

BASED ON AN ACTUAL EVENT

The Battle of Mogadishu in Popular Culture

By Jared M. Tracy, PhD

(Image credit: DVIDS)



(Image credit: DVIDS)



The year 2023 marks thirty years since the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia on 3-4 October 1993. The mission objective was for Task Force Ranger—which included soldiers from the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), and other Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) units—to capture high-value associates of Mohamed Farrah Aidid, head of the Somalia National Alliance (SNA). Aidid, a powerful warlord aspiring to be president, had been frustrating United Nations Operations in Somalia II (UNOSOM II) efforts to bring relief to the starving and war-torn country, to include killing UN peacekeepers. The U.S. believed it was time to bring Aidid to justice.

Task Force Ranger had already made six attempts to track down Aidid since its arrival in August 1993, capturing members of his inner circle along the way. Intended to last less than an hour, the mission on 3 October devolved into some of the fiercest urban combat since Vietnam, becoming an overnight fight for survival and exfiltration in the face of thousands of SNA and irregular fighters. With the support of conventional, joint, and international partners, ARSOF soldiers achieved their tactical objectives, but at the cost of eighteen U.S. lives lost, dozens more wounded, and two downed MH-60 Black Hawk helicopters on the battlefield.¹

ARSOF soldiers earned recognition for their heroism and sacrifice during the battle, among them Master Sergeant (MSG) [Gary I. Gordon](#) and Sergeant First Class (SFC) [Randall D. Shughart](#),

TOP: Members of TF Ranger in 1993, before the Battle of Mogadishu.
BOTTOM: The crew of “Super 64,” one of the two downed MH-60s in the Battle of Mogadishu, in a photo from September 1993: Winn Mahuron, SSG Thomas J. Field, SSG William D. Cleveland, CW4 Raymond A. Frank, and CW3 Michael J. Durant.

who posthumously received the Medal of Honor.² However, the political fallout from the Battle of Mogadishu led to the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Somalia within six months, followed by the end of UNOSOM II in March 1995. Public perception of the battle was initially shaped by media coverage, as it would take time for the Department of Defense (DoD) to research and publish detailed historical accounts on U.S. military operations in Somalia.³ In the meantime, the mission came into sharper view in the public eye through the book *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (1999) by journalist Mark Bowden, and the film that it inspired, *Black Hawk Down* (2001), produced by Jerry Bruckheimer and directed by Ridley Scott.

Starting in late 2000, DoD public affairs elements helped coordinate ARSOF support to the film's writers, producers, and actors. From the outset, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) sought to ensure that the battle and those who fought and died in it were appropriately represented and received a fitting tribute. This collaboration contributed to the film's harsh depictions of modern combat and its gritty yet inspiring tone. As a result, the award-winning *Black Hawk Down* helped shape popular understanding about this significant event. After providing a brief chronology of the film's development and release, this article describes how USASOC assisted the production of *Black Hawk Down*.

The time between the publication of Bowden's book and the national release of the film *Black Hawk Down* in January 2002 was less than three years. Ken Nolan was the only credited screenwriter, though he was assisted by Bowden and

TOP: President William J. Clinton addresses media questions about Somalia during a press conference on 14 October 1993, ten days after the Battle of Mogadishu. **BOTTOM:** Gold Star wives Stephanie Shughart (left) and Carmen Gordon (right) accept the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor to their husbands, Randall and Gary, on 23 May 1994.





MSG Gary I. Gordon



SFC Randall D. Shughart



Assistant Secretary of Defense Pete Williams (left) presents an award to Philip M. Strub, in recognition of his outstanding work in support of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, 15 January 1993. Some eight years later, Strub would help coordinate DoD support to the making of *Black Hawk Down*.

others with the ever-evolving script. Filming took place primarily in and around Rabat, Morocco, between March and June 2001. In late May 2001, the film's first trailers accompanied the release of *Pearl Harbor* (which also featured Josh Hartnett, who played Staff Sergeant Matthew Eversmann in *Black Hawk Down*). The film's tentative release date was 2 November 2001, but the deadly 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. led filmmakers to briefly reconsider delaying it until spring 2002. As one news source at the time reported, "Just six weeks ago, as the events of Sept. 11 shook America, Hollywood rushed to postpone any terror-related films that might offend public sensibilities, abruptly pulling a number of completed pictures . . . because of fears that Americans wouldn't want to see war movies any time soon."⁴ However, by November, "those concerns appear[ed] to be receding," and Hollywood decided to start releasing *Black Hawk Down* in late 2001.⁵

