



THE ORYX AND THE BLACK HAWK

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Lieutenant-Colonel GOYA

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In 1991, after the collapse of its state, Somalia was plunged into anarchy with all the economic consequences this implies for an already miserable population. The following year, faced with the impossibility for humanitarian organizations to provide food supplies with a minimum of security, the United Nations organized a first military operation. Encouraged by its success, in March 1993 the UN decided to go further by disarming the warlords, first and foremost the most dangerous of them all, Mohamed Farah Aïdid. Several operations were launched in the heart of Mogadishu against his organization, the Somali National Alliance. The last of them, carried out on 13 October 1993, proved to be a failure, well known thanks to Marc Bowden's book *Black Hawk Down* and the film of the same name. What is less well known is that a few months earlier, in June, the French of Operation Oryx ^[1] had successfully carried out a similar action in the same area and against the same opponents. Since this phenomenon is historically rare, it may be interesting, excluding any cocardier spirit, to compare the two operations.

¹The oryx is a species of gazelle.

The failure of the Task Force Ranger

On October 3, 1993, a Somali informant warned the CIA that a meeting of prominent members of the National Alliance would take place at about 3 p.m. at the Olympic Hotel in the Bakara district. The Americans, independently of the UN, decided to engage there the Task Force Ranger, specially trained to track Eid, with Rangers, Delta Force commandos and special forces helicopters (Task Force 160)^[1]. ¹ The mode of action chosen was simple and identical to what had been done during six previous raids. Seventy-five Rangers carried by four MH-60 Blackhawks must cordon off the area after being lowered by ropes (fast-rope method). Simultaneously, about twenty Delta Force

dropped by light AH-6 Littlebirds helicopters were to seize the Aïded lieutenants. After the capture, a convoy of twelve Humvee vehicles[2] and trucks is tasked to come and pick up everyone and bring them back to the base, located at the airport. The whole area of action is flown over by helicopters in support.

At 4 p.m., only 20 minutes after the start of the action, 24 men were captured and the motor convoy arrived in the area. Everything seems to be going well, except for a Ranger stick that was placed in the wrong place and one of the men was seriously injured when he fell from his rope. Three vehicles are detached from the convoy to assist him. By the time they want to reach the Olympic position, the situation changes. A deluge of fire and RPG-7 [3] anti-tank rockets fell on the main convoy. Two vehicles were destroyed and several men were hit. The confusion is total. At 16:20 hrs, the Blackhawk Super 61, orbiting above the action zone, is hit in turn. It crashed three blocks away. Two men were killed and five others wounded, including the captain, Cliff Wolcott, who was trapped inside his machine. To rescue them, a platoon of Rangers struggled to make their way from the Olympic Hotel, while a fast-rope rescue team was dropped off at the crash site. They all quickly find themselves surrounded by a crowd of women, children and armed militiamen. Around the wreckage, the Americans have, on average, one casualty every five minutes. General Garrison, commanding Task Force Ranger, is trying to rescue the perimeter of Super 61 with the Olympic motorcade. The convoy, under constant fire, was guided by a control aircraft that filmed the area of action and acted as a relay between the convoy and the operational centre. The result is that the guidance system is out of sync, which causes confusion. Although the distance is short, the convoy gets lost in the maze of alleyways. A driver is decapitated by the explosion of a rocket. After an hour, General Garrison gives up and orders the convoy to withdraw to the base with the prisoners and wounded that it can carry. At the same time, at 1640 hours, a third helicopter (Super 64) was hit. It crashed a little further on as it tried to reach the airport, creating a third point to be rescued when the only planned rescue team had been committed to Super 61.

A new convoy was formed at the airport with part of the first and reinforcements from the 2nd battalion of the 10th (American) Mountain Division, part of the UN Quick Reaction Force. This force, which includes 22 light vehicles, starts at 17:45. Barely a few minutes later, it was stopped in a pool of fire and despite a flurry of fire [4], the American infantrymen were unable to advance. The convoy then had to withdraw under difficult conditions. It did not reach the base until after 7pm. In the meantime, seeing the vulnerability of Super 64, two Delta Force snipers, under observation from their MH-60s, asked to be dropped near the carcass. They hope to hold out until reinforcements arrive. As soon as their aircraft regained altitude, it was hit in turn and "crashed" just before reaching the base. As the convoy was unable to get through the fireblocks, the two snipers fought until their ammunition ran out, then were submerged and killed [5]. The pilot of Super 64, Michael Durrant, was captured. When night fell, there were still more than ninety men immobilised around the original objective and the wreckage of Super 61. Equipped for a daytime operation of no more than an hour, they had few night vision devices, suffered from thirst and began to run out of ammunition.

