The gripping true story of the Black Hawk pilot, shot down, captured and tortured

IN THE COMPANY OF HEROES

MICHAEL J. DURANT with STEVEN HARTOV

About the Book

In the autumn of 1993, American special forces were dispatched to the famine-stricken land of Somalia. Their intervention in this war-torn country was the most dramatic US military action since Vietnam. A routine mission went horribly wrong when Michael Durant's Black Hawk helicopter was shot down over Mogadishu and he was quickly surrounded by Somali troops and taken captive. The brutal torture he underwent was made all too clear to the world when his coerced statements were broadcast on live television and his battered face appeared on the cover of magazines around the globe.

Michael Durant's ordeal was first described in Mark Bowden's international bestseller *Black Hawk Down* and the critically acclaimed film of the same name. This, his first-person gripping account tells of bravery under fire, torture, imprisonment, and the terrifying day by day reality for a soldier, unarmed and helpless in enemy hands, fighting to survive.

Contents

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Acknowledgments

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The acts described in these pages appear unique in many ways, but they have been repeated throughout our proud history in the countless displays of courage and sacrifice that are the hallmarks of the American patriot. This work is dedicated to those patriots, the millions of men and women who have served this great country and those who continue to serve our nation so valiantly.

Introduction

I first met Michael Durant in April 1997, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, when I was researching my book *Black Hawk Down.* Durant was still an active-duty pilot with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, a unit with a top-security clearance, and it had taken me more than a year to get permission to interview him.

When I arrived at Fort Campbell, I was surprised to find myself with not one, but three public affairs officers as escorts. They introduced me to Durant, a fit man with ramrod posture and a very serious manner, and then asked if we minded if they all sat in on the interview. It seems they weren't worried about a security breach; they just wanted to hear Durant tell his story.

No wonder. Durant's experience is one of the most harrowing in the history of the American military, and one of the most compelling ever told. Shot down over Mogadishu, injured in a hard crash landing, briefly rescued by two brave Delta Force operators, Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart, who died protecting him (and who were awarded posthumous Medals of Honor, the first since the Vietnam War), beset by an angry mob, stripped, and beaten, and certain of his own pending death, only to be spared, carried off into captivity, shot, publicly interrogated, and finally, after eleven days, released. The pilot's story was about being thrown into a terrible, exhausting extreme of human experience, and somehow coming back alive. We all listened spellbound.

In a calm, deliberate voice, Durant unfolded the tale. He clearly remembered every detail of the event. Given the

lives that were lost around him, Shughart, Gordon, his copilot Ray Frank, his crew chiefs Bill Cleveland and Tommy Field, Durant felt compelled to get the story straight—indeed, he told me that the only reason he had agreed to talk to me was his concern that the incident be recorded correctly. In captivity he had kept notes secretly scribbled in the margins of a Bible given him by visiting members of the International Red Cross. His determination to remember his story had begun then, lying in pain on a cot in some dark quarter of Mogadishu, not knowing if he would ever see home again.

When he did get home, Durant found himself in an awkward and often painful predicament. He was celebrated as a hero, but he didn't feel like one.

'All I did was get shot down,' he told me.

The real heroes were the men who died trying to save him, yet Durant was the one who got to come home and get on with his life. There were offers for books and movie deals, some of which rankled the families of those whose men didn't make it. The army considered Durant's performance under terrifying circumstances to have been a model for soldiers in captivity. Durant did a dignified and admirable job of coping with it all, of acknowledging the heartfelt admiration of his countrymen, never failing to downplay his own heroism and salute that of the men who fought to save his life. In light of it all, it's little wonder that he took such care in telling the story to me. When I went to Somalia and found the man who had supervised Durant's captivity, Abdullahi Hassan, known as "Firimbi," he confirmed Durant's story down to the smallest detail, and was filled with admiration for the American helicopter pilot.

In writing *Black Hawk Down,* I was faced with the challenge of blending hundreds of stories, and by necessity Durant's, like the others, was reduced to fairly summary form. I am very pleased that he has the opportunity in this book to tell the whole thing in his own words. Having once

sat and listened to him myself, I can tell you that you are in for an adventure.

Mark Bowden
January 2003

A Note from Michael J. Durant

There are many reasons why I decided to write this story. I felt compelled to do so from the beginning, yet put it off for some reason. Knowing well the pain suffered by those involved, I thought that perhaps it might be best to let it become a not-so-distant memory. I have written it at last, because so many people have asked me to do so, and more important, so that when my children are old enough to read it they will have their father's account of what happened.

