

## Book Review

### IN THE COMPANY OF HEROES<sup>1</sup>

REVIEWED BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN SIEMIETKOWSKI<sup>2</sup>

*Ranger! Ranger! You die Somalia!*<sup>3</sup>

#### Introduction

On 3 October 1993, Somali insurgents shot down a Blackhawk helicopter piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Three (CW3) Michael Durant. As the only survivor of the crash, the Somalis captured Durant and held him prisoner for ten days. Ten years after the battle of Mogadishu, Durant, one of the central combatants of those terrible days in Somalia, published his personal memoir of the fight, his captivity, and his eventual release. Equally as riveting as Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down*,<sup>4</sup> *In the Company of Heroes* is a hard-to-put-down tale of courage, humor, and, ultimately, survival. Though some readers may tire of the author's swagger and sarcasm, the book is riveting and provides valuable lessons about preparing for and surviving captivity.

"Ranger! Ranger! You die Somalia!" sums up the abject terror felt by Durant upon his capture and initial torture by the Somalis. The Somalis yelled this at Chief Durant as they dragged him away from his burning helicopter and tore at his clothes,<sup>5</sup> as they rifled through "every pocket of [his] trousers" in search of valuables,<sup>6</sup> and as they "jabbed AK-47 barrels in [his] face."<sup>7</sup> Just as the phrase became a mantra for Durant's Somali tormentors, it almost becomes an incantation that forms the backdrop for Durant's gripping narration.

#### A Peripatetic Format

*In the Company of Heroes* jumps among places and times central to the author's life, despite the book's focus on Somalia in October 1993. The author devotes a prologue and nine chapters to harrowing accounts of his capture and captivity in Somalia. He intersperses these Somalia memories with chapters devoted to his earlier training and assignments. For example, following Chapter Two, *A Prisoner of Hate*,<sup>8</sup> which describes his initial capture, Durant details his early career flying medical evacuations (medevacs).<sup>9</sup> Even within chapters, Chief Durant sometimes wanders from one time and place to another. When detailing the clutching and grabbing of the angry Somali mob, Durant deviates and mentally "return[s] to [his] home in New Hampshire," describing the people and activities of his childhood.<sup>10</sup> When recounting a mission during his assignment to Korea, he also suddenly returns to memories of being "a young kid in a small New England town."<sup>11</sup>

At first, this itinerant format is annoying to the reader. It is difficult to switch from reading about the author falling asleep in captivity, "feeling the hot tears running from the corners of my eyes and into my ears,"<sup>12</sup> to reading on the next page of text about the author's thoughts in 1998 about being a medevac pilot.<sup>13</sup> After digesting a chapter that concludes with the

---

<sup>1</sup> MICHAEL J. DURANT & STEVEN HARTOV, *IN THE COMPANY OF HEROES* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Drilling Individual Mobilization Augmentee, Criminal Law Department, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> DURANT & HARTOV, *supra* note 1, at 42, 49-50, 56, 58.

<sup>4</sup> MARK BOWDEN, *BLACK HAWK DOWN* (1999). For a review of *Black Hawk Down*, see Major Tyler J. Harder, *Mark Bowden's Black Hawk Down*, 166 MIL. L. REV. 199 (2000) (book review).

<sup>5</sup> DURANT & HARTOV, *supra* note 1, at 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 56 ("Ranger, Ranger, kill many Somalis! You die Somalia!").

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 67 (Chapter Three, *Korea*).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 141.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 143.

author stating, “I had no idea if it would be one night of captivity or a thousand,”<sup>14</sup> the reader wants to know what happened when Durant woke up the next day in Somalia. Instead, the author returns to reminiscing about Korea in November 1985.

Durant, however, carefully weaves his movement of time and place so that the reader arrives at the understanding the author seeks to achieve. Durant’s interlacement of stories allows his memories to feed off of each other. For example, when Durant deviates from his searing description of being carried aloft by the Somali mob to discuss his New Hampshire childhood, the morphing of his childhood memories into his present terror accentuates that terror all the more:

Her [Durant’s high school girlfriend] smile was wide and snow white, and I felt my chest flutter with the promise of romantic adventure as I raised my hand and she reached out for me . . . Then suddenly her smile turned into a vicious snarl, her fingers grabbed for my crotch, and she screamed and squeezed with all her might.<sup>15</sup>

