

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

Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* is a dramatic, minute-by-minute account of the climatic battle in the unsuccessful campaign to end the human suffering in Somalia. The Battle of the Black Sea, as it is known, was the most intense fighting involving American troops since the Vietnam War, resulting in 18 American soldiers and over 500 Somalis killed.

Bowden, a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, spent more than two years conducting interviews, reviewing official after-action reports, and analyzing hours of previously classified documents and combat video footage shot from helicopters during the battle. He also spent several days in Mogadishu constructing accurate maps of the battle area and talking to Somalis present during the fighting. His investigations resulted in a series of articles published by the *Inquirer*, an hour-long video, an elaborate web site and this book. A full-length motion picture is sure to follow.

In the summer of 1993, President Clinton agreed with senior military leaders to send Task Force Ranger, a group of almost 500 combat troops, to Mogadishu. Task Force Ranger consisted of soldiers from the 75th Ranger Regiment and a small cohort of operators from the elite counter-terrorist unit commonly referred to as the Delta Force. As soon as they arrived in Somalia, the Rangers and "D-boys," as the Delta Force operators were known, began to conduct raids against suspected militia strongholds. After a few disappointing missions, they began to achieve success. Several high-ranking militiamen were captured in near-perfect raids sending the confidence level of the young American troops soaring.

The plan for the 3 October raid was similar to the previous ones: MH-60 helicopters would rapidly insert the Rangers and Delta operators. The Rangers would secure the area surrounding a house where two of Mohamed Farrah Aidid's senior advisers were reported to be. Once the area was secured, the D-boys would assault the house, capture the suspects, and the entire force would be extracted out of the area by a ground convoy. The mission was supposed to last less than an hour.

The operation immediately ran into problems. As the assault elements were being inserted by helicopter, a Ranger, laden down with almost a hundred pounds of ammunition and equipment, lost his grip on the slick ropes and fell 70 feet. As a medic tended the injured man, the security force came under intense fire from small arms and rocket-propelled grenades. In a just a few minutes, the Somalis wounded several soldiers and shot a helicopter from the sky.

Despite heavy fire, Ranger leaders quickly moved their soldiers into position and the two suspected militiamen were captured. The ground convoy, however, was repeatedly ambushed and became disorientated in the confusing streets of Mogadishu. Instead of evacuating the assault troops from the target area, the convoy had to return to its base after several vehicles were destroyed and scores of men were killed or wounded.

In describing the action, Bowden rapidly shifts focus among several of the battle's participants. We watch Corporal Jamie Smith, a popular and competent junior leader, slowly bleed to death in the arms of his squad leader while a medic desperately tries to repair his severed artery. We can feel Lieutenant Colonel Danny McKnight's frustration as he attempts to move his crippled relief convoy through the narrow, confusing streets of Mogadishu. We are shocked when Sergeant First Class Earl Fillmore, one of the dreaded Delta Force operators, crumples to the ground, shot in the head by a Somali gunman. Although Task Force Ranger achieved a military victory, Aidid was the real winner that day. When the American public woke to images of an American soldier's naked corpse being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, and the news of a beaten and bruised pilot in enemy hands and 18 soldiers dead, support for continued involvement in Somalia quickly ended. Bowden, however, refuses to assign blame for the mission's outcome, remaining focused on conveying an accurate, detailed account of the battle.

Military leaders can apply several of the lessons learned from this book. First, company grade officers and non-commissioned officers will notice the importance of pre-combat inspections. Several Rangers did not take adequate amounts of water and nobody took night vision devices which would have given the American's a distinct advantage during the hours of limited visibility. On a positive note, the Ranger Regiment's emphasis on realistic live-fire training was validated. The ability of riflemen and machine gunners to quickly identify and accurately engage targets proved to be a vital force multiplier. Field grade military officers will learn from the mistakes made in coordinating the action of the ground convoy and assault element. Long after the ground convoy encountered intense fire and returned to base, several members of the assault element believed that the convoy was only minutes away. Additionally, the lack of adequate maps and contingency plans prevented senior leaders from quickly introducing additional troops into the area of operations.

Black Hawk Down is an excellent description of small unit combat. It proves that modern combat at the battalion and lower level has changed little in the last 60 years. Furthermore, it is an outstanding example of how quickly peace operations and other non-traditional military missions can shift into war.

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[The views expressed by the author of this review are not necessarily the views of the United States government or the United States Army.]