

## Rise of the private-sector soldier

Falluja killings put spotlight on corporate cadres Military planners say price right for neo-mercenaries

They did not go gently, and they are not alone.

The four U.S. security guards who were horribly killed in the western Iraqi city of Falluja on Wednesday — their burned corpses bludgeoned, mutilated and finally strung up from the girders of a bridge for all the world to see — were among the most sensational victims of an increasingly dangerous and difficult conflict.

The shocking manner of their deaths may yet have untold consequences for U.S. policy in the region.

But the four dead Americans were also a stark reminder that the largest single ally of the roughly 130,000-strong U.S. military force in the country is not Britain, Spain, Poland or any of the other members of the so-called "coalition of the willing" occupying the country.

Instead, Washington's largest single ally in the conflict is none other than the private sector.

"We're willing to provide protection for any legitimate entity," says David Johnson, director of special projects and training for the Steele Foundation, a California-based company that does exactly that — provide physical protection for a price.

It currently has some 500 agents stationed in Iraq, plus hundreds more in other twitchy areas of the world.

"I would say we have something on every continent."

The four Americans killed Wednesday in Falluja were employees of a company called Blackwater Security Consulting, based in Moyock, N.C., and were not soldiers in the conventional sense, although they all had previous military training and experience.

Instead, they were combatants of a different kind — front-line mercenaries of the corporate world, the new warriors of fortune.

"You have to think about this in terms of a marketplace," says Peter W. Singer, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank.

Singer is an expert on the worldwide growth of private military contractors, companies that increasingly are doing the work — often the dirty work — and suffering the sometimes ghastly casualties previously the exclusive domain of conventional military forces.

"The industry," he says, "is booming."

Nowhere is it booming more loudly — or more lethally — than in Iraq.

According to Singer, the private military industry has more than 15,000 personnel on Iraq's parched and deadly ground, roughly one-tenth the entire foreign military presence in the country, a figure that eclipses the British contingent of about 9,000 conventional troops.

These private-sector "assets" — as they are known to their employers — run the same risks faced by conventional soldiers, sometimes with the same bloody results.

But their deaths or injuries do not show up on casualty lists like those kept by the Pentagon.

As of yesterday, the United States and other coalition forces had suffered a total of 704 fatalities since invading Iraq last year. Of these, 603 were American soldiers.

But neither of these figures includes deaths suffered by employees of PMCs, or private military companies — and those fatalities are rising, too.

Last Sunday, two guards employed by a London-based PMC called Olive Security — "the international strategic security consultants" — were shot and killed in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul while providing convoy protection to their clients near a power station in the area.

The clients survived.

The casualties were a British-born Canadian named Andy Bradsell, 33, of Victoria, B.C., and Christopher McDonald, 39, from Northern Ireland.

They were shot and killed after courageously propelling their vehicle into the path of attackers so the men they were protecting could escape.

Another British private military contractor — Global Risk Strategies — has had as many as 1,200 of its personnel in Iraq at one time, making it effectively the sixth-largest contributor to the coalition forces.

Most of its troops are either Nepalese Gurkhas or demobilized Fijian soldiers.

In recent years, Singer says, neo-mercenaries of one nationality or another have served their corporate masters in more than 50 countries, undertaking the full range of military duties — from chopping vegetables in makeshift kitchens to maintaining sophisticated weaponry and carrying automatic rifles into combat.

"The reasons these firms have thrived is that they're meeting a need," says Singer, who estimates the value of the industry at upward of \$100 billion U.S. a year.

With the end of the Cold War, many countries began to decrease the size of their military forces. It seemed both cheaper and more practical to start contracting out to the private sector for many of the services previously considered integral parts of conventional military operations, especially such seemingly mundane aspects of warfare as transport, training and logistics.

It wasn't long before the private sector moved into these areas in a big way.

Meanwhile, soldiers-turned-entrepreneurs also began staking a claim to what some might call the

"sexier" side of the business — the side that involves shooting and being shot at.

"They provide tactical combat expertise," says Singer, who has recently written a book on the subject called *Corporate Warriors: The Rise Of The Paramilitary Industry*. "They work around the world. These guys are basically on the ground, carrying weapons."

The first private military company to emerge after the Cold War was a firm that reared up in Africa in the mid-1990s — a South African company called Executive Outcomes that ran military operations on behalf of paying clients, from the embattled government of Sierra Leone to the similarly embattled government of Angola, both of which were besieged by rebels.

Now defunct, the company proved to be astonishingly effective at its chosen trade, deploying small numbers of seasoned, well-equipped and highly motivated fighters against much more numerous but far less skilful adversaries.

"In modern warfare," says Singer, "the numbers don't matter as much as the quality of the troops."

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**'We're willing to provide protection for any legitimate entity'**

***David Johnson, the Steele Foundation***

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In recent years, all sorts of companies have entered the highly lucrative field. And their services don't come cheap.