At another point, Durant leaves his Somalia narrative to state, “I had never been so cold in my life.”<sup>16</sup> Referring there to his survival, evasion, resistance, escape (SERE) training, this is a perfect transition between times and places as Durant recounts how he called upon his SERE training when his captors asked him to videotape a statement.<sup>17</sup> Later, there is an unlikely transition between Durant’s description of U.S. helicopters flying overhead, and his reminisces of the first Gulf War.<sup>18</sup> Even here, though, the transition makes sense simply because Durant seems puzzled that of all the places he could dream about, he “returned instead to memories of Iraq.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to juxtaposing these times and places, removing the reader from Somalia does not necessarily lead to boring text. Wholly apart from the emotive retelling of his Somali captivity, Durant’s non-Somali chapters would make for interesting reading all by themselves. The author introduces his *Korea* chapter by stating “The wounded soldier in the back of my chopper was going to die.”<sup>20</sup> He then recounts a nail-biting tale of flying through a dangerous snow storm to take that Soldier to the hospital.<sup>21</sup> In describing his role in Panama in 1989, Durant states, “Then the Panamanians opened up with everything they had” as he recounts the airborne operation.<sup>22</sup> In similar riveting fashion, Durant opens his *Iraq* chapter with, “A SCUD missile launcher loomed in my gunsight, and I knew I had it dead to rights.”<sup>23</sup> Such peripatetic wandering between times and places also breaks up the tension inherent in retelling Durant’s horribly mesmerizing story of capture and captivity.

### A Gripping Tale

Durant’s story is unavoidably spell-binding. Even if *In the Company of Heroes* was poorly written, the facts themselves would keep readers awake long into the night. Matching those facts with a compelling, first-person narrative captures readers and ensures them long nights and rapid pulse rates.

Even before describing his mission, capture, and captivity, Durant’s vivid account of the *smells* of Somalia brings the scene to life:

I think it was the first time that I really smelled Somalia . . . the heavy stench of fetid garbage, mixed with nostril-flaring fumes of JP-4 jet fuel. We were right on the ocean, the wind usually blowing from the southwest, carrying the brine of the sea. Coffee was constantly brewing in the [Joint Operation Center],

---

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 280-83.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 281.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 67-71, 85-87.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 229.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 283.

and it blended with the cold concoctions from the mess hall, floating above a thin layer of urine and feces fog from the Porta Potties.<sup>24</sup>

Durant offers other similarly engaging observations as his ill-fated mission prepared to launch and later as he approached the target area. Referring to his sense of uneasiness about flying in daylight, Durant states, “For a second, something crawled up my stomach.”<sup>25</sup> Discussing his initial view as his chopper took off, Durant writes, “I am not a man who believes in omens, but there were sharks in the water.”<sup>26</sup> Using verbs like “flying,” “hover,” “echoed,” “tiptoeing,” “deployed,” “snagged,” “nudged,” “scraping,” and “banging,” the author describes the deployment of his “chalk” of Rangers from his helicopter.<sup>27</sup> At points like this, which are common throughout, the book simply is very hard to put down. For example, Durant provides the following description of the crash of his helicopter:

I heard a rapidly accelerating whine, an unearthly, building scream, and then the tail rotor assembly completely disintegrated into vapor with an earsplitting BANG . . . Super Six-Four started to spin so fast that the sky and ground became nothing but two blurred strips of blue and brown in front of my eyes . . . I was hurled against the harness, my hands desperately yanking and twisting the controls . . .<sup>28</sup>

Regaining consciousness after the crash, Durant realized the extent of his back injury.

Two of my vertebrae had smacked together on impact, displacing the disk between them and pulverizing each other. Every muscle in my back must have tried to prevent that catastrophe and been ripped apart in the effort, and it felt like some evil giant had me on his worktable, squeezing my spine in an iron vise. I stopped moving and just tried to breathe without passing out.<sup>29</sup>

The pilot next assessed his leg injury.

My right leg felt strangely numb, and as soon as I tried to move it I knew that the femur had broken clean in half over the edge of my Kevlar seat. My M-9 pistol was still strapped to my right thigh, and as its weight shifted I could feel the splintered ends of my bones grinding against one another.<sup>30</sup>

Details like this are so graphic that the reader can almost feel back and leg pain when reading Durant’s account.

