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Private U.S. Guards Take Big Risks for Right Price

By JAMES DAO

OYOCK, N.C., April 1 - Nestled inconspicuously amid the pinelands and horse farms of northeastern North Carolina lies a small but increasingly important part of the nation's campaign to stabilize Iraq.

Here, at the 6,000-acre training ground of Blackwater U.S.A., scores of former military commandos, police officers and civilians are prepared each month to join the lucrative but often deadly work of providing security for corporations and governments in the toughest corners of the globe.

On Wednesday, four employees of a Blackwater unit - most of them former American military Special Operations personnel - were killed in an ambush in the central Iraqi city of Falluja, their bodies mutilated and dragged through the streets by chanting crowds.

The scene, captured in horrific detail by television and newspaper cameras, shocked the nation and outraged the tightly knit community of current and former Special Operations personnel. But it also shed new light on the rapidly growing and loosely regulated industry of private paramilitary companies like Blackwater that are replacing government troops in conflicts from South America to Africa to the Middle East.

"This is basically a new phenomenon: corporatized private military services doing the front-line work soldiers used to do," said Peter W. Singer, a national security fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington who has written a book on the industry, "Corporate Warriors" (Cornell

University Press, 2003).

"And they're not out there screening passengers at the airports," Mr. Singer said. "They're taking mortar and sniper fire."

The Associated Press identified three of the victims as Jerry Zovko, 32, an Army veteran from Willoughby, Ohio; Mike Teague, a 38-year-old Army veteran from Clarksville, Tenn.; and Scott Helvenston, 38, a veteran of the Navy.

Blackwater declined to identify the dead men, but issued a statement: "We grieve today for the loss of our colleagues and we pray for their families. The graphic images of the unprovoked attack and subsequent heinous mistreatment of our friends exhibits the extraordinary conditions under which we voluntarily work to bring freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people."

Though there have been private militaries since the dawn of war, the modern corporate version got its start in the 1990's after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At that time, many nations were sharply reducing their military forces, leaving millions of soldiers without employment. Many of them went into business doing what they knew best: providing security or training others to do the same.

The proliferation of ethnic conflicts and civil wars in places like the Balkans, Haiti and Liberia provided employment for the personnel of many new companies. Business grew rapidly after the Sept. 11 attacks prompted corporate executives and government officials to bolster their security overseas.

But it was the occupation of Iraq that brought explosive growth to the young industry, security experts said. There are now dozens, perhaps hundreds of private military concerns around the world. As many as two dozen companies, employing as many as 15,000 people, are working in Iraq.

They are providing security details for diplomats, private contractors involved in reconstruction, nonprofit organizations and journalists, security experts said. The private guards also protect oil fields, banks, residential compounds and office buildings.

Though many of the companies are American, others from Britain, South Africa and elsewhere are providing security in Iraq. Among them is Global Risks Strategies, a British company that hired Fijian troops to help protect armored shipments of the new Iraqi currency around the country.

Blackwater is typical of the new breed. Founded in 1998 by former Navy Seals, the company says it has prepared tens of thousands of security personnel to work in hot spots around the world. At its complex in North Carolina, it has shooting ranges for high-powered weapons, buildings for simulating hostage rescue missions and a bunkhouse for trainees.

The Blackwater installation is so modern and well-equipped that Navy Seals stationed at the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Va., routinely use it, military officials said. So do police units from around the country, who come to Blackwater for specialized training.

"It's world class," said Chris Amos, a spokesman for the Norfolk Police Department.

In Iraq, Blackwater personnel guard L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the civilian administration, among their other jobs. Around Baghdad, the Blackwater guards, most in their 30's and 40's, are easily identified, with their heavily muscled upper bodies, closely cropped hair or shaven heads and wrap-around sunglasses. Some even wear Blackwater T-shirts. Like Special Operations Forces, they use walkie-talkie earpieces with curled wires disappearing beneath their collars and carry light-weight automatic weapons.

In the northern city of Mosul, where Mr. Bremer met with about 130 carefully vetted Iraqis on Thursday, Blackwater guards maintained a heavy presence, standing along the walls facing the Iraqi guests with their rifles cradled. More than once, Iraqis and Western reporters moving forward to take their seats in the hall were abruptly challenged by the guards, with warnings that they would be ejected if they resisted.

The company also received a five-year Navy contract in 2002 worth \$35.7 million to train Navy personnel in force protection, shipboard security, search-and-seizure techniques, and armed sentry duties, Pentagon officials said.

The rapid growth of the private security industry has come about in part because of the shrinkage of the American military: there are simply fewer military personnel available to protect officials, diplomats and bases overseas, security experts say.

To meet the rising demand, the companies are offering yearly salaries ranging from \$100,000 to nearly \$200,000 to entice senior military Special Operations forces to switch careers. Assignments are paying from a few hundred dollars to as much as \$1,000 a day, military officials said.

Gen. Wayne Downing, a retired chief of the United States Special Operations Command, said that on a recent trip to Baghdad he ran into several former Delta Force and Seal Team Six senior noncommissioned officers who were working for private security companies.

"It was like a reunion," General Downing said.

Sheriff Susan Johnson of Currituck County, N.C., where the entrance to Blackwater is situated, said several of her deputies had been lured away by the company to work overseas.

"It's tough to keep them when they can earn as much in one month there as they can in a year here," Sheriff Johnson said.

But critics say the rapid growth of the industry raises troubling concerns. There is little regulation of the quality of training or recruitment by private companies, they say. The result may be inexperienced, poorly prepared and weakly led units playing vital roles in combat situations. Even elite former commandos may not be well trained for every danger, those critics say.

Representative Jan Schakowsky, Democrat of Illinois, has also argued that the United States' growing use of private military companies hides the financial, personal and political costs of military operations overseas, since the concerns face little public scrutiny.

In particular, Ms. Schakowsky has objected to administration plans to increase the number of private military contractors in Colombia, where three American civilians working for a Northrup Grumman subsidiary have been held hostage by Marxist rebels for more than a year. The three were on a mission to search for cocaine laboratories and drug planes when they were captured.

"I continue to oppose the use of military contractors who are not subject to the same kind of scrutiny and accountability as U.S. soldiers," Ms. Schakowsky said last week. "When things go wrong for these contractors, they and their families have been shamefully forgotten by their American employers."

Eric Schmitt, in Washington, and John F. Burns, in Baghdad, contributed reporting for this article.