them,” Luttrell wrote. Murphy eventually realized their only hope was to call for help once again. From his position, he couldn’t connect, so he sat on a small rock out in the open, making one last attempt. He succeeded, but it cost him his life.

A short while later, all of Luttrell’s teammates were dead, and then a Taliban grenade blew him sideways and over a ravine. When he came to, the SEAL realized the blast had blown his pants off, and he was badly injured: His back and nose were broken, and his face was busted up, he wrote. His left leg was full of shrapnel, and his shoulder ached. Yet somehow Luttrell found the strength to move, crawling into a “crevasse” and waiting until it was safe to emerge.

What he didn’t know at the time was that Murphy’s call sprang the U.S. military into action. Eight members of the 160th Special Operations

Aviation Regiment and eight Navy SEALs had quickly boarded a helicopter to come to his rescue. But as the aircraft flew over the mountains and the team prepared to rope down, an insurgent fired a rocket-propelled grenade. It struck the fuel tanks, Luttrell wrote, and no one survived.



A U.S. helicopter flies over mountains north of Asadabad in 2005, near where the chopper sent to rescue Luttrell’s SEAL team was shot out of the sky, killing 16 Americans.REUTERS

When darkness fell, the SEAL started walking. He was exhausted, scared and dying of thirst, but he pushed on. The next day, he wrote, he stumbled upon a waterfall, where he drank a bit and cleaned his wounds.

That’s when a few Afghan villagers appeared before him. “No Taliban!” one of them shouted. “No Taliban!” He gave Luttrell water and helped carry him back to their village. “[Soon],” Luttrell wrote, “I met my first real friend, Mohammad Gulab.”

For days, Gulab and the other villagers protected Luttrell from the militants—even in the face death threats. They considered it their duty

under Pashtunwali, a tribal honor code requiring them to protect those in need. As Gulab guarded Luttrell, the SEAL wrote, another villager went to a nearby U.S. military base with a note from the American.

Eventually, as the Taliban prepared to attack, Luttrell wrote, a team of Army Rangers arrived and whisked him and Gulab off in a helicopter that took them to a nearby U.S. military base in Asadabad.

Before they parted, Luttrell tried to give Gulab his watch, a token of his gratitude, but the villager declined. The two hugged. “I had no words in his language to express my thanks,” Luttrell wrote. “Our paths, which had crossed so suddenly and so powerfully in a life-changing encounter for both of us, were about to diverge.”

‘Full of Sadness and Anger’

Saving Luttrell was an extraordinary act of courage, and it destroyed Gulab’s life. The Taliban put him on a kill list, so he couldn’t return to his village. His wife and children had to flee, and his family lost nearly everything: Their home and most of their clothes, their taxi and timber business, their apple trees and the land, where they had planted wheat and corn.

In the summer of 2005, not long after Gulab saved Luttrell, the U.S. military showed its gratitude. At the urging of several Marine commanders, Gulab received some cash and a job at the base in Asadabad. He asked about Luttrell several times, but no one was able to put him in touch with the American, so over the next six months, Gulab settled into his new life.



The family is living in a drab, four-bedroom apartment that costs them \$719 a month. COOPER NEILL FOR NEWSWEEK

That is until early 2006, when he and his brother-in-law were walking on a rural road outside of Asadabad. As they passed through a valley, the Taliban began firing at them with AK-47s. Gulab emerged unscathed, but a bullet hit his brother-in-law in the ribs. Fortunately, there were American troops nearby, and they airlifted the two Afghans to see a doctor.

Things only got worse for Gulab. Less than a year later, the U.S. military arrested him, fearing he was collaborating with the Taliban, among other things. After several days, they set him free and apologized. Gulab says they continued paying him, but he was no longer allowed on the base. The Afghan pressed on—he bought another truck and hired workers to haul timber.

In 2010, he again tried to reach out to Luttrell. This time, he traveled roughly 50 miles to a U.S. military base in Jalalabad, where he met a muscular man with a beard named Joe Fairchild, who Gulab says worked as a military adviser. Fairchild declined to comment for this story, but the Afghan says he contacted Luttrell for him. To confirm his identity, Gulab

says he gave Fairchild a photo a friend took of the SEAL dressed in traditional Afghan clothing during his time in the village, shortly after the battle. Luttrell responded enthusiastically and said he'd been trying to get in touch.

In the five years since he and Gulab had last spoken, the American had served another tour, retired and received the Navy Cross for heroism in combat for that mission in Kunar. He had also received permission from his superiors to publish his memoir, which he worked on with Patrick Robinson, a British novelist.

