



# CROSSING THE INTERSECTION OF DEATH

By Peter Grier



*TSgt. Timothy Wilkinson broke cover three separate times to aid severely wounded Rangers and Special Forces troops. His dashes across a wide intersection under an unceasing barrage of small-arms fire and rocket propelled grenades saved many lives.*

**I**t was a firebox hot Sunday afternoon in Somalia, Oct. 3, 1993. Air Force TSgt. Timothy A. Wilkinson was sitting on an ammo can in a US Army Black Hawk helicopter circling above the ruined city of Mogadishu. The call came in about 4:30 p.m.: A rocket propelled grenade had struck the tail of Super 61, another Black Hawk that was supporting

a US attempt to snatch local warlords. The aircraft had spun down and crashed in bad guy territory.

Wilkinson was a PJ, an Air Force pararescue jumper. Finding and saving personnel in harm's way is what PJs do for a living. Immediately, Wilkinson and fellow members of his combat search and rescue team began preparing for insertion to the crash site. Another call came in: There were

**TSgt. Tim Wilkinson earned the Air Force Cross for his heroism during 1993's harrowing Battle of Mogadishu.**

eight US personnel on Super 61, not four. RPGs were flying through the airspace below, more than Wilkinson had ever seen on previous missions.

Fast-rope was clearly the best way in. Their pilot came in hard, banked, and then flared up the nose of the Black Hawk to about 30 degrees to slow the helicopter. Downwash from the rotors kicked up Somali dust and created a brownout. Thick ropes dangled from both open doors.

### Heat, Dust, and AK-47 Rounds

Wilkinson was the last man on the right side. He kicked out some medical supply bags forgotten in the rush, then grasped the rope with his heavy leather fast-rope gloves and slid off into the dust. It was like descending a flexible fireman's pole as fast as possible.

The second he cleared the door, the Black Hawk took an RPG in its main rotor. The pilots didn't flee. They waited until Wilkinson and his fellow rescue team members were on the ground. Then they struggled away, trailing smoke, with no oil pressure. They would make it back to the airport—barely.

The ground was a chaos of heat, dust, and snapping AK-47 rounds. Wilkinson was standing on Marehan Road, a narrow thoroughfare in a

warren of stone walls and buildings near the Bakaara Market, epicenter of the area of influence for warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid and his Habr Gedir clan.

Wilkinson moved to a wall on the west side of the street. He was sweating and could not see anything. He had no idea how to find the crash site of Super 61. Then he saw some members of his team on the other side of the street, moving south to a corner about 130 feet away.

Wilkinson grabbed his medical bags and hustled after them as automatic weapons fire kicked up dirt in the street. He rounded the corner and blinked: Crammed in a narrow alley, the wrecked Black Hawk seemed huge. It was sitting on its left side, tail boom cracked, rotors missing.

Rangers and Special Forces at the site had established a command post and casualty collection point about 15 feet down the alley. Wilkinson extracted some litters from his bags and got them ready to load wounded.

He figured that a ground convoy of Army personnel would arrive shortly and he had to be ready. He also figured that they had a half-hour or so until Aidid's fighters could organize themselves for a concerted attack.

That surmise was incorrect. The PJ had just landed in a battle that would stretch into the next day and be immortalized in the book and movie "Black Hawk Down." Wilkinson would earn an Air Force Cross for his actions.

"I was wrong about how much time we had, as I was about everything else

that day. We were decisively engaged right from the start," said Wilkinson in an oral history published in *The Battle of Mogadishu: Firsthand Accounts From the Men of Task Force Ranger*.

Somalia in 1993 was the definition of a failed nation. It had been split by sectarian and ethnic warfare since the collapse of the government of Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991. Drought and fighting over food stocks and relief supplies had caused widespread famine in the country in 1992, leading the US to begin a food airlift. Violence continued to hamper aid distribution, so in December 1992, President George H. W. Bush ordered in US military forces.

"Their mission was to ensure that relief supplies reached the people who needed them and thus to 'break the cycle' of starvation and save lives," according to the publication "The United States Army in Somalia: 1992-1994" by the US Army Center of Military History.

Officially, the US military was operating under the umbrella of the United Nations Operations in Somalia, or UNOSOM. During the course of the Somali operation, 23 nations, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Italy, Malaysia, Morocco, and Pakistan provided troops.

But US firepower, intelligence, and logistics capabilities were the backbone of the effort. Within a few months, aid was flowing relatively freely to the desperate Somali people.

