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## GUNS for hire

A Canadian film looks into the dark world of private soldiers, writes ALEXANDRA SHIMO

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In the confessional opening monologue of the documentary *Shadow Company*, former British Army soldier James Ashcroft admits that providing security in Iraq is different from anywhere else because "here, we can do whatever it takes to protect our principal. We can clip cars, point weapons at them, or shut them off the road and keep driving." With these words, this film about modern mercenaries lets us into the violent and lawless world that has hitherto been largely ignored.

The film weaves in and out of the personal story of Ashcroft, who is a former college buddy of the film's first-time director, Vancouverite Nick Bicanic. Both went to Cambridge University, but then their lives took very different paths. Ashcroft went into the British Army, while Bicanic set up a software company before drifting into film. They reconnected when Ashcroft e-mailed the 32-year-old director to say he was no longer with the British forces, but had decided to become a "mercenary."

"At first, I thought he was only joking because I didn't think there were mercenaries for real," says Bicanic, who teamed up with a more experienced director, Jason Bourque, to write the screenplay and put the film together. "And when I realized he wasn't joking, and he was going to become a modern-day mercenary, I thought, what's this world coming to? The idea of profit-motivated corporations at the forefront of modern warfare is quite a fundamental shift. I wanted to find out who these people are and what they were doing there, and I thought it was worth investigating."

When his initial attempts to gain a distributor were rebuffed, Bicanic decided to fund the documentary himself from the proceeds of selling his software company. Since Ashcroft had already signed up for private security work in Iraq, Bicanic gave him a camera and told him to film as much as he could.

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The results are powerful and fresh. Some security contractors hired to protect officials and business people complain that they have had to work with colleagues who don't have appropriate training and are firing their machine guns at unspecific targets, while others admit their warning shots might have hit civilian cars. In one scene, Ashcroft details the problems of buying machine guns from the black market -- the prices are going up because so many private security companies are eager to bypass the lengthy, bureaucratic process of purchasing a gun legally.

The film documents how private soldiers make do, such as by armoring their vehicles by welding steel plates to the tailgates of pickup trucks. Ashcroft talks about some the dangers of his work in Iraq -- a rocket fired from the back of a donkey blew up a private security team -- and how they cope with these daily dangers -- by shooting at all lone approaching donkeys. Bicanic tells the stories of Canadians such as Andy Bradsell, who died on the job in Iraq, and of the recruitment policies of companies such as Toronto-based Globe Risk Holdings, one of the world's biggest international private security firms.

At one point, a Zimbabwean named Neal Ellis casually defends the occasional "atrocities" of private security contractors.

"Obviously, there are cases where the so-called mercenaries haven't done what they were supposed to have done," Ellis says to the camera. "Everybody knows that atrocities have gone on. But most of the modern mercenaries are very professional soldiers."

Amnesty International USA says these issues and the atrocities have not been well publicized, which is why they are distributing the film to human-rights activists across the United States. "There have been private military contractors accused of abuse in the Abu Ghraib scandal, and hundreds of shootings at Iraqi civilians," says Mima Rosenthal, director of the business and human-rights program at Amnesty International USA. ". . . *Shadow Company* is a powerful but fair film that describes this developing human-rights issue."

The film is also generating controversy in Washington, with screenings organized on Capitol Hill this summer. Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy has taken an interest in the film, and his team has organized two showings so far with prominent members of Congress, and a panel discussion.

"The film takes a thorough and balanced look at the use of private security forces in Iraq and raises serious policy questions," Kennedy told *The Globe*.

Bicanic concurs -- which is why he made the film in the first place. "There is a very large private contingent of soldiers for hire in Iraq," he says, both Canadians and Americans. The latest estimate by one expert, Robert Young Pelton, puts it at 70,000 private soldiers.

But not all of them are as well-trained or capable as Ashcroft. "Everybody inside the industry . . . acknowledges that there are trigger-happy cowboys in some companies," says Bicanic. "There are stories of guys who shouldn't be there and they don't have the right kind of experience, so they panic in certain environments. And when you panic, civilians can get hurt."

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