This story is about loyalty, duty, honor, and love: loyalty to your comrades, your unit and your country; dedication to duty; honor in the face of extreme adversity; and love for a small boy, very far away, whose life together with his father had only just begun. It is a story about doing what you know is right in your heart, despite what others might think or say. It is about never giving up, ever, under any circumstances.

This story is, of course, all based on my perspective. Therefore, some may remember these events slightly differently. Hopefully, the discrepancies will be only minor, and if not, rest assured that no intentional deviation from the truth is in these pages.

On the morning of October 4, 1993, I swore allegiance to the truth, no matter the consequences. It is one of the most important promises made to God that I have kept.

‘It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly; so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.’

THEODORE ROOSEVELT
SORBONNE, PARIS
APRIL 23, 1910

PROLOGUE

Somalia
October 3, 1993

It was a perfect day for prayer, a bright and tranquil Sunday morning. The skies and seas were polished blue, soft winds bore silver-edged clouds, and the coastal sands gleamed white like ribbons of salt. It would have been easy to believe in some sort of heavenly power.

But for most of us in Task Force Ranger, the helicopter pilots and our crews, the eager young Rangers and squint-eyed Special Forces, the muscled armorers and whiz-kid intelligence analysts, these autumn mornings in Mogadishu all ran together. A Sabbath day felt hardly different from any other, blending into the workweek like the steamy, bleached hues of the African vista. Sure, a few guys knelt before the army chaplain with heads bowed, praying for salvation.

The rest of us prayed for another mission.

We had come here to do a job, dispatched by our government to stem the rampant corruption that was bleeding Somalia dry and decimating its people. Already a famine of Old Testament proportions had swept the country, starving more than 300,000 Somalis to death. Now a vicious warlord, Mohamed Farrah Aidid, had stormed into the power vacuum, leading a coalition of thugs called the Somali National Alliance. A sand dune buccaneer, he was pillaging our humanitarian aid and selling it off for a profit, while cold-bloodedly murdering any and all who tried to interfere and stop him.

Ours wasn't the first protective force on the ground or in the skies over Somalia. For over a year, U.S. Army troops and Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and Marines had been conducting operations here in support of United Nations relief efforts. When our unit arrived, Operation Restore Hope was already in full swing, with the men of Joint Special Operations Forces-Somalia capturing caches of small arms, destroying illicit ordnance depots, and forging alliances with friendly indigenous forces. Our comrades had felt that their efforts were at last turning the tables on starvation and allowing the Somalis free access to the U.N. relief provisions.

But back in June, Aidid's gunmen had suddenly ambushed and slaughtered twenty-four Pakistani soldiers assigned to UNOSOM, United Nations Operations-Somalia. American AC-130 gunships were sent in, blasting Aidid's weapons-storage facilities, SNA tank compounds, and even his personal propaganda station, 'Radio Mogadishu.' The warlord himself was driven underground, yet the effect of the interdiction turned out to be somewhat like stomping a boot on a hornet's nest. SNA attacks swelled against U.S. and U.N. personnel and installations, and Secretary of Defense Les Aspin ordered deployment of our Joint Special Operations Task Force. The JSOTF was a quick-reaction outfit composed of U.S. Army Rangers, Special Forces, Special Ops helicopters, Air Force special tactics personnel, and Navy SEALs. It was code-named 'Task Force Ranger,' and our mission was to capture Mohamed Aidid and all of his key henchmen and turn them over to UNOSOM forces.

To most of us, the job seemed pretty straightforward and simple. Mogadishu was Tombstone, and we were Wyatt Earp. We were going to clean up the town.

I ran that morning, as I did on most mornings. After my standard breakfast of grapefruit slices and oatmeal, I got out there with a bunch of guys from our 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) – the U.S. Army's

only special ops aviation unit that handles ‘high-risk’ missions – and we jogged the three miles around the Mogadishu Airport perimeter. The intense summer swelter had receded, so it was an easy run. Most of us wore training shorts and T-shirts, but there wasn’t much more than a chain-link fence separating us from the Somalis, so someone always slung a fully loaded MP-5 submachine gun over a shoulder, its stock banging against his spine as we loped.