Little violence occurred between February and May of 1993. Markets reopened, travel within the country became possible, and some officials



AP photo by Dominique Mollard



DOD photo by PHCM Terry Mitchell

**A gunner on a US Army Black Hawk covers the flight of a Cobra gunship during a patrol over Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993.**

**US marines stand guard while others load ammunition and weapons seized in a raid at the Bakaara Market in Mogadishu. US forces were originally in Somalia to ensure that relief supplies reached the needy.**

began talking of reinstating a Somali national police force to enforce the shaky calm.

“However, clan rivalry and US reluctance to engage in long-term ‘nation-building’ operations soon doomed the effort,” concludes the US Army Center of Military History.

May was the turning point. The US, eager to bring troops home, turned control of the mission completely over to the UN. The military situation then began to unravel. Warlord Aidid seemed to have little respect for the UN or the new UNOSOM II forces.

On June 5, his fighters ambushed and killed 24 Pakistani UNOSOM II soldiers. In response, US AC-130 gunships began hammering Aidid’s weapons depots, radio station, and related facilities.

The UN issued a warrant for Aidid’s arrest. In August, Aidid’s men detonated a mine under a UNOSOM II vehicle, killing four US military policemen. As the security situation worsened, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali asked new US President Bill Clinton to help catch Aidid.

The answer to this request was Task Force Ranger. An assault force composed of Delta Force special operators, Army Rangers, Air Force pararescuemen and combat controllers, Navy SEALs, and a special operations aviation element, TF Ranger was in Somalia by Aug. 28. Over the next few weeks it staged six raids into Mogadishu from its base at the airport on the outskirts of the city.

TF Ranger snatched one of Aidid’s key lieutenants. It limited Aidid’s mobility to areas of the city under his more-or-less direct control. But resistance was stiffening. Aidid’s men seemed more and more willing to engage US forces with every weapon at their disposal, from small arms and RPGs to 106 mm recoilless rifles.

Then on Oct. 3 TF Ranger launched its seventh mission. Intelligence had revealed that Aidid aides were meeting near the Olympic Hotel, in an area known as the Black Sea. If the US could capture his top men it would be an audacious strike against the warlord in an area central to his power.

But things quickly began to go wrong.

Helicopters carrying the assault and blocking forces arrived at the target in good order. The assault team captured 24 Somalis and prepared to load them into ground convoy trucks. Then a circling Black Hawk—Super 61—was downed by an RPG three blocks away.



Corbis photo by Chris Rainier

**A soldier for one of the warring factions struggling for control of Somalia hefts a rocket launcher through Mogadishu in 1993.**

Aidid’s forces slammed TF Ranger with heavier fire than in previous raids. Another Black Hawk went down a mile south of the first destroyed helicopter.

### Inside the Snow Globe

The Battle of Mogadishu was on. The two-day firefight would develop into the fiercest engagement for the US military since the Vietnam War.

At the Super 61 crash site Wilkinson found more US personnel than had roped in with his team. Some of the Rangers and Special Forces personnel involved in the nearby snatch-and-grab had moved in to lend support.

One of the helicopter crew chiefs was walking about dazed, still stunned from the crash. A Special Forces sniper was trying to lift the copilot out of the top right side of the wreckage. The copilot was dead. The sniper said the pilot was dead, too.

Wilkinson crawled into the wreckage from the right side door, which was now at the top since the Black Hawk was lying on its side. The sniper was right: The pilot, like the copilot, had been killed by the impact of the crash. The body was trapped underneath the crushed instrument panel and would not be easy to remove.

Wilkinson wiggled back out to see if there was any way to dig underneath the helicopter to get at the pilot. No go. He dropped back into the fuselage. Then he saw a small patch of desert camouflage cloth under the debris piled at the cabin’s bottom. Was someone still inside?

He called out and saw a flight glove move. A hand waved. The left-side gun-

ner and crew chief was still strapped in his seat—and alive. The PJ dug at the junk that covered the gunner and began to cut his seat straps. A Special Forces medic dropped in to help. The gunner, freed, began to stand up. At that moment the interior of the Black Hawk lit up with enemy fire.

“It looked like the inside of one of those little snow globes that you shake and watch the flakes swirl about,” said Wilkinson in his *Battle of Mogadishu* firsthand account.

All three men were hit by shrapnel. Wilkinson was wounded in the face and arm while the gunner lost two fingertips. They began ripping up the Kevlar floor panels of the helicopter and leaning them against the sides to provide some protection against bullets. After they slid the gunner outside, Wilkinson and the Special Forces medic handed out the Kevlar panels to place around the casualty collection point at the aircraft’s tail.

Wilkinson tended to the wounded while Rangers kept up a steady stream of suppressing fire. Somali RPGs seemed to come in waves, with a large volley every 20 minutes or so. The PJ surmised that was the length of time it took for Aidid’s fighters to return to their warehouse, stock up, and get back to the battle. Not every grenade exploded, perhaps due to the poor quality of the Russian-made munitions.

