



## Who's Fighting Our Wars?

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During the first Gulf War, there was one private military contract (PMC) employee for every 100 soldiers. In today's Iraq war, that ratio has risen dramatically to one PMC for every 10 soldiers.

It's figures like this that make Nick Bicanic's new documentary, "Shadow Company," such an eye-opener. Nation-states are paying private companies to provide armed civilians, in lieu of soldiers, on an unprecedented scale. Yet, aside from a handful of allegations about contract workers firing on innocent civilians, little is known about PMCs.

In January 2004, Bicanic, of Purpose Films, began a correspondence with a friend who had joined a private military company and was stationed in Baghdad. Through the pseudonymous "James," who provides narration throughout "Shadow Company," and hundreds of hours of interviews, Bicanic became aware of how much of the war effort was being run by PMCs. "I realized that this film really had to be made because the rules of war had changed, and there was a relevant message about modern warfare that wasn't coming across in other media," he says.

Currently in negotiations for release, the film has already attracted attention from media outlets and Hollywood producers. Bicanic joined AlterNet via telephone to discuss the film.

### **What do you try to convey through the film?**

The film is about the modern-day mercenary, or the private military contractor. They are vital in modern warfare today because the U.S. Army can't go to war without them. They're so overstretched in Iraq that they literally can't have dinner without PMCs. The film tells the story of the men that do this kind of work. It looks at what do they do, where they come from, and what motivates them to put their lives in harm's way on a daily basis. We wanted to chronicle what exactly is going on in the state of modern warfare and modern conflict resolution today. In order to do that, we also had to tell the history of privatization and warfare -- where it originated, historical precedents and where this happens today.

### **How far back can the concept of the mercenary be traced?**

For as long as there has been war, there has been the outsourcing of war. One of the reasons why we wanted to make the film is to point this out. People look at what's happening in Iraq and think it's new. In actual fact, what's different is there's just a lot more of them and we're hearing about them more. Historically, it hasn't been 20,000 contractors in the same space as the U.S. Army. It might be 100 guys flying planes in Colombia or 50 guys doing executive protection in the Philippines. But, the idea of using private armed civilians to in some way affect the result of a conflict has been around for a long time.

### **Why has there been an upsurge in PMCs?**

The upsurges throughout history have always occurred in a similar setup: where there's been a drastic reduction in the number of armed forces yet at the same time a conflict that requires armed forces. This is when people are culled from private environments. In this particular case, the U.S. government decided to enter a conflict that it did not have the ability to fully service with its own military. They had to create all these private roles because there weren't enough soldiers to fill them.

**If PMCs have been around for so many years, why are we only getting a documentary made about them now?**

It was difficult to find some of this information. The industry is not as transparent and accountable as it should be, and that's one of the points we try to make in the film. Back in the day, even if you tried to look for information on this stuff, it would have been much more difficult to find. In a sense, we started looking for it is just as it started to become more available. This is simply because, for the first time ever, the firms were forced to go on recruiting drives because so many people were needed.

**What was the result of this urgency?**

In the early stages in Iraq, so many people were needed so quickly that companies came out of nowhere. There was the infamous case of the company Custer Battles. This was a massive scandal because they appeared to be doing a good job for the better part of nine to 12 months. But that's because nobody was looking. And when they started looking, they realized that Custer Battles was charging the U.S. for employees that didn't exist. This kind of thing happened a lot in the beginning. But, as more people started paying attention, things stabilized more. Hopefully, enough stuff has been shaken out that the major bad apples like Custer Battles have gone away. However, unless we look more closely and educate both the government and the general public, people just aren't going to know what's going on.

**From your interviews and research, what did you learn about the recruiting process?**

All these companies have recruitment offices that go and select people. The American companies don't have a problem with the number of people applying. They actually have to turn people away. There's usually some sort of a three-week selection and training course, and that's designed to weed people out. For example, Blackwater has a very large training compound much like a military base, and they put people through a training procedure that also functions as part of the selection. They see how you shoot, move, drive, operate within a teamwork environment, whether you're a natural leader or not, how much experience you have. They try to see whether people will function once they put them into an environment that actually has real bullets flying at them.

**How do these contract employees work alongside of coalition military forces?**

It's an interesting problem because you suddenly have an environment where you need so many people, and you're in the same area as a nation-state military -- in this case the U.S. Army. This creates a very difficult environment for the soldiers themselves. For the first time ever, both the U.S. and U.K. Special Forces had real difficulty retaining men. While usually oversubscribed, they had to go on big recruitment drives.

It's simple math: you have a given individual who has the prospect of risking his life as part of a member of a nation-state military for X amount of dollars or doing virtually the exact same level of risk and almost the exact same job for roughly three to five times the money for a private company. The proof is in the pudding. A very large number of U.S. and U.K. Special Forces are asking for early retirement, and it's a serious problem. The U.S. Army refused to speak to us about this matter even though we wanted to address it quite specifically. Documents were leaked to the press that indicated that they were actually offering retention bonuses -- something they haven't done before.