The premiere of *Black Hawk Down* occurred on 18 December, followed by limited release in Los Angeles and New York City ten days later. Distributed by Sony, it hit theaters nationwide on 18 January 2002, eventually grossing roughly \$173 million worldwide against a \$92 million budget. Nominated for numerous awards, *Black Hawk Down* won the categories Best Film Editing and Best Sound at the 74th Academy Awards in March 2002.⁶ Less well known was how much support the acclaimed film had received from USASOC, headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (known as Fort Liberty since 2023), prior to and during production. This relationship all started with a phone call from the Pentagon to Fort Bragg in late 2000.

Special Forces (SF) Major (MAJ) Timothy McAllister* was serving in the U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC) G-3 at Fort Bragg when he was contacted by Philip M. Strub, DoD Film/Entertainment Coordinator in the Pentagon



LEFT: BG Frank J. Toney, Jr., Commanding General (CG), USASFC, approved MAJ McAllister’s* participation in a preliminary meeting with Jerry Bruckheimer at the Pentagon in late 2000 to discuss possible DoD support to *Black Hawk Down*. **RIGHT:** As CG, USASOC, LTG Bryan D. Brown (pictured here as a full general) pledged full support to the making of *Black Hawk Down*.



160th SOAR DUI



75th Ranger Regiment DUI

in Arlington, Virginia, about the proposed film. Strub considered McAllister* an ideal DoD project officer due to his ARSOF affiliation and his previous assignment as an entertainment liaison in the U.S. Army Public Affairs Office (PAO) in Los Angeles, California. The Commanding General (CG) of USASFC, Brigadier General (BG) Frank J. Toney, Jr., approved McAllister’s* participation in a preliminary meeting with Strub and Bruckheimer in the Pentagon. At the meeting, Bruckheimer pitched the concept for *Black Hawk Down*, with assurances that “every soldier would come out as a hero,” and requested DoD technical and materiel support to the film at the producer’s expense.⁷

As the higher command for all ARSOF units, USASOC emerged as the most obvious Army command to provide this requested support. Upon returning to Fort Bragg, McAllister* relayed

Bruckheimer’s request to the CG, USASOC, Lieutenant General (LTG) [Bryan D. Brown](#). With the DoD already on board, Brown enthusiastically pledged full support to the producers.⁸ Over the next several months, USASOC support took three main forms: review of Nolan’s draft script; providing ARSOF familiarization and training to the actors; and soldiers, technical expertise, and equipment during the filming itself in Morocco. The pace moved quickly due to the short amount of time between the request for support and the designated time for filming.

USASOC received the draft script in early December 2000, which was in turn provided to the 75th Ranger Regiment and 160th SOAR (“Night Stalkers”), to be returned with comments no later than 11 December. While realizing that the filmmakers would take creative license, the 75th

and 160th went through great pains to guarantee that their units, soldiers, and fallen heroes were as truthfully represented as possible. They strove for realism and accuracy, to include ensuring that the characters talked, looked, and acted like real ARSOF soldiers. The producers accepted many but not all of their recommended changes; due to the number of deviations, they elected to change the first line of the film from “This is a true story” to “Based on an actual event.” ARSOF units continued to review revised scripts, even during filming in Morocco.⁹ Meanwhile, in early 2001, arrangements were made for actors to receive familiarization with and training from 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) at Fort Bragg, the 160th SOAR at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia (known as Fort Moore since 2023).

