



The High-Risk Contracting Business

The notorious killings of four Blackwater security contractors in Fallujah in March 2004 and the news coverage about their lives offered a glimpse into the world of the people attracted to this work. Their deaths also triggered growing concerns about the regulation and accountability of private security contracting firms.

On March 31, 2004, four men working for Blackwater USA as security guards -- Scott Helvenston, Wesley Batalona, Jerry Zovko and Michael Teague -- were ambushed by insurgents in Fallujah. They were killed, their bodies burned and mutilated, and two were strung up on a bridge over the Euphrates. The insurgents made their own video of the attack and the images were broadcast around the world. Overnight, the presence of private contractors in Iraq was highlighted and the dangers and questions surrounding their work in a combat zone took center stage. The Marines in charge of the area didn't know the Blackwater team would be traveling that day into the dangerous city of Fallujah, but four days later they were ordered to invade the city and find the killers; this was not the original plan they had had for quelling the insurgency in the area.

The Blackwater mission was to provide security for trucks belonging to a food caterer, ESS. The empty trucks were being sent to pick up kitchen equipment from the 82nd Airborne. But the Blackwater men were uneasy. One team member, former Army Ranger Wes

Scott Helvenston



By all accounts, Scott Helvenston, who joined Blackwater in March 2004, was well prepared for security work. He had been a Navy SEAL instructor and was a world class athlete. But he was in debt and Blackwater's pay -- about \$600 a day -- was a chief reason for signing on for a two-month contract. He told a friend he expected to be guarding Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition

Provisional Authority. But he never met Bremer. Blackwater had a new contract with a catering company, ESS, and they were scrambling to find new guards.

- [A final e-mail](#) -- Written on the eve of his departure for the mission, it's addressed to Blackwater officials. He complains about last-minute changes in pulling the team together and some problems with a team member. But he declares his resolve to stick with the mission.
- A Blackwater colleague [pays tribute](#) -- In a letter written to Helvenston's family after his death, she writes about the kind of man he was and his attitude toward his job in Iraq.
- [Read Helvenston's full story](#) -- "Scotty Bod Grows Up" -- as reported in the Raleigh News & Observer's special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required for this series.)

Jerry Zovko



A 6'3" former Army Ranger, he was born in Cleveland, joined the military in 1991 and had a reputation for being independent, with a knack for getting what he wanted. A Croatian-American, he got himself assigned to Bosnia in 1995 to help keep the peace. In

Batalona, complained to a friend that the team had never worked together before. And contractually, Blackwater was to supply two SUVs with three guards per vehicle. Instead, the men set out that morning with just two men per car, each short a rear gunner.

After the killings, concerns mounted about the regulation and accountability of private security companies. In a case that is being closely watched by contractors, the families of the men filed wrongful death lawsuits against Blackwater in January 2005. The suits charge Blackwater "knowingly and intentionally" sent the men out "without the needed and promised protections" such as equipment, personnel and maps ([read the lawsuit](#), PDF file).

But in a privatized war, it's hard to determine who can be held responsible; disentangling the chain of contracts behind the mission is difficult and has so far obscured any final accountability. Blackwater denies responsibility for the contractors' deaths and says it doesn't know who directed the March 31st mission. Blackwater was contracted through a Kuwaiti company, Regency, to a Cypriot company, ESS, the food caterer. ESS has refused to tell FRONTLINE exactly whom they were working for.

RELATED LINKS

+ [American Contractors In Iraq](#)

A site that collects a range of material that conveys the personal side of the private contractors' world. View the "[tribute videos](#)" that were produced by their family and friends.

+ [KBRjobs.com](#)

This Web site of the largest private contractor in

1997, after being thwarted in joining the Green Berets, he left the army and went to work as a security contractor for DynCorp in Qatar and Dubai, where he learned Arabic. In the summer of 2003, he signed on with Vinnell to help train the new Iraqi army, telling his family it was important work because the Iraqis needed the chance to take charge of their own country. Three months later, he joined Blackwater Security Consulting.

- ["He always had a smile and a good sense of humor"](#) A letter written to Zovko's family from an old Army buddy relating what he was like and why he had signed on for contractor work.
- [His contractor ID letter](#) The authorization letter that allowed him to travel as a private contractor working for Vinnell.
- [A letter of condolence](#) Sent to Zovko's family from L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.
- [Read Zovko's full story](#) -- "A Private, Driven Man" -- as reported in the *Raleigh News & Observer's* special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required.)

