

"Give me your panty hose damnit." - Earthquake (1974)

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SHADOW COMPANY

by Pete Vonder Haar
(2006-03-16)
2006, Un-rated, 100 minutes
[CREDITS](#)



There are an estimated 20,000 private soldiers on the ground in Iraq, more than the total number of combined non-US coalition ground forces, and one for roughly every ten American soldiers. "Shadow Company" directors Nic Bicanic and Jason Bourque attempt to find out where these guys come from, what exactly they do, and why they do it.

The movie starts with a brief history of mercenaries in warfare, dating back millennia to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Their widespread use didn't really fall off until fairly recently, as the rise of nation-states in the 19th century led to the formation of professional standing armies. The dissolution of white African governments in the latter half of the last century, however, gave rise to the modern concept of the mercenary, as soldiers from places like Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa found themselves literally without a country, and possessing a rather specific skill-set, one ill-suited to most civilian pursuits.

Bicanic and Bourque interview a number of these folks, and we learn of their actions in places like Sierra Leone and Angola during the '70s and '80s. Action was mostly confined to the African continent, until a little thing we in America like to call The Greatest Tragedy of All Time, or 9-11. Private security firms, or private military companies (PMCs), exploded in number after September 11, 2001. And unlike many of those involved in such ventures beforehand, not all were of the same professional caliber or experience.

Strictly speaking, a "mercenary" is a soldier who accepts financial remuneration for their services, which are offered with little or no concern for the larger interests of the group/nation that hires them. Their level of expertise is strictly a matter of concern for their employer (and those they're supposed to be protecting), and as famed author Robert Young Pelton notes, the American government has created a great employment opportunity in Iraq for anyone with a gun.

The philosophies of the companies that put men on the ground vary widely. American firms like Blackwater adopt a more aggro approach, while British PMCs tend to "go native" to a greater extent. Not that it really matters in the long run, as interviews with Iraqi insurgents make it clear they just want to kill the "foreigners with guns." And while the more discriminating companies will demand a certain level of tactical experience, the movie points out that the end of the Cold War led to a glut of professional military men looking for work, meaning the supply won't dry up anytime soon. The increasing use of PMCs in places like Iraq and Afghanistan also creates legal problems, since their employees aren't generally governed by the laws of the country in which they operate. Mercs that step out of line are often spirited out of the country with no chance of recourse for the victims in country.

The proceedings here are helped greatly by the presence of a number of actual "private contractors," all of whom are extremely candid about their profession and the disparities between public perception of mercenaries and the realities of the trade. They're well-paid for their work, which is anything but glamorous, and – in the event you're working with someone not quite up to speed – can be even more hazardous than expected.

"Shadow Company" is a fascinating documentary, shining some needed light on the individuals who are called upon more and more to take fill in the gaps left by a diminished standing military.

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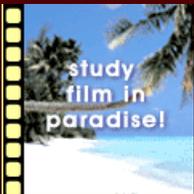
3) You are so pissing me off with this poll question!

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