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A Million Enemies

A reporter reconstructs the deadly battle between American forces and Somali street fighters in 1993.

By WILLIAM FINNEGAN

When President George Bush sent the Marines into Somalia in late 1992, the idea was not to fight a war. It was to help end a famine by securing, with an overwhelming deployment of force, relief supply routes against the depredations of Somali militias whose power struggles had caused the famine to begin with. Like the eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, the operation seemed, at the time, to be a success on its own terms. And yet, less than a year later, American forces in Mogadishu were embroiled in something that looked and felt very much like war. How did that happen? And who, exactly, was the enemy?

Mark Bowden's "Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War" is a minute-by-minute reconstruction of the climactic battle in the short, ill-fated American military campaign in Mogadishu. The Battle of the Black Sea, as it is known, was the most serious firefight involving American troops since the Vietnam War. Eighteen American soldiers were killed, and more than 70 wounded, in 15 hours of ferocious fighting. More than 500 Somalis -- not all of them, by any means, combatants -- were killed, among more than a thousand casualties. Bowden, a reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer, was not in Mogadishu at the time. (Neither were any other American reporters.) But his account, built on interviews with battle participants and Army records, has great immediacy nevertheless.

It also has a publishing prehistory worth noting. It first appeared as a 29-part series in The Inquirer, then became a multimedia phenomenon: an hourlong video, a CD-ROM and an elaborate series on The Inquirer's Web site, complete with audio and video clips. "Thank you for taking part in the Black Hawk Down experience," the Web site purrs, ending 20 rounds of E-mail Q. and A. between the public and the author. (All this was posted more than a year ago. It was not book publicity. That is yet to come.) Inevitably, in this season of "Saving Private Ryan" and "The Thin Red Line," Bowden is now writing a screenplay for Jerry Bruckheimer, the action-blockbuster producer.

Much of the book feels camera-ready as is. P.O.V. Wounded Soldier: "Spalding began to lose feeling in his fingertips. For the first time in the ordeal he felt panic. He thought he must be lapsing into shock. He saw a little Somali boy who looked no more than 5 years old with an AK-47, shooting it wildly from the hip, bright flashes from the muzzle of the gun. Somebody shot the boy and his legs flew up into the air, as though he had slipped on marbles, and he landed flat on his back. It happened like a slow-motion sequence in a movie, or a dream. The D-boy driving,

Foreman, was a helluva shot. He had his weapon in one hand and the steering wheel in the other. Spalding saw him gun down three Somalis without even slowing down. He was impressed."

What this demotic, you-are-there prose lacks in literary finesse -- and the black irony and high style of the best modern war reporting, from A. J. Liebling to Michael Herr, is entirely absent from "Black Hawk Down" -- it makes up in pure narrative drive. Thankfully, Bowden provides useful glosses of the politics, both local and international, and the strategic reasoning (if that's the right term) that brought a humanitarian mission to such a bloody pass. Without this context, the battle itself would make no sense at all.

Somalia had not had a central government since 1990, when its longtime dictator was overthrown by rebel factions. The United Nations, having taken responsibility for the American-led intervention, naturally preferred to have a government to which it could hand over authority. And so the international agency got into the "nation-building" business, seeking to reconcile Somalia's faction leaders to a power-sharing arrangement. But Mohammed Farah Aidid, whose Habr Gidr clan militia had been the main player in the dictator's overthrow, was not interested in sharing power. He believed he had earned the right to rule the country.

General Aidid's forces began to regard the United Nations as an enemy, and in June 1993 they ambushed a peace-keeping convoy, killing 24 Pakistanis. Aidid was duly declared an outlaw by the United Nations commander in Mogadishu, Adm. Jonathan Howe, an American, who put a \$25,000 price on the general's head. The conflict got personal: Aidid's supporters put a million-dollar price on the head of the man they called "Animal" Howe.

The hunt for Aidid was a fiasco. In July helicopters under United Nations command fired high-explosive TOW missiles into a house where a meeting of Habr Gidr clan elders was being held. There were 250 casualties, including 54 dead, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Four Western journalists who rushed to the scene were also killed, by a furious mob. "The journalists' deaths focused worldwide anger on the Somalis," Bowden writes, "but in Mogadishu the shock and outrage was over the surprise attack." This was not the only massacre perpetrated from the air. Aidid, defiant and uncaptured, became a folk hero, and the United Nations, particularly its helicopters, became widely hated in Mogadishu.

In August President Clinton granted Howe's request for an elite American force to help capture Aidid, sending 450 commandos, most of them Army Rangers, to Mogadishu. The Rangers soon

BOOK EXCERPT

"As the helicopter force swept in over it, gliding back in from the ocean and then banking right and sprinting northeast along the city's western edge, Mogadishu spread beneath them in its awful reality, a catastrophe, the world capital of things-gone-completely-to-hell. It was as if the city had been ravaged by some fatal urban disease. The few paved avenues were crumbling and littered with mountains of trash, debris, and the rusted hulks of burned-out vehicles. Those walls and buildings that had not been reduced to heaps of gray rubble were pockmarked with bullet scars. Telephone poles leaned at ominous angles like voodoo totems topped by stiff sprays of dreadlocks . . ."