The only solution was an armoured raid, but only Pakistani and Malaysian peacekeepers had any. The Americans are therefore obliged to ask the UN command for help, but it takes almost five hours to bring together the armoured vehicles scattered over different points and mount a coherent operation in the imbroglia of the various chains of command. It was finally only at 11 p.m. that the column of seventy vehicles, including four Pakistani T-55 tanks and Malaysian Condor armoured infantry carrier vehicles (but carrying American infantrymen), was launched. The progression is difficult and it takes another three hours of methodical fighting to reach the security perimeters. Two lost

Condor vehicles were destroyed in this action and a secondary operation had to be mounted to rescue them. Removing Wolcott from his helicopter and retrieving all the dispersed personnel took several more hours, and it was not until dawn that the last Rangers finally reached a safe area on foot behind armoured vehicles that were too heavy to take them on board.

The toll is heavy, nineteen American soldiers and one Malaysian died, and eighty Americans, seven Malaysians and two Pakistanis were injured. A pilot was captured and the same evening all the world's television news broadcasts the images of the bodies of the soldiers killed near Super 64 dragged by the crowd in the streets of Mogadishu. Two helicopters were destroyed and four others severely damaged. Faced with this huge media failure, the success of the mission [6] and the hundreds of militiamen shot down (and just as many civilians) do not weigh heavily.

The intervention of the Saqui de Sannes grouping

The French operation takes place in the very tense context of June 1993. On 5 June, near the Radio Mogadishu station, a Pakistani contingent lost 24 dead and the UN requested reinforcements from the French and Moroccan contingents. On 9 June, French troops of Operation Oryx formed a detachment under the command of Colonel de Saqui de Sannes' head of the 5th Overseas Inter-Arms Regiment (RIAOM). In addition to a small command cell (two light P4 vehicles, a transmission vehicle and an armoured front vehicle (VAB) with a combat group), the detachment comprises two sections of In addition to a small command cell (two light P4 vehicles, a transmission vehicle and an armoured vehicle forward (AAV with a combat group), the detachment comprises two infantry sections on VLRA (light reconnaissance and support vehicle), two infantry sections on VAB, a platoon of three ERC 90 Sagaie (90mm wheeled gun) and a logistics section. The total number of troops and 50 vehicles is about 200. Most of the men are "porpoises" (marine infantry), professional soldiers from Djibouti. The two sections on VAB and the protection group are formed with conscripts called "long service volunteers" from the 9th ^{Parachute} Hunter Regiment (RCP) or the 17th Parachute Engineer Regiment (RGP). On 17 June, the group will be reinforced by a helicopter detachment (two Puma, one with a 20 mm gun, two anti-tank gazelles and one unarmed gazelle).

During the week of 10 to 16 June, the group is engaged in multiple escort and investigation actions. On the 16th, it was ordered to take cover along the Avenue du 21 octobre, to the east of General Aided's headquarters, which was taken over by the Moroccan and Pakistani contingents on the morning of the 17th. Their action quickly took a catastrophic turn. The Pakistani contingent was stopped and one of its officers was killed. The Moroccan battalion on its side was mired in a crowd. The officers intervene to parley. They are thus clearly identified by snipers placed in the surrounding buildings and immediately shot when the civilians move away. Within a few minutes, the battalion deplores five dead, including its commander, and thirty-five wounded, including the second in command.

Listening to the Moroccan radio network, the French became aware of the worsening situation and prepared to act. Shots began to be fired in their direction, coming from two large buildings nearby: the tobacco factory and above all the military academy. The shooters are spotted but they use women as mobile screens in front of the windows. Colonel de Saqui does not want to engage his sections in the conquest of these buildings when they are likely to intervene at any time. He therefore ordered the ERC to strafe the facades as a sign of determination and ordered the sections to "counter-sniper" with their own snipers. The role of these twelve men would be decisive throughout the day to

eliminate the militiamen without affecting the civilian population. One of them, after having shot a sniper, managed to destroy his weapon when a woman came to retrieve it. For Colonel de Saqui, this is not only a question of ethics but also a way to preserve the future by not arousing hatred among the population. The French won this first duel and the threat was, for the time being, averted.