(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)

Those visiting 7th SFG included actors William Fichtner and Eric Bana, who portrayed fictional composite characters SFC Jeff Sanderson and SFC Norm ‘Hoot’ Gibson, and Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, who portrayed Medal of Honor recipient MSG Gary I. Gordon. Training received from SF soldiers included weapons familiarization, Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT), explosive breaching, close-quarters combat, hand-to-hand fighting, and Fast-Rope Insertion and Extraction System (FRIES) orientation. According to Fichtner, “Before reading the script, all I knew about what happened in Somalia was from CNN sound bites—that we had gone in there to help feed the starving people there and then something went wrong so we left.” His experience at Fort Bragg was eye-opening and memorable. “In preparing for my role, I made a number of real friends in the Army down [at] Fort Bragg, not just acquaintances but friends. I am proud of what my new friends do on a daily basis in defending this country.”¹⁰



(Image credit: U.S. Army)

TOP LEFT: Actors Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Eric Bana, and William Fichtner during explosive breaching training with 7th SFG at Fort Bragg. **TOP RIGHT:** Fichtner executes an arm and wrist lock during combatives training with 7th SFG. **MIDDLE:** Coster-Waldau, Fichtner, and Bana conduct dry fire exercises. **BOTTOM:** Coster-Waldau, Bana, and Fichtner take a break with their SF trainers at Fort Bragg.



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)

Meanwhile, actors Jeremy Piven and Ron Eldard, who played Clifton P. Wolcott and Michael J. Durant, pilots of the two downed MH-60s, visited their 160th SOAR counterparts at Fort Campbell. This included familiarization with special operations helicopters, equipment, and capabilities; meetings with veterans from Somalia, to include receiving a briefing on the battle from Durant himself; and paying respects at the Night Stalker memorial wall outside of the regimental headquarters. In addition, Eldard participated in a portion of [Green Platoon](#), a stressful, physically and mentally intense training program that all incoming Night Stalker candidates must complete before joining the Regiment. While neither Eldard nor Piven flew any helicopters for the film, their experience at Fort Campbell helped familiarize them with Night Stalker culture and gave them a deeper appreciation for the 160th's role in Somalia.

The largest group of actors to receive training

was the nearly twenty individuals who visited the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning. Among these were Hartnett, Ewan MacGregor (who played Specialist [SPC] John Grimes), Orlando Bloom (who portrayed Private First Class Todd Blackburn), Tom Hardy (who played SPC Lance Twombly), Ewen Bremner (who played SPC Shawn Nelson), Jason Isaacs (who portrayed Captain Michael Steele, Commander, Company B, 3/75th Ranger Regiment [B/3/75]), and Tom Sizemore (who portrayed Lieutenant Colonel Danny R. McKnight, Commander, 3/75th Ranger Regiment). Given fresh "high and tight" haircuts, the actors received intensive training from roughly ten Rangers in weapons, MOUT, tactical drills, hand-to-hand fighting, first aid, signal, and helicopter familiarization. This crash course in Ranger culture and tactics were designed to help prepare the actors for the upcoming filming in Morocco. They would be joined in-country by actual ARSOF soldiers and equipment.

LEFT: Actors Ron Eldard (left) and Jeremy Piven, who played pilots of the two downed Black Hawks in the film, sit in an MH-60 cockpit while visiting the 160th SOAR at Fort Campbell. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Eldard (in black shirt with back facing the camera) attends a briefing on the Battle of Mogadishu from Michael Durant, pilot of "Super 64" who was shot down and held captive for 11 days. **MIDDLE:** Eldard chats with Special Operations Aviation Training Company (SOATC) instructors during his attendance at Green Platoon. **RIGHT:** Eldard visits the Night Stalker Memorial outside of 160th SOAR headquarters at Fort Campbell.



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



Actors receiving "high and tight" Ranger haircuts.



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)

TOP LEFT: Jason Isaacs (standing, left), Ewan MacGregor (kneeling, second row, second from left), Orlando Bloom (kneeling, first row, right), and other “Ranger” actors receive a class on heliborne operations.
TOP RIGHT: Actors take a break from MOUT training to enjoy some field chow.
MIDDLE LEFT: Actor Tom Sizemore works on closed guard escapes during hand-to-hand fighting training with the Rangers.
BOTTOM LEFT: “Ranger” actors receive field medical training.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Hartnett loads blank rounds into a magazine during MOUT training.