-- from the [first chapter](#) of 'Black Hawk Down'

became the new focus of local hatred. Their powerful Black Hawk helicopters whipped the roofs off whole neighborhoods with the force of their rotor wash -- even, according to Bowden, tearing infants from the arms of their mothers. Under pressure to find Aidid swiftly, the Rangers, forced to rely on poor intelligence, floundered at first. But then they seemed to make progress, arresting some of Aidid's lieutenants in lightning raids.

It was one of those raids, launched on Oct. 3, that became the Battle of the Black Sea. The targets were two of Aidid's senior advisers, reported to be in a house in the Black Sea neighborhood, a Habr Gidr stronghold. The Rangers, led by small units of highly specialized supersoldiers known as Delta Force operators, went in by helicopter. The plan was to leave by ground convoy. The operation was supposed to take 30 to 40 minutes. Things began to go wrong immediately. A Ranger fell 70 feet out of a helicopter. Ground fire was unexpectedly intense. Then one of the Black Hawks was shot down by a well-aimed rocket-propelled grenade.

Bowden shifts the narrative point of view, rapidly and regularly, from one battle participant to the next. Thus, we ride to the battle with Rangers who see themselves as "predators, heavy metal avengers, unstoppable, invincible," and we feel the confusion and panic of individual soldiers as the operation begins to unravel. We learn, in passing, about the type of men who become Rangers -- very young (average age, 19), physically fit, highly motivated, and, almost without exception, not African-American -- and we come to know something about the remarkable array of weapons they carry. We also learn that the "indigenous personnel" are known to our boys as "Skinnies" or "Sammies." A limitation to the author's seeming omniscience becomes evident only when the battle grows desperate: we realize that the fighters to whose thoughts we are privy must be those who, however imperiled, survived.

Some of the best passages in "Black Hawk Down" tell the story from the Somali point of view. Bowden spent a week in Mogadishu in 1997 interviewing local survivors of the battle, and their accounts help make sense of the overwhelming popular hostility that the Americans faced. Bowden spoke to Somali lawyers, engineers and former United States Embassy staff members, as well as to the gunmen known as mooryan -- the fighters who ruled (and still rule) the streets of Mogadishu, and who, whether loyal to Aidid or not, turned out in the thousands that day to kill Americans. To the Rangers, it seemed that every man, woman and child in the city had picked up a gun, and their impression was not wildly mistaken -- by that stage, "Mogadishu felt brutalized and harassed," according to an American-educated Somali lawyer, and "every death associated with the fighting was blamed on the Rangers." The enemy, in other words, had become almost everyone in a city of a million people.

The insanity of such a situation seems obvious, but the reality sinks in only as we watch a Black Hawk crew chief, just before his craft is hit, "mowing down whole crowds of Sammies." After that chopper goes down (another Black Hawk also fell into the streets; two more limped, disabled, back to base), securing the crash site becomes the mission's new main objective. The fighting around the helicopter makes harrowing reading. For sheer gore and hellishness, however, nothing approaches the agonies of the ground convoy as it gets lost in the maze of city streets and is cut to pieces by enemy fire -- all with aircraft overhead offering useless directions by radio. More than half of the men in the convoy were killed or wounded. As happened so often in Vietnam, the great technological advantages enjoyed by one side proved worthless in the field.

Once the battle begins to sprawl, keeping all the soldiers' names straight is no easy task. And yet focusing on fewer men might have done less justice to the true chaos and complexity of the battle. Most of the Rangers and "D-boys," as the formidable Delta operators are called, ended up spending the night in enemy territory, and the fact that most of them survived is astonishing. Indeed, given the casualty figures, the Americans were justified in claiming a battlefield victory. But the Habr Gidr won the war that day, and they knew it. Oct. 3 has since become a local holiday.

When images of an American corpse being dragged through the streets -- and of Michael Durant, a captured helicopter pilot, looking battered and scared -- were beamed back home and around the world, Washington's will to fight was broken. The hunt for Aidid was called off. There was much grumbling in Congress about having American troops under United Nations command -- although in fact the Rangers had never been under its command. Les Aspin lost his job as Secretary of Defense as a result of the Battle of the Black Sea. The international campaign to help the Somalis form a government collapsed, and within 18 months the United Nations had packed up and left the country. Aidid was killed in 1996. Somalia still does not have a government.

Like other observers, Mark Bowden believes that the failed mission in Somalia has had a "profound cautionary influence" on American military policy. Judging from the Clinton Administration's abject responses to the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, this is so. The West's experience generally in Somalia, Bowden writes, "ended a brief heady period of post-cold-war innocence, a time when America and its allies felt they could sweep venal dictators and vicious tribal violence from the planet." Bowden has performed an important service by picking out and meticulously dramatizing such a turning point in recent history. Until "the Black Hawk Down experience" came along, this strange and terrible battle was in danger of being forgotten.

I got enemies, a million enemies Living in the streets tonight I got enemies, a million enemies But, baby, I am feeling fine. [Verse 2]
Another identical verse Ask her what's wrong And it will only make things worse We'll never ever never ever ever know We'll never
know. [Pre-Chorus] Free my mind Ultraviolet shine We've got time To walk a line. [Chorus] (Every single day, every single day)
Anything you want is fine (I got enemies, a million enemies) Does it ever cross your mind? Watch the video for Million Enemies from
Wavves's Million Enemies for free, and see the artwork, lyrics and similar artists.Â Mines not a solitary heart Ask him what's wrong And
he won't know where he should start We'll never ever never ever ever know We'll never know Freeâ€¦ View full lyrics. Similar Tracks.
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