

The Face of Modern Battle

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Bowden, Mark. *Blackhawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999.

DeLong, Kent, and Stephan Tuckey. *Mogadishu: Heroism and Tragedy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

On 3 October 1993, 160 of America's best warriors launched a raid to arrest renegade Somali warlords. The team of men had carefully trained for a routine mission. In the six previous raids, things had gone the American's way. The combination of superior weapons, well-trained troops and technology seemed to cow the Somali opponents, many illiterate nomads armed with old soviet-bloc weapons. But the October mission was to be very different. Somali opposition was to be heavy and in the end, the Americans would find themselves in a desperate, neck-or-nothing battle of attrition. When the battle ended, hundreds of Somalis and two score Americans were dead and our notion of peacekeeping was changed.

Two recent books attempt to tell the story of that 48-hour operation and the tragedy that ensued: *Blackhawk Down* by journalist Mark Bowden, and *Mogadishu: Heroism and Tragedy* by Kent DeLong and Steven Tuckey. Bowden's *Blackhawk Down* is a collection of articles previously published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Bowden's account is as urgent and fast paced as a gunfight. In a precise and effective narrative, Bowden describes the action in a voice that places the reader in the dusty alleys and back streets of Mogadishu. The prose is journalistic and the direct language gives power to the voices of the men involved in the fight. "Galentine did not feel frightened. It didn't register that he could get killed. He just aimed his M-16 at someone down the street, aimed at center mass, and squeezed off rounds. The man would just drop, just like target practice, only cooler."

Bowden's book shows the reader the events of that October day from the Somali as well as American side. The reader learns the motivations behind the seeming suicidal Somali actions. Through Somali voices, we read of young Americans whose lives we value, as indifferent killers. "Who were these Americans who rained fire and death on them, who came to feed them but then had started killing?" No Somali kept the terrible tally of killed and wounded, so they came on. Every fight was an individual gun battle between knots of determined men.

The mission was initially straightforward, almost routine. The American led intervention had gone wrong. Somali warlords like Mohamed Farah Hassan "Aideed" were challenging UN authority and blocking efforts to keep the peace. In a bold move, forces nominally loyal to Aideed ambushed and massacred UN forces on the streets of Mogadishu. Admiral Jonathan Howe, senior UN representative in country, had already warned Aideed that he would be blamed for any attack on UN troops in his territory. In reaction to the attack, the United Nations announced it would arrest "Aideed" as the instigator of the outrage. The job of bringing Aideed and his band to book was given over

to Task Force Ranger, a group of Special Operations forces made up of US Army Rangers and Operators of Delta Force, the elite counter-terrorism unit. As in any delicate military operations, there were plenty of missteps, snafus and embarrassing moments. These too, Bowden covers with understanding.

The 3 October raid was an effort to net three men on that list. Intelligence sources tipped off the Americans to a meeting near the Olympic hotel in a neighborhood controlled by Aideed's allies and near the largest arms market in the city.

DeLong and Tuckey recount the same operation in their book *Mogadishu: Heroism and Tragedy*. Yet, their work is about American heroism devoid of the introspective voice Bowden lends the young soldiers. It is a classic war story told with compassion and intelligence, but by someone who was not there. The reader never comes to understand the Somalis and their will to face death at the hands of a superior force. Here we see young men in battle described as skilled warriors rather than real people. Still it is a tribute, as the title clearly indicates, to the men who were wounded and captured in that unfortunate raid. But in *Mogadishu*, we are never forced to confront the frailties of our soldiers, the very quality that makes these men so heroic. "If you are in the 75th Ranger Regiment, it's not a job," one ranger is quoted as saying, "it's a way of life." But it is exactly that way of life that receives short shift from DeLong and Tuckey.

The battle at the Olympic hotel was warfare at its most basic - a determined man with a weapon facing off another equally determined man. The logistical art, operational art and all the modern theories of conflict must not lose sight of that simple, terrible fact. This American raid reminds us of the amazing quality of our soldiers and the bloody logic of war. *Blackhawk Down* is a thorough bit of storytelling and journalism. *Mogadishu*, published in 1994, reads like a rushed attempt to get on the bookshelves fast. In their haste DeLong and Tuckey miss what Bowden so clearly communicates, combat is still an emotional and fearful enterprise.

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