STAFF SGT. Matt Eversmann's lanky frame was fully extended on the rope for what seemed too long on the way down. Hanging from a hovering Blackhawk helicopter, Eversmann was a full 70 feet above the streets ofMogadishu . His goggles had broken, so his eyes chafed in the thick cloud of dust stirred up by the bird's rotors.

It was such a long descent that the thick nylon rope burned right through the palms of his leather gloves. The rest of his Chalk, his squad, had already roped in. Nearing the street, through the swirling dust below his feet, Eversmann saw one of his men stretched out on his back at the bottom of the rope.

He felt a stab of despair. Somebody's been shot already! He gripped the rope hard to keep from landing on top of the guy. It was Pvt. Todd Blackburn, at 18 the youngest Ranger in his Chalk, a kid just months out of aFlorida high school. He was unconscious and bleeding from the nose and ears.

The raid was barely under way, and already something had gone wrong. It was just the first in a series of worsening mishaps that would endanger this daring mission. For Eversmann, a five-year veteran fromNatural Bridge,Va. , leading men into combat for the first time, it was the beginning of the longest day of his life.

Just 13 minutes before, three miles away at the Ranger's base on theMogadishu beach, Eversmann had said a Hail Mary at liftoff. He was curled into a seat between two helicopter crew chiefs, the knees of his long legs up around his shoulders. Before him, arrayed on both sides of the sleek UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, was Eversmann's Chalk, a dozen men in tan, desert camouflage fatigues. He had worried about the responsibility. Twelve men. He had prayed silently during Mass at the mess hall that morning. Now he added one more.

. . . Pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

It was midafternoon,Oct. 3, 1993 . Eversmann's Chalk Four was part of a company of U.S. Rangers assisting a commando squadron that was about to descend on a gathering of Habr Gidr clan leaders in the heart ofMogadishu,Somalia . This ragtag clan, led by warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, had challenged theUnited States of America .

Today's targets were two top Aidid lieutenants. Commandos, the nation's elite commando unit, would storm the target house and capture them. Then four helicopter loads of Rangers, including Eversmann's men, would rope down to all four corners of the target block and form a perimeter. No one would be allowed in or out.

Waiting for the code word to launch, which today was "Irene," they were a formidable armada. The helicopter assault force included about 75 Rangers and 40 Commando troops in 17 helicopters. Idling at the airport was a convoy of 12 vehicles with soldiers who would ride three miles to the target building and escort the Somali prisoners and the assault team back to base.

The swell of the revving engines had made the earth tremble. The Rangers were eager for action. Bristling with grenades and ammo, gripping the well-oiled steel of their weapons, they felt their hearts race under their flak vests. They ran through last-minute mental checklists, saying prayers, triple-checking weapons, rehearsing their choreographed moves. They had left behind canteens, bayonets, night-vision devices (NODs) - anything they felt would be dead weight on a fast daylight raid.

It was3:32 p.m. when the lead Blackhawk pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant, announced:

"F-in' Irene."

And the swarm of black copters lifted up into an embracing blue vista ofIndian Ocean and sky. They eased out across a littered strip of white sand and moved low and fast over the breakers.

Mogadishuspread beneath them in ruins. Five years of civil war had reduced the once-picturesque African port to a post-apocalyptic nightmare. The few paved avenues were crumbling and littered with mountains of trash and debris. Those walls and buildings that still stood in the heaps of gray rubble were pockmarked with bullet scars and cannon shot.

In his bird, code-named Super 67, Eversmann silently rehearsed the plan. When his Chalk Four touched the street, the boys would already be taking down the target house, arresting the Somalis inside.

Then the Americans and their prisoners would board the ground convoy and roll back for a sunny Sunday afternoon on the beach.

It was the unit's sixth mission since coming toMogadishu in late August. Now Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison, their commander, was taking a calculated risk in sending them in daylight into the Bakara Market area, a hornet's nest of Aidid supporters.

The commandos rode in on MH-6 Little Birds, choppers small enough to land in alleys or on rooftops. In the bigger Blackhawks, Rangers dangled their legs from the doorways. Others squatted on ammo cans or sat on flak-proof panels laid out on the floor. They all wore flak vests and helmets and 50 pounds of gear and ammo.