Once we were outside the Task Force Ranger compound, a fenced-in area of battered old hangars, mobile barracks trailers, and sandbag emplacements, the airfield seemed to host a convention of international troops. The Russian pilots who flew relief missions for the U.N. were all out-of-shape vodka drinkers who grinned and waved as we passed, looking us over as if relieved that the Cold War had never gone hot. The Italian carbinieri lounged back in their easy chairs and smirked from beneath their sunglasses, while the French paratroopers raised their noses, as if we personally had desecrated Paris with McDonald’s franchises.

Already the sun was hard and slicing through the morning haze, a humid, steady breeze coming in off the nearby Indian Ocean. One thing for sure, I was going to go home in great physical condition and with a suntan to envy. I was hoping to run the Marine Corps marathon in Washington, D.C., as I’d done the year before. My wife had come up to watch that one and brought along our baby boy, Joey. I had swelled with pride when I crossed the finish line, even though it took me days to recover. This year, chances were slim that we’d be out of the ‘Mog’ – like the Mog in Mogadishu – in time for the race, but I wanted to be ready for it, just in case.

There was another purpose for PT, of course – to stay physically tuned up and ready. You never knew when a two-hour mission would turn into ten or more. Guys played volleyball out on the compound asphalt or lifted weights in

the makeshift gym, because it was always a ‘hurry up and wait’ situation and you had to keep active. You might be doing nothing for hours, or even days, and then all of a sudden you’d be ‘jumping through your ass’ to go out and fly a mission.

After my run and a quick shower, I pulled on my desert flight coveralls and settled down in the shade of a small tree, just outside the crumbling building that held the JOC – the Joint Operations Center. As Flight Lead and a Standardization Instructor Pilot, I was planning an aerial gunnery training mission for the next day. Somewhat like the old ‘squadron leaders’ of earlier airpower days, I was responsible for keeping my element razor sharp. That consisted of four Blackhawk assault helicopters, escorted by one SAR (Search and Rescue) bird and two AH-6 Little Bird gunships. Most of our Blackhawks were new aircraft, the latest Sikorsky model; twin engine MH60Ls with myriad special mission equipment upgrades. Under the right conditions, they were capable of speeds up to 193 knots and a service ceiling in excess of 20,000 feet. But with our load of eighteen Rangers and four crewmen on board, the best we could do was about 160 knots. The Blackhawk had become the workhorse of Army aviation, with the capability to haul 9,000 pounds of external payload on the cargo hook or an equivalent amount of cargo inside. It could be set up for a wide variety of missions, and in Somalia, we were configured to carry the maximum number of troops. But we could also be called upon to fly our Blackhawks in an attack helicopter profile, using them as gun platforms, so that was why we needed to train. We could change configurations in a matter of minutes, so for gunnery practice, we’d be going out the next day with a pair of the MH-60Ls, each armed with a 19-shot 2.75-inch rocket pod, a wing-mounted 30mm M-230 chain gun, and two 7.62mm window-mounted mini-guns, all fixed forward. We would select a remote and desolate range area, set out some old tires as targets, and

practice running fire, honing those skills that can deteriorate even in combat conditions.

I was a Chief Warrant Officer–3, but as Flight Lead I sometimes felt more like a logistics manager: conducting the briefing, writing the operations orders, setting up ranges, attending to safety issues, getting clearances from commanders, making sure the ammo was laid on and the crews ready. I never saw it as mundane and I truly enjoyed it, and it was all necessary prep work for the biggest thrill ride of a lifetime: aerial gunnery. We were finalizing our plan when I caught the flash of a human form rushing by and heard the slap of boot soles and an urgent warning.

‘Possible mission developing downtown.’

I raised my chin, and I think it was the first time that I really smelled Somalia. I hadn’t taken in much of that before, but there it was: the heavy stench of fetid garbage, mixed with the nostril-flaring fumes of JP-4 jet fuel. We were right on the ocean, the wind usually blowing from the southwest, carrying the brine of the sea. Coffee was constantly brewing in the JOC, and it blended with the cold concoctions from the mess hall, floating above a thin layer of urine and feces fog from the Porta Potties. There were no sewage facilities, so shower water puddled on the ground, stagnating in the sun. There were men who showered rarely, or to little effect, carrying a halo of dried sweat like the infamous Pigpen of ‘Peanuts’ comic strip fame. Our Task Force members were fitness freaks, so few of them smoked, but most chewed tobacco of some kind and the compound was stained with stinking clots of brown juice, like puddles of blood after a pitched battle.

