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## Shadow of the front line

Doc attempts to shed light on the risky world of PMCs Just don't call the

war-zone workers "mercenaries"

Mar. 17, 2006. 01:00 AM

[GEOFF PEVERE](#)

MOVIE CRITIC

AUSTIN, TEX.—It's not even noon yet, and I'm sitting in the plush lobby of the Austin Four Seasons hotel with a Vancouver-based first time documentary filmmaker and two men who might commonly be called "mercenaries," but who prefer to be referred to as "private military contractors."

I decide I'll call them anything they want.

Nick Bicanic, the co-director of the documentary *Shadow Company*, is a big guy with dark eyes that suggest both determination and intensity. He looks, in short, like the kind of person who'd decide to make a movie about guys like Alan Bell and Cobus Claassens, two respected members of the international private military contracting industry whose livelihood in part depends upon their not talking to guys like Nick Bicanic.

But Bicanic was persuasive. Like many people around the world, he'd watched in both horror and amazement at the images of the hideously charred bodies, suspended from a bridge, of four "PMC" employees who were killed in Fallujah in April 2004. And he'd also recently learned that a former university buddy of his had suddenly decamped from a promising law career to go into the international soldier-for-hire business.

And so a certain question began nagging at the Croatian-born, British-educated former dot-com entrepreneur. "Who were these guys?"

"I discovered that rules of war had changed," says Bicanic. "And I became fascinated to find out what these new rules were. I also learned that there were 20,000 of these individuals working in Iraq alone. So I wanted to know who these guys were, what they were doing and why."

Easier said than done. By nature the private military contracting industry is secretive. Indeed, secrecy is a large part of what its clients are looking for. So, despite the fact the business of hiring private armies is bigger than ever and still growing, Bicanic faced certain seemingly insurmountable hurdles when it came to getting these soldiers of fortune on camera.

Bell, the British-born, Toronto-based head of Global Risk Holdings, one of the world's biggest international private security firms, was initially reluctant to put himself in front of Bicanic's cameras.

"Most of my clients don't want to see me on TV," says Bell, whose blue eyes are every bit as piercing as Bicanic's brown ones. "But I saw an opportunity here to educate people about private military companies, and people in the security industry generally."



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Besides, the filmmaker impressed him. He was looking for the story Bell wanted to tell. "Nick seemed to want to bring everything to the fore in terms who's doing what and how it worked, what we thought and why we weren't these Rambo guys that Hollywood turns us into," Bell said. "As soon as I realized where he was going with this I thought that I had to be part because I'd like to do my bit to educate people who watch this documentary on exactly what we do, who we are, how we work, what our morals are and what our standards are — things that we will do and things that we won't do."

Claassens, an ex-soldier in the South African army and current head of the security firm Southern Cross, was a veteran of the controversial PMC-executed ousting of the dictatorial government in Sierra Leone, where he still lives. He too was skeptical about revealing himself to Bicanic, but then the filmmaker offered to come to Sierra Leone and just hang. This meant that Claassens could learn to feel comfortable with Bicanic long before anybody ever broke out a camera.

"We became friends quite apart from actually helping with the documentary," says Claassens, whose own eyes are invisible somewhere on the other side of the mirror lenses of his sunglasses. "At the time I didn't think that I was of much use to him. But it turned out to be different and I'm happy it did because the movie reflects very positively on what we did in Sierra Leone.

"I'm obviously completely biased toward what we did there," Claassens elaborates. "Because I feel we did a good job.

"And that sort of comes out in the story and it gave me the chance to — not defend our position because I don't think we need to defend anything — but to put our position forward and tell our stories. And the documentary does that."

For both Bell and Claassens, one of the most useful things *Shadow Company* accomplishes is that it dispels the common pop cultural image of the — please excuse me for saying it — "mercenary."

I ask Claassens just what the most common misperceptions of his business are.

"The most obvious ones are the ones that come to mind immediately," he says. "You know, they're a bunch of baby-killers out there, murdering poor, defenceless Africans, rampaging and looting all over the country, blowing up bank safes, enriching themselves in the diamond fields, not giving a shit what they were there for and in general causing mayhem until the United Nations sensibly deployed a force and kicked them out.

"That's the story I sometimes hear. And the reality of that is really far removed. This movie gets that."

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