Stripped down, most Rangers looked like teenagers (their average age was 19). They were products of rigorous selection and training. They were fit and fast. With their buff bodies, distinct crew cuts - sides and back of the head shaved clean - and grunted Hooah greeting, the Rangers were among the most gung-ho soldiers in the Army.

Inside Super 67, Eversmann was anxious about being in charge. He'd won the distinction by default. His platoon sergeant had been summoned home by an illness in his family, and the guy who replaced him had suffered an epileptic seizure.

Now, as they approached the target site, he felt more confident. They had done this dozens of times.

By the time the Blackhawks had moved down over the city, the Little Birds with the Commando troops were almost over the target. The mission could still have been aborted. But the only threat spotted was burning tires on a nearby street. Somalis often burned tires to summon militia. These, it was determined, had been set earlier in the day.

"Two minutes," came the voice of the Super 67 pilot in Eversmann's earphones.

Two advance AH-6 Little Birds armed with rockets then made their "bump," or initial pass over the target. It was3:43 p.m.

Cameras on spy planes and orbiting helicopters relayed the scene back to commanders at theJointOperationsCenter on the beach. They saw a busyMogadishu neighborhood, in much better shape than most. The landmark was the Olympic Hotel, a five-story white building, one of the few large structures still intact in the city. Three blocks west was the teeming Bakara Market.

In front of the hotel ranHawlwadig Road , a paved,north-south avenue crossed by narrow dirt alleys. At the intersections, drifting sand turned rust-orange in the afternoon sun.

One block up from the hotel, across Hawlwadig, was the target house. It was flat-roofed with three rear stories and two front stories. It was shaped like an L, with a small courtyard enclosed by a high stone wall. In front moved cars, people and donkey carts.

Conditioned to the noise of the copters by months of overflights, people below did not stir as two Little Birds made a first swift pass, looking for trouble. Seeing none, the four Commando Little Birds zoomed down toHawlwadig Road , disappearing into swirling dust as the commandos leaped from their helicopters and stormed the house. Next came the Blackhawks with the Rangers.

Eversmann's copter hovered just above the brown storm. Waiting for the three other Blackhawks, it seemed to the sergeant that they hung there for a dangerously long time. A still Blackhawk was a big target. Even over the sound of the rotor and engines the men could hear the pop of gunfire.

The 3-inch-thick nylon ropes were coiled before the doors. When they were finally pushed out, one dropped down on a car. This delayed things further. The pilot nudged his aircraft forward until the rope dragged free.

"We're a little short of our desired position," he told Eversmann. They were going in a block north of their assigned corner. Still, that wasn't crucial. The sergeant thought it would be a lot safer on the ground.

"No problem," he said.

"We're about 100 meters short," the pilot warned.

Eversmann gave him a thumbs-up. He would be the last man out.

When it was his time to jump, the strap on his goggles broke. Flustered, he tossed them and sprung for the rope, forgetting to take off his earphones. He jumped, ripping the earphone cord from the ceiling.

In the excitement, time slowed. All his movements became very deliberate. He hadn't realized how high they were. The slide down on the rope was far longer than any they'd done in training. Then, on his way down, Eversmann spotted Todd Blackburn splayed out on the street at the end of the rope.

Eversmann's feet touched down next to the fallen Ranger, and the crew chiefs in the copter released the rope. It fell twisting to the road. As the Blackhawk moved up and away, the noise eased and the dust settled. The city's musky odor bore in.

Pvt. 2 Mark Good, Chalk Four's medic, was already at work on Blackburn. The kid had one eye shut. Blood gurgled from his mouth. Good inserted a tube down Blackburn's throat to help him breathe. Sgt. First Class Bart Bullock, a Commando medic, started an IV. Blackburn hadn't been shot, he'd fallen. He'd somehow missed the rope and plummeted.

He was still alive, but unconscious. He looked pretty busted up. Eversmann stepped away. He took a quick count of his Chalk.