I didn’t smoke or chew or drink, but I did have a bottle of Jack Daniel’s whiskey stowed in my rucksack, to be swigged in celebration when we finally captured Mohamed Aidid. I didn’t know then that I’d never get a chance to crack it open.

Inside the JOC, Brigadier General Bill Garrison, the commander of Task Force Ranger, paced as the leaders of his ‘cells’ assembled. He was a man who engendered great respect and he looked like something out of a Hollywood movie, with his bristle-steel hair, pilot’s Ray-Bans, and a cigar clenched in his teeth that he rarely lit. Element leaders hustled in from volleyball, their bunks, or the latrine. Cliff Wolcott was there, a 160th CWO like me and Flight Lead of the assault force. I represented the blocking force of four Blackhawks assigned to carry a company of Rangers, who were commanded by Captain Mike Steele. My own 160th battalion commander was there too, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Matthews, as well as the commander of the exfiltration ground element, Lieutenant Colonel Danny McKnight. The mission was profiled as a ‘snatch and grab,’ and the point men of the assault would be the special operators. They weren’t just Special Forces, they were Delta, and there is no other military unit in the world as highly trained, and with an attitude to match it. Just working with them swelled the chests of the younger Rangers, who often sneered, ‘We’re just the road guards for Delta.’ But they sneered it with great pride.

The mission profile wasn’t new. We’d practiced it more times than I could count and had already executed it six times inside the city, three at night and three by daylight. We hadn’t encountered much resistance, just some inaccurate small-arms fire and a few Rocket-Propelled Grenade rounds, but no aircraft had been damaged and no ground troops seriously injured. It was like a well-rehearsed ballet of zipping helos and lightning infantry. First, Little Bird gunships would take out any heavy weapons at the target. Next, Wolcott’s assault flight would take in the Delta operators to make the snatch. Just behind them, I would bring in my Rangers as the blocking force, and then the entire Task Force would withdraw with its shocked and blindfolded prisoners. The only factors that differed with

each of these missions were the target details: Who, Where, and When.

Today, the targets were two of Mohamed Aidid's 'top tier' lieutenants, Omar Salad and Abdi 'Qeybdid' Hassan Awale, major players in the warlord's Habr Gidr clan. An indigenous intel asset had fingered them inside a building in the 'Black Sea,' the roughest part of town just next to the Bakara Market, and already a P3 Navy Orion surveillance plane was high overhead, its cameras focusing on the target area. The large video monitors in the JOC flickered with images of the Olympic Hotel and Hawlwadig Road. The area teemed with people, rusty bicycles, and battered old cars hissing steam from overheated radiators, or abandoned and stripped down to the frames. It made me think of a flea market, inside an auto wreck yard, inside a suburban slum.

For a second, something crawled up my stomach. The men and birds of our 160th SOAR(A) had been nicknamed 'The Night Stalkers,' because utter darkness was the environment in which we thrived. The technology of night-vision equipment had become so advanced that we could fly, assault, insert, and withdraw, seeing all without being seen, until it was way too late for the opposition to react. We owned the night, as if it was broad daylight. But this was broad daylight, and although we'd successfully executed six previous missions, we had lost the element of surprise.

In the bustling JOC the mission was developing very rapidly. We couldn't wait to see if our targets would just hang around, drinking tea and bullshitting about women and the weather. We couldn't hope to have a CIA asset wander into the target building, snap a covert photo of the party, and hustle back out with a one hundred percent confirm. We had to go on information and belief. And faith.

But in a special ops environment, no element leader can afford to be shy about offering solutions or raising dilemmas. I was a combat 'vampire' who loved the night, but I held my peace about the risks of a daylight op,

because there was no other option. Yet a number of other officers quickly voiced issues, to a background score of distant helo turbines whining up and desert combat boots thumping across the tarmac like heavy hail.

‘Sir?’ someone said to General Garrison. ‘I’ve got some exfil issues.’

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘Okay, air exfiltration is not an option, so we’re forced to use the ground convoy. But I think we might wrap it up long before the vehicles are in position.’

‘We’ll be there when you’re ready,’ said Colonel McKnight. His lightly armored Humvees and five-ton trucks were already assembled to move to a rendezvous point near the Olympic Hotel. I wondered if the hotel had had a single client this year, or ever.

‘But the place is nasty with Skinnies today,’ someone else said, using the nickname for hostile Somalis. ‘We might get boxed in on the return.’

