

2009 Aircraft Operations Training Symposium

By Dick Cole
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On a March Monday as the Eastern Seaboard lay paralyzed by an unseasonably heavy snow, DCMA personnel were doing their best to get to Denver for the 2009 Aircraft Operations Training Symposium. In Denver, the weather was uncharacteristically warm for March 2, with bright sunshine and temperatures hovering around 75 degrees.

“The annual symposium is a safety and training requirement for all military flight operations personnel as a forum for training, sharing ideas and refining policy. It also helps the attendees to sharpen their professional skills to aid cooperation with our industry partners and provide customer-focused, quality products and services to operational units in the field,” said AO Acting Executive Director Jim Broadway.

Somehow, all of the agency attendees managed to get to Denver, including Charlie Williams Jr., the DCMA director, and the symposium began,

in earnest, with a reception at 6:30 p.m. Monday. After trading harrowing tales of their journeys to Denver, many attendees “hit the sack” for a restful night before the busy conference got underway the next morning at 7 a.m.

Williams was first on the agenda for the symposium, spending 45 minutes speaking to attendees about changes instituted in the agency’s performance management program and discussing the functional realignment review that was underway among the agency’s senior leadership team. Following his address, Williams presented annual awards to AO personnel who excelled in the performance of their duties.

Also addressing the attendees were Air Force Col. Aaron Clark, Aeronautical Systems Division deputy director; Ron Youngs, Special Programs Division director; Scott Blank, deputy director of the International Division and Broadway. Also introduced to the attendees was Navy Capt. Marc Feallock who was to assume the executive directorship of AO a few days after the symposium’s conclusion.

The symposium’s second day featured presentations by a panel of legal experts, a Naval Safety Center representative, an Air Force Flight Safety Center representative and briefings from the Department of Defense, Sikorsky and the Army. The one presentation that held the audience’s full attention came from retired Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Michael Durant (see sidebar, “Black Hawk Down Vet Speaks to Symposium Attendees”).

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All of the AIMO personnel attending the symposium gathered for a group photo (Photos by Dick Cole, DCMA Public Affairs).

Durant was the pilot of *Black Hawk* helicopter “Super 64” that crashed during a combat operation in Mogadishu, Somalia, Oct. 3, 1993. After a horrific street battle, Durant fell captive to a street mob and held prisoner for 11 days. Throughout his captivity, Durant suffered from a broken back, leg as well as face

and gunshot wounds. His image as a POW appeared on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report* and on worldwide television.

Durant told the AOTS audience about that day’s events and turned them into compelling lessons for personal and professional growth. He also

applies the lessons learned that day to show how organizations and individuals can succeed through better planning, motivation and flexibility. The feature film, “Black Hawk Down,” directed by Ridley Scott, dramatized the events of that day and the 15-hour rescue mission to bring the participants home. 



Acting AO Executive Director Jim Broadway addresses the attendees.



Air Force Col. Aaron Clark, deputy director of DCMA's Aeronautical Systems Division, speaks to the symposium.



DCMA Director Charlie Williams, Jr., was the symposium's keynote speaker.



Ron Youngs, director of DCMA's Special Programs Division, reports to the symposium on the health of his division.



Aircraft operations personnel from around the world attended the symposium.



A legal panel conducted a question and answer session for symposium attendees.



Air Force Lt. Col. Matthew Evans tells the attendees they're on break.



Stephen Swenson, DCMA Aeronautical Systems Division director of technical operations, delivers a speech about safety.



AIMO Kelly attendees get together for a group photo.



Aircraft Integrated Maintenance Operations, Enterprise, Ala., Commander Army Lt. Col. John Jones accepts the award for Outstanding Small Aviation Program Team.



DCMA AIMO Kelly, Texas, Air Force Master Sgt. Roque Barrera accepts the award for Outstanding Aviation Maintenance Manager.



AIMO Kelly, Texas, Commander, Air Force Lt. Col. George Rogers accepts the Outstanding Large Aviation Program Team Award on behalf of his organization.



Navy Lt. Cmdr. Michael Fludovich accepts the award for Aviation Safety Officer of the Year.



DCMA Lockheed Martin, Owego, N.Y.'s, Navy Cmdr. Craig Washington accepted the award for Outstanding Small Flight Activity on behalf of his contract management office.



Air Force Maj. Andrea Maueri, **DCMA Korea**, accepts the award for Outstanding Chief of Flight Operations.



Air Force Reserve Maj. Kerry Tidmore, **DCMA Lockheed Martin Marietta**, accepts the award for Outstanding Mobilization Augmentee.



