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History 2701E

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**Historical Movie Review**

**Black Hawk Down: The Battle of Mogadishu**



Black Hawk Down is a 2001 American war film detailing a disastrous mission in Somalia taking place on October 3rd 1993. The film takes place in the city of Mogadishu, Somalia where powerful warlord Mohammed Farrah Aidid controls the Somali civilian population through means of terror and famine. The film captures two days of chaos and bloodshed between American troops and Somali insurgents, as the U.S. military's unrivaled firepower and technology are overwhelmed in the densely populated slums of "the Mog." The film tells a compelling story of courage, terror, brotherhood, and heroism. Black Hawk Down is predominantly accurate in recounting the Battle of Mogadishu, however the film oversimplifies the complexities surrounding the situation in Somalia.

In the opening scenes of the film, images of dead and malnourished Somalian civilians unfold across the screen. "According to the International Red Cross, famine had claimed the lives of some 300,000 Somalis."<sup>1</sup> The haunting images of East Africa in 1992 prompt the world to take action against the rule of Mohammed Farrah Aidid. The warlord is essentially starving his population through the seizure of international food shipments, in order to keep the populace in line. The movie's first scene features an American helicopter watching over a hectic scene at the Red Cross Food Distribution Center near Mogadishu. At first, men, women, and children are seen scrambling for food, then running for their lives in a hail of machine gun fire as Aidid's regime reinforces his dominance. A member of Aidid's militia claims that "this food is the property of Mohammed Farrah Aidid."<sup>2</sup> For the viewer, the traumatic conditions of Somalia seems to be in direct correlation with the warlord Aidid, when in actuality the conditions in Somalia had been apparent for decades. "Throughout the end of the Cold War, the U.S. armed

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<sup>1</sup> I. Lawrence E. Casper, *Falcon Brigade: Combat and Command in Somalia and Haiti* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 9, <http://www.questia.com/read/106092601>.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, Ridley, "Black Hawk Down," DVD.

and supported the Somali dictator and former Soviet client Mohammed Siad Barré.”<sup>3</sup> Barré was the military dictator and President of the Somali Democratic Republic from 1969 to 1991. Due to Somalia’s geographical proximity to the Middle East’s richest oil fields, “the U.S. turned a blind eye to Barré’s oppressive domestic policies, flooding Somalia’s economy with billions of dollars of military aid in exchange for strategic military bases.”<sup>4</sup> Prior to 1992, the U.S. had agreed to deals with Somalia in order to pursue their own geopolitical interests, but neglected the deteriorating conditions of life for Somali civilians. “The famine conditions represented in the opening sections of *Black Hawk Down* are thus to a significant extent a result of government policies- both domestic and international- rather than a product of anarchy unleashed by the absence of centralized government.”<sup>5</sup> The tumultuous state of life in Somalia had been present for decades. The film illustrates the situation only as of 1992, when Mohamed Farrah Aidid, has taken power, after exiling Barré from Somalia. This is reinforced in the second scene of the film when American military personnel intercept Atto, Aidid’s arms dealer. During his interrogation Atto says, “See all this, it’s shaping tomorrow, a tomorrow without a lot of Arkansas’ white boys’ ideas in it.”<sup>6</sup> Atto points to the broader significance of the conflict in Somalia, emphasizing that “This is civil war. This is our war. Not yours.”<sup>7</sup> Atto insinuates that the situation in Somalia has been present long before the U.S. arrival, and will continue long after their departure from their land.

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<sup>3</sup> Ashley Dawson, "New World Disorder: Black Hawk Down and the Eclipse of U.S. Military Humanitarianism in Africa," *African Studies Review* 54, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2465752881>.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Dawson, "New World Disorder: Black Hawk Down and the Eclipse of U.S. Military Humanitarianism in Africa," *African Studies Review* 54, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2465752881>.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley Dawson, "New World Disorder: Black Hawk Down and the Eclipse of U.S. Military Humanitarianism in Africa," *African Studies Review* 54, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2465752881>.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, Ridley, "Black Hawk Down," DVD.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, Ridley, "Black Hawk Down," DVD.

Black Hawk Down proves to be significantly accurate in depicting the military events of October 3rd to October 4th 1993. The United States entered Somalia after a horrific shootout in June 1993, which “left 24 Pakistani UN soldiers dead, resulting in a resolution passed by the United Nations (Resolution 837) which ordered the arrest of those responsible in the massacre.”<sup>8</sup> In late August 1993, America’s elite soldiers Delta Force and Army Rangers, are sent to Mogadishu with the main objective of capturing Mohammed Aidid. “The group consisted of 400 well-trained and disciplined specialist that were collectively designated ‘Task Force Ranger’ (TFR) with the sole purpose of capturing Aidid.”<sup>9</sup> There is a debriefing prior to the October 3rd mission where General Perino says, “It looks like we have good intel on this target. We have at least two 'tier-one personalities' here. It's going to be a hot party.”<sup>10</sup> The two tier-one personalities are Omar Assad, Aidid’s top political advisor and Abdi Hasan Awale, his interior minister. The opportunity came on October 3rd when the U.S. military received intel that Aidid will be meeting with his personnel in a two story building. In order for the mission to begin, the Somali source had to give the signal to the U.S. spy plane above. In Black Hawk Down, the source leaves his car and pops the hood in order to give the signal, however the signal actually involved “an Abgal clam member opening his car roof, then walking around his car twice in order to signal that the targets were in the house.”<sup>11</sup> “At 3:30 PM, the code word “Irene” is said