‘Exfil by air’s a negative,’ another pilot stated firmly. The plan called for the helos to hover at about thirty feet, uncoil fast ropes, and let the D-boys and Rangers slide down like firemen on slick poles. But there was nowhere to then land our choppers and pick them up. ‘We could do a rooftop extraction, but like we saw on the last mission, hovering up there like sitting ducks makes us very vulnerable to the RPG gunners.’

‘And there’s an antenna tower on the target building.’ An SF officer jabbed at a video monitor with his gloved finger. ‘We’d have to blow it before the helos come back in, and it’ll take time.’

‘Don’t sweat it, boys,’ McKnight said to his Ranger officers. ‘Your convoy will be there.’

‘And if it’s not,’ Garrison grinned around his cigar stub, ‘the helos will come in and pull your asses out like they always do.’

And that was it. We had been in there for all of ten minutes. Garrison gave the order to load the helicopters. An intel officer had already ‘burned’ enough copies of the aerial recon photos to pass around, and we snatched up our gear and pushed out the door. We still had no final launch order, but my gut told me the mission was ‘go.’ I didn’t even take the time to sprint back to my bunk for my kneeboard, which contained a mission packet with all the standard procedures relevant to the op. I had decided that a quick crew briefing was more important than getting my kneeboard, and I didn’t have time to do both. Besides, my copilot, Ray Frank, had his for certain, and we were never more than an arm’s length apart. It didn’t matter. I knew this thing by heart.

For the second time that day, I ran, and I was far from alone. More than a hundred men ran with me – Rangers, Delta operators, chopper pilots – charging half a klick across the tarmac to a flat dirt apron where our helos were parked just off the main runway. More than a score of coal-black aircraft hulked there in the sun, their rotors still immobile, but auxiliary power units building to a controlled scream, providing juice to get the radios and critical systems up and running. Four of them were AH-6 Little Bird gunships, not much larger than fat Ford Explorers, but lethal in a street fight. And four more were fixed with steel slat benches jutting out from their airframes, on which the assaulters would perch like insane circus acrobats. There were eight Blackhawks, including Wolcott’s pair for hauling more SF operators, my four for the Ranger blocking element, a Search and Rescue bird, and the C2 Command and Control bird, containing Colonel Matthews and SF Colonel Harrel and a stuffing of commo gear. The wind of my sprint was in my hair, and our charge reminded me of something out of *Apocalypse Now. I love the smell of jet fuel in the morning* . . .

The only things I carried were my MP-5 submachine gun, the intel photos, and an M-9 pistol strapped to my leg in a

holster on my ‘bat belt.’ Everything else was already in my helo, Super Six-Four, sitting there fully armed and mission-ready as always. All the systems would be up, radios working, miniguns loaded, preflight checks all done. That was why I loved flying with Ray and my crew chiefs, Tommy Field and Bill Cleveland, so damned much. Everything was always perfect.

Tommy, in his late twenties, had a race car back in his garage in Lisbon, Maine, and he treated ‘his helicopter’ no differently from that hot rod. The wheels were always slick with Armor All, the windshield washed after every mission. There wasn’t a drop of oil on that thing. And Bill, a bit older than Tommy, I called ‘My Squire.’ When I showed up he’d have my black survival vest already in his hands, the ceramic, bulletproof ‘chicken plate’ tucked into the chest pocket, holding it up for my arms like some medieval footman. No one worked harder than these men. They often flew missions with us from dark to dawn, and when we pilots were already snug in our racks, they were still out there turning wrenches, cleaning, repairing, topping off fluids, and filling out maintenance reports. With these guys, you didn’t even have to preflight the bird. All you had left to do was hop in and hit the start buttons. I had known them for almost five years.

I stood outside my helo, and while Bill geared me up I handed out the intel photos and briefed the other pilots and crews real quick. I looked in their eyes to make sure they understood everything and didn’t have any questions. They nodded and took off like ducks scattering from a gunshot.

Captain Steele, company commander of Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment, was already herding eighteen of his men into our bird. He was a huge man, probably 280 pounds of solid muscle, and had been a lineman for the Georgia Bulldogs. Not long ago, a whole squad of his Rangers had held him down and used two of their thickest plastic prisoner cuffs to hog-tie him. He had

simply snapped them in half. His fire support officer, Lieutenant Jim Lechner, was with him, and their RTO bristled with radio gear and antennae, and the rest hauled M-16A2s, CAR-15s, Squad Automatic Weapons, M-60s, ammo, IV bags, water, Kevlar vests with chicken plates, grenades and blades, and all the accoutrements of war that would take Super Six-Four to its load limits with a total of twentytwo souls aboard. They turtled into the cargo bay and tucked their legs up to make room.