Little, Brown won the book at auction with a seven-figure advance, according to *The New York Times*, and it became a major success. But Luttrell's harrowing days in the Hindu Kush continued to haunt him, and fame apparently didn't make his life easier—even after Universal reportedly purchased the rights to his story in 2007 for several million dollars. “He was full of sadness and anger and confusion over everything that had happened on that mountain,” one of his friends told The Daily Beast. “At the same time, everyone back home wanted a piece of him.”

Gulab, however, says he wanted only friendship—and Luttrell said he wanted the same. When the Afghan contacted him through Fairchild, the former SEAL was setting up a nonprofit, the Lone Survivor Foundation, to help American military personnel adjust to life after war. He invited Gulab to come to the U.S. for the foundation's inaugural gala. The Afghan didn't have a passport or the money for the flight, but Fairchild and the foundation took care of that.

Gulab almost didn't make it to the States. In May 2010, months before he was supposed to fly to Houston, he stepped outside his home in Asadabad to get some fresh air. As he stood near the doorway, two men on motorcycles pulled up and fired at him with pistols. Gulab stumbled backward and scrambled inside as a bullet ricocheted off a wall and struck him in the upper thigh. The wound wasn't serious, but it was a painful reminder that the Taliban would never stop trying to kill him.

In a futile attempt to hide from the Taliban, who were trying to kill him, Gulab left his village and moved to Asadabad, capital of Kunar Province.ROBERT

NICKELSBURG/GETTY

Coming to America

When Gulab landed at the Houston airport in September 2010, Luttrell was waiting for him, a watch in his hand—a reminder of their emotional parting five years before. For the next two weeks, the Lone Survivor Foundation paid for Gulab to travel around the country with Fairchild and an interpreter. The Afghan learned about dinosaurs at the Houston Museum of Natural Science and flew to Washington, D.C., where he was impressed by the splendor of the White House and moved by the memorial for soldiers who died in Afghanistan.

Back in Texas, Gulab enjoyed firing guns and palling around with Luttrell at his father-in-law's ranch. When Luttrell offered to help Gulab acquire a green card, the Afghan said he was appreciative but wasn't ready to leave his country, despite the threats against his life. Before they parted once again, this time in Houston, Gulab says Luttrell promised to hold a fundraiser for him and the other villagers who had saved him.

Soon after Gulab returned to Asadabad, his life was again thrown into turmoil. The Taliban stole his timber truck and all the wood it was carrying. With his family in danger, and no way to make a living, he contacted Fairchild and others at the base. They gave him thousands of dollars to help the family move to Jalalabad.

Luttrell helped too. He raised more than \$30,000 with a fundraiser, and sent the money in installments over the next three years to the Afghan's bank. Gulab says Luttrell asked him to give \$13,000 to the other villagers, which he says he did.

For the next two years, Gulab and his family remained relatively safe. But one night in 2012, as he returned from a grocery store, riding in the passenger seat of his nephew's Toyota, the Taliban opened fire from the side of the road. A bullet pierced his nephew's skull, and the gunman fled into the night.

Gulab was devastated. He loved his nephew and felt guilty about his death. But at least the Taliban didn't know where he lived. At least he had Luttrell, who promised to always come to his rescue.

'You Were the True Hero'

Over the next year, Gulab and Luttrell periodically kept in touch through an Afghan intermediary, and both seemed frustrated at times by the language barrier. So in early 2013, the former SEAL sent him an intriguing message through a new interpreter, a fellow Pashtun. Director Peter Berg had turned *Lone Survivor* into a movie, and Universal planned to release it in late December. Luttrell had consulted on the film and wanted his friend to help with promotion.



Luttrell, left, with Mark Wahlberg, who portrays him in 'Lone Survivor,' at the movie's L.A. premiere in 2013. JORDAN STRAUSS/INVISION/AP

Gulab was excited. He was eager to see Luttrell again, and he was proud that the movie would show the world how he and his village had defied the Taliban and saved the American. But he also knew it would make him a

bigger target—especially if he went to the U.S. He thanked the interpreter for the offer but declined.

Gulab says Luttrell kept trying and even promised him money. “It’s not that I’d pay you,” the Afghan villager recalls him saying. “It’s money from the movie.” Gulab still wasn’t sure, explaining, “I didn’t save Marcus for money.” The translator, he recalls, pushed harder. “Now is not the time to think about Pashtunwali,” he told him. “Now is the time to open up your lap and let the money fall in.”

He had a point, Gulab thought. With money from the film, he could move to Kabul—even to America, if it came to that. He didn’t specify a sum; that would have been impolite, but he said yes. “Whatever you offer me,” Gulab recalls telling the interpreter, “that’s OK.” And so, in the summer of 2013, Universal secured a visa for Gulab, and the Afghan sent his family back to Asadabad to live with relatives.