Navy Capt. Dan Cuff, **DCMA AIMO St. Augustine, Fla.**, Commander accepts the award for Outstanding Large Flight Activity on behalf of his AIMO.



Michael Morse, **DCMA Special Programs South**, accepts the award for Outstanding Quality Assurance Representative.



Jeffrey Eichholt accepts the award for Outstanding Contract Safety Specialist.

Black Hawk Down Vet Speaks to Symposium Attendees



Michael Durant tells the DCMA Aircraft Operations Training Symposium attendees about his 1993 shootdown and 11 days of captivity in the hands of Somali rebels. (Photo by Dick Cole, DCMA Public Affairs)

Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Michael Durant and his crew — Bill Cleveland, Ray Frank and Tommy Field — were aboard “Super 64,” an MH-60A Black Hawk helicopter assigned to D company of the 160th Special Operations Group during *Operation Gothic Serpent* in Mogadishu, Somalia, on Oct. 3, 1993.

The operation, designed to capture Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, took place from August to October 1993 under the supervision of the Joint Special Operations

Command. As part of the operation, Task Force Ranger, under the command of Army Maj. Gen. William Garrison, deployed in Mogadishu on a mission to arrest two of Aidid’s lieutenants in what is called the Battle of Mogadishu.

Prior to the beginning of *Operation Gothic Serpent*, there was an ongoing civil war in Somalia, and Aidid and the United Somali Congress, and later the Somali National Alliance, drove Mohamed Siad Barre’s dictatorial regime from power. Both sides were brutal in the ongoing conflict, in which the United Nations and the United States had interceded to restore order.

On the afternoon of Oct. 3, 1993, two leaders of Aidid’s clan were at a residence in central Mogadishu, and Garrison sent 19 helicopters, 12 vehicles and 160 men to arrest them on orders from the United Nations. Once captured, the two Somali militia leaders were placed in ground vehicles. Armed Somalis converged on the convoy from all over the city. During the first hours of

the battle, the Somalis shot down MH-60A *Black Hawk*, “Super 61,” with a rocket-propelled grenade. The pilots did not survive; however, the crew survived the crash landing and held off the advancing militia until a rescue team was able to recover them.

Durant’s *Black Hawk*, “Super 64,” also fell to militia with an RPG while flying air cover during the rescue of “Super 61.” This time no rescue team was immediately available. Two Special Forces snipers — Army Master Sgt. Gary Gordon and Sgt. 1st Class Randy Shughart — volunteered repeatedly to try to secure Durant’s crash site and were finally given permission knowing full well it would probably cost them their lives. When the team arrived and attempted to secure the site, Gordon was shot. Eventually, after holding off Somalis and most likely killing many, all of Durant’s surviving crew and Shughart died when they ran out of ammunition, leaving Durant alone at the crash site. The militia took him hostage after beating him violently.

Durant had a broken right leg, a broken back and he was shot in the right shoulder. Soon after his capture, CNN was showing pictures of jubilant Somalis bouncing on the rotor blades of Super 64. Militiamen also had bodies of the crew and their Special Forces rescuers, dragging them through the streets at the end of a rope as Somalis kicked and poked at them. Durant remained a prisoner for 11 days before returning to U.S. military control.

“All of a sudden, your life changes in a minute,” Durant told the audience.



Durant at the controls of “Super 64.” In the background is co-pilot, Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Ray Frank, who perished with the rest of Durant’s crew, Oct. 3, 1993. (Photo courtesy of Michael Durant)

"You think back on all the training and you hope you can remember everything. The key to success in any operation is people, not equipment." Durant also said that being a part of the special operations community taught him the value of teamwork and cooperation are essential to any enterprise. "If you go through adversity with people, you develop a strong bond and you depend on each other. You can't do without one another and you will do anything to help one another succeed."

Many people describe the Somalia mission as a failure. Durant, despite his personal experience, called it a success. "We went in to reopen relief supply lines that were cut by civil war. Before we went into Somalia, 300,000 people died of starvation because of the civil war and a multi-year drought. We did what we went there to do.



The "Super 64" wreckage, viewed from the air, more than two weeks after Durant and his crew were shot down. (Photo courtesy of Michael Durant)

Durant went through a number of surgeries and was able to return to flying about two years after the crash of "Super 64." He even ran a marathon to prove to military doctors that he was fit.

Based on his statement, he also saw to it that Gordon and Shughart posthumously received the Medal of Honor for their effort to save the crew of "Super 64."



Black Hawk similar to the one flown by Army pilot Michael Durant during the Battle of Mogudishu. (DoD photo)