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Nightstalker Pilot's Account of 03/04 Oct 1993

by Capt. Gerry Izzo (Super65)

During the last few days many pilots have come up to me and asked me if I had seen the movie "Blackhawk Down." I don't mind talking about the movie, and I welcome the opportunity to talk about the heroism and valor of my friends. I just wanted to post some comments here about the movie and my impressions. Also I wanted to try to answer some frequently asked questions.

First of all, I and many of my friends that also flew on the mission thought that the movie was excellent! It is technically accurate and it is dramatically correct. In other words, the equipment, lingo and dialogue are all right on. By dramatically correct, I mean that it very effectively captured the emotions and tension that we all felt during the mission. It did this without being a cartoon, (like TOP GUN) or being over the top, (like FIREBIRDS). It's true that the screenwriters had to consolidate two or three people into one, but this was necessary because otherwise there would have been too many principal characters to keep track of. Also in the actual mission we had nearly 20 aircraft in the air that day. In

In the movie they had 4 Blackhawks and 4 "Little Birds". The unit could not afford to commit the actual number to the filming of the movie. However, through the magic of the cinema, they were able to give the impression of the real number. Our force mixture was as follows: Super 61 - Lead Blackhawk Star 41-44 Little Bird Assault Super 62 - Trail Blackhawk These aircraft made up the assault force. Their mission was to go into the buildings and capture the individuals who were the target of the day. Super 61 was shutdown, killing both pilots. (They were **CW4 Cliff Wolcott and CW3 Donovan Briley**. The three of us shared a room at the airfield.) Star 41 landed at the crashsite and the pilot **CW4 Keith Jones** ran over and dragged two survivors to his

aircraft and took off for the hospital. Keith re-enacted his actions in the movie. Super 62 was the Blackhawk that put in the two Delta snipers, Sergeant First Class Randy Shughart and Master Sergeant Gary Gordon. They were inserted at crashsite #2. Shortly after Gary and Randy were put in Super 62 was struck in the fuselage by an antitank rocket. The whole right side of the aircraft was opened up and the sniper manning the right door gun had his leg blown off. The aircraft was able to make it out of the battle area to the port area where they made a controlled crash landing. (This is not depicted in the movie.)

Next was the Ranger Blocking Force. This consisted of 4 Blackhawks: Super 64 (CW3 Mike Durant, CW4 Ray Frank) Super 65 (Me, Cpt Richard Williams) Super 66 (CW3 Stan Wood, CW4 Gary Fuller) Super 67 (CW3 Jeff Niklaus, CW2 Sam Champ)

The mission of the blocking force was to be inserted at the four corners of the objective building and to prevent any Somali reinforcements from getting through. In the movie there is a brief overhead shot of the assault. My aircraft is depicted in the lower left hand corner of the screen. This is the only part of the film where I come close to being mentioned. As the assault is completed, you hear the Blackhawks calling out of the objective area. When you hear, "...Super 65 is out, going to holding..." that's my big movie moment. There is also a quick shot of an RPG being shot at a hovering Blackhawk. I did have one maybe two fired at me, but I did not see them or the gunner. I only heard the explosions. We were not able to return fire, although some of the other aircraft did. Make no mistake. I am fully aware of my role in this mission. My job was the same as the landing boat drivers in "Saving Private Ryan." Get the troops in the right place in one piece. I am very proud of the fact that my crew and I were able to do that. After having done this in Grenada, Panama and Somalia, I can identify with the bombardiers of World War Two. You have to ignore all of the chaos that is going on around and completely concentrate on the tasks at hand. That is holding the aircraft as steady as possible so the Rangers can slide down the ropes as quickly and safely as possible.

Okay, Okay, enough about me. Super 64 was shot down also with an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade). They tried to make it back to the airfield, but their tail rotor gave way

about a mile out of the objective area. They went down in the worst part of bad guy territory. The dialogue for the movie appears to have been taken from the mission tapes as it is exactly as I remember it. (This was the hardest part of the movie for me to watch). The actions on the ground are as described by Mike Durant, as he was the only one from the crew to survive the crash and the gun battle. It was here the Gary and Randy won their Posthumous Medals of Honor.

Super 66 was called in at about 2000 hours to resupply the Rangers at the objective area. Some of the Rangers were completely out of ammunition and were fighting hand to hand with the Somali militia men. (Also not depicted in the movie). Stan and Gary brought their aircraft in so that they were hovering over the top of the Olympic Hotel with the cargo doors hanging out over the front door. In this way they were able to drop the ammo, water and medical supplies to the men inside. Stan's left gunner fired 1600 rounds of minigun ammo in 30 seconds. He probably killed between 8 to 12 Somali militia men. As Stan pulled out of the objective area, he headed to the airfield because his right gunner had been wounded, as had the two Rangers in the back who were throwing out the supplies. Once he landed, he discovered that he'd been hit by about 40-50 rounds and his transmission leaking oil like a sieve. Super 66 was done for the night.

