

## **‘Blackhawk Down’ vet reflects on Battle of Mogadishu**

By Carl Stoffers  
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Twenty-two years later, Somalia is largely unchanged. Synonymous with war, terrorism and piracy, the country where 18 Americans died during a bloody battle on Oct. 3, 1993 is still a dangerous, often-forgotten place.

But for men like Keni Thomas, who fought in the battle later immortalized in the book and movie “Blackhawk Down,” Somalia is never far from thought.

“There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t think of it,” said Thomas, 50, a former U.S. Army Ranger. “I think that goes for anybody that has come back from something like that.”

Thomas and his fellow Rangers deployed to Somalia in August 1993 with orders to arrest the country’s most powerful warlord, Mohammed Farah Aidid. Aidid’s militia was stealing food shipments meant for starving Somalis and had slaughtered 24 Pakistani peacekeeping troops.

After dozens of raids in which members of Aidid’s militia were arrested, the Rangers and Delta Force commandos received a report that Aidid’s top lieutenants were meeting in Mogadishu. They prepared to head into the city expecting to be back in an hour.

“We had done around 42 raids” up to that point, Thomas said. “We had a bit of a ‘Superman’ mentality, but you kind of have to if you’re in that situation.”

The raid commenced on the afternoon of October 3. Four Blackhawk helicopters loaded with Rangers, along with several support aircraft, flew into the city. The Rangers slid down ropes from the hovering helicopters to the street, where they set up a security perimeter around the target building.

Simultaneously, a squad from Delta Force landed and took Aidid’s lieutenants prisoner. The targets were secured; and the Americans waited for a ground convoy that was to take them back to the base. Despite a large group of armed Somalis massing in the area, the raid appeared to be over.

“We had accomplished our objective,” said Thomas. “We had the prisoners and were preparing to head back.”

Then, the unthinkable happened.

One of the orbiting Blackhawks was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. Thomas watched from the ground as the huge helicopter went into a spin and crashed in the city.

“It was just disbelief,” said Thomas. “I remember thinking ‘How could that happen?’ That’s when everything went bad.”

The mission immediately changed to a rescue as the Americans, now under heavy fire from Somali militia, attempted to navigate through the city to the crash site.

“Looking back at how cramped that city is and how narrow those alleys are, I don’t know how we made it,” said Thomas.

While the contingent of Rangers were fighting their way toward the first Blackhawk, a second helicopter was shot down, crashing in another part of the city.

The convoy of lightly-armored Humvees and trucks was trying to make it to the second crash but kept getting lost in the city’s maze-like streets, taking heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, Thomas and his comrades set up a perimeter around the first crash site and fought off hordes of Somali gunmen for the next twelve hours. It wasn’t until the following morning that a convoy of armored vehicles arrived to rescue them. But, in their haste to get the wounded men evacuated, the convoy inadvertently left without them.

“There was about 25 of us that had to run out of the city,” said Thomas. “If there was ever a time that I was scared, that was it. You could feel the beginning of panic. It was a miracle that everyone who had to run made it out.”

When Thomas got to the safety of a soccer stadium being used by the Pakistani military, the reality of the situation became clear. Of the 160 troops that were sent into the city the previous day, 18 were killed and more than 80 wounded. One of helicopter pilots was captured and would be held for 11 days before being released. Somali casualties were estimated in the thousands.

There was the additional horror of the bodies of dead American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, which Thomas said had a profound effect on the survivors of the battle.

“I wanted to go back out there,” he said. “We all did. We still had people in the city to bring home.”

After the Pyrrhic victory, President Clinton pulled the Rangers out of Somalia, angering many of the unit’s men.

“It was really frustrating,” said Thomas. “If it was important enough to send us there, why wasn’t it important enough to let us stay and finish the job?”

Thomas, now a successful musician in Nashville, recently spoke to Clinton about the mission. What the former president said changed his perspective.

“I came away from that conversation feeling that he wasn’t fully informed about what was going on over there,” said Thomas. “He seemed very sincere, he even had a tear in his eye at one point, but I don’t think he was fully informed, and that was part of the problem.”

Thomas went back to Mogadishu with another former Ranger in 2013, for the twentieth anniversary of the battle. What he saw did not surprise him.

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “There was still bullet holes everywhere from our weapons. I don’t think we made any kind of difference there.”

The Battle of Mogadishu was the bloodiest battle U.S. forces fought in two decades. It had a profound effect on Keni Thomas and the other men who fought there.

“If there is one word to describe how I feel about it, it would be ‘defining,’ because it made every one of us who we are,” he said.

“It taught me the positive value in taking care of each other, in looking out for the guy next to you.”