

# Mothers Say Mistakes Led to Fallujah Tragedy

## Details Uncovered by Mothers' Quest for Justice

**Apr. 7, 2005** - It has been one year since the world watched on television some of the most brutal images from the war in Iraq. Four American civilians were shot dead in Fallujah. Their bodies were set on fire, dragged through the streets and then hung from a bridge. Now, an ABC News investigation brings to light allegations that a series of grave errors led to the tragic event -- one which set off months of some of the worst fighting and losses of life of the Iraq conflict.

The four victims worked for a little-known and secretive private security company called Blackwater. At least 11 of its employees have been killed in Iraq. The mother of one of the employees, Scott Helvenston, says the company cut corners protecting its men. In a lawsuit, Katy Helvenston-Wettengel and families of the other victims are alleging the men were sent on the mission at the last minute, undermanned and ill-equipped, and that the company has tried to cover up its errors.

"I know Blackwater didn't pull the trigger," Helvenston-Wettengel said. "But they put Scotty and these other three guys in that spot at that time, with no way to protect themselves. And as far as I'm concerned they might as well have done it themselves."

### From Soldier to Civilian

Scott Helvenston spent 12 years in the elite U.S. Navy special forces unit called the SEALs. A blond, handsome 38-year-old, he had a physique that stood out even among the hardened military men around him.

But transition to a civilian life didn't come easy for Helvenston. He worked in Hollywood as an adviser on several films, including the Demi Moore film "G.I. Jane." Helvenston later produced a series of Navy SEALs exercise videos, but they didn't sell well. He briefly appeared in a reality television show called "Combat Missions," which featured competitions between former special forces members. The show was quickly canceled.

Last year, with two children and an ex-wife to support, Helvenston signed on with Blackwater for \$600 a day. Among its many contracts, Blackwater provides the heavily armed security guards for top U.S. officials. Helvenston told his mother he would be in the security detail for Paul Bremer, the U.S. presidential envoy to Iraq and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority.

But that never happened. Instead, according to this mother, Helvenston was sent out on convoy duty, protecting a load of kitchen supplies. He called his mother before he left on the mission, leaving her a final message on her answering machine to tell her that he loved her.

On March 31, 2004, everything changed.

Helvenston-Wettengel, at home in Florida, watched in horror as the gruesome images of bodies flashed on the news.

"They said, 'Oh, it's contractors, civilian contractors,' and I thought they were talking about maybe the oil fields and stuff, those kind of contractors," she said.

But as the hours passed, she knew something was terribly wrong with her son. "I knew he would have called me if he was OK," she said. "I knew, I knew he was gone."

Helvenston-Wettengel was notified of her son's death by a Blackwater representative at 3 a.m. the next day.

### **Searching for Answers**

In the difficult year after losing her son, Helvenston-Wettengel says she sought out more details about what really happened last March 31. Searching on the Internet, she found Donna Zovko, the mother of another victim, 32-year-old former Army Ranger Jerry Zovko. Together they asked Blackwater for further details of their sons' deaths. They say they were dumbfounded by the response.

"At one point, we were actually told -- my [other] son, my husband and myself -- that if we wanted to see the paperwork of how my son and his co-workers were killed that we'd have to sue them," said Zovko, of Cleveland.

"They told me the same thing," Helvenston-Wettengel said. "They said we'd have to sue them, so OK, we're gonna sue you."

Along with family members of the two other Blackwater employees in the convoy, Mike Teague and Wesley Batalona, Zovko and Helvenston-Wettengel brought suit against the company, and they say they found themselves confronted with some troubling new information.

### **Ill-Equipped and Undermanned**

One startling discovery was that when their sons were dispatched on the dangerous mission, they were not sent out in heavily armored vehicles. Armored vehicles, which cost about \$100,000 each, are able to deflect small-arms fire. Instead, the men were sent out in simple SUVs with only reinforced back bumpers, according to Helvenston-Wettengel.

"I'm a very forgiving person, but I don't think I will ever forgive them for that. And I think it was all about greed and the dollar," Helvenston-Wettengel said.

Also, according to Dan Callahan, the lawyer for the families, under the Blackwater contract for the mission, six men were to be in the detail, three for each car.

But a video taken by the attackers shortly after the men were killed shows that Blackwater had only sent two men for each car, leaving the rear gunner lookout post empty.

"These insurgents were able to walk right up to them and shoot them point blank with small arms weapons," Callahan said. "Had they had no armored vehicle but the third person with his eyes open looking backward, they could've taken defensive action."

Compounding the problem, Blackwater did not give the men maps of the area, according to what some employees have told the mothers, possibly contributing to the critical turn missed by the convoy that morning. Instead of taking the road around Fallujah, they headed straight into a city where Americans

are coveted targets.

"Total neglect," Callahan said. "They put people out there into harm's way, without really caring about their life."

Helvenston-Wettengel said she was sick when she found out. "I threw up," she said. "I literally threw up."

### **Office Politics?**

And finally, there is the e-mail Helvenston's mother discovered her son had sent to the president of Blackwater just before he left on the convoy. "It is with deep regret and remorse that I send you this e-mail," Helvenston began the message. "During my short tenure here with Blackwater I have witnessed and endured some extreme unprofessionalism."

Helvenston also described a clash with other Blackwater personnel, who he wrote had the attitude: "Let's see if we can screw with Scotty."

"He was told at 3 o'clock in the morning that he's gonna be leaving at 5 o'clock in the morning, with a different group," Callahan said. "He had never met these people, never had any opportunity to test his weapons, but he was jerked out of his team, and put into another."

### **Hired Soldiers**

The mothers' lawsuit may finally force some exposure to the murky world of private military contracting that has only gained in notoriety and controversy since the Iraq war began.

"There's more than 20,000 private military contractors on the ground. So when we talk about a coalition of the willing, in reality, we have a coalition of the billing there," said P.W. Singer, a senior foreign policy fellow at Brookings Institution and author of "Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry." "It's a hundred billion dollars worth of business of companies carrying out roles that soldiers used to do."

Based out of Moyock, N.C., Blackwater has been awarded more than \$80 million worth of security contracts. Its owner, Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL with influential family ties to the Republican Party, would not talk with ABC News for this report. His father, Edgar Prince, was a prominent Republican Party donor and helped Gary Bauer found the Family Research Council, a "pro-family" lobbying group. His sister, Betsy DeVos, is a former chairwoman of the Michigan Republican Party.

The rapid growth of military contracting is cause for concern, said Singer, particularly in the lack of industry oversight.

"Because it's such a new industry, there's no laws there," he said. "There's no courts that people have been able to turn to. The military can't control them because they're not part of the military. And then finally you have issues of basic managerial oversight, and that's been absent here. Specifically, the Pentagon doesn't even know how many of these guys are working for them, let alone what they're doing in these cases."

Officially, the company has expressed its regrets to the families but says its men knew what they were getting into in Iraq. They have asked for the lawsuit to be dismissed.

Helvenston-Wettengel said she will continue her fight for her son. "I can't stop," she said. "I'm not going to stop. They cannot do this and get away with it."

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