USASOC developed its filming support package with the following priorities in mind: personnel safety and well-being, military credibility, and zero cost to the American taxpayer. Its “Statement of Requirements” listed the following as its desired result: “Assist in the successful support of U.S. military personnel deployed to Rabat, Morocco, and ensure Production Company is provided with authentic rotary-winged assets and ground operations personnel to complete filming of [the] movie.”¹¹ While the PAO stated that USASOC support “is authorized under DoD and [Army] policies” and that it “behooves the Army to support such projects to ensure accuracy in portrayal of our units,” it clarified that the production company would pay for or reimburse all costs for USASOC involvement.¹² It was later revealed that “total reimbursable costs for the movie were \$2.2 million.”¹³

The ARSOF package to Morocco included soldiers from B/3/75, pilots and crewmembers for four MH-60 and four MH/AH-6 “Little Bird” helicopters, and support personnel, totaling roughly 150 servicemembers. These personnel handled the real-world aspects of filming, such as fast-rope insertion by the Rangers and all of the aviation seen in the film. They would also help beef up the on-screen presence of soldiers, since the number of actors constituted only a fraction of who was present in October 1993. MAJ McAllister* was there as USASOC’s representative and as the DoD Project Officer, ensuring that the soldiers were cared for according to the agreed-upon arrangement. Production company-funded provisions for the soldiers included food, water, billeting, refrigeration, medical support, transportation and fuel, security for personnel and equipment,

TOP: Bremner receives training on machine gun operations. Other weapons introduced included the M16 rifle and Mk 19 automatic grenade launcher. **BOTTOM:** Actors and their Ranger trainers pose for a group picture at Fort Benning, early 2001.



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



Battle of Mogadishu veteran COL (ret.) Lee Van Arsdale, seen here addressing an audience at the U.S. Military Academy in April 2021, served as a private consultant during filming in Morocco in 2001, along with COL (ret.) Thomas Matthews (not pictured). To the left of Van Arsdale is COL (ret.) Larry Perino who, as a First Lieutenant in October 1993, helped secure the “Super 61” crash site. To the right of Van Arsdale are fellow Somalia veterans Chief Warrant Officer (ret.) Stan Wood, MAJ (ret.) Jeffery D. Struecker, and MSG (ret.) Matthew Eversmann.

communications, interpreters, office supplies, and a covered 5,000-square-foot maintenance facility and aircraft hangar.¹⁴

The production company also brought on two Mogadishu veterans, Lee Van Arsdale and Thomas Matthews, both retired colonels, as private consultants. As reported by *The Washington Post*, “Van Arsdale and Matthews were on set in Rabat and Sale, Morocco, every day from ‘rolling’ to ‘it’s a wrap,’ keeping a close eye on the stuntmen, extras and actors. Of particular importance was making sure the actors wore their uniforms and carried their weapons like real soldiers.”¹⁵ Van Arsdale noted, “There’s always someone who will find a way to hold their weapon wrong or wear something incorrectly in the background.”¹⁶ According

to Matthews, “For the memory of the soldiers who were killed in that combat operation and their families, I felt I should do the best job I could to technically advise on the movie . . . From the beginning, Jerry [Bruckheimer] and Ridley [Scott] said they wanted this to be something special, a tribute to the soldiers in the mission. Everyone involved understood that this was being done for the memory of the men.”¹⁷

As filming drew to a close and trailers began appearing in theaters, USASOC headquarters and units braced for an explosion in media attention and public interest. Their plans included preparing public announcements, releasing positive stories about Mogadishu veterans and ARSOF soldiers who supported the film, and select media engagements by ARSOF personnel.¹⁸ USASOC PAO guidance also provided answers to

common questions that media members may ask about the film. For example, when asked about historical accuracy, an acceptable response was that it was “a fictionalized account of real events,” and that it was “reasonably realistic and historically accurate,” despite the presence of artistic license.¹⁹ USASOC and unit PAOs addressed requests for interviews from such outlets as the History Channel, CNN, MSNBC, and local newspapers, on a case-by-case basis.

Select servicemembers, veterans, senior leaders, and Gold Star family members were able to view the film prior to the 18 January 2002 nationwide release. One such event in Washington, DC, on 15 January, was attended by Vice President Richard B. Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld,

Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White, U.S. Army Chief of Staff GEN Eric K. Shinseki, Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Jack L. Tilley, and other servicemembers and dignitaries. Many were astounded by the film’s gruesome realism. SMA Tilley, for one, said that it reminded him of his combat experience in Vietnam.²⁰

