

TITLE: Chapter Luncheon: Operation Gothic Serpent, aka “Blackhawk Down”



Colonel Lee Van Arsdale with COS Chapter President Colonel Steve Shambach

The Colorado Springs Chapter of MOWW was honored to have one of its own members, Colonel (Ret) Lee Van Arsdale, present a fascinating first-hand account of Operation Gothic Serpent, the August to October 1993 Task Force (TF) Ranger deployment to Somalia with a mission to kill or capture Gen Muhammed Farah Aided. Colonel Van Arsdale provided an After Action Report with Lessons Learned from the operation as well as a candid critique of the film “Black Hawk Down” for which he served as a Military Advisor. Although TF Ranger had previously conducted six successful missions in Mogadishu, Somalia, the most well-known operation, and the subject of the book and movie, was the capture and extraction of two of General Aided’s Key Lieutenants. The operation was based on intelligence that targeted a heavily guarded, notoriously bad section of Mogadishu overrun with refugees from clan fighting and the famine in Somalia. Using street maps of Mogadishu, Colonel Van Arsdale deftly reviewed the mission plan, the chronology of activities, and the successful capture of the high value targets by Army Special Mission Unit (SMU) operators using MH-6 “Little Birds”. He then detailed the fateful extraction effort which led to the downing of two MH-60 Black Hawk helicopters by enemy Rocket Propelled Grenades, the attack of an angry mob of over 3,000 locals (the Intelligence Report indicated only 300 enemy combatants present in the area), and the heroic ground rescue of the TF Ranger wounded from each of the two crash sites.

The audience was both spellbound and amused by Colonel Van Arsdale’s soft-spoken yet dead-panned account of some of the more dicey moments of the operation. He provided an unusual first person account from his perspective as both an Operational Planner in the Tactical Operation Center and his subsequent role when directed by the Commander, General Garrison,

to lead the 10th Mountain Division Quick Reaction Force (QRF) to rescue the survivors still in contact with the enemy. Throughout the presentation, he compared the actual events of the operation to the cinematic depiction in the movie and lamented that, although he was usually successful in achieving an accurate portrayal of the events, the Director purposely modified some scenes for effect. He stressed that, contrary to the movie version, no TF member was left behind and forced to run to an extraction point while avoiding a crowd of enemy combatants. He also recounted the story of a SMU Senior Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) who commandeered a United Nations Armored Personnel Carrier that was forbidden by the Rules of Engagement to move into the contested area and used it to get to the crash site amid small arms fire. When asked how the NCO was able to convince the Malaysian driver to risk his life for the rescue operation, Col Van Arsdale indicated that “he can be very persuasive”. Throughout the presentation, the MOWW members could not help but be impressed by his detailed memory of the mission, his obvious compassion for the soldiers who fought - particularly those that were lost, and his intimate knowledge of the names, skills, and contributions of the TF Ranger participants. Articulate and humble, Colonel Van Arsdale never mentioned that he was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic actions leading the relief column to rescue the survivors from the downed helicopters.

In the course of his 25-year Army career, Colonel Lee Van Arsdale served in three combat zones in leadership positions and was decorated for valor with both the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. He served in the toughest leadership assignments, primarily in Special Forces, with 11 years spent in the First Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (Airborne) where most of his missions were strategic, classified operations, around the world. Following his military career, Lee continued to provide support to the Defense Department serving as the Chief Executive Officer of both Triple Canopy, Inc., an integrated security solutions company and Creative Radicals, a software company. He now serves on the boards of select companies and does volunteer work for veterans’ organizations.



Colonel Van Arsdale addresses questions from the COS MOWW members