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<sup>8</sup> Military Factory, *"Despite the humanitarian-minded end-goal, the American involvement in Somalia proved a nightmare all around, shaping US foreign policy for the next several decades."* Accessed November 10, 2013. [http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle\\_of\\_mogadishu.asp](http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle_of_mogadishu.asp).

<sup>9</sup> Military Factory, *"Despite the humanitarian-minded end-goal, the American involvement in Somalia proved a nightmare all around, shaping US foreign policy for the next several decades."* Accessed November 10, 2013. [http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle\\_of\\_mogadishu.asp](http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle_of_mogadishu.asp).

<sup>10</sup> Kent Delong and Steven Tuckey, *Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 8, <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>11</sup> Delong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. *"Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy."* Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

to the pilots and the mission begins.”<sup>12</sup> 16 helicopters were sent by the 160th Special Aviation Regiment carrying 100 elite U.S. military soldiers consisting of the Delta Force and U.S. Army Rangers from the Joint Operations Command Center. The two story building featured in the film did not have any iconic features, but according to historical documents “the target house has antennas making it highly visible in comparison with other structures.”<sup>13</sup> The narrow streets and alleyways of Mogadishu are shown from the aerial view of the Blackhawk helicopters. This layout would lead to “a nearly unparalleled spectacle of urban violence.”<sup>14</sup> The Bakara gun market is featured in the film where “civilians could buy an AK-47 assault rifle for \$150.”<sup>15</sup> At 3:42 PM, in accordance with the film, American soldiers begin to raid the target building. The ground convoy would face many difficulties in the unfamiliar urban environment and tight-winding streets of Mogadishu. “At 3:50 PM, Ground convoy arrives in position, waiting for the signal to load the prisoners.”<sup>16</sup> “Cliff Wolcott, the Blackhawk Super 61 pilot was shot down by an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) on October 3rd at 4:10 PM after inserting Delta Force troops at target site.”<sup>17</sup> At 4:20 PM, in line with the film, Michael Durant’s Blackhawk helicopter is shot down just a mile south of the 1st crash site by another RPG. The planned 30 minute operation transformed into a two-day rescue mission, where endless RPG-fire and gunfire would rain down

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<sup>12</sup> Delong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. “*Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy.*” Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>13</sup> Delong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. “*Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy.*” Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>14</sup> Dawson, Ashley. “*New World Disorder: Black Hawk Down and the Eclipse of U.S. Military Humanitarianism in Africa.*” *African Studies Review* 54, no. 2 (2011): 177+. <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2465752881>.

<sup>15</sup> Lorch, Donatella. “Reporter’s Notebook; Arms Dealers Hustle Again In Mogadishu.” *The New York Times*, 11 02, 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/02/world/reporter-s-notebook-arms-dealers-hustle-again-in-mogadishu.html>

<sup>16</sup> Delong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. “*Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy.*” Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> Delong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. “*Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy.*” Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

over Mogadishu, as U.S. soldiers attempt to reach the two crash sites. As the conditions of urban warfare intensified, the brotherhood and teamwork of U.S. soldiers only improved, as the QRF force takes off in combat column for rescue effort at Durant crash site. By the end of the fighting, “US casualties numbered 73 wounded, 18 dead and one helicopter pilot taken prisoner (Michael Durant; 11 days captive.)”<sup>18</sup> “Somali militiamen and civilians (including armed and unarmed women and children) suffered over 500 dead and another 1,000 wounded.”<sup>19</sup> Finally with the morning of October 4th, 1993, “at 5:45 AM, the convoy arrives back at the sports stadium,”<sup>20</sup> ending the bloodshed of the Battle of Mogadishu.

The endless determination of U.S. soldiers to save their fellow rangers grows stronger through the night, as the battle draws on into the early morning of October 4th 1993.

Somali civilians in the movie are depicted rather accurately as they speak in their native tongue, with subtitles being displayed at parts throughout the movie. The use of men, women, and children in the film as insurgents accurately identified the difficulties of American soldiers in determining when to engage with Somali combatants. This also left the viewer to empathize with the Americans, as the Somalis became increasingly heartless since the film did not focus on their condition and rather on the objectives of the mission and the heroism of American soldiers. “Black Hawk Down excludes the culture and history of the Somali people and imagines them as

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<sup>18</sup> Military Factory, *"Despite the humanitarian-minded end-goal, the American involvement in Somalia proved a nightmare all around, shaping US foreign policy for the next several decades."* Accessed November 10, 2013. [http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle\\_of\\_mogadishu.asp](http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle_of_mogadishu.asp).