In August, Universal flew Gulab to Houston first class, and he suddenly felt like a celebrity. Everywhere he went—New York, Houston, Los Angeles—someone wanted to talk to him, to thank him for saving Luttrell. He walked the red carpet twice and hobnobbed with Hollywood stars. He even visited Las Vegas. Over the course of several months, Gulab saw the film three times. His fondest memory of the trip was meeting Mark Wahlberg, the actor who plays Luttrell in the film. When the two had a moment to chat at the movie’s New York premiere, the actor told Gulab, “You were the true hero.”

Luttrell was busy promoting the movie, but the Afghan enjoyed spending time with him when he could. Since they’d last seen each other, the former SEAL had become an entrepreneur, launching his own clothing line (and later his own brand of ammunition called Team Never Quit). The burly Texas native frequently offered to help him start a business, Gulab says, and the two discussed a market the Afghan said he wanted to buy in Asadabad. When Gulab began to miss home or worry about his family, he claims Luttrell comforted him, offering to buy him a house in Dubai or get him a green card and build him a home in Houston. Robinson, Luttrell’s co-author, recalls a similar exchange: “[Luttrell and his wife] offered to build Gulab a large house on a river,” he says, “and to provide him with

livestock...that would give him an income and he would be safe there forever.”

As the buzz around *Lone Survivor* increased, Luttrell advised him to seek asylum, since it was proving difficult for him to get a green card. Gulab decided against it. Doing so meant he could never return to Afghanistan or reunite with his family, or so he thought. “I was 100 percent sure the U.S. government would give me a green card,” he says. “I [had] sacrificed a lot.”



Wahlberg, with Ali Suliman, who played Gulab in the movie version of 'Lone Survivor.'ALAMY

That sacrifice would soon be rewarded, Gulab says his friend told him. At a party at the home of the interpreter’s parents in California, the Afghan remembers sitting with his translator in the dining room when Luttrell sidled up to him. They had something important to discuss. As the three huddled, Gulab claims they hashed out a verbal agreement: Luttrell promised to link him up with Robinson, his co-author, so he could tell *his* version of how they met, and the Afghan could keep the profits from the book. Gulab also maintains that Luttrell promised him a 50-50 split on whatever he made from the movie. Later, the villager claims, he asked the

interpreter if Luttrell and Universal would draw up a contract. Gulab recalls the translator telling him not to worry about it and saying, “Whatever [Luttrell] says, he will do.”

‘He Took Two Rounds to the Chest’

True to his word, Luttrell invited Gulab to his house outside of Houston to meet with Robinson. For days, the British novelist and the Afghan villager chatted as the interpreter translated. Gulab had never read Luttrell’s book—he can’t read or write in any language, and he understood the movie was fictional. But as Robinson went through Luttrell’s version of what happened in Afghanistan, Gulab thought many parts of the story were not the way he remembered them.

Most of the differences were minor. But a few turn that battle against some of the world’s most dangerous militants into something far less heroic. Gulab maintains the SEALs were far from the stealthy, superhuman warriors described in *Lone Survivor*. They didn’t die because they spared civilians, he says; they died because they were easily tracked, quickly outmaneuvered and thoroughly outgunned. The militants, like many others in the area, heard the helicopter drop the Americans on the mountain, Gulab claims. The next morning, they began searching for the SEAL’s distinctive footprints. The way Gulab heard it from fellow villagers, when the militants finally found them, the Americans were deliberating about what to do with the goat herders. The insurgents held back. After Luttrell and company freed the locals, the gunmen waited for the right moment to strike.

The battle, Gulab claims, was short-lived. He wasn’t on the mountain with Luttrell but says everyone in the village could hear the gunfire. Gulab scoffs at the estimate by Naval Special Warfare Command that 35 Taliban died in the battle. (A Navy spokesman declined to comment on the matter.) But the Afghan claims the villagers and American military personnel who combed the mountain for the bodies of the dead SEALs never found any enemy corpses. (Andrew MacMannis, a former Marine Colonel who helped draw up the mission and was on scene during the search and recovery effort for the dead SEALs and other military personnel, says there were no reports of any enemy casualties.)

More puzzling: While Luttrell wrote that he fired round after round during the battle, Gulab says the former SEAL still had 11 magazines of ammunition when the villagers rescued him—all that he had brought on the mission.

Gulab wasn't the first to question the accuracy of *Lone Survivor*. In his 2009 book, *Victory Point*, the journalist Ed Darack wrote about the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment in Afghanistan, the unit that planned the mission. He uncovered a bevy of discrepancies in Luttrell's account. Some are small: He got the name of the operation wrong—it was Red Wings, like the hockey team, not Redwing. Others are more significant: The target, Ahmad Shah, wasn't an international terrorist or a close bin Laden associate. He was the head of a small Taliban-linked militia. Citing reports gleaned from phone and radio intercepts, Darack estimates only eight to 10 militants attacked the SEALs, not 80 to 200. In fact, two graphic videos the gunmen shot during the firefight show only seven men in Shah's militia.