Durant’s writing makes the reader *empathize* with his in extremis situation. Describing the sound of the approaching mob, Durant says,

It was the sound of approaching death, just overwhelmingly terrifying, and I knew that as soon as they came around the nose of that helicopter and saw me, they were going to chop me to pieces. That’s what they had done to the Nigerians. That’s what they did to *everybody*. We had heard eyewitness accounts of them playing soccer with the skulls of their enemies.<sup>31</sup>

Durant further relates the mob clubbing him with the “severed arm of one of my comrades,” throwing dirt into his eyes and mouth as they carried him aloft, and feeling pain as his “broken femur cleaved into the back of my leg, the sharp bone puncturing right out through my skin.”<sup>32</sup> In similar gripping fashion, Durant describes noticing the broken bones in his face<sup>33</sup> and his surprised horror as a Somali shot him when he was chained and in his makeshift prison cell.<sup>34</sup> Even when the action

---

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 23, 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 95.

slows down, Durant’s description of relatively mundane activities is fascinating: “Then [the guard] came up with a small wooden stick . . . I soaked the stick in water, rubbed the frayed end over my teeth, and rinsed. I ended up with a few splinters in my gums. . . .”<sup>35</sup>

Likewise, when recounting his thoughts during captivity, Durant’s story is emotive: “I decided it was going to be a long wait . . . I would have to slow the metabolism of my hope.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when hearing his friend’s voice calling out from an overhead chopper, ““Mike Durant . . . We will not leave without you,”” the author “swallowed hard, my streaming eyes following the sweet drone of that helo’s rotors,” as he silently said, “I know you won’t Dan . . . I know you won’t!”<sup>37</sup> Durant reveals further introspection when relating his emotions upon receiving pictures of his wife and young son. “I waited till [his guard] left, and then I stared at my family for an hour, slowly caressing their images with my fingers.”<sup>38</sup> Revealing his non-warrior side, Durant recounts his emotions upon learning that the Somalis were to release him: “I could almost feel the walls of my defenses cracking, like thin fissures appearing in the face of a dam.”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, when recounting his release, Durant continues his gripping narrative. He describes his excitement at receiving medical treatment, “Morphine? Did he say morphine?”;<sup>40</sup> the incongruity of his guard carrying United Nations credentials while wearing a “Viva Aidid” t-shirt;<sup>41</sup> and the shock of the American who first saw him, “Holy Mother of God! It’s Mike Durant! *Medic!*”<sup>42</sup>

### Swagger and Sarcasm

Though it detracts little from the book, some readers may tire of Durant’s swagger and sarcasm. Chief Durant comes across as a John Wayne gunslinger and a classic wise-guy. Early on Durant writes, “Mogadishu was Tombstone, and we were Wyatt Earp.”<sup>43</sup> In discussing his colleagues, Durant describes them as “the kind of professionals who could pick off a rabbit from a roller coaster with a BB gun. To me, they were Batman and Robin, only much better.”<sup>44</sup> In recounting his Korea assignment, Durant writes, “There were other officers, a fixed-wing pilot, and the kinds of Army nurses people envision from M\*A\*S\*H. For a time, I had a fine relationship with a nurse . . . .”<sup>45</sup> When describing a visit from a Somali doctor, he recalls thinking to himself, “What I need is a double dose of morphine and bottle of Jack.”<sup>46</sup>

At times Durant’s prose exhibits much bravado, but clearly it is not false bravado. Durant’s training and combat missions earned him the right to brag long before he went to Somalia. Moreover, Durant demonstrates his awareness of knowing when to boast about “Tombstone” and when to recognize reality by stating, “I could use the John Wayne standard and give up only the Big Four [when being interrogated on camera]. That worked great in the movies, but here my goal was survival, not fruitless heroism.”<sup>47</sup>

Durant’s comments from capture through captivity also offer prime examples of sarcasm. For example, Durant states the following: “Hey, maybe you guys would consider exchanging me for a Mercedes with a CD player and a Mohamed Aidid hood ornament;”<sup>48</sup> “making Custer’s Last Stand look like nothing more than a rained-out corporate picnic;”<sup>49</sup> “This is just

---

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 131.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 178.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 212.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 311.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 319.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 325.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 328.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 329.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 81.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 114.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 116.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 52-53.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 54.

what I need . . . . A minus-three-star hotel and a restless roommate;”<sup>50</sup> “Combat rations. That was the result of my failing to specify a menu request;”<sup>51</sup> “Don’t bother making up the room. And I’ll just go down to the lobby for the buffet;”<sup>52</sup> “Whatever you say, man. Enjoy your Third World Alka-Seltzer;”<sup>53</sup> and “And don’t forget the buxom nurse twins and the beer keg.”<sup>54</sup>

Though this sarcasm becomes tiring at times, the reader senses that it is just Durant’s character. Furthermore, Durant likely needed that sarcasm and sense of humor to mentally survive capture and captivity. When you are forced to use the same bowl for relieving yourself *and* washing yourself,<sup>55</sup> you have to keep your sanity somehow, and humor and sarcasm obviously helped Durant through his ordeal.