**Sounds almost like a military brain-drain.**

Definitely. The militaries are facing what every company faces when there are suddenly other companies offering much more money for the same job -- their best people are leaving, and it is causing a serious problem. If you're a young officer, and you're looking at your career prospects for the next 10 years, and every day, at lunch,

you see these guys who have better equipment, are getting paid five times as much as you and live in a house with a pool while you're stuck in your barracks, that's got to have an effect of your morale.

### **What kind of PMC jobs are there?**

You could be doing anything from standing in one place and guarding a particular fixed point -- a crossroads or building or some oil installation or refinery or power plant. Or, you could be moving people around from point A to point B.

The environment is so risky that convoys get attacked on the move, people get kidnapped and people get assassinated. It's like the Wild West in more ways than one. Like in the old days, when they had people riding shotgun, literally, in stagecoaches so that the Indians wouldn't attack them. The modern-day equivalent of riding shotgun is three vehicles, four guys apiece with bullet-proof plating on the glass driving at high speeds, weaving in and out in order to survive and keep their client alive.

### **Did the PMCs and employees you spoke with have a problem with the word 'mercenary'?**

The word mercenary is used a lot in the documentary. I don't have a particular problem with that because one of the things that interested me in the making of this documentary is discovering what the word actually means. The word carries with it very negative connotations, but there is no real clear accepted definition of the word. Many of the companies and employees take great steps to distance themselves from the word.

Initially, the companies themselves used the term "private military company." But then they realized that, from a public relations point of view, calling yourselves a freelance military operator was a bad idea because it sounded too much like mercenary. So, they changed it to private security companies. It's all one and the same thing.

I don't necessarily think "mercenary" deserves the negative connotations that it has. Many of these guys call themselves mercenaries. They perhaps do it slightly as a joke, but they don't consider it to be a priori a negative thing. They just think, this is what I do, and I do it for a living, and I'm not wearing the uniform of a nation. So, therefore, I am a mercenary.

### **Did you get any sense these mercenaries were more, less, or equivocally reliable as uniformed soldiers?**

I asked my friend James, who was halfway through his tour in Iraq, "What about this issue that you hear about all the time: If you're there only for money and you really start to get into trouble, you can just run off if you get scared because you won't face a courts-martial or other military repercussion. Why wouldn't you just bail and leave everyone in trouble?"

He laughed and asked me who I would rather be with in the event of a problem: a 19-year-old cook from some sort of infantry division that's probably seen combat for the first time in his life and is going to panic, or a 38-year-old guy who has 20 years' worth of combat experience. The point is that these guys are more experienced than almost all the soldiers in Iraq.

People often like to say that if you're motivated just by profit, then you can't really be on the frontlines. If you're a professional, you can. There are a lot of "cowboys" out there, and those are the ones that are a problem. Our view is that if you promote transparency and accountability in the industry, then these problem people and the problem companies can essentially come to light and be pushed out. As long as this remains hidden, as long as there aren't documentaries like this that talk about what the industry is and what these people do, it's breeding ground for these dodgy companies that come in under the radar, get some backhanded deal. That creates problems because no one knows what these guys are doing, then they can do whatever they want.

**There have been recent allegations of contract workers firing at civilians. What can be done in the event of such a transgression?**

One of the surprising things I learned from the interviews is that local Iraqi laws do not apply to armed civilian contractors. That's actually by decree. They don't apply because it is specifically stated that they don't apply in their contracts with the U.S. government. What that means is that, in the event of something happening, the person responsible is usually just removed from the country. He's not liable under local laws, but at the very least it would be a political and public relations problem for the company involved. In some instances the person is fired, but that doesn't always have to be the case. That's really about it. They can be disciplined. But how much damage can a company do to an individual? They can essentially remove them from their employment, and that's it. If local laws are not applicable, then they haven't really broken any laws.

**Did any of the companies or workers you spoke with want local law to apply in order to weed out some of the more negligent companies?**

The one thing that the professional security contractors hate is the unprofessional "cowboys." They give the industry a bad name and create a very negative reputation. But the companies certainly don't want local law to apply because then they wouldn't be able to operate correctly. If you're in a convoy moving at 100 miles an hour and you have to worry about being liable for scratching a car if it cuts in front of you, you just shouldn't be there. There's no way the company could maintain any kind of profit margin. I don't think the individuals want local laws to apply but not because they want to retain the right to indiscriminately shoot people. They realize that if local laws apply, they won't be able to operate correctly.