“[Luttrell's claims] are exaggerated nonsense,” says Patrick Kinser, a former Marine infantry officer who participated in Operation Red Wings and read the former SEAL's after action report. “I've been at the location where he was ambushed multiple times. I've had Marines wounded there. I've been in enough firefights to know that when shit hits the fan, it's hard to know how many people are shooting at you. [But] there weren't 35 enemy fighters in all of the Korengal Valley [that day].”

Gulab claims that one afternoon, while sitting with Luttrell in his father-in-law's living room, he brought up some of these discrepancies. The timing was more than bad—in a few hours, the two were supposed to sit down with TV anchor Anderson Cooper for a *60 Minutes* interview. The former SEAL seemed angry, Gulab recalls. Later, he claims the interpreter took him outside to chat: “Whatever Marcus says in the interview,” the Afghan recalls being told, “say yes.” (The interpreter declined to comment for this story.)

Luttrell's account to 60 Minutes, given years after Darack's book came out, differs in significant ways from his memoir, other interviews he gave and speeches he's made around the country. Now Shah was not a threat to the home front. Now there were just 30 to 40 fighters on the mountain. Now he appeared to indicate Murphy alone decided to let the goat herders go. (His

lawyer, Tony Buzbee, said in a statement: “Marcus Luttrell stands by his account in *Lone Survivor*. Everything he wrote in his book is absolutely true.”)

As Luttrell spoke to Cooper, it was clear that his fallen comrade still haunted him. “[Murphy] took two rounds to the chest,” he said. “It dropped him. I tried to make my way up to him.... I was out in the open, waving my hands. I was like, ‘Just come down to me.’... I heard his gun go off and a lot of gunfire in his area. I was trying with everything I had to get to him, and he started screaming my name. He was like, ‘Marcus, man, you gotta help me! I need help, Marcus!’ It got so intense that I actually put my weapon down and covered my ears. ‘Cause I couldn’t stand to hear him die. All I wanted him to do was stop screaming my name.... And I put my weapon down in a gunfight while my best friend was getting killed. So that pretty much makes me a coward.... I broke right there, I quit right there.”

Some eight years later, Luttrell couldn’t change what happened to Murphy, but he still had Gulab, a man he now called his brother in blood. “I love you,” Luttrell said at one point during the interview with Cooper, throwing a meaty arm around his Afghan friend.

Gulab smiled sheepishly and said in Pashto, “I love you too.”

‘He Totally Changed’

That conversation was one of the last Gulab says he had with Luttrell in the U.S. Not long after the *60 Minutes* interview, Gulab returned to the home of the translator’s parents in California. They treated him well, he says, but the interpreter was rarely around. “I was a stranger in this country,” Gulab says. “[The translator] was like my eyes and mouth.” With no cellphone, email or other way to contact family or friends, he says he felt lonely, depressed. He had little money and no way to travel on his own. Gulab asked the interpreter to call Luttrell several times but says he never got through. As the weeks passed, Gulab started to feel that he’d been used. “He totally changed,” Gulab says of Luttrell. “If it wasn’t for the movie, Marcus would never have asked me to come here.”

Perhaps something was lost in translation between the two men. But about a month after his last conversation with Luttrell, Gulab says the interpreter

abruptly announced it was time to return to Houston, and they did. The next morning, Gulab learned he was being sent back to Afghanistan. Luttrell's wife, Melanie, gave him several thousand dollars in cash and bought him a variety of items—from socks to laptops, Gulab says. He appreciated the money and presents. But the film was now in theaters, and he was increasingly worried about the Taliban's reaction to it. He says he wanted to stay in the United States, to look for a house in Texas and try and bring his family over. Yet Luttrell, he claims, had dropped the subject.

In his statement from Buzbee, the former SEAL disputes this, saying he encouraged Gulab to stay but that he left on his own accord. He did not comment on Gulab's claims about the money from the movie. "The allegations that the Luttrells mistreated Gulab in any way are absolutely false," the lawyer said. "The Luttrells believe that Gulab has come under the influence of one or more handlers in Afghanistan, who are manipulating Gulab for their own financial gain. Shortly before becoming aware that Gulab was making these ever-changing, and false, allegations, the Luttrells, were approached by people claiming to be acting for Gulab, who asked for substantial amounts of money. Others associated with the *Lone Survivor* movie and book were also approached with similar requests, at about the same time. It is curious that Gulab's allegations and the financial requests came in the same time frame." (Gulab denies these allegations.)