At 5:30 p.m. another call came: US forces wanted a medic across the intersection of the alley and Marehan Road to the south. About a dozen Rangers and Special Forces personnel were hunkered down in a courtyard. Some were wounded and needed help.



**The picked-over remains of a US Black Hawk helicopter photographed in Mogadishu in 1994. Eighteen US servicemembers were killed in the Battle of Mogadishu.**

The location was about 150 feet away, but it might as well have been a mile. The wide intersection was a shooting gallery, and the shooters were Somalis with automatic weapons.

Wilkinson did not hesitate. He picked up his medical sack, moved to the corner of the intersection, and said, "Cover me!" His colleagues later said they just laughed at what they all knew was a cinematic absurdity.

As he broke into the open, Wilkinson thought to himself that he just needed to put his head down and plow ahead, as if he were stealing second base. But his boots felt heavy and he seemed to be stealing that base in slow motion. AK-47 rounds zipped around him. Somehow, he made it to the courtyard unscathed.

Three casualties awaited him. The most seriously wounded was a Ranger who had taken a bullet in the hip and groin. He was in great pain and bleeding heavily. Wilkinson tried to wrap the wound as tightly as he could with a pressure dressing. Then he slipped rubber pneumatic pants over the Ranger's legs and pelvis and pumped in air to apply more pressure still.

The bleeding slowed and stopped. He gave the Ranger a dose of morphine and kept up IV fluids. At the rate he was using up bags his fluid supply would soon be exhausted.

Wilkinson radioed back to the casualty collection point for more. At first he told them to try and throw the fluids across the street. Then he thought better of this approach; if the toss did not make it, the bags would be lying in the street, an aim point for Somalis waiting for a US soldier to stoop and

try and retrieve them. Plus, the bags might well burst on impact, making the whole attempt a waste.

Wilkinson decided he would rather run across the street twice than stop in the middle once. So he put his head down and bowled back across to his original position amidst the familiar crack of automatic weapons.

### **What I'm Paid To Do**

He stuffed IV bags in his pockets, plus some bandages and other assorted supplies, then yelled, "Cover me!" again. For the third time he raced across an open killing zone under fire, though "raced" might be something of an exaggeration.

He made it to the courtyard safely.

"My teammates have come up with a couple of theories to explain my success in transiting the hostile no-man's-land between the two isolated groups of the task force," Wilkinson said in his account. "One theory suggests that while I was running across the road I was clumsily dropping pieces of my gear and had to stop to pick them up, thereby creating a stop-start, up-down target the enemy couldn't get a good bead on. The other theory is that an exaggerated rate of arm swing combined with a pathetically slow rate of movement created the optical illusion of moving faster than I actually was, so the enemy was constantly leading me too much. I don't think either theory holds much merit. I think God just watches over fools."

Their position took fire throughout the night and the defenders suffered further casualties. At one point a Ranger was wounded by an RPG, which peppered him with shrapnel and covered him in black residue from the explosion. He looked like a cartoon character who had survived an exploding cigar, according to Wilkinson, but fortunately his injuries were relatively minor.

In the early morning hours of Oct. 4, the armored vehicles of a pick-up quick-reaction ground force finally arrived. Wilkinson loaded his wounded into a Malaysian armored personnel carrier and jumped in after them. The APC moved a bit down the street, and then stopped to take on another casualty. It stayed still for an hour-and-a-half while RPGs rattled the walls.

Finally the convoy rolled out, reaching the relative safety of a soccer stadium at about 8 a.m. When Wilkinson reached the US base at the airfield some hours later he was shocked at what he saw: piles of weapons, bullet-riddled and bloodstained Humvees, and the empty cots of the 18 US personnel killed in action.

"It was then that I became aware of just what a huge impact this battle had had on Task Force Ranger," Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson earned the Air Force Cross, the service's highest honor for gallantry in combat, for his actions in the Battle of Mogadishu. He was the first enlisted airman to receive the award since 1975.

His citation mentions that he repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to pull dead and wounded crew members from the wreckage of Super 61, and that he ignored all concern for personal safety to cross the deadly open intersection.

"Sergeant Wilkinson's medical skills and uncommon valor saved the lives of multiple gravely wounded American soldiers in the longest sustained firefight involving United States combat forces in over 20 years," reads the Air Force Cross citation.

"I didn't do anything spectacular," Wilkinson said of his actions that day. "People were counting on me to do what I'm paid to do," he told Air Force officials. "I was just holding up my end of the deal on a bad day; everyone there was doing what was expected of them." ■

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