



Former Ranger NCO Says Of Battle of Mogadishu: ‘Very Early On, I Assumed I Was Going To Die’

By Nick Duke

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In October, the Army will mark the 20th anniversary of the Battle of Mogadishu, a 1993 conflict in Somalia that inspired the book *Black Hawk Down* and the movie of the same name.

As part of the commemoration of the 20th anniversary, the Airborne and Special Operations Museum at Fayetteville, N.C., is in the process of developing an in-depth temporary exhibit dedicated to telling the story of the battle.

The exhibit will incorporate video interviews with veterans of the battle, as well as testimonies from family members and artifacts from the battle.

Fort Benning will also play a role in the exhibit, as Fort Benning TV is helping conduct interviews with subjects who live nearby.

One veteran, former Ranger Sgt. John Belman, visited Fort Benning recently to share the story of his role in the battle.

Belman was a member of a combat search and rescue

team sent into the streets of Mogadishu after a Black Hawk helicopter was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade on Oct. 3, 1993.

As part of the CSAR team, Belman and his fellow teammates had been training specifically for the possibility of a helicopter crash.

“We knew that if we were going to be on the ground at all, it was going to be a bad situation, and we knew that the mission automatically would change if a helicopter got shot down,” he said. “I went in knowing things were going to be ugly and things were going to be bad.”

Once the CSAR team arrived at the crash site, Belman said it began to take heavy fire from the Somali militia.

As casualties mounted and more and more Soldiers were wounded, Belman said he found himself thinking he probably would not survive the battle.

“Very early on, I assumed I was going to die,” he said. “The thought just occurred to me that the odds of us making it out alive were very slim given the amount of

fire we were taking, the number of wounded and what we had left to help get us out.”

Despite the bleak situation, Belman said one of his most vivid memories is of he and a fellow Soldier laugh-



Lt. Col. Sean Bernabe, commander of 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, and Pfc. Cody Nix, the youngest Soldier in 2nd Brigade Combat Team, salute the Memorial of the Fallen Golden Dragons during the Mogadishu Mile Run on Oct. 4, 2010. The run and memorial honor those who died during the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Sabin)

ing at one point.

“Sometimes things that would seem completely terrifying or ridiculous just end up being funny,” he said. “I can remember our combat controller on our helicopter was right next to me at one point and lots of people were getting shot. He got kind of winged in the arm and he and I just looked at each other and started laughing about it.”

The CSAR team held its position for 15 hours into the early morning of Oct. 4, when an armored United Nations convoy and elements of the 10th Mountain Division were able to extract it and the survivors of the Black Hawk crash.

“I was out 15 hours, but it certainly didn’t feel like 15 hours,” Belman said. “When you’re not sure about how it’s going to end or when it’s going to end and there’s a lot of uncertainty about what’s going to happen in the next five minutes, let alone two hours, that tends to magnify

every moment in terms of how long it feels.”

Belman left the Army in 1995, and since then, the Battle of Mogadishu served as the basis of the book and film *Black Hawk Down*.

Belman said that though there are inaccuracies in the movie’s portrayal of the battle’s events, he felt it served an important purpose.

“If you take it from the perspective that it’s Hollywood and they have to certain things to dramatize the event, I think it was a decent portrayal of what happened,” he said. “The purpose that it served was a good one in the sense that the American people didn’t really have any idea of what combat was like. Even though we’ve been at war for 12 years now, most people outside of Fort Benning or outside the communities of friends that I’ve got don’t really know what it’s all about.

“They might know a few people in the military, but we kind of have a society on autopilot when it comes to combat, and I think movies like that at least show something that is similar to what we experience and go through.”

Jim Bartlinski, the director of the Airborne and Special Operations Museum, said he is pleased to have veterans like Belman sharing their stories for the exhibit, many for the first time.

“I feel very honored that they are trusting us to tell their story,” Bartlinski said. “A lot of these guys have not spoken publicly about this story. We feel a great responsibility to ensure that their story is told accurately and respectfully. We’ve been very happy with the support we’ve been getting from the various commands involved with the operation and from the veterans themselves.

“It’s kind of taken on a life of its own. As people find out about it, they want to be a part of it and have their voices heard, and we couldn’t be happier about this.”

The video interviews being conducted will be edited into a 15-to-20 minute introductory video, with other excerpts used as videos that will accompany certain displays or artifacts within the exhibit.

In addition to telling the story from the perspective of the Soldiers who lived through it, the exhibit will also present the viewpoint of the family members of those Soldiers as they followed the events through news reports.

Most importantly, however, Bartlinski said the exhibit will be a chance to show an example of the Army values in action.

“The Army values are going to be highlighted during this exhibit, and we’ll show how they were exemplified during the battle,” he said.

The exhibit will open Oct. 3, the 20th anniversary of the battle, and will be open for two years.

Though the exhibit is meant to serve as a reminder of the sacrifices made during the battle, Belman, who doesn’t often speak about his combat experience, said he

thinks the sacrifices made in Mogadishu are no greater than those that have been made during the past 12 years in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“I try to keep in mind that what we went through wasn’t anything special compared to what people have been doing over the past 12 years,” he said. “You’ve got

men and women who have been deployed numerous times, some of whom have seen or experienced things that approached or surpassed what we went through. I was in combat once for 15 hours and a movie was made about it, but that’s nothing compared to what people are doing today and the sacrifices that have been made.”



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