On the ride to the airport, Gulab spoke to Luttrell on the phone, and the American apologized for not being there, explaining that he was busy promoting the movie. Gulab wasn't so polite. "You said you would get me a green card," he recalls saying. "You made lots of promises that you didn't keep."



Since writing his memoir, Luttrell began a foundation and has become an entrepreneur, starting his own lines of clothing and ammunition.BAPTISTE FENOUIL/REA/REDUX

After the interpreter translated, Gulab says Luttrell wished him a pleasant flight and hung up. Gulab felt betrayed. Luttrell had not only profited from the book and film but also landed a lucrative career as an inspirational speaker, earning \$55,000 to \$60,000 a pop to tell his story, according to Speakerpedia. Gulab had little more than the money in his pocket—and now his life was in greater danger than ever.

Lone Survivor became a blockbuster, earning nearly \$155 million at the box office globally. And by the time Gulab's plane landed in Kabul, the Taliban had bootleg versions of it. "Soon," one militant warned him by phone, "we will blow you to hell."

This was not an idle threat. Not long after he returned to Afghanistan, Gulab was walking along a path in the woods when the militants detonated an improvised explosive device in front of him.

During the day, Gulab slept at home, cradling a Kalashnikov. At night, he left his family and went to a secret location. The threats kept coming. One district commander, Mullah Nasrullah, was livid that his fighters had yet to kill the famous villager from Sabray. The commander even called Gulab. "There was nothing honorable about what you did," the commander said. "The man you protected was an American soldier, not a Muslim." Gulab didn't back down. "I told the commander the man I saved was a human being. The question of honor has nothing to do with his religion."

'I Won't Keep Silent'

On April 9, 2014, while I was working at a website called Vocativ, I received an email from Sami Yousafzai, a Pashto-speaking colleague in Islamabad, Pakistan. He wanted to write about Gulab's return to Afghanistan, and he met the timber worker a short time later at a secret location. Gulab was furious. Weeks earlier, after a period of silence from Luttrell, he had received the book contract from the interpreter. It not only signed away his rights to review the manuscript but also indicated he had to split the profits three ways. The former SEAL appeared to be taking a big cut for Gulab's story. The Afghan's friends advised him not to sign, but he didn't listen; he needed the money.

On May 2, Mike Spies, another colleague working on the story, spoke to a Luttrell representative and a second person associated with the former SEAL. They accused Yousafzai of fabricating the interview, for which Gulab was outraged. To prove it, the second person dialed Gulab into the call. Static filled the line, and then Spies heard a man speaking in a foreign language as the second individual translated. Gulab, Spies said, was furious, swearing “in the name of Allah” that he had never talked to Yousafzai.

I was puzzled, because I knew that wasn’t true. We had photos from their interview, which Yousafzai recorded, and copies of Gulab’s visas. We also had a signed copy of the book contract. Later, Yousafzai reached out to Gulab and asked what had happened. The Afghan says he was on the call but claims he said: “I won’t keep silent!”

To get a sense of why Gulab didn’t seek asylum, Spies later called Michael Wildes, a former federal prosecutor and prominent New York attorney. Wildes told us the Afghan had either misunderstood, that something was lost in translation or he was tragically misinformed. Asking for asylum didn’t mean he could never return to Afghanistan—nor did it mean his family couldn’t join him in the States. Because of Gulab’s heroic act and the threats against him, Wildes believes he could have remained in America, brought his family over and eventually acquired a green card. Now that Gulab was back in Afghanistan, however, his options were limited. He would have to seek refuge at the U.S. Embassy and flee to another country.

On June 24, Vocativ published the story, and it quickly went viral. When the clicks waned, however, Gulab was still in Afghanistan, still in hiding, still afraid and still angry.

‘Your Jewish Friends Cannot Save You’

In the fall of 2014, while I was living on assignment in Tel Aviv, Israel, my phone rang in the middle of the night. I didn’t pick up in time, but the number indicated it was Wildes, who had taken on Gulab’s case for free and was trying to use the media to push the U.S. government to help. He and I hadn’t spoken in a while, and there was a sense of urgency in his voice message I’d never heard before.

For months, Wildes had been working with Gulab, and he'd made several useful contacts in Kabul and Asadabad. The Afghan hadn't worked for the U.S. military long enough to qualify for the Special Immigrant Visa program. But thanks to the lawyer and one of his contacts, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul sent a recommendation to the State Department, saying it was in the U.S. national interest to settle Gulab in America.

It wasn't the first time the lawyer had tried to bring a foreign ally to the states. The 51-year-old has spent the past two decades representing high-profile asylum seekers—Russian spies, Pakistani scientists and even contestants in Miss Universe, a beauty pageant once partly owned by Donald Trump. Along the way, he's received death threats, and he says the Saudi government once hired a team to bug his office.