At 8.30 a.m., the group was ordered to release the Moroccan contingent. Two routes were possible, the southern route was wide and therefore fast, but it involved crossing the zone held by Pakistanis made very nervous by recent events and then mixing with the Moroccan contingent. The colonel decided to go through the north, a more difficult route but one that would allow him to reach a median from which it would be possible to support the retreat of the Moroccans. The grouping is divided into three elements. The colonel will go to the solid ground with the ERC platoon (Lieutenant Carpentier), a section on VAB (Lieutenant Nivlet) and his protection group (Chief Warrant Officer Boulin), also on VAB. His deputy, Commander Bonnemaïson, will hold the crossroads north of his position with a section on VAB (Staff Sergeant Martinez) and a section on VLRA (Captain Delabbey). The last platoon (Chief Warrant Officer Grand) will protect the departure junction and logistical support, in particular the two medical vehicles (Captain Adani). It will serve as a reserve and cover for the withdrawal at the end of the mission.

Once the orders are given, the group will take to the streets "at full speed". The surprise is complete and it manages, despite a few clashes and a volley of RPG rockets, to quickly reach its positions. On the ground, the first echelon stood guard at 360 degrees. Located high up, it is in a good position to support the Moroccans, 150 metres away. Aïded's men pulled themselves together and postponed all their efforts against the French. Reinforcements arrived from the Bakara district and the fighting quickly escalated. A sniper from the 9th RCP ^{shot down} three snipers in a few minutes.

The second echelon, on the crossroads, was surrounded by the crowd and caught under sniper fire. A group leader at the front of a VAB is wounded in the head and then in the hand. The section assistant dragged him inside the vehicle and managed to evacuate him before taking his place in the turret. The crowd withdrew abruptly and left the place to "technicals" (4x4 pick-up trucks, equipped with machine guns). Four RPG rockets narrowly miss the VABs. Two "technicals" are destroyed by machine gun fire. The section on VLRA, further back, had two wounded, one of whom, Master Corporal Lisch, was hit in the head. The crew of the Puma helicopter, insistently asking for targets for their 20 mm gun. Chief Warrant Officer Grand, in the third echelon, was also violently attacked and asked for help. The situation is very serious.

Colonel de Saqui de Sannes, after some hesitation, refused any Puma fire to avoid a massacre among the population, but had the ERC platoon strafe the roofs surrounding the crossroads. Major Bonnemaïson, for his part, took the decision to seize the surrounding barracks and in particular the old hospital. About thirty militiamen were put out of action in this action, without any French casualties. From the conquered positions, French snipers quickly took control of the surrounding area. The situation then slowly changed. Aïded's militiamen began to have doubts and began to fear being surrounded in turn by a force whose numbers they overestimated. They retreat to the north.

Around 1.30 p.m., the Moroccans were finally able to disengage and the first two French echelons replaced them on their position. The UN command in Somalia, regaining hope after this initial success, then ordered the French to search the military academy and the general hospital in the hope of capturing Aïded. An Italian mechanized company came to support them. The buildings were searched without any real opposition. Many wounded militiamen were discovered in the hospital, as well as numerous proofs that this place,

under the protection of the Red Cross (in its defence), had been used as a fire base. Once the excavations were completed, Colonel de Saqui ordered the retreat to the position of Chief Warrant Officer Grand and then back to the UN base. Accustomed to rations, the French were surprised to see the ordinary, managed by the Norwegians, evacuated for their exclusive use with a good hot meal.

Throughout the day, the French had only one seriously wounded and two lightly wounded. It is difficult to estimate the enemy's losses, but they certainly exceeded fifty. Civilian casualties, if they exist, can only be minimal.

Differences of approach

Several differences in approach between the French and Americans may explain the contrasting results of the two operations. On October 3, the "decision-maker" commanded the raid from a Joint Operations Center (JOC). He was linked to the area of operations by three OH-58 helicopters equipped with video cameras and various high-tech communications means. The problem is that he did not seem to fully feel the atmosphere of the combat zone. The troops on the ground, for their part, were waiting for General Garrison to make decisions. So they showed some restraint when the first fighting started and left the initiative to the Somalis. The abundance of communications, coupled with a complex chain of command, proved to be a source of confusion.