His men had peeled off as planned against the mud-stained stone walls on either side of the street. That left Eversmann in the middle of the road with Blackburn and the medics. It was hot, and sand was caked in his eyes, nose and ears. They were taking fire, but it wasn't very accurate. Oddly, it hadn't even registered with the sergeant. You would think bullets clipping past would command your attention, but he'd been too preoccupied.

Now he noticed. Passing bullets made a snapping sound, like cracking a stick of dry hickory. Eversmann had never been shot at before. As big a target as he made at 6-foot-4, he figured he'd better find cover. He and the two medics grabbed Blackburn under his arms, and, trying to keep his neck straight, dragged him to the edge of the street. They squatted behind two parked cars.

Good looked up at Eversmann. "He's litter urgent, Sarge. We need to extract him right now or he's going to die."

Eversmann shouted to his radio operator, Pvt. Jason Moore, and asked him to raise Capt. Mike Steele on the company radio net. Steele, the Ranger commander, had roped in with two lieutenants and the rest of Chalk One to the block's southeast corner.

Minutes passed. Moore shouted back to say he couldn't get Steele.

"What do you mean you can't get him?" Eversmann asked.

Neither man had noticed that a bullet had severed the wire leading to the antenna on Moore's radio. Eversmann tried his walkie-talkie. Again Steele didn't answer, but after several tries Steele's lieutenant, Larry Perino, came on the line.

The sergeant made a particular effort to speak slowly and clearly. He explained that Blackburn had fallen and was badly injured. He needed to come out. Eversmann tried to convey urgency without alarm.

So when Perino said, "Calm down," it really burned Eversmann. This is one hell of a time to start sharpshooting me.

Fire was getting heavier. To officers watching on screens in the command center, it was as if their men had poked a stick into a hornet's nest. It was an amazing and unnerving thing to view a battle in real time. Cameras on the surveillance aircraft circling high over the fight captured crowds of Somalis erecting barricades and lighting tires to summon help. People were pouring into the streets, many with weapons. They were racing from all directions toward the spot where orbiting helicopters marked the fight. There wasn't much the Joint Operating Command could do but watch.

Eversmann's men had fanned out and were shooting in every direction except south toward the target building. He saw crowds of Somalis way up Hawlwadig to the north, and others, closer, darting in and out of alleys, taking shots at the Rangers. They were coming closer, wary of the Americans' guns.

The Rangers had been issued strict rules of engagement. They were to shoot only at someone who pointed a weapon at them, but already this was getting unrealistic. Those with guns were intermingled with women and children. The Somalis were strange that way. Whenever there was a disturbance in Mogadishu, people would throng to the spot: men, women, children - even the aged and infirm. It was like some national imperative to bear witness. And over this summer, the Ranger missions had stirred up

widespread hatred.

Things were not playing out according to the script in Eversmann's head. His Chalk was still in the wrong place. He'd figured they could just hoof it down Hawlwadig, but Blackburn's falling and the unexpected volume of gunfire had ruled that out.

Time played tricks. It would be hard to explain to someone who wasn't there. Events seemed to happen twice normal speed, but from inside his personal space, the place where he thought and reacted and watched, every second seemed a minute long. He had no idea how much time had gone by. It was hard to believe things could have gone so much to hell in such a short time.

He kept checking back to see if the ground convoy had moved up. He knew it was probably too soon. It would mean that things were wrapping up. He must have looked a dozen times before he saw the first humvee - the wide-bodied vehicle that replaced the jeep as the Army's all-purpose ground vehicle - round the corner three blocks down. What a relief! Maybe the boys are done and we can roll out of here.

He radioed Lt. Perino.

"Listen, we really need to move this guy or he's going to die. Can't you send somebody down the street?"

No, the humvees, could not move to his position.

Good, the medic, spoke up: "Listen, Sarge, we've got to get him out."

Eversmann summoned two of Chalk Four's sergeants, rock-solid Casey Joyce and 6-foot-5 Jeff McLaughlin. He addressed McLaughlin, shouting over the escalating noise of the fight.

"Sergeant, you need to move him down to those humvees, toward the target."