The film’s graphic depiction of the deadly event was praised, with one Mogadishu veteran calling it “90- to 95-percent accurate.” However, others pointed out historical errors or the sheer inability of cinema to truly depict what happens in combat. One SF officer attending the screening remarked, “You have to remember that we just sat through a little more than two hours of a depiction of what happened, when those soldiers were in a very hairy situation for more than 18 hours.”²¹ Post-viewing comments by Matthew Eversmann seemed to veil some misgivings about the portrayal of the battle, perhaps the inaccurate depiction of him going to the “Super 61” crash site, which he did not do in 1993. “I’d made peace with this,” he said. “Certainly, it’s difficult to watch a recreation of it, but I’ll always know inside my heart the real memories and that’s all that counts.”²²

While opinions of the film varied, *Black Hawk Down* unquestionably helped define popular perceptions of the battle. USASOC’s support to the making of the film had ensured that it was credible and sufficiently realistic. Of paramount concern to the producers and especially USASOC was honoring the ARSOF heroes who fought and died there; in that sense, it was a complete success. While the final version of the film bore its share of inaccuracies and artistic liberties, *Black Hawk Down* nonetheless retains educational and inspirational value, and stands as an enduring tribute to those who served and gave their lives there on that fateful day thirty years ago.



A memorial tribute to the ARSOF soldiers who lost their lives in the Battle of Mogadishu, 3-4 October 1993.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For an overview of the UN mission in Somalia, Task Force Ranger, and the Battle of Mogadishu, see Eugene G. Piasecki, "'If you liked Beirut, you'll love Mogadishu': An Introduction to Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) in Somalia," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 3, no. 2 (2007), https://arsof-histo.org/articles/v3n2_like_beirut_love_mogadishu_page_1.html.
- 2 For the upgrade of awards for ARSOF soldiers who fought in the Battle of Mogadishu, see USASOC PAO, "60 Army Special Operators awards upgraded for Operation Gothic Serpent," 1 July 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/248099/60_army_special_operators_awards_upgraded_for_operation_gothic_serpent.
- 3 See, for example, the U.S. Army Center of Military History's *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994* (2002) and *United States Forces, Somalia After Action Report* (2003).
- 4 Rachel Abramowitz, "The Movies' Military Strike," 5 November 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-nov-05-ca-491-story.html>.
- 5 Abramowitz, "The Movies' Military Strike."
- 6 IMDB, "*Black Hawk Down*," n.d., https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0265086/?ref=ttloc_ov_i
- 7 Thomas McAllister*, interview with Jared M. Tracy and Suzanne Harrison, 30 June 2023, USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC, hereafter McAllister* interview, 30 June 2023.
- 8 McAllister* interview, 30 June 2023.
- 9 McAllister* interview, 30 June 2023.
- 10 Joe Burlas, "'Black Hawk Down' reflects Army values," 16 January 2002, <http://www.pomgrenade.org/WGR/militainment/blackhawk.html>.
- 11 USASOC, "Statement of Requirements," n.d., copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC, hereafter "Statement of Requirements."
- 12 USASOC, "ANNEX C (Public Affairs Guidance) to OPOD 01-17 BHD Support," n.d., copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC.
- 13 USASOC, PAO Guidance, n.d., copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC, hereafter USASOC PAO Guidance.
- 14 McAllister* interview, 30 June 2023; "Statement of Requirements"; Elizabeth Snead, "The Special Operation of '*Black Hawk Down*,'" *The Washington Post*, 13 January 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2002/01/13/the-special-operation-of-black-hawk-down/cbf4cff9-610e-49d2-b44c-7a12f10909f5/>.
- 15 Snead, "The Special Operation of '*Black Hawk Down*.'"
- 16 Snead, "The Special Operation of '*Black Hawk Down*.'"
- 17 Snead, "The Special Operation of '*Black Hawk Down*.'"
- 18 160th SOAR, PAO Planning Document, n.d., copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC.
- 19 USASOC PAO Guidance. **It addressed other topics such as the need to safeguard ARSOF tactics, techniques, and procedures, and why USASOC could not support marketing efforts for the film (namely, the DoD does not endorse products or services).**
- 20 Burlas, "'Black Hawk Down' reflects Army values."
- 21 Burlas, "'Black Hawk Down' reflects Army values."
- 22 Linda D. Kozaryn, "Soldiers Who Relive Fateful Battle Say 'There Are Heroes Among Us,'" January 17, 2002, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC.