

# Prologue

## The Twenty-First Century Mercenary

The sweat slowly trickling down his back went almost unnoticed as he moved his eyes left to right in a slow zigzag. Rooftops, windows and doorways were scanned in the slow steady movement he had used so many times in Northern Ireland. Belfast, though, was now but a distant memory. It was a lifetime away. Then he only had the IRA (Irish Republican Army) to worry about, but now there were so many different factions - the Militia, foreign insurgents from so many Muslim countries intent on Jihad, Al-Qaeda, tribal factions - and all with one purpose, to kill him and his kind. After all, he was only an Infidel in the pay of the Americans.

He strained to hear his team leader's voice on his radio. Not an easy task over the noise of the fifty or so Iraqi kids in front of him all wanting his attention at once. Some demanded Pepsi, others begged for water or food; all were as pushy as hell. Gimme food! Gimme water! They didn't know what 'please' or 'thank you' meant, they just demanded. Shouting 'Gimme' like that turned the soldiers off giving them anything. They were just seen as the greedy little bastards most of them were. Most of these kids had no need to beg. All were well clothed and clean; they didn't have that sad pitiful look of the desert children, who in comparison to their city cousins had very little and lived a hard life. They came from comfortably- off middle class Iraqi families and from the better part of the town, but this didn't stop them seeing what they could scrounge from the soldiers and contractors; like any other kids all over the world, they were just trying it on. One moment they had been starving, the next they had turned into professional beggars. Some of them were enterprising and would sell the troops rusty Iraqi bayonets and helmets. Now they hustled a few dollars by selling badly copied, pirate pornographic DVDs. To their credit most of the soldiers and contractors chased them away but they could always find one or two individuals to buy their wares.

Usually there would just be a spontaneously formed crowd of kids reacting to the presence of foreign soldiers, but at other times it could be more sinister. The enemy was not shy of using children to test the soldiers, watching how they reacted to the situation. Were they alert? Did they relax and give the children

sweets, or did they just sit in their vehicles and ignore the kids? All this information was invaluable to the Insurgents and Militia, helping them to plan their next attacks. In the case of PSD teams, (Personal Security Detail - bodyguard team) children had been known to scribble in the dust coating the rear windows of the Hard Car. This would mark the car carrying the team's Principal so that the attackers could identify their primary target. Children had even thrown grenades into unsuspecting Humvees because their occupants had become complacent and allowed them too close to the vehicle.

The poorer kids would gather up the chocolate bars and water and scurry off home to give the booty to their parents. The Coalition Forces' bottled water was prized by the Iraqis because it was clean and disease free. Until the US Corps of Engineers started rebuilding and replacing the old water purification plants most of the water the Iraqis drank came from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It was contaminated with sewage and chemical waste and many people had died from drinking it. This was a problem in Iraq long before the Coalition invasion took place. Saddam had done nothing to ease the water shortage of his own people. He chose to give them very little so they could be more easily controlled.

"All Call Signs, Principals are moving to the second floor!" The message came through his radio ear-piece unheard by any of those around him. He twice clicked the pressel switch - his personal radio's 'send' button - to confirm he had received the information, and continued his scan of the area. His lack of military uniform, his loose-fitting sand coloured trousers, black 'softie' T-shirt and black body armour confirmed to those watching that he was not the usual kind of soldier; the 9mm Sig pistol nestled in his tightly strapped leg rig and the Bushmaster rifle held at the low ready position painted a different picture. He was a professional: a gun for hire. In the old days he would have been called a mercenary but now his trade was legitimate. He was not here to attack anyone; he was here just to defend his principals as they went about their daily work of rebuilding the infrastructure of a defeated Iraq. To any observant onlooker he clearly had a certain something about him. Unlike many of the US Army's National Guard soldiers, who had been in Iraq for too long and were just looking forward to going home, this man was fully alert and watchful. He hadn't been ordered to fight - he had volunteered. Not for the good and benefit of the Iraqi people, nor for Queen and Country; he'd done all that. Now he was here for the money: more money than he could earn in the army; more money than he could earn as a civilian. He was using the skills he had been taught in his country's armed forces, but this time it was for himself. He would take that money home and improve the life of his own family, paying off a heavy

mortgage and the debts he had run up, many of them accrued whilst serving in the army. He had sold his soul for the Yankee dollar.