Wildes's years of experience taught him to take precautions — he keeps a Glock on his hip and a bulletproof vest in his trunk. He carries four cellphones and sometimes hires drivers and bodyguards.

Not long before he called me in Tel Aviv, Wildes's contacts in Afghanistan went dark. He soon found out why. That fall, the Taliban's "shadow governor" in Kunar province sent Gulab a written threat. "This letter is from the brave fighters and the mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate," it read. "Your Jewish friends cannot save or protect you. I hope the suicide bombers or the Taliban brothers will fulfill my order. Soon, they will send you to the grave."

A member of Afghan security forces in February surveys the aftermath of a suicide attack in Kunar, a province riven with attacks by Taliban supporters.NOORULLAH

SHIRZADA/AFP/GETTY

Later that fall, the Taliban stormed Gulab's house in Asadabad. That's the night he and his wife ran up to the roof with assault rifles. That's when he fired into the darkness. And that's when he finally gave up hope. That's also around when Wildes called me in the middle of the night.

Months passed with little progress, but the lawyer asked me not to write anything about Gulab's predicament. Two people, he said, were going to extraordinary lengths to help his client, risking not only their jobs but also their lives. One of them, an Afghan friend, was shot by the Taliban for

helping Gulab and still receives death threats. Wildes says he's also received a threat but declined to elaborate.

Even with his friends behind him, Gulab still had to wait months to leave the country for India. And once he crossed the border, Wildes worried how he would support his wife and kids. In the winter of 2014, Gulab was forced to make an agonizing decision: Flee with half his family or wait and risk another attack. He chose the former, hoping the Taliban would leave his wife and children alone. "The bottom line," Wildes says, "was to get him the hell out. He was attracting the Taliban...like flypaper."

The American Abandoned You

Around December 2014, Gulab received a call from an unfamiliar number. "Infidel," the man on the other line said. It was the Taliban—again—but instead of threatening his life, this caller was mocking him.

Months earlier, the Americans had released five Taliban leaders from the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In exchange, a Taliban-aligned group freed a prisoner of their own: Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl. They could have worked out a similar deal with Luttrell, the caller argued. The American abandoned you, Gulab recalls him saying, referring to Yousafzai's article. "We could have spared your life," the caller added. "If you had brought Marcus back to the mountain, we would have traded him for money and prisoners, and you could have kept the ransom."

Shocked, Gulab hung up.

About a month later, another call came. This time it wasn't the Taliban. It was one of his contacts. India had approved his travel visa. That night, Gulab and his sons packed their clothes into two small suitcases and prepared to leave the country. The next morning, on January 9, 2015, Gulab held his wife's hands in his and said goodbye. As he looked at the tears in her eyes, he felt a deep sadness. "My head was spinning," he says, "and everything turned to black and white."



Gulab with two of his children in their apartment complex; his son Irshad, right, is now the family's primary breadwinner, in part because his English is far better than that of his parents. COOPER NEILL FOR NEWSWEEK

The next day, Gulab met one of his contacts, who handed him his plane tickets and several hundred dollars. Then the Afghan and his sons boarded a flight from Kabul to New Delhi. It had been nearly 10 years since he had saved Luttrell. Now, as the plane climbed into the sky, Gulab looked out the window. He said goodbye to the mosques and government ministries, goodbye to the streets and alleyways, goodbye to the mountains and valleys. He said goodbye to his country forever.

Down and Out in New Delhi

Once Gulab escaped, he assumed the worst was behind him. He was wrong. Life in India's crowded capital proved harder and far more expensive than he expected. "There are a lot of bad people trying to cheat [refugees]," says Ziaulhaq Fazilhaq, a 28-year-old Afghan who befriended Gulab in New Delhi.

A former interpreter for the U.S. military, Fazilhaq had been living in India for over a year when he met Gulab. He'd landed a job as a U.N. translator, but that took him months. The prospects for his illiterate friend and his sons were much worse.

Fazilhaq found Gulab and his sons an apartment—a small room and bathroom with no kitchen—and helped them register with the U.N. refugee agency. Because Gulab had saved the life of a Navy SEAL, his new friend assumed it wouldn't take long for him to move to the states.

Months later, Gulab was still waiting. His savings were gone. Unable to make rent, he and his sons spent weeks living in the apartment or a tent, depending on what he could afford.

In April, however, an Afghan friend loaned him thousands of dollars to buy his wife and three daughters plane tickets. His wife was clinically depressed, but with Fazilhaq's assistance, he found a doctor to treat her. At first, it seemed to help, but life in Delhi was harder than it was in Afghanistan, and their apartment now felt even more crowded. After 22 days, Gulab's wife asked to return home with her daughters.