Wesley Batalona



A native of Hawaii, Batalona was career Army and a former Ranger sergeant with a reputation for being tough. Like the others, his motive for signing on for security work in Iraq was mixed: a yearning for some adventure, a bit of self-challenge, and the money. He wanted to help out his father who was facing foreclosure on his house. Batalona joined the Army in 1974 and took part in the

1989 invasion of Panama, the first Gulf War and the 1993 humanitarian mission to Somalia. After 20 years he retired and ended up taking a hotel night security work. But he yearned to do more and didn't hesitate when he learned through contacts with other former soldiers about security work in Iraq.

- Read [Batalona's full story](#) -- "Army Molds a Future" -- as reported in the *Raleigh News & Observer's* special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required.)

Iraq, Halliburton's subsidiary KBR, lists the many jobs available.

+ [Iraq Coalition Casualties: Contractors](#)

A site offering a partial list of contractors' deaths shows 244 killed to date. It lists names, nationalities, circumstance surrounding the death, contractor's occupation and the employer.

+ [Danger Zone Jobs](#)

How many international high-risk jobs are available? This site offers an idea, displaying high-paying jobs in Iraq and other countries, and in various fields including security, operations, intelligence, linguists, engineering, construction, mechanical and transportation.

+ ["I'm From the Private Sector and I'm Here to Help"](#)

A June 2005 radio story from NPR's "This American Life" series describes what it's like being a civilian contractor working in a war zone.

[home](#) + [introduction](#) + [watch online](#) + [join the discussion](#) + [contractors](#) + [faqs](#)
[interviews](#) + [baghdad from a bulletproof window](#) + [producer's chat](#) + [readings & links](#)
[tapes & transcript](#) + [press reaction](#) + [credits](#) + [privacy policy](#)
[FRONTLINE home](#) + [WGBH](#) + [PBS](#)

posted june 21, 2005

FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of wgbh educational foundation.
photo copyright ©2005 corbis
web site copyright 1995-2005 wgbh educational foundation



Introduction

June 21, 2005

As the Army struggles to meet recruitment numbers, FRONTLINE takes a hard look at private contractors servicing U.S. military supply lines, running U.S. military bases, and protecting U.S. diplomats and generals. Between the logistics giant Halliburton and a myriad of armed security companies, private military contractors comprise the second largest "force" in Iraq, far outnumbering all non-U.S. forces combined. There are as many as 100,000 civilian contractors and approximately 20,000 private security forces.

In "Private Warriors," FRONTLINE correspondent Martin Smith travels throughout Kuwait and Iraq to give viewers [an unprecedented behind-the-scenes look](#) at companies like Kellogg, Brown & Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, and its civilian army. KBR has 50,000 employees in Iraq and Kuwait that run U.S. military supply lines and operate U.S. military bases. KBR is also the largest contractor in Iraq, providing the Army with \$11.84 billion dollars in services since 2002.

Historically, there is nothing new about the military's use of [private contractors](#), but the Iraq war has seen outsourcing on an unprecedented scale. The policy change came after the Cold War when the Pentagon was downsizing under then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Cheney first hired Halliburton as a consultant and later became the company's president. Halliburton subsidiary KBR is now one of the largest recipients of government contracts.

FRONTLINE visits the biggest Halliburton/KBR run base, Camp Anaconda, in the Sunni triangle. Behind concrete walls 28,000 soldiers and 8,000 civilians live in bases that offer Taekwondo and Salsa lessons, movie theatres, fast food courts, and four meals a day. The amenities are impressive, but some argue that there is a price to pay. Says a former base commander [Marine Colonel Thomas X. Hammes](#), "it's misguided luxury ... somebody's risking their lives to deliver that luxury."

And while KBR was glad to provide Smith with a tour of the facilities, they weren't able or willing to answer some basic questions about how much certain services -- like feeding the troops -- cost. Smith eventually finds some answers from the Army base commander, but numerous audits are underway to determine just how the contracts are being fulfilled. In response to allegations of overcharging in the tens of millions of

dollars, KBR's Vice President of Worldwide Military Affairs, [Paul Cerjan](#) says, "the only thing we can do is stand up and give a true and honest evaluation of what we've done. ... And let whoever is making the assessment make the assessment. We are not afraid of that process."