The final group of aircraft were the 4 MH6 gunships, and the command and control Blackhawk and the Search and Rescue 'Hawk'. They were Barber 51-54 MH6's Super 63 C&C Super 68 SAR

In the movie, the gunships are shown making only one attack. In fact, they were constantly engaged all night long. Each aircraft reloaded six times. It is estimated that they fired between 70 and 80,000 rounds of minigun ammo and fired a total 90 to 100 aerial rockets. They were the only thing that kept the Somalis from overrunning the objective area. All eight gunship pilots were awarded the Silver Star. Every one of them deserved it!

Next is Super 68. The actions of this crew were very accurately portrayed. The only difference was that they were actually hit in the rotor blades by an RPG. This blew a semicircle out of the main rotor spar, but the blade held

together long enough for them to finish putting in the medics and Rangers at the first crashsite. It was then that they headed to the airfield. What they did not know, was that their main transmission and engine oil cooler had been destroyed by the blast. As they headed to the airfield all 7 gallons of oil from the main rotor gearbox, and all 7 quarts from each engine was pouring out. They got the aircraft on the ground just as all oil pressures went to zero. They then shutdown, ran to the spare aircraft and took off to rejoin the battle. They were in the air just in time to affect the MEDEVAC of Super 62, which had landed at the seaport. The pilots of this aircraft were **CW3 Dan Jollota**, and MAJ Herb Rodriguez. Both men were later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Major Rodriguez is retired from the Army now and he teaches middle school with my wife in Clarksville, Tennessee.

Finally there is the Command and Control Blackhawk, Super 63. In the back of this aircraft was my battalion commander, LTC Matthews, and the overall ground commander, LTC Harrell.

In the movie, there is a scene where the men on the ground were begging for MEDEVAC. By this point in the battle we had 5 Blackhawks out of action, either shot down or shot up so much they couldn't fly anymore. Of the two assault force and four blocking force 'hawks', only myself and Super 67 were left. I fully expected LTC Harrell to send us in to try to get those men out. I jacked a round into the chamber of my pistol and my M16. I knew that the only way to do was to hover with one wheel balanced on the roof of the building. Then the Rangers would be able to throw the wounded in. I knew that we were going to take a lot of fire and I was trying to mentally prepare myself to do this while the aircraft was getting hit. My friends had all gone in and taken their licks and now I figured it was our turn. (Peer pressure is such a powerful tool if used properly.) Quite frankly, I really thought that we were at best going to get shot down, at worst I figured we were going to be killed. The way I saw it we had already lost 5 aircraft, what was 2 more? I had accepted this because at least when this was all over General Garrison would be able to tell the families that we had tried everything to get their sons, fathers or husbands out. We were even willing to send in our last two helicopters. Fortunately for me LTC Harrell realized that the time for helicopters had passed. The decision was made to

get the tanks and armored personnel carriers to punch through to the objective area. Once again, the dialogue in the movie is verbatim. What you don't hear is me breathing a sigh of relief! I remembered thinking that maybe I was going to see the sunrise after all.

I guess I got a little carried away. I really didn't mean to write this much. People ask me if this movie has given me 'flashbacks'. I don't think you can call them flashbacks if that day has never been out of my mind.

I hope that when you do see the movie it will fill you with pride and awe for the Rangers that fought their hearts out that day. Believe me, they are made of the same stuff as those kids at Normandy Beach. When 1LT Tom DiTomasso, the Ranger platoon leader on my aircraft, told me that we did a fantastic job, I couldn't imagine ever receiving higher praise than that. I love my wife and children, but the greatest thing I've ever done is to be a Nightstalker Pilot with Task Force Ranger on 3-4 Oct 1993.

Thank you for reading this. I look forward to answering any and all questions anyone may have about the movie or the actual battle. I just thought that this might fill in some of the blanks. Thank you again.

Capt. Gerry Izzo (Super65) "NSDQ" Nightstalkers Don't Quit

Source: <http://www.patriotsherald.com/content/blackhawk.php>

NOTES:

1. Mark Bowden authored the book *Blackhawk Down* (which later was made into a movie) which chronicled the events and heroism on 3 and 4 October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia. The book features the events and individuals mentioned in the above article by CPT Gerry Izzo.
2. CW4 (Ret) Michael J. Durant, then a CW3, and writer Steven Hartov authored *In the Company of Heroes* chronicling the events and heroism on 3 and 4 October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia.
3. *THE QUIET PROFESSIONAL: "A Tribute to the late CW4 Raymond A. Frank, U.S. Army"* an article by Ray Bell in the June 1995 reveals the origin of the term Quiet Professional. Major General Jack Keane, then Commander, 101st Division (Air Assault), addressed the assembled Warrant Officers at the meeting held in 1992 at Fort Campbell. General Keane used the words "quiet professional" as he talked about warrant officers, and specifically applied that title to a warrant officer with whom he was personally acquainted. The name of this warrant officer was CW4 Raymond A. Frank, U.S. Army; *"The Quiet Professional."*