I had been with this particular group of Rangers on four previous missions. We called them ‘The Customers,’ and nothing mattered more to us than keeping the customers satisfied. They were the reason for our existence, and we never forgot that.

I hopped into Super Six-Four, settled into the right seat, and harnessed up. The doors had been removed, because they provided no ballistic protection anyway and when the dust kicked up you could see better if you could just look down. Ray was already in the left seat and ready to go, just waiting for me before the blades turned. He was in his upper forties, gray haired, calm and with the easy smile of a veteran. We’d worked together for so long that we hardly needed to speak anymore. I handed him the intel photo and jabbed my finger at the target building, just north of the Olympic Hotel. He looked at the four landing zones our flight would go into and strapped it to his kneeboard. Ray was still super sharp, but he was ready to retire. This was going to be his last deployment.

I pulled on my black SPH-4 helmet, tapped the smoked visor down, pushed the mike boom right up to my lips, and plugged into the commo net. The big blades above were spinning faster and faster, flashing shadows over the canopy like strobe lights reflecting off a disco ball. Dervishes of dust kicked up and spun away from the cockpit. I spotted General Garrison, head bent into the grit spatter and moving from chopper to chopper, apparently wishing good

fortunes. I hadn't seen him do that before, and wondered if he shared the only concern I had. It wasn't for us helo crews, but for the men who'd be exfiltrating by ground in the lightly armored vehicles. We really needed armored personnel carriers and tanks to guarantee their safe passage, but the request for them had been denied by the 'powers that be' back in Washington. There wasn't much chatter in my headphones, just occasional commo checks and updates from the JOC. And then the various elements, or 'Chalks,' started to call in their ready status, one by one, from front to back of the formation, using the prearranged code word, a woman's name.

'Barber Five-One is *Lucy*.'

'Barber Five-Two is *Lucy*.'

'Super Six-One is *Lucy* . . . Star Four-One is *Lucy*.'

'Star Four-Two . . . Star Four-Three . . . Star Four-Four . . . Super Six-Two . . .'

I keyed the mike on my cyclic. 'Super Six-Four is *Lucy*.'

And so it went, on down to Colonel Matthews in Super Six-Three, the C2 chopper at the back.

'Roger, understand the flight is *Lucy*.'

Now we waited for that one name we needed to hear, 'Irene,' the signal that the mission was Go. It was game time, what we'd trained and prepared for. It was also that twilight of nervous energy when the true personalities of individuals popped up. Some guys tripped all over themselves, some settled into the studied calmness of brain surgeons. Most of us were a little keyed-up, but it sure helped to have been in similar situations before.

I thought I was a pretty darn good pilot. Experience had given me that conviction. I had been to 'Prime Chance,' the secret antimining operations in the Gulf back in '88. I'd flown 'Just Cause' in Panama in '89 and 'Desert Storm' in '91. And now, Somalia. I was on top of my game. I wasn't arrogant, but there probably weren't too many people who

could fly a Blackhawk or shoot as well as I could at that time of my life.

The run to the city was right there; we'd lift off and be over target within minutes. It would be real quick, and we didn't have a lot of time to think about it. It was only three miles to the Olympic Hotel.

There was no time to ponder fate, sit down, have a cup of coffee, write a goodbye letter home. I never wrote one anyway, never had one stowed in my gear. I never told one of my buddies what to say to my folks, 'if.' I didn't think about my wife, or my son, or home. I wasn't especially religious. I didn't pray. I was totally focused on the mission. The only time those kinds of thoughts encroached on me was when things were slow, and they weren't slow today. I never thought about what might happen if I got killed. I didn't think I *could* be killed. There was an expression for that kind of helo jock denial: *Big Sky, little bullet.*

I had been in the army for twelve years, and I had become just about all that I could be. I was still young, yet far from green, a thirty-two-year-old, battle-tested helo pilot. Cocky, maybe, but my reflexes and instincts were at their peak, a man who could meld with a multiton machine and bend it to his will. I was a Flight Lead, and when I spoke and flexed my wrists and worked my Blackhawk's controls, a cavalry of America's finest warriors would follow me to battle. I perched there at the razor tip of my country's spearhead, while behind me an armada of armored men and deadly weapons waited for the word. I felt no fear, only faith that I could do the job. Invincible.

The code word to launch crackled in my ear, and I grinned and keyed my mike as I lifted off.

'Fuckin' *Irene*.'

I am not a man who believes in omens, but there were sharks in the water. The formation rose up through its own enormous cloud of rotorwash dust, briefly swinging in an arc

out over the sea, and I glanced down at the azure waves, sparkling in the sunlight like a sea of diamonds. And there they were, hundreds of them, slithering just below a surface that looked deceptively inviting. The sharks fed on the runoff from a camel-meat processing plant, eagerly awaiting anyone foolish enough to enter their domain. They had already ambushed and dined on a few careless members of the U.N. task force. No one swam here anymore.

I glanced down at my watch. It was midafternoon, just past 15:30. My wedding ring gleamed from my watchband, where I placed it anytime I was working. The sharp edges and hardware of military aircraft are notorious for snagging the rings of married men. I had met more than one pilot or crewman lucky to still have ten fingers after having one reattached.

The formation banked out wide to orient into the wind. With any aircraft assault, you pretty much always want to land into the wind. It increases your lift performance and helps with the noise, reducing the time the enemy can hear you coming. It cuts down on the dust cloud, blowing it back to your rear. Out in front of us I could see eight helicopters: the two Little Bird gunships, a Blackhawk, four more Little Birds with ‘people pods,’ and another Blackhawk. Clusters of legs and combat boots hung down from the cargo bays of the Blackhawks, their camo trousers whipping in the slipstream like frigate pennants. Outside the Little Bird fuselages, the ‘door kickers’ hunkered on their benches, looking like space rangers in their black hockey helmets, headsets, goggles, and locked and cocked assault rifles affixed with all sorts of Aimpoint sights and underslung grenade launchers.

The choppers bobbed and weaved, keeping a loose formation, staying about three rotor discs apart, maybe fifty meters. We weren’t the Thunderbirds, trying to look pretty; we just had to get there fast and be ready when we did. Ray and I were flying by rote, heads alternating inside and

outside the cockpit, tuning radios, reviewing maps, doing our pre-assault checks, miniguns armed, shoulder harnesses locked, and all the while orienting ourselves on the city below and keeping our spot in the flight.

It wasn't even a five-minute hop and we were over the thick of the city, if you could call it that. It was more like an urban sprawl of concrete and plaster huts, corrugated roofs, frameless windows, jagged holes punched into everything. I remembered how when I'd first come into Mogadishu a month earlier aboard a C-5A, from a distance the pastel Indian Ocean and sugar cube town looked like the French Riviera. And then you got up close and the Mog's bad haircut and acne scars came into focus. Every single thing that couldn't be bolted down had been snatched up by the poverty-riddled populace. Even the telephone poles had been stripped, because the wire could be sold on the black market for its copper strands. The tallest building around was the seven-story Olympic Hotel. The leaves of the meager eucalyptus trees drooped under a thick frosting of dust.

I eased back on the airspeed to put some distance between the lead elements and my flight of four as we swept in toward the target, completely obscured now by a roiling cloud of brown dust kicked up by the six choppers putting in the assault force. All over the city, thick ribbons of black smoke were rising from clots of burning tires, the Somalis' warning signals that Americans were in the air. We had all seen these smoke signals before, but never in such volume or so early. Aidid's people were getting their shit together. *To arms, to arms, the Rangers are coming*.

The two lead Little Bird gunships zipped out of the dust cloud without firing a shot. They had found no targets, and that was a good sign. One by one, the assault birds started dropping their loads and calling it in as they banked away.

'Star Four-One is out.'

'Super Six-One is out.'

I kept count in my head, making sure not to progress until I heard every one of them come out. The last thing you wanted was to have a ‘midair.’ It would be bad enough getting shot down by the enemy, but it would be a dismal failure if we crashed into each other. My flight stayed with me in a loose box formation, but maintaining perfect air integrity.