Many or most employees of PMCs previously received extensive training while serving in conventional military forces — funded at taxpayer expense — and now put the benefits of that training at the service of government or corporate clients at a very high price, much higher than the sums paid to operate standard military forces.

"This is one of the few industries where the client has already paid for the human capital that is then being charged back to you at two to 10 times the former rate," says Singer.

For competitive reasons, the salary scale for private-sector soldiers on hazardous duty tends to be kept secret.

"We cannot reveal that kind of information," says Tom Stallings, director of marketing for the Steele Foundation. He notes, however, that salaries vary according to nationality. In Iraq, for example, locally engaged staff are paid substantially less than foreign-hires.

Richard Isaacs, vice-president of the Lubrinco Group, a New York-based "vulnerability management firm," estimates that remuneration for American or European nationals hired as private security agents in Iraq likely would run around \$600 U.S. a day for short-term projects or \$100,000 a year for longer contracts.

Private military companies do not operate only in war zones.

For example, the Steele Foundation was under contract to the government of Haiti for five years to

provide physical protection for Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

But Aristide was ousted from power late in February and the contract is currently "under evaluation," as Johnson puts it.

The kind of individual attracted to this line of work tends to belong to a gung-ho breed.

Many or most of the private-sector guards currently deployed in Iraq have previous combat or law-enforcement experience, are intimately familiar with guns and military tactics, and have the muscled, square-jawed look of men who favour physical action over more cerebral pursuits.

Despite high payroll and other costs, military planners argue that private-sector contractors are a relatively inexpensive way to go, because their services can be engaged, terminated, increased or reduced, as the needs of the moment dictate.

Some critics contest this.

For one thing, government contracts to such companies have tended to be awarded on a highly partisan basis — see, for example, the huge involvement in post-war Iraq of Halliburton Corp., formerly run by current Vice-President Dick Cheney.

A lack of competition in the bidding process often results in high or even exorbitant prices.

Besides, supposedly short-term military contracts have a way of extending themselves, sometimes indefinitely.

"Take Iraq," says Singer. "Does anyone, being intellectually honest, believe that we're going to be there for a short time?"

If the economic attractions of private-sector warfare aren't necessarily all they're cracked up to be, the political benefits just might compensate — at least from the point of view of governments intent on knocking foreign heads without upsetting the local electorate.

That's what Jan Schakowsky believes the White House is currently doing in Colombia.

She says that, by sending private-sector contractors to do the work of conventional troops, Washington is able to avoid attracting unwanted public attention to its Colombian activities, thereby increasing its political elbow room.

With U.S. support, the Colombian government is currently fighting a war on many bloody fronts — pitting government troops against two leftist guerrilla armies and several violent drug cartels, not to mention a welter of right-wing paramilitary outfits.

Schakowsky, a Democratic congresswoman from Illinois, opposes the Bush administration's current bid to raise the cap on U.S. military personnel in the war-ridden South American country from 400 to 800, while increasing the limit on Americans sent to Colombia by private military contractors from 400 to 600.

"The numbers proposed by the administration, while too high on their own, are misleading because they do not include those foreign nationals who are recruited by these companies as subcontractors,"

Schakowsky says.

Some critics note that the use of mercenaries — especially foreign mercenaries — may make warfare more palatable politically because mercenaries' deaths tend not to elicit the degree of indignation or remorse at home that traditional soldiers do when they fall in battle.

Consider a case in point. Dateline: Somewhere in southern Colombia.

In February, 2003, a privately operated Cessna aircraft was shot down by leftist rebels while flying a reconnaissance mission in Caqueta province. The pilot and passengers — all but one of whom were American — survived the crash.

All the Americans aboard were former U.S. military officers and all were employed by a military contractor called California Microwave Systems, a division of Northrop Grumman Corp.

The company was being paid to map illicit coca-growing operations in Colombia. Coca is the raw material used in the production of cocaine.

Following the crash, the plane's American pilot was killed in a firefight with rebels, as was a Colombian soldier also aboard the aircraft. Three American passengers were taken prisoner by the rebels and have yet to be released.

The incident has attracted only limited media and public attention in the United States, likely much less attention than it would have aroused had those involved been conventional U.S. soldiers on active duty.

According to Schakowsky, the men have been "shamefully forgotten" by their employers.

Still, governments that rely on the services of such private contractors may well find they can prosecute overseas wars at a lower political risk.

They also may find that their insurance bills are substantially reduced.

Such considerations may become increasingly significant for U.S. policy-makers as the conflict in Iraq grinds on at immense expense and with mounting casualties, while horrific images are displayed to voters at home.

Against this grim backdrop, the role of privately contracted military personnel is likely to become more important, not less.

"They're filling a gap that we've allowed to develop," says Singer. "It's a way of avoiding some of the political cost."