On the French side, the "decision-maker" was present in the midst of the fighting. He therefore had a direct grasp of the situation and could react immediately. Moreover, in the 1980s, the Americans put the emphasis on planning and training their staffs. On the other hand, there was no special effort to encourage initiative on the part of captains, lieutenants and, even less so, sergeants. The overwhelming superiority of American means, as in the first Gulf War, made this unnecessary. On the other hand, French contact officers accustomed to micro-interventions, where a single company could be engaged in a distant theatre, were much better trained in "situational awareness". In addition to a good experience of Africa, the French executives also benefit from a good knowledge of the places they have been manoeuvring on for a week. Each of them has maps and photographs of the area. The helicopters fly over them as "guardian angels" and inform them "in real time" about snipers, the presence of civilians in buildings or crowd movements. All the French vehicles have orange panels that make them perfectly visible from the sky.

This difference in philosophy can be seen in the way the lights are applied. The French fired a total of 3,500 rounds of light ammunition (5.56 mm and 7.62 mm) and about 500 12.7 mm. No rockets or explosive shells were used. The American consumption of ammunition was several dozen times higher (at least 120,000 cartridges, not to mention the massive use of rockets). Shooting down a militiaman required a few dozen cartridges for the French and several hundred for the Americans. In reality on the French side, the enemy losses were almost all obtained "for sure", either by the formidable FRF2 precision rifles or by FAMAS in close combat. The Americans, for their part, had a culture of firepower. Combat and fire training often boils down to the choice of targets to which the maximum amount of fire is applied. Section chiefs do not have snipers at their disposal and clashes quickly lead to a deluge of fire. In addition to the fact that the Task Force Ranger ran out of ammunition fairly quickly, this led to considerable civilian casualties in a context where the entire clan, including women and children, were either attending or taking part in the fighting. These civilian casualties ended up destroying the legitimacy of the action as much as they had fuelled hatred towards the Americans for months, which explains the Somalis' relentlessness. Moreover, in an African urban environment made up

of mud blocks, heavy ammunition and rockets easily pierce the walls and therefore sometimes hit their inhabitants. Lighter bullets have an unfortunate tendency to bounce, increasing the risk of fratricidal fire.

The Americans, at the time, were not accustomed to manoeuvring in the city. Where the French were able to seize key points to dominate the area, such as the old hospital, the Americans often remained in the streets. They were all the more vulnerable there because they did not have armoured vehicles. The US Army at that time, and it is still largely the case today, made a clear distinction between heavily armoured forces, on M1 Abrams tanks or M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, and very light forces, best equipped with unarmoured vehicles, Humvees or trucks. In addition to the fact that the huge Abrams and Bradley would not necessarily have been adapted to the streets of Mogadishu, they were above all discarded as constituting an "aggressive" signature that did not correspond to the low profile desired by the Clinton administration [7]. 7] The Task Force Ranger therefore uses vehicles that all prove to be vulnerable when the action lasts. The French grouping is itself only partially armoured (VAB and ERC) but this is sufficient to have "ram sections" to penetrate an area and to resist small arms. In June, the militiamen are still afraid of helicopters and do not know how to face them. In October, they learned how to use their anti-tank rockets to shoot them down.

All these elements combined mean that while the French and Americans benefit from the initial surprise by the speed of movement, the former retain the initiative throughout the day while the latter quickly lose it. In October, the surprise changed sides when the first helicopter crashed and the Americans were not trained for this. All their action was based on the invulnerability of their means of transport and they had no alternative. On September 15, however, a helicopter was shot down by rocket fire and there was no change in the modes of action.

Once again, this is not a matter of advocating any intrinsic French superiority and even less of passing judgment on the personal worth of the combatants. The single example of the two American snipers volunteering to rescue a helicopter crew surrounded by militiamen is enough to inspire admiration for the men of the TF Ranger. "His Majesty Chance[8]" also had an undeniable role in both actions. Let us simply note that ignorance of the human environment in which one operates leads inevitably to disappointment and if there is only one aspect of ORYX's success to be retained, it is the proper consideration by those involved of the ingenuity, courage and customs of their adversaries.

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[1] In total, about 400 men.

2] High-mobility multiwheeled vehicles (HMMWVs).

3] RPG: in Russian Raketniy Protivotankoviy Granatomet or, in English, Rocket-Propelled Grenade which can be translated as "anti-tank rocket".

4] 60,000 rounds are fired during this action.

5] Randall Shugart and Gary Gordon will be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously.

6] Very provisional since the prisoners were released a few days later in exchange for pilot Michael Durrant.

7] Similarly, the AC-130 gunship, a veritable "flying fortress" particularly effective in urban combat, was withdrawn from Somalia a few weeks before the operation. These decisions will cost Secretary of Defense Les Aspin his job.

8] Frederick II.

Title : le Lieutenant-Colonel GOYA

Author (s) : le Lieutenant-Colonel GOYA

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