



From Mogadishu to Hollywood: Keith Jones, the Star 41 pilot who played himself in Black Hawk Down during the battle of October 3, 1993

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Thirty-three years ago, on **October 3, 1993**, on the streets of Mogadishu, a small **MH-6 Little Bird** from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment became part of one of the most dramatic episodes of the battle that came to be known as **Black Hawk Down**. Its radio call sign was **Star 41**. At the controls were **Karl Maier and Keith Jones**, two “Night Stalkers” pilots.

Eight years later, when Ridley Scott recreated that battle for the screen, something extraordinary happened: **Keith Jones returned to the controls of Star 41 and played himself**, recreating before the cameras part of what he had actually experienced under fire.

Super 61 is shot down

On the afternoon of **October 3, 1993**, the U.S. Task Force Ranger was conducting an operation in downtown Mogadishu to capture several senior figures in Mohamed Farrah Aidid's organization.

What was meant to be a relatively brief action quickly turned into a battle.

At around **4:20 p.m.**, the MH-60 Black Hawk **Super 61**, flown by **Cliff “Elvis” Wolcott** and **Donovan “Bull” Briley**, was struck by an RPG and crashed among the city's buildings. Both pilots were killed in the crash, while several of the men aboard survived.

Among them were two Delta Force operators, **Daniel Busch and Jim Smith**, who began defending the crash site as Somali forces converged on the wreckage.

In the air, the first challenge was determining who was still alive and whether they could be reached.

Star 41 lands beside the wreckage

The **Star 41** Little Bird, carrying Karl Maier and Keith Jones, reached the site where Super 61 had gone down.

An MH-6 is an extremely small and agile helicopter designed to deliver special operations personnel directly onto an objective. Under those circumstances, its size allowed the crew to attempt something that would have been far more difficult with a Black Hawk.

Star 41 landed beside the crash site.

Keith Jones left the helicopter and moved toward the wounded while Maier remained with the aircraft, providing cover. The U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum recounts the action, describing Jones carrying the critically wounded **Daniel Busch** toward the Little Bird under intense enemy fire.

Busch had continued fighting despite his wounds. He would die shortly after evacuation.

Jim Smith was also evacuated.

Jones's Silver Star citation describes Star 41 as one of the first aircraft to arrive at the crash site and notes that **Karl Maier engaged enemy forces with his personal weapon while Jones recovered the two wounded men**. Once aboard, the Little Bird transported them to a

medical facility.

It was one of those actions in which the defining traits of the 160th SOAR were displayed in their most extreme form: flying at very low altitude, entering confined spaces, and putting a helicopter down where, in theory, no one would have wanted to land.

The Night Stalkers motto, **“Night Stalkers Don't Quit”**, was not merely a slogan in Mogadishu that night.

The Silver Star

For his actions during the battle, **Chief Warrant Officer Four Keith Jones** received the **Silver Star**, one of the United States' highest decorations for military valor.

The citation directly links the award to his actions as copilot of Star 41 during the fighting on October 3: arriving at the wreckage of Super 61, extracting the wounded under fire, and then flying them to the aid station.

The recovery of Super 61, however, was only one part of a battle that lasted through the night.

Just minutes later, **Super 64**, the Black Hawk piloted by Michael Durant, would also be shot down. Another of the actions that became symbolic of Mogadishu would unfold at its crash site: that of Delta snipers **Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart**, who repeatedly requested to be inserted on the ground to protect Durant and were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Eight years later, Mogadishu recreated in Morocco

In 2001, Ridley Scott began filming *Black Hawk Down*, based on Mark Bowden's book, in Morocco.

To make the film as credible as possible, the production secured the cooperation of the U.S. Army. Actual Black Hawk and Little Bird helicopters from the **160th SOAR** were used, while military personnel took part in the preparation and filming.

Among those pilots was **Keith Jones**.

It was then that cinema and history literally overlapped.

Jones was called upon to **recreate his own actions during the battle**, returning to the role of Star 41's pilot. He had not asked to appear in the film: he was in Morocco alongside the other 160th SOAR personnel assigned to support the production.

In the movie, therefore, **Keith Jones plays Keith Jones**.

Not an actor chosen to resemble the real pilot. Not a stand-in tasked with portraying him.

It was him.

A very different scene for someone who had lived it

For Jones, that reconstruction inevitably held a different meaning than it did for the other men on set.

Production notes recall how difficult it was to confront those memories again. One of the men he had recovered in 1993, **Daniel Busch**, had not survived his wounds. In the film, Busch is portrayed by actor Richard Tyson.

The production of *Black Hawk Down* also involved other service members who had actually taken part in the battle, using them as consultants, pilots, stunt performers, or extras.

But Jones's case remains particularly significant: **a man called upon to cinematically recreate, in the same type of helicopter, an action for which he had been decorated for military valor**.

Star 41, a small part of an enormous battle

The Battle of Mogadishu claimed the lives of **18 U.S. servicemembers during the fighting on October 3 and 4**; a nineteenth American servicemember, Matt Rierson, died on October 6 in a subsequent mortar attack. Dozens were wounded.

The name *Black Hawk Down* has inevitably tied the memory of that battle to the large downed MH-60s.

But alongside the Black Hawks, the tiny **MH-6 and AH-6 Little Birds of the 160th SOAR** also operated tirelessly, crucial for inserting operators, evacuating the wounded, and providing close support to forces trapped in the city.

Among them was **Star 41**.

And among its pilots was Keith Jones.

On October 3, 1993, he rushed toward wounded men while fighting raged around him.

Eight years later, in front of Ridley Scott's cameras, he once again stood beside that Little Bird.

This time, it was a film.

The first time was not.