Mohammad Gulab, in his apartment in Fort Worth, Texas, is struggling to support his family but is relieved that he no longer has to worry about being ambushed by the Taliban. COOPER NEILL FOR NEWSWEEK

Months passed with no movement in his case, and Gulab was getting desperate. The U.S. was performing security checks, and there was nothing to do but wait. Finally, in August, Gulab's contacts told him to bring his wife and daughters back to New Delhi. Once again, he borrowed money for their flights. In late September—about nine months after he arrived in India—the U.S. government approved his visa and that of his wife and seven children.

Experts say Gulab was lucky. Due to bureaucratic logjams, “we have applicants who have waited for five years, coming up on six years,” says Lara Finkbeiner, the deputy legal director at the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Wildes says that's no excuse. “If he had waited...to save a Navy SEAL, Marcus Luttrell never would have survived.”

Allah Bless America

On a brisk night in January, I meet Gulab for the first time, in the parking lot of a Best Western in suburban Fort Worth. He is wearing a navy Six Flags winter jacket over a white *salwar kameez*, which stops inches above his gray dress socks and black loafers.

Joining us are Gulab's 17-year-old son, Shahidullah, and Fazilhaq, his friend from India. The four of us are going to eat at an Afghan restaurant on the other side of town. We pile into Fazilhaq's silver Honda Odyssey and snake over the highways—a concrete labyrinth of pickup trucks and SUVs. As we bump over the road, I see signs advertising Tiger Cabaret, a local gentleman's club, and “an evening with Macklemore and Ryan Lewis.” We exit the highway and head toward a trendy, gentrified neighborhood in east Dallas. At a stoplight, we watch a homeless man move from car to car, begging for change. The light turns green, and we drive off.

Gulab fears a similar fate. You can see it in his face—from the wrinkles on his forehead to the dark circles under his eyes. Not long after he moved to Fort Worth, he tried contacting Luttrell, but he never heard back. In the meantime, he eagerly started exploring his new neighborhood, playing with his children in a nearby park and shopping at Goodwill. One of his favorite things to do was stroll through the brightly lit aisles of a local grocery store, staring at the fully stocked shelves: coconut water and Colgate toothpaste, neon green Gatorade and Honey Nut Cheerios, baked beans and bath scrubbers, Sunny D and Betty Crocker SuperMoist yellow cake. It all seemed remarkable for a man still learning to steer a shopping cart.

About 10 days after he got off the plane, he spoke to a friend in Kunar province. He still hadn't heard from Luttrell and wanted to fly to Houston to hash things out. Now that he was in the States, he hoped the former SEAL would help him find a job. But his friend advised against it. Not long after Gulab arrived in the U.S., this friend said, someone from Luttrell's camp asked the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security to send him back to Afghanistan, afraid he would harm the family. (Both the State Department and Department of Homeland Security declined to comment, citing privacy concerns. The Luttrells wouldn't directly confirm or deny the claim, but generally dispute all of Gulab's allegations.) But the friend did confirm his conversation with Gulab, asking for anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

When Gulab heard this, he panicked. He says he's never threatened the Luttrells but was afraid the U.S. would send him back to the Taliban. Fazilhaq tried to calm him, but Gulab felt betrayed. "If I'd known that Marcus was such a dishonorable person," he says, "I would not have come to America. I would have asked [to go to]...Canada or Germany."

We pull up to Nora, a trendy restaurant that boasts a "taste of Afghan culture," along with signature cocktails such as the Kabul Mule. We sit at a table near the door. Over the clangor of forks and knives, I start asking Gulab questions. Some of the other patrons stare. "A lot of people look at me," Gulab later tells me, referring to his traditional Afghan clothes. "Some people laugh at me, but some people like it."

When the food comes, Gulab takes a few bites of his lamb, spinach and rice, then pushes it aside. "Stomach acid," he says. I know it's something more. I tell him I'm not insulted, and he relaxes, opens up. "There are no Afghans here," he says. "If you like the kebab here, I will buy a sheep and slaughter it myself. I've slaughtered a lot of animals."



A traditional Pashtun meal prepared by Gulab's wife in the small four-bedroom apartment they all now share.R.M. SCHNEIDERMAN FOR NEWSWEEK

After dinner, we head back to my hotel. As we park, I see a police car near the entrance. Gulab and his son seem nervous. “Maybe Marcus called them?” Shahidullah says. It’s an absurd thought, but Gulab’s son is worried.

The four of us make tea in the lobby and chat. Gulab says he appreciates the freedom he has in the U.S., the safety and security. He no longer has to sleep with a gun by his side—a strange, naked feeling. For more than a decade, the Taliban’s threats kept him awake at night. Now he can’t sleep because he’s worried about his future.