They unfolded a compact litter, and with Joyce and McLaughlin in front and medics Good and Bullock in back, they took off down the street. They ran stooped. Bullock was still holding the IV bag connected to the kid's arm. McLaughlin didn't think Blackburn was going to make it. On the litter he was dead weight, still bleeding from the nose and mouth. They were all yelling at him, "Hang on! Hang on!" but, by the look of him, he had already let go.

They would run a few steps, put Blackburn down, shoot, then pick him up and carry him a few more steps, then put him down again.

"We've got to get those humvees to come to us," Good said finally. "We keep picking him up and putting him down like this and we're going to kill him."

So Joyce volunteered to fetch a humvee. He took off running on his own.

AFTER THE HELICOPTER force had moved out over the beach, Staff Sgt. Jeff Struecker had waited several minutes in his humvee with the rest of the ground convoy at the base. His was the lead in a column of 12 vehicles. They were to drive to a point behind the Olympic Hotel and wait for the D-boys to wrap things up in the target house, which was just a five-minute drive from the base.

Struecker, a born-again Christian from Fort Dodge, Iowa, knew Mogadishu better than most guys at the compound. His platoon had driven out on water runs and other details daily. The stench was what hit him first. Garbage was strewn everywhere. People burned trash on the streets. They were always burning tires. They burned animal dung for fuel. That added to the mix.

In this African city people spent their days lounging outside their shabby rag huts and tin shacks. There were gold-toothed women in colorful robes and old men in loose, cotton skirts and worn, plastic sandals. When the Rangers searched the men, they would often find wads of the addictive khat plant they chewed to get high. When they grinned their teeth were stained black and orange. In some parts of town the men would shake their fists at the Rangers as they drove past.

It was hard to imagine what interest the United States of America had in such a place. But Struecker

was just 24, a soldier, and it wasn't his place to question such things. Today his job was to roll up in force on Hawlwadig Road, load up Somali prisoners, the Commando teams and the Rangers, and bring them back out.

He had three men in his vehicle: Spec. Derek Velasco, Spec. Tim Moynihan and a company favorite, Sgt. Dominick Pilla. Dom Pilla was a big, powerful kid from Vineland, N.J. - he had that Joy-zee accent - who used his hands a lot when he talked. Pilla was just born funny. He loved practical jokes. He had bought tiny charges that he stuck in guys' cigarettes. They'd explode with a startling Pop! about halfway through a smoke. Most people who tried that kind of thing were annoying, but people laughed along with Pilla. His cutting impression of Capt. Steele was a highlight of the little skits the Rangers sometimes put on in the hangar.

Struecker and the rest of the column timed their departure so they wouldn't arrive at the hotel before the assault on the target house had begun. Then they immediately got lost. Struecker, who was leading the convoy, took a wrong turn and watched with alarm as the rest of the vehicles drove in a different direction. He'd found his way back, but only after the rest of the vehicles had already moved up to the target house to load prisoners.

One of the humvees in the column held a group of Commando soldiers and Navy SEALs, that service's elite commando unit. They raced on ahead of the convoy to join the assault force, which had found 24 Somalis in the house and were handcuffing them. As this humvee approached the house, SEAL John Gay heard a shot and felt a hard impact on his right hip. He cried out. Master Sgt. Tim "Grizz" Martin, a commando in Gay's humvee, tore open Gay's pants and examined his hip, then gave Gay good news. The round had hit smack on the SEAL's knife. It had shattered the blade, but the knife had deflected the bullet. Martin pulled several bloody fragments of blade out of Gay's hip, and bandaged it. Gay limped out, took cover, and began returning fire.

In the mounting gunfire, they were startled to see a Ranger running toward them down Hawlwadig Road. It was Casey Joyce. He quickly explained Blackburn's condition, and pointed back to where the others were waiting. He jumped into the humvee, and they drove up a block to where the young private waited on the litter with Sgt. McLaughlin and the two medics.

They set Blackburn in the back of the SEAL humvee and got permission to take him back to the base immediately.

Struecker and his companion humvee had just found their way back to the main convoy and were ordered to escort the SEAL humvee. It had no big gun on top. Struecker's had a 50-caliber machine gun, and his companion humvee had a Mark 19, which could rapidly fire big, grenade-like rounds. The three-vehicle column began racing back to base through streets now alive with gunfire and explosion.