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Chasing Shadows: Documentary takes thoughtful, eye-opening look at the history and impact of the soldier-for-hire on the changing battlefields of the post 9/11 world

BYLINE: Michael D. Reid, Times Colonist

Twenty thousand of them operate in Iraq alone. Mercenaries. Soldiers of fortune. Hired guns. Or, as many prefer to be called, "private military contractors."

Whatever you call them, they trigger images of gung-ho, bloodthirsty Rambo types, but most don't fit that stereotype.

That's what Nick Bicanic discovered when he made Shadow Company, a thoughtful, eye-opening documentary about international private military contracting. It makes its Canadian premiere May 1 at Toronto's Hot Docs festival.

Co-directed by Jason Bourque, Shadow Company engagingly explores the history and impact of the soldier-for-hire on a changing global battlefield.

Eschewing exploitation, the filmmakers opted instead for a balanced and innovative approach to a complex issue.

Dispelling misconceptions about corporate soldiers without glorifying them, the film features animation, dynamic editing, and TV and video game footage fused with varying viewpoints from historians, ethics experts, journalists and military personnel.

Participants include Alan Bell, counter-terrorism expert and president of the international security firm Globe Risk Holdings; Cobus Claasens, a South African army career soldier who went to work for Executive Outcomes, the private military company hired by Sierra Leone's government to defeat guerrilla forces; and John Mullins, an Oklahoma-born Special Forces veteran-turned-security consultant who lent his name and image to the best-selling Soldier of Fortune video game.

A British dotcom entrepreneur who co-founded Vancouver's Purpose Films production company in 2003 with Remy Kozak, Bicanic says he was attracted to the material because of his concern over how global warfare has changed.

Like many, he was shaken by graphic news footage of four security employees who were brutally killed in Fallujah two years ago.

"I suddenly discovered that the rules of war had changed in some very fundamental ways," he recalled.

"I found myself amazed that from the Vietnam War onwards, as conflicts were becoming more and more in the public eye, they were falling more and more into private hands. This duality freaked me out."

Those changes hit close to home when Bicanic learned a former university pal had decided to give up a lucrative law career to become a soldier-for-hire. That was the genesis of the project and informed the manner in which it would be told.

"He was sending me jokey e-mails saying, 'I'm going to become a mercenary,'" recalled Bicanic. "I realized he was serious."

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Curious to know more about who these contractors were, why they'd want to get into this business and what they actually did, Bicanic was ready to face his next challenge: Getting these skeptical, highly secretive people to tell their stories.

"A lot of them come from a strong military background and have spent most of their working lives not talking to people about what they're doing," explains Bicanic. "It's almost like they're culturally conditioned not to discuss it."

The charismatic filmmaker persuaded them with assurances he would present a balanced view.

"It's easy to go, 'They're evil. They kill babies,' and all that, but it's sensationalist and in many cases untrue," he says. "Our objective was not to say, 'These guys are evil, and this is why.' Nor did I want to say, 'Check out how cool these guys are.'"

To capture footage, Bicanic and Bourque travelled from North America to Iraq and Sierra Leone. That's where Claasens proudly recalls how over 18 months the Executive Outcomes team of 150 soldiers, during a controversial mission, managed to get a 15,000-strong rebel force to the bargaining table with the government that hired them.

An insider's diary featuring photos, video footage and voice-over commentary from James Ashcroft, 28, an Oxford law graduate-turned-private soldier under contract in Iraq, is intercut with commentary.

Says political analyst Peter Warren Singer: "9/11 has been the Internet boom of these companies."

Adds author Robert Young Pelton, explaining how even kids in Iraq are being paid as mini-mercenaries to take shots at American troops: "George Bush created the ultimate entrepreneurial Wild West scenario in Iraq."

The film also acknowledges Hollywood's take on the modern mercenary.

"It was crazy ... I mean, it was just a joke," laughs Emmy Award-winning writer-producer Stephen J. Cannell as he recalls the success of The A-Team, his series starring Mr. T as a mercenary with attitude.

Bicanic said he included such references to show how our perceptions of the soldier-for-hire are shaped by the media.

Edmonton-based Tasha Larson, the former New VI television anchor whose husband, security contractor Andy Bradsell, was killed by masked insurgents while protecting a GE executive in Iraq in 2004, offers a more sobering perspective.

"They made the ultimate sacrifice and that's ultimately what the business is about," says the widowed mother of three.

While there's no distribution deal yet, Shadow Company has generated a lot of buzz since making its world premiere at the South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas, last month.

Its fans include documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock (Super Size Me) and director Edward Zwick (Glory).

Spurlock, who facilitated the film's late festival entry, expressed interest in launching it through his new production company. Zwick, describing it as being "extremely well-executed," invited Bicanic to meet him in Los Angeles.

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Last week Bicanic and his partner, writer-actress Domini ka Wol ski , also took Zwick up on his offer to visit him and meet star Leonardo Di Caprio on the Mozambique set of Blood Diamonds, his new film co-starring Jennifer Connelly and Djimon Hounsou.

"One of the reasons he liked the documentary was because Blood Diamonds is very much about a private military company operating in Sierra Leone," said Bicanic.

Not bad for a first-time documentary filmmaker who had a tough time pitching his offbeat project to broadcasters.

"We encountered a lot of resistance, particularly from CBC," he lamented. "They wanted to dictate the tone of the piece."

Fed up with being told their "non-standard approach" wasn't acceptable, they decided to go it alone.

"That pissed us off and we said, 'Screw this.' That pretty much set the tone for everything."

GRAPHIC:

Colour Photo: by Domini ka Wol ski ; Jason Bourque, left, a former Victoria resident, and Nick Bicanic look forward to the Canadian premiere their documentary, about soldiers-for-hire, May 1 at Toronto's Hot Docs festival.

; Colour Photo: courtesy of Purpose Films; James Ashcroft, centre, an Oxford law graduate-turned-private soldier, shares a Humvee with U.S. soldiers in Iraq in the documentary Shadow Company.