I was talking internal on the intercom, keeping the ‘customers’ situationally aware. They had things of their own to prepare and had to know how much time was left to the target. Ranger Captain Steele would be wearing a headset, listening to the radios, but within a minute of the drop he’d have to take that off and strap on his helmet. His Rangers on the door sills would be held in by a long strap, and they’d need enough warning to remove it and set up for fast roping. It was a crucial part of my job to keep them up to speed, and I couldn’t let them down, not for a second. I thought of them as the most highly trained, professional soldiers in the world.

I could hear the muffled voice of Steele shouting updates to his Chalk leader, but mostly I just heard the constant whir of my own blades above and the altering tone of the engines as I worked the controls. It was a high-pitched whine, sort of like the howl of a hungry young wolf. If there was any small-arms fire already coming up at us, I didn’t hear it or see it. It wasn’t like what they showed in the movies, with rounds zipping by and tracers burning trails in the sky. You couldn’t see small-arms tracers under the African sun, and unless something actually thwanged off your cockpit you’d never know you were being shot at.

The earphones in my helmet hissed, ‘Star Four-Three’s goaround.’

One of the Little Bird pilots couldn’t get into his designated landing position and had to execute a ‘goaround.’ This wasn’t terrific, but it was nothing we hadn’t prepared for or executed previously. I had to slow my flight

even more while his Chalk endured a stomach-wrenching roller-coaster loop and came back in. The dust was unbelievable. We pulled back to a crawl, maybe only forty knots, hovering in over the rooftops. We didn't know it because of the cloud, but the RPGs were already exploding in the air around us.

Ignorance was – temporarily – bliss.

The Little Bird pilot called himself 'out,' rolled away, and we dipped and roared forward. We had to get our blocking force in fast, not only to keep the bad guys out of the target area but to keep any 'leakers' from escaping the assault element. The only visibility I had was through the Plexiglas 'chin bubble' at my feet. Ray read off the radar altimeter, describing what little he could see on his side. The Olympic was on my side and certainly the best reference point for locating the intersection I wanted. I caught a glimpse of the target building, and then it disappeared in a tornado of filth as another Blackhawk pulled up on my right to insert his blocking force. My good friend Stan was flying that helicopter, and I'd bet on him to find the right spot any day or night of the week. I brought Super Six-Four in as low as possible, to a twenty-foot hover, using a utility pole straight down through the chin bubble as a reference.

'Ropes,' I called over the intercom.

My crew chiefs, Tommy and Bill, echoed me loud and the thick green hawsers were deployed. It was a well-rehearsed routine. All I had to do was keep it steady, holding the forward left box position, with Chalk Two right behind me, Chalk Three abeam me to the right, and Chalk Four right behind him. But the pilot of that last chopper, Super Six-Seven, had been flying the C2 bird until today, just up there boring holes in the sky, and this was his first encounter with the 'brown monster.' The dust cloud was more than a hundred feet high, and he felt his way down into it like a wader tiptoeing into cold lake water. He deployed his ropes too early, and they were only thirty feet long. A Ranger went

out his door, lost his grip on the rope, and fell into oblivion. It was right then and there that the mission started to unravel, like the hem of an old sweater as you tug on one loose strand. But I didn't know any of that at the time. I was having problems of my own.

'Right rope's hung up on a wire.'

It was Bill's voice in my ears, dead calm and steady, telling me we'd snagged on probably the last telephone wire still intact in Mogadishu. *Of all the damn phone poles in the city,* I thought.

'Forward, ten.' Bill offered a correction as he peered down past his minigun at the snared hawser, and I carefully nudged the helo forward.

'*Hooollldd*,' he sang. I could tell by his tone that the rope was dangling straight and free, and I held it steady while our eighteen Rangers leaped for the lines like comic book heroes. I could hear Steele's Chalk leader barking, '*Go, Go, Go*,' and the butt plates of M-16s and M-60 light machine guns scraping and banging against my floor as the troops dove into the dust storm. Within seconds, they were all gone. 'Good luck, guys,' I whispered as Bill and Tommy tripped the releases and the ropes fell from their mounts like limp cobras. None of us had a clue that those young Rangers were in for the fight of their lives.

'Ropes clear,' Tommy announced, and I hauled the helo into a rising left bank as I keyed my mike.

'Super Six-Four is out.'

And that was it. I thought it was over, at least for my element. I'd take my flight to a holding pattern, about two miles north of 21 October Road, and execute long, lazy, racetrack circles until the D-boys and Rangers came out by ground. And then we'd all head back for a raucous debrief, where we'd run through all the events and hammer each other over even the smallest mistakes. There are no perfect games.