<sup>19</sup> Military Factory, *"Despite the humanitarian-minded end-goal, the American involvement in Somalia proved a nightmare all around, shaping US foreign policy for the next several decades."* Accessed November 10, 2013. [http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle\\_of\\_mogadishu.asp](http://www.militaryfactory.com/battles/battle_of_mogadishu.asp).

<sup>20</sup> Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey, *Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 8, <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

unaware of their own desperate need for the so-called civilizing mission rooted in American social, political, and economic models.”<sup>21</sup>

Heroism, brotherhood, and self-sacrifice are themes depicted both in the film and in historical literature pertaining to the Battle of Mogadishu. Matt Eversmann, the main character, is deemed a hero in conducting his fellow soldiers to safety. His heroism is reinforced when “Sergeant Todd Blackburn was injured in the original insertion.”<sup>22</sup> Blackburn falls from the helicopter when he is attempting to rope down. Lying motionless on the barren dirt, Eversmann quickly rushes over and makes sure that Blackburn returns to base safe. An example of self-sacrifice for a brother is also exemplified when Smith, without regard for his own life, runs to help his fellow soldier Twombly and in doing so is shot, and then slowly bleeds to death. The true brotherhood of American soldiers is intense and emotionally captivating as “American soldiers are trained as warriors to make a difference and to save lives, not just fight for fighting’s sake.”<sup>23</sup> This is further reinforced when “two snipers, Shughart and Gordon are dropped off at Durant crash site to help fight armed crowds.”<sup>24</sup> Durant, the sole survivor of the second crash, had a broken leg, and depended on a rescue party to reach him. Shughart and Gordon were dropped off under heavy enemy pressure and sacrificed their life for pilot Michael Durant. In the film, Somali citizens hoist the lifeless body of Shughart, when in reality “their bodies were dragged through the streets.”<sup>25</sup> Delta Sergeants Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart were the first

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<sup>21</sup> Barkman, Adam. *The Culture and Philosophy of Ridley Scott*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey, *Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 8, <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>23</sup> Barkman, Adam. *The Culture and Philosophy of Ridley Scott*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> DeLong, Kent, and Steven Tuckey. “*Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy*.” Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994. <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>25</sup> Genoways, Ted. “*The Horn's Dilemma*.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 88, no. 1 (2012): 1+. <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2580437691>.

soldiers to receive the medal of honor posthumously since the Vietnam War. The message of 'leave no man behind,' is further exemplified when "At 5:20 AM, QRF and Rangers extract bodies from the Wolcott crash site and prepare to transport them to the airport."<sup>26</sup> In the final scene of the movie, Eversmann is seen talking to the body of his fallen comrade, "Corporal James Smith who was fatally shot when he attempted to aid at the Wolcott crash site."<sup>27</sup>

Eversmann emphasizes the heroism of the American soldiers during the Battle of Mogadishu by saying, "Nobody asks to be a hero. It just sometimes turn out that way."

At the end of the film, a number of facts come across the screen pertaining to the end of hostile conditions in Somalia. The ending facts inform the viewer that, "On August 2, 1996, warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid was killed in Mogadishu. The following day General Garrison retired."<sup>28</sup> The implication assumed after reading the ending facts was that the American military had something to do with the death of Mohamed Farrah Aidid. However, "on July 24th, 1996, Aidid and his men clashed with the forces of former allies Ali Mahdi Muhammad and Osman Ali Atto and Aidid suffered a gunshot wound in the ensuing battle and later died from a heart attack on August 1."<sup>29</sup> For a meaningful ending to the movie, there was a need for the justification of the loss of 18 young American soldiers, and that justification comes as an allusion that retirement of General Garrison and the death of Mohammed Farrah Aidid were related.

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<sup>26</sup> Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey, "Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy" (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 8, <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>27</sup> Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey, "Mogadishu! : Heroism and Tragedy" (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 8, <http://www.questia.com/read/106969249>.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, Ridley, "Black Hawk Down," DVD.

<sup>29</sup> Serrill, Michael (12 August 1996), "Death of a Warlord", Time Magazine, retrieved 2011-03-19

In conclusion, Black Hawk Down is predominantly accurate in reporting the urban warfare that took place in Mogadishu, Somalia between October 3rd to October 4th, 1993. Themes of heroism, brotherhood, and self-sacrifice are riddled both throughout historical literature and the film. The inspiring tale of the American soldiers and the animalistic depiction of Somali citizens, influences viewers to empathize with the Americans. The realistic depiction of warfare and bloodshed, makes a viewer feel as if he was in the battle, however Black Hawk Down oversimplifies the complexities surrounding the situation in Somalia.

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