His trigger finger lay alongside the trigger guard of his rifle. He had full control of his weapon and would use it without a moment's hesitation if he, his principal or any member of his team was threatened. Maybe the eleven magazines of 5.56 ammunition packed into his assault vest and body armour and the three magazines of 9mm ammo for his pistol hanging on his belt rig told them he meant business and had come prepared for a fight.

To the watchers in the crowd who made it their business to notice these things, this man with his unmistakable air of professionalism was the equivalent of Saddam Hussein's Secret Police. He could be ruthless when the job required it and like the Secret Police of the old regime he was an unknown quantity. Ever alert to possible threat, his head turned continually from side to side, but at the same time he held a loose conversation, exchanging pleasantries with the less pushy and friendlier children around him. After all, they were not his enemy. His dark glasses with their mirrored lenses hid his eyes. You could learn a lot from a man's eyes. Was he tired, alert, distracted, or bored? No one could tell. He was not the easy target the terrorists sought, and the watchers had all the time in the world. They would wait for another target and another day. They were patient. If they waited long enough one would certainly come along: it always did.

# Chapter 1

## The Call to Arms

It was June 2003 and I was very pissed off with the world. I had retired from the British Army, having completed thirty plus years in the Regulars and the Reserves. Now that I was a civilian I looked around me and didn't like what I saw. Most of the Western World was convinced we had peace. Peace in our time: now where had I heard that before! Each country in turn was busy bending to the will of the noisy minorities demanding disarmament, while the silent majority stood looking on inactive. The tree huggers and the Loony Left were having a field day running roughshod over the majority of law abiding citizens. We had a culture where the victims of crime had fewer rights than their attackers; where the word 'multiculturalism' was used to give more and more rights to illegal immigrants and take away the rights of those born and bred in the mother country. Everyone was afraid to speak frankly in case they were branded as racist. In my book if you were black you were black, and if you were white you were white. What was wrong with that?

Thanks to Brussels interfering in everyone's business, England - to name but one of many countries - was in real danger of losing its sovereignty. Its laws were being eroded by Belgium-based Eurocrats who had nothing to do all day but think up daft ways of screwing people and making it look like they were doing something constructive. As a result most European countries were downsizing their armed forces. It was true that more money was being spent on military technological advances but as any former soldier will tell you, when you've dropped your bombs and fired your missiles and the air force has gone home for a cup of tea and a sandwich it's not over by a long chalk. It's the PBI, (The Poor Bloody Infantry), the 'grunts' on the ground who have to go in with rifle and bayonet and winkle out the enemy hunkered down in their holes and bunkers. The militaries of the world were being run by faceless accountants: young financial whizzkids, who had never served in the forces themselves but might have played a few games of Delta Force on their PlayStations. They thought they were qualified to tell the generals what they should spend their money on, and so everyone was going 'hi tec'.

Unfortunately the British Army was no different, and many good loyal regiments were being disbanded to save money. I found it depressing to see this happening, and so much military expertise being lost. Many highly trained combat soldiers were made redundant, adding to the rapidly growing numbers of unemployed. The average age of a 22-Year man on discharge from the armed forces is around 40 to 42 years old. Unfortunately the typical infantryman has problems finding employment at the age of 40 and he will struggle unless he takes a resettlement course that's going to give him a trade he can use. He is still a young man but considered by many employers too old to hire or retrain. So there we were with PEACE, and I was amazed! As a former professional soldier, I found it really frustrating that so many people thought we were living in a time of peace and didn't need a large military presence anymore. I only had to look around me or turn on the box and watch the news on TV to realise that wasn't the case. It was all over the daily newspapers for everyone to read. If I could see all the trouble in the world, why couldn't other people! There were clearly more flash points around the globe than ever before. Britain, America and their allies were involved in many of these trouble spots in one way or another - usually as the world's policemen, trying to clear up the mess or get two sides to agree to peace. Suicide bombers were blowing themselves up somewhere around the world every day, killing innocent women and children in the process. This was a worldwide problem and no country was safe anymore. We were at war, had been for some time, and most of the world was still asleep to the reality of it.