**You talk a lot about the resentment that companies and employees harbor for the few "cowboys." Recent allegations of misconduct were aimed at a company called Aegis which was run by Tim Spicer, who was charged with violating a U.N. arms embargo in the past. Is there resentment toward the U.S. government in terms of whom these contracts are being awarded to?**

No one in the U.S. or U.K. companies understands why Tim Spicer and Aegis were given this particular contract. It was a contract to essentially oversee and handle communication and control of all the private security companies that are working out there. They're this umbrella company that's supposed to help everybody control and communicate to each other. But at the time that Aegis was awarded this contract, they had no men on the ground and no experience in the area. On top of that, the person in charge of the contract was a guy who had, as is clearly stated in the documentary, screwed up on numerous occasions in a major way.

Official protests were lodged when this contract was awarded by DynCorp. I tried to talk to DynCorp, but they refused to speak to me. But every individual that I spoke to was appalled that this was happening. Even the guys who just carry the guns, and are obviously not going to be in touch with somebody at the level of Tim Spicer, had heard of him and how much he screwed up before. To this day, it's still not clear as to why that contract was awarded.

**Having traced the history, and then seeing it in the context of present-day conflict, what do you think the future of the concept of the mercenary is?**

In some ways, we're seeing the future playing out right now in Iraq. It's a modern example of what happens when a very large military commitment is made in one area. Many people in the industry think that what happened in Iraq is unique in the sense that when the Iraq war finishes, assuming that there is some sort of an end in sight, the amount of people required to service the private military sector, will decrease significantly.

So, will this happen again the next time that there is a conflict? Will there be a large amount of private military around? I suspect there will. I suspect that this is a trend. One of the reasons we made this film is because this concept is not going away. It's

important that people know about what this is. We need to open people's eyes to this. War is more and more in the public eye, but it is also becoming more and more in private hands. This sort of equation is very dangerous.

### **Why has there been such a lack of transparency?**

A lot of the companies refused to speak to me even though I tried to get across the point that we were attempting to do an even-handed view of the industry. First of all, they didn't believe me because they're paranoid. Second of all, they just don't like speaking to the media. Some of them are changing their views slightly, but you have to remember that a lot of the guys running these companies come from a background of covert operations for nation-state militaries, where the whole idea of talking to anyone about what they were doing was anathema. They were bred to not talk about what they do.

Even though, what they do now should, and eventually hopefully will, come under extremely close public scrutiny. Their instincts are still to carry on doing things like they were when they had their training in the Army -- to not tell anyone about what they're doing and be secretive and promote this secret warrior credo.

### **Did you face any resistance from PMCs while you were putting together the film?**

Yes. I did an interview with a Canadian national who was due to start working for the U.S. company Triple Canopy. About three weeks after I did the interview, I got a phone call from the head of public relations demanding that I remove the interview. It just seemed odd to me to demand that the interview be removed when the documentary hadn't even been made yet. When I refused, he threatened to fire the guy who I interviewed. Literally during the phone conversation, an email popped up from the guy I interviewed who was in Iraq, and he was saying that he had been placed on restrictive duty, and was told that, if he didn't remove his association with the project, he would be sent home. So I said I wouldn't use it. As it happens, I did end up using some of it.

But in the grand scheme of things, I really don't think it matters. That sort of heavy-handed response is indicative of the level of transparency that really shouldn't be there. Why was it really that important that that one guy had spoken to someone from the "press" would be come down on so hard? The guy was talking about how he wanted to buy a sailboat and sail around the world and that's why he wanted to make money working for a PMC. I even sent a copy of this to the guy from Triple Canopy, but it didn't make any difference to him.

### **The public does not seem to expect transparency and open discussions with, say, the U.S. Army. If PMCs are effectively doing similar jobs to those in nation-state armies, is it fair to demand more accountability and transparency from them?**

I think it is. The fundamental difference in my opinion is that a nation-state army has a hierarchical chain of command that eventually sits with a democratically elected government -- that is who the army is ultimately accountable to. Whereas a private corporation that is profit-motivated is accountable to no one but its shareholders. One only needs to look at a few overbilling scandals -- Custer Battles, Aegis, Halliburton's \$150 toilet seat -- to consider the kind of thing that might, and has, happened.

### **The U.S. government's investigations into allegations against contracting companies have largely been shrouded from public view. Do you think this has damaged the perception of these companies?**

Yes, because what the U.S. is doing with a lot of these companies is essentially foreign policy by proxy. They're washing their hands of the consequences the second they hand over the contract and the cash. They're pretending that they don't have to worry about it anymore. But they do have to especially because the amount of people that they assign to manage these contracts is simply not enough.

Just think about their attempt to solve the problem. Rather than better managing the contracts, and forcing accountability and transparency, they created this uber-contract with Aegis where they put another layer of private companies in between themselves and the companies. They just award another contract for no logical reason. They're shooting themselves in the foot. If the U.S. government's desire is more accountability and more transparency, they're certainly not going about it in a very sensible way.

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