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English 106

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Historical Representation Essay

### The Battle of Mogadishu

War movies generally fall into two different categories—movies with romance and highly-embellished combat scenes and movies that are cut-and-dry, incorporating brutal, gruesome scenes that accurately portray the events. *Pearl Harbor* is an example of a war movie that is in the first category, which added romantic scenes to make it more appealing and softened the war scenes. *Black Hawk Down*, however, is true to the actual events that took place in Somalia during the Battle of Mogadishu. *Black Hawk Down* truthfully depicts the events that occurred during the daylight mission accurately by portraying the vivid incidents that took place in the 1992 battle to show the heroics of the men and give them credit for what they accomplished.

Both the movie and real life events that occurred in Somalia on October 3, 1992, were dreadful and unexpected. A team of Delta Force and Army Rangers were sent in with the intentions of a “humanitarian” mission. Their mission was to take out some high profile warlords. However, that was not how the mission went; instead, they were fired upon and had to deal with two Black Hawk helicopters being shot down while still needing to complete the objective. This war between the Americans and the militia was not the only thing taking place in 1992. The movie was filled with scenes of starving children and poorly clothed civilians. Genocide was an outcome of the struggle for power in Somalia, and famine plagued the nation, taking 300,000 lives (*Black*).

The director of *Black Hawk Down*, Ridley Scott, and producer Jerry Bruckheimer made it their priority to present the events in the movie exactly as they happened in 1992. In an interview, Bruckheimer is quoted as saying, “If you read the commentaries from the soldiers who were in the operation ... they all say it was a very accurate portrayal of what happened” (Duncan). On the U.S. Department of Defense press releases webpage, there is an article about *Black Hawk Down*. In the article, Chief Warrant Officer Rodney 'Sam' Shamp of the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, piloted Black Hawk 'Supersix Seven' during the raid, praises the movie. He is quoted as saying, "I believe they did an excellent job of capturing the emotions, the feelings and the camaraderie that comes from combat and the professionalism that existed” (qtd. in Kozaryn). So, even the brave-hearted men that served in the one day firefight agree that the movie portrays the war accurately.

The movie shows important historical events that happened in Somalia, such as the soldiers trying to save a wounded comrade, the drop-off of the soldiers, and the two Black Hawk helicopters being shot down. These three key events that occurred in Somalia are in the movie to prove to the audience that the battle was not an easy task and that, in their efforts to complete the mission, many lives were lost.

In the movie, there is a scene showing the soldiers making their final stand. They stick together, determined to defeat the militia in a violent battle. After the firefight, a vital member of the team gets shot in the knee. Three soldiers risk their lives to help perform a dangerous surgery. They failed to remove the bullet, and, later on that night, he died. This scene is filled with ghastly, vivid details, making it a point to show the audience exactly what the soldiers dealt with during the battle. The entire film is consistent with the actual events. The most accurate

scene in the movie is during the intense firefight between the Americans and Somali militia.

Dennis Showalter, professor of history at Colorado College, reviewed the movie. He states,

In the film, as in reality, the raid thus contributes to its own catastrophe. Nevertheless, as the surrounded Americans tend their rising numbers of wounded and stand off increasingly overwhelming odds, it is difficult not to be caught by the feeling that a particular place in Hell awaits.... (Showalter 650)

Showalter expresses his interpretation by calling the scene both accurate and realistic, for it shows the audience what the men had to endure. In addition to the accuracy of the movie and real events, the reason for portraying it as they did was to honor those soldiers. In an online production notes page, Mike Stenson, the executive producer of *Black Hawk Down*, is quoted as saying,

The thing is, all these guys were heroes...the reason they ended up in a 16-hour firefight was that they went to rescue their fallen comrades instead of going back to base and waiting for reinforcements. We wanted to make sure we paid tribute to the group while focusing on certain characters for dramatic purposes. (Duncan)

The soldiers risked the mission and their lives in trying to save their soldiers. During this specific scene, the opposition is firing at them, trying to prevent the soldiers from going back to rescue the injured. The scene is graphic and emotional as the viewer can see the soldiers' challenges they faced. The producers of *Black Hawk Down* decided as a team that accuracy was the key focus when producing the movie in order to give credit to soldiers who risked their lives to successfully complete the mission.

The drop-off of the soldiers into the city was disastrous. In the movie, the soldiers were getting ready to land when the opposition shot missiles and bullets at the helicopter. The film shows the men engaging with the militia in a bloody beginning to the battle. This scene accurately was portrayed as it occurred in Somalia in 1992. In the book *Battle of Mogadishu: Firsthand Accounts from the Men of Task Force Ranger*, a radio operator for the Americans gives his account of what he saw during the drop-off. Mike Kurth states, "I couldn't see five

feet outside the door. I couldn't make out the ground or even the buildings... almost immediately we were greeted with incoming fire way too early in the mission" (Eversmann et al. 72). This account is accurate in the movie as well. Without embellishing or exaggerating these scenes, the producers shed light on that specific scene in a way that cannot be altered, giving credit to the Delta Force and Army Rangers. The audience is given the facts as they were in 1992. Not only did the producers realize what a spectacular job they did on presenting the mission truthfully, but so did the soldiers who fought in the Battle of Mogadishu.

Many of the soldiers who were sent on the mission into Somalia were not expecting to deal with the cruel and punishing opposing militia. They did not have support and were essentially on their own until the end of the firefight. Gerry Izzo, a soldier who flew one of the choppers, is quoted as saying,

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. (Izzo)

Izzo's quote proves that the filmmakers of *Black Hawk Down* did intend to portray the events in Somalia accurately and give those men recognition and glory for their accomplishments, something they did not always receive when they returned. Even though the mission was not completed in the way it was presented, or in the timeframe they planned for, the mission's objective was still achieved, yet, when the soldiers came back home, the entire mission was scrutinized for the damage the Americans caused.

Another accurate scene in the movie was when a Black Hawk helicopter is shot down by an RPG. The movie vividly describes the flight into the city and shows the helicopter being hit, and the pilot strategically maneuvering the chopper to let all the other soldiers jump off before the crash. The courage and determination of the pilot is portrayed accurately in the movie as it

happened in Somalia. In the book, *Battle of Mogadishu: Firsthand Accounts from the Men of Task Force Ranger*, John Belman, a soldier on the helicopter that was eventually shot down, gives his reflections of what happened:

Then I made my way through the crash site. At this point the dust had settled, so visibility was very good...and there was the helicopter. This big, powerful machine, which inspired confidence in us all, was...out of commission. (Eversmann et al. 126)

Mike Kurth, Gerry Izzo and John Belman, give their accounts of the mission and their thoughts on the movie; as a result of their firsthand experiences, they provide evidence that proves, indeed, *Black Hawk Down* is true to what happened in Somalia.

When compared with textual evidence and commentaries from the soldiers who partook in the mission, *Black Hawk Down* proves to be accurate to the Battle of Mogadishu in 1992 in Somalia. From the saving of the soldier, to the drop-off to the helicopters being shot down, we realize the impact the war had on both sides. The director and producer understood that viewers needed to see the real battle itself, and not another Hollywood-inflated movie. The soldiers who fought deserve to be remembered for their acts of valor and heroism. It was a risky operation, with none of them expecting to be there for more than 30 minutes. The accuracy portrayed by the movie gives those men the acknowledgment for their success in Somalia and gives the audience the facts and truth of the Battle of Mogadishu.

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