When the First Gulf War kicked off we struggled to form a decent sized fighting force. It took twice as many logistic vehicles and personnel as the planners had calculated to supply the fighting soldiers on the ground, and many of them later admitted they'd been wrong. Having won that one, the first thing our governments did was disband more regiments and units, and scrap ships and RAF squadrons: the very units that had won the war for us. Unfortunately, we *hadn't* really won that one, though, and along came Gulf War 2. This one had to be fought in the face of a struggle to get reluctant allies involved, and relying on the reduced expertise of a now depleted military to tackle the situation as we should have done the first time round. More problems started to show through the cracks. The defence cuts had been so draconian that huge numbers of logistical and rear echelon troops that had been available during the first Gulf War no longer existed. These soldiers would have been used to police captured areas and maintain law and order in the towns and villages. They would have been used to guard prisoners. They would have guarded priority targets such as water purification plants, hydro-electric dams and facilities, and of course

hospitals and other vital organizations and buildings. Using teeth arm soldiers to carry out these duties meant a drain on the front line fighting man, drastically slowing down the efforts of our commanding generals to bring the war to a close as early as possible and stability to Iraq. It also made our troops a duty target for the Insurgents, hell bent on causing chaos and preventing us from finishing the operation.

The only option available for our various armed forces was to hire retired soldiers as civilian contractors and let them carry out all the rear echelon duties. They would be expensive but only for a short time, and they could be sacked in an instant once the generals thought the country was stable enough for its own troops and police to take over peacekeeping duties. In the early days of 2004 vast sums were spent on encouraging civilian security and defence companies to recruit for the contracts on offer. The personnel and expertise needed were ready and waiting in Civvy Street, put there by the last round of redundancies. They were only too pleased to get back to the work they enjoyed and were good at, and they knew they would be well paid for their services. Fighting as contractors, they wanted the type of money that reflected the risks they were now taking as civilians.

The problem now was how to make use of these people without being seen to employ mercenaries, which is what they were by definition. 'Mercenary' was still a dirty word to many people, and so the American Government brought in new rules of engagement to try to bring a bit of respectability to the situation. They wouldn't be allowed to go pro-active - that is, pursue the enemy. They would be allowed to fight only in defence of themselves, their equipment and their employers. Their own personal rules of engagement were deliberately left ambiguous to give them more manoeuvrability in the combat zone. In most cases they would and how deep his pockets were.

As in all times of crisis, men of vision stepped up to the challenge. Companies such as Blackwater, Aegis, Erinys, Blue Hackle and many others were formed by retired Special Forces soldiers. They knew they could make lots of money doing what they did best, and began recruiting from like-minded personnel. This was the second oldest profession in the book. Great kings and leaders had called upon this type of soldier throughout history, but somehow it didn't seem right to employ them in our politically correct, 'enlightened' modern times. The word 'mercenary' was not fashionable, and so the term 'contractor' was born.

As a former Paratrooper and retired 22-Year man, I considered myself very patriotic. I was originally recruited into the army in Cold War days, believing all the propaganda about the Russians massing for an invasion of our peaceful

shores and gladly volunteering to fight for my country and keep the Russians from the door. I had kept myself reasonably fit, and had expected to be called up for Iraq. I knew my age would make a difference, but I could still be called up in a teaching capacity. In fact I was quite convinced - maybe naively - that I and many like me would be needed. In the event, the long awaited letter from the Ministry of Defence never landed on my doorstep, and out of sheer frustration I twice rang Manning and Records to volunteer. The person at the other end assured me I would be getting a return phone call but it never came and I was not called up. I had to watch the Second Gulf War on TV from the comfort of my armchair. Bollocks! Being a retired 'older soldier' was becoming boring. It wasn't what I wanted in life.

As the war was scaled down and President Bush declared Mission Accomplished, coalition soldiers were still being killed. Didn't these ungrateful bastards realise we were trying to help them? There were daily news reports of Muslims from all over the world flocking to the Insurgents' cause: they saw this as a Jihad. The western governments had yet to realise they had opened a Pandora's Box. I was still at home champing at the bit and eager to do something to help. Then one night out of the blue, a mate of mine with whom I had served in the Parachute Regiment called.