In addition to swagger and sarcasm, the book also has a few other shortcomings. Though the book contains some maps of Mogadishu, it would be helpful to see sketches of the rooms where the Somalis held the author captive. It would also be interesting to learn more about the breakup of the author’s marriage a few years after his return from Somalia.<sup>56</sup> Though inappropriate to pry too far into Durant’s personal life, it nonetheless would be intriguing to know what effect, if any, his Somali experience had on the end of his first marriage and on his subsequent remarriage.

### Surprises

While the entire book is fascinating, Durant surprises the reader several times with interesting facts that only an insider would know. In his *Acknowledgements*, Durant thanks Ross Perot first,<sup>57</sup> and later describes Perot’s quiet support to his family and all Special Operations families.<sup>58</sup> At the other extreme, Durant recounts his surprise and anger at Colonel (retired) David Hackworth’s personal attack on his conduct while in captivity.<sup>59</sup> Though most readers will have heard of the rescue attempt by Medal of Honor winners’ Randy Shugart and Gary Gordon, Durant’s account of his time with them as the Somalis swarmed towards the downed chopper is the only first-hand account of their on-the-ground heroism.<sup>60</sup> Later, the author shares a very personal letter sent to him by Shugart’s widow<sup>61</sup> and recounts an almost spooky experience he had when checking out a book in Gary Gordon’s hometown library.<sup>62</sup> Durant even admits to having an erotic dream while in captivity.<sup>63</sup>

For judge advocates, the most interesting surprise in the book is likely to be where Durant describes the first American he saw upon his release at the United Nations compound:

The van doors suddenly opened again, and standing there with his mouth gaping was a *lawyer*. He was an American major, the Task Force Ranger JAG officer, and I recognized him instantly . . . And I would never be so happy to see a lawyer again. He stood there for a moment in shock, and then he yelled. “Holy Mother of God! It’s Mike Durant! *Medic!*”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 123.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 131.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.* at 196.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 208.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 261.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 175.

<sup>56</sup> *See id.* at 356-57.

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at v.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* at 342-44.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.* at 351.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 28-39.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.* at 347-49.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.* at 359.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.* at 134.

<sup>64</sup> *Id.* at 328-29. The Judge Advocate General officer was Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Gary Walsh. Telephone interview with Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Gary Walsh (Aug. 31, 2006).

## Lessons Learned

*In the Company of Heroes* is chock-full of lessons for all Soldiers, especially those deploying to combat areas. Though no Soldier ever wants to think about capture, Durant offers valuable lessons to commit to memory. Upon his initial capture by the Somali mob, Durant's focus was, "If I can survive for five [minutes], then I'll worry about the next five."<sup>65</sup> Durant also describes locking his elbows a certain way when being chained to help loosen his arms,<sup>66</sup> the importance of staying hydrated even when you don't feel like drinking,<sup>67</sup> tolerating pain when it is "pain with a purpose,"<sup>68</sup> and the importance of "establishing a connection" with his captors.<sup>69</sup> The author also notes lessons learned upon his release and return to the U.S., such as dealing with news media<sup>70</sup> and distinguishing between real friends and phony friends.<sup>71</sup> Continuing to alternate between advice for combat and non-combat situations, Durant exhorts pilots to "carry all the ammunition and water they can,"<sup>72</sup> and emphasizes the importance of family support groups.<sup>73</sup> Finally, in somewhat of a shot at political leaders, Durant expresses his unit's frustration at not being allowed to complete the mission: "It is difficult enough to bury a fallen comrade, but even harder to look into the eyes of his family, knowing that the objective for which he died has been deemed unobtainable by the very men who sent him to his death."<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Michael Durant's *In the Company of Heroes* is a must-read for anyone who even remotely liked *Black Hawk Down*. A gripping read, the book also provides valuable lessons and even some insider surprises. Though some may tire of the author's swagger and sarcasm, no reader will begrudge Durant the right to tell this riveting story of courage, humor, and survival.

---

<sup>65</sup> *Id.* at 41.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at 56-57.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.* at 59, 91-92.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* at 128.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 171.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 337, 344.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.* at 336-37, 350.

<sup>72</sup> *Id.* at 357.

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* at 358.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.* at 347.