“When the Americans came to our country and they were fighting the Taliban, one of them [Marcus] came to my house,” Gulab says. “He was my guest. Now I’m in their country, the USA, and we’ll see how they treat me.”

The Lion of Fort Worth

The next morning, the sky is gray and filled with clouds when Fazilhaq arrives at my hotel. We drive to the apartment complex where he and Gulab live with hundreds of other refugees—Afghans and Syrians, Iraqis and Somalis, a smattering of Burmese. A security guard greets us at the gate and lets us pass. The street names sound regal— Emperor, Imperial— a stark contrast to buildings’ worn brick facades or the patches of beige grass, the empty swimming pool or the bare branches of trees, curling toward the sky.

Earlier that morning, I had purchased a copy of Robinson’s book about Gulab, *The Lion of Sabray*, published late last fall. True to his word, Robinson sent Gulab \$15,000—one-third of the advance. The money has been helpful, the Afghan says; it allowed him to pay back some of what he borrowed while in India. He’s grateful to Robinson for writing the book but feels he hasn’t been properly compensated. He says he signed the contract under significant stress—the Taliban was trying to kill him—and should have received a larger cut.

Luttrell never took a portion of the advance, according to Robinson. After Yousafzai’s story appeared, the former SEAL was upset. “Marcus was absolutely furious about the entire thing,” Robinson adds. “He said, ‘I just can’t bring myself to help him sell this book. He said... ’I don’t want anything to do with it or him.’” (Luttrell did not directly confirm or deny Robinson’s account.)

Robinson says he wasn’t sure what to do, but the book was finished, so he found a publisher and gave Gulab a third of the money, as promised (he says he kept Luttrell’s cut). “If Marcus had got behind this book, it would have made a ton of money,” he says. “Without Marcus promoting it, it went nowhere. But Gulab did it to himself.”

Gulab says he never received a copy of *The Lion of Sabray* from Robinson or the publisher, so as we sit in his drab four-bedroom apartment, I read him parts of his story.

“In the book, they say Gulab thought [Luttrell] looked like Fidel Castro.”

“Castro?” Fazilhaq asks.

“Yes,” I say. “The Cuban leader.”

Gulab shrugs. “I don’t know who that guy is.”

Robinson’s book paints a heroic portrait of Gulab, but the more I read, the more details he disputes. Robinson says he interviewed Gulab extensively, took notes and double-checked details with the interpreter, but as with *Lone Survivor*, he didn’t record the interviews. “Gulab pretty well agreed with about 90 percent of [Marcus’s book],” the writer says. “He told me he heard there were 100 dead Taliban on the mountain.”

Gulab admits there are certain parts of his story he doesn’t remember, and I see some inconsistencies in his version of events. None, however, seem to explain the differences between what Robinson wrote and what the Afghan claims happened.

For Gulab, there’s a telling passage in the last chapter that shows how *The Lion of Sabray* echoes Luttrell’s side of the story. As Robinson describes why the Afghan returned home in 2014, there is no mention of Gulab’s dispute with Luttrell—even though the book was finished after their rift. “I agonized over my decision,” the Afghan says in the book. “Even with all the security of America, I had to go home. I had to go back to my mountains. I had to go back to Afghanistan. But in two little corners of this world, in the Hindu Kush and eight thousand miles away in Southeast Texas, love, respect, and friendship will forever hold Marcus and me together.”

There is nothing holding them together now, and Gulab feels abandoned. The State Department funneled his case to a local relief agency, which paid his rent and gave him thousands of dollars in cash assistance over eight months—all on the condition he continued looking for work and attended free English classes. Yet on May 30, Gulab’s benefits will expire. He will still get food stamps and health care. But the agency stopped paying his rent in April. To get by, the family is now relying on Gulab’s 19-year-old son, Irshad, who makes \$10.60 an hour at a local electronics warehouse.



Gulab is trying to make his way in his new home, but with a language barrier and the feeling of isolation it brings, he spends most of his time at home playing with his kids. COOPER NEILL FOR NEWSWEEK

Gulab says he's still looking for a job (and the relief agency is helping him), but his English is rudimentary, despite several months of classes. His dream is to start a family business, so he can once again be his own boss. Some of his friends have started a GoFundMe campaign to help. "I'm very glad to be in America," Gulab says. "But a lot of things are different [than in Afghanistan]. The people of America should not close their eyes on me."

The more Gulab and I speak, the more I see he's struggling, that he's riven with resentment. Over the next few days, I try to change the subject, to talk about his life in India, the Taliban's threats, his job prospects, but the conversation keeps coming back to Luttrell. "I'll never regret saving Marcus," he says. "[But] I regret what I did to help the movie. [And] I pray that one day Marcus tells America the truth."

With Sami Yousafzai in Islamabad, Pakistan, and Ed Darack in Fort Collins, Colorado