"Hey Mate, guess where I'm phoning from! Bleeding Baghdad! It's a job creation scheme. You want the work, get your arse into gear and get over here!" He gave me some more details before the line became distorted and we were cut off.

Working on his advice, I eagerly pressed my home computer into service and started to research the Internet for companies working in Iraq. This gave me hope that I might get a job yet. The Internet gave me the names of lots of firms operating in Iraq on a range of security related missions. Most of them I had never heard of, but what the heck! - a job is a job. I had a choice: did I want to go as an unarmed truck driver working on the logistics contracts? Good money, but unarmed? No bloody chance! If I was going somewhere people were trying to kill me, I wanted to be able to shoot back. There must be other choices too. Thanks to my hobby of parachuting, I had many military friends in other countries, and most were retired or serving paratroopers like myself. I contacted a few of them that I thought might be able to help, and picked their brains for possible employment options. The 'Airborne Brotherhood' was very helpful. With loads of freshly gleaned information, I began to build a database of security firms and their contracts. Then I went on line and checked their company web sites to see which were actively recruiting security personnel.

Some were a bit guarded about what they were doing in Iraq; others blatantly offered former servicemen and women the opportunity to work for big bucks.

I eagerly sent off several copies of my CV to firms that had requested it and contacted other firms directly by phone. I then took a deep breath and sat back to await their replies. Most companies didn't even bother replying. One or two sent back an email telling me they had nothing at the moment, but if I wanted to wait a couple of months they had contracts in the pipeline. One female administration officer from a well-known American security firm sent me what could only be described as a snotty email: "We are currently employed by the United States Department of Defence and are only employing American citizens. I see from your resume that you are not. Is this the case?"

Now, it's not a good idea to send this kind of mail to a retired paratrooper of any nationality who has just sunk two bottles of wine. The red mist came down and I had this urge to strangle the stuck up bitch. I sent back a blistering reply. It went on a bit, as I was in full flow and I was so bloody angry. A couple of the passages were: *So this is our US/UK 'special relationship'!* and, *We're good enough to stick our arses in the shit alongside our American friends when there's a war on, but not good enough to be employed when the war is over!* For some reason I didn't get a reply, but I had made my point and I felt a little better for it.

Then out of the blue Armor Group, an American firm with its UK HQ in Buckingham Gate, London, invited me to come to their offices for an interview; it would include an all-day presentation. A friend of mine, John, was going for the same interview. This was good: the two of us could watch each other's backs and share any information we picked up. It was a typically English cold, grey morning when I took the train to London and arrived suited and booted, wearing my Parachute Regiment tie and clutching my very extensive CV.

It was a short walk from the tube station to Buckingham Gate along an old street full of large, imposing Regency, Victorian and Edwardian buildings - the history of British architecture in a single street. Most were posh hotels or VIP conference rooms. It was easy to imagine our captains of industry busy in private rooms, making the crucial behind-the-scenes deals that would ultimately affect our country and whole way of life. I was entering an unknown territory and I had a bit of a nervous knot in my stomach as I approached the address. I counted the door numbers down and found the right hotel a few hundred yards along the street. A uniformed doorman directed me to the conference rooms to the rear of the building.



I walked in at the open door to Conference Room 3 where the meeting was to take place. There were a lot of similarly 'booted and suited' people milling around talking to each other, but after a quick sweep of the room I spotted John. I didn't feel too bad now I'd seen a friendly face, and then as I went over to join him I noticed another retired paratrooper friend of mine.

"Hello, Alan!" He looked up in surprise from the conversation he was having with another candidate.

"Hello, you old bastard! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I wasn't sure," I said, "but now I see you're here I guess I'm slumming!"

John, Alan and I shook hands and then quickly made our way towards the front of the room and took three chairs in the front row. I thought we might as well go for the best seats in the house so we could see the speakers' faces. You can tell a lot by people's mannerisms and facial expressions and we'd be able to get a good idea if these people were going to bullshit us.