"Private Warriors" also explores a very different kind of contractor -- the private world of security teams that work for firms like Blackwater, Aegis, and Erinys. They provide armed protection for U.S. government officials, government offices, military installations and even military commanders.

"The Pentagon's increasing reliance on outsourcing military functions raises important questions about accountability and the chain of command," says Smith. Through [conversations](#) with top military commanders, policy planners, military experts, and contractors, "Private Warriors" explores some of the dangers in bringing in the private sector to prosecute the war.

Warns George Washington University Professor [Steve Schooner](#), an expert on military contracting, "We have tens of thousands of armed contractors in Iraq defending the Green Zone, defending the military, defending contractors... But they're not part of the military command structure." Schooner suggests there can be trouble when private contractors carry weapons and have tactical responsibilities yet aren't getting the same information or direction. [Peter Singer](#), a fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of "Corporate Warriors" agrees: "There's a bubbling resentment ... and you're starting to sense a backlash from the military."

Smith obtains unusual access to Erinys, a British private security company. They have been charged with protecting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and are paid \$50 million a year for the task. Erinys is staffed with an assortment of ex-Special Forces and policemen from around the world. A private security guard at Erinys makes approximately \$400 dollars a day, twice what a soldier makes. Some guards make up to \$1000 a day. While some see these men as hired guns, they do not view themselves that way. They say they are just men with more expertise than the military when it comes to protection. If [Andy Melville](#), a project manager with Erinys in Iraq is correct, private warriors could become more prevalent in Iraq.

"Americans would like to withdraw troop members," says Melville. "And perhaps it is part of their policy to reduce troop members and replace them with private security contractors."

Given the recent difficulties in obtaining enough recruits for the Army, FRONTLINE asked the Pentagon for a high-ranking official to discuss if there are plans to place greater reliance on private warriors and to address other questions about accountability and costs. The Pentagon declined to provide anyone to be interviewed after acknowledging this was a sensitive issue.

Like regular soldiers, security contractors have a high profile, and increasingly, find themselves being targeted by insurgents and have suffered casualties as a result. Indeed, the dangers of this war come into sharp focus in the film. A security guard with another company, who accompanies Smith on a run to a reconstruction site north of Baghdad, was killed less than 24 hours later by a suicide car bomb. The next day,

Blackwater lost six men when a helicopter carrying their employees was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade. In a spike of violence, 18 private contractors were killed during the two-week period the FRONTLINE team was in Iraq.

"Private Warriors" also reexamines one of the most shocking episodes of the war, when the charred remains of Scott Helvenston, Wes Batalona, Jerry Zovko, and Michael Teague -- killed while protecting a truck convoy headed to pick up kitchen equipment -- were desecrated and strung over a bridge in Fallujah in March 2004. FRONTLINE follows [their story](#) and speaks to close personal friends and family who claim that the four men were poorly equipped for the mission, lacking vehicle armor and sufficient manpower to fend off an attack.

In addition to lingering questions about accountability in the incident, Marine Colonel [John A. Toolan](#), who was ordered into the city to find the killers, found himself forced to change his original plan for quelling hostilities. The private contractors had gone in unbeknownst to the Marines. Colonel Toolan tells FRONTLINE, "Certainly the next time ... I'm sent some place with Marines, the amount of control that I need to establish up front is gonna be clear."

"Private Warriors" ends on the infamous Baghdad Airport Road. In the last four months there have been at least 150 attacks on this 5-mile stretch. So far the U.S. military and their partners in the private sector have been unable to secure this vital link. Smith has his own private security guards as he travels along what Iraqis call Death Road. He leaves behind a country where the fact that business for the private contractors is booming signals how difficult and dangerous the situation remains.

[home](#) + [introduction](#) + [watch online](#) + [join the discussion](#) + [contractors](#) + [faqs](#)
[interviews](#) + [baghdad from a bulletproof window](#) + [producer's chat](#) + [readings & links](#)
[tapes & transcript](#) + [press reaction](#) + [credits](#) + [privacy policy](#)
[FRONTLINE home](#) + [WGBH](#) + [PBS](#)

posted june 21, 2005

FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of wgbh educational foundation.
photo copyright ©2005 corbis
web site copyright 1995-2005 wgbh educational foundation