There were about thirty retired servicemen attending, and judging by the excited chatter they all appeared keen to get back into the type of work they felt they did best. Without warning, a side door suddenly opened and the place went quiet, as if on cue. Everyone stopped talking at the same time and watched with interest as one guy and two females entered, made their way down to the front of the room and seated themselves at the long table facing us.

To begin with they ignored us as they quietly conversed and shuffled papers, and then the guy loudly cleared his throat and I guessed that meant the meeting was now in session. Taking it in turns, our three speakers proceeded to explain the work the company did and where they saw us in the great plan of things. From the way they spoke you could be forgiven for thinking there was work for everyone in the room. We were subjected to a couple of hours of company bullshit on how good they thought they were, during which I found it hard to stay awake. The glare of the fluorescent lighting and the closed windows making the room hot and stuffy didn't help, and I wasn't interested in how well they were doing on the Stock Exchange: I just wanted them to cut to the chase and tell me if I had a job. Looking around me I could see quite a few other people were suffering from nodding dog, their eyes wanting to close. To the trained ear the company representatives came over as nervous and hesitant; they were trying to convince us how good their company was, but it sounded like they didn't believe their own bullshit. To me it sounded like a firm that was in a little over its head, trying to recruit the type of people they hoped could pull off the operation and save their bacon.

My gut feeling was telling me these people were incompetent and would unwittingly be doing their best to get me killed. However, I wanted a bloody job. I wanted it so much, I'd be their bloody tea boy to get a foot in the door! OK, maybe I was a bit over eager. I hated being a civilian and this was my way out of a life I didn't like, didn't want and couldn't fit into. The main speaker, who introduced himself as Nick, was a tall, lean guy, mid-thirties, with the so-obvious air of an officer about him. Every inch a 'Rupert', he was trying to put himself across as an all-singing, all-dancing cool dude. He knew he had an assembly of senior non-commissioned officers in front of him with more experience of soldiering than he could ever hope to gain in his whole lifetime, and he wanted to convince us he had been there, seen that, done that. If he hadn't tried so hard, we might have believed him.

When I first received the interview letter I googled Armor Group to find out a bit about them. During my research one of my commando friends had given me some background on this Nick character. He was reported to be a retired Royal Marine Reservist officer, a bit of a bullshitter who talked a good fight but hadn't got a clue. He had seen no active service and had a habit of flying into Iraq on administration missions and then out again so quick he had scorch marks on his boarding cards. As I sat there listening to him drone on I was convinced he was living up to his reputation, and I imagined the worst case scenario of him being in charge of my team on the ground. As he rambled on, completely oblivious of the fact that he had bored to death everyone in the room, I began to see holes in his description of the job. Other candidates were asking him about the weapons that were available to the operators. Did we have armoured cars? How long did the contracts last? What life support systems were in place? What about phone calls home; email availability? All these were relevant questions to the modern contractor - we don't mind sticking our necks out, but we do like our luxuries! - but mostly undreamt of when I first joined the army.

Our friend Nick was evasive on all subjects. He twisted and turned, never giving a straight answer to any of the more searching questions put to him. This boy would make a good politician. As far as I was concerned, I was selling my soul for the Yankee dollar. Fighting for Queen and Country was all well and good, but it wouldn't pay the bills. As long as the money was good I could take any crap they dished out. After all, that was what I was here for: the money. When at long last the presentation was finished, Nick invited us to retire to a side room for tea and biscuits. It was all very civilised, but the room was hot and stuffy and my mouth was dry. I didn't think a cup of tea was going to do it for me. Right then I would have preferred a nice cold pint of beer.

We were told to relax and we would be called forward one at a time for an interview. I poured a cup of coffee from the jug provided and followed John and Alan to a quiet corner of the room to compare notes. "What do you think John?" I asked, taking a sip of hot coffee.

Without hesitation he answered straight back. "Our friend Nick is feeding us a load of company shit. All I want to know is have I got a job? How much am I getting paid for risking my neck, and for how long? Is that too much to ask the boring fucker! I don't want to buy shares in the bloody company, I want to get out on the ground and do the job." No one had been very impressed by the presentation, but what the hell - a job is a job.

Alan was a bit of a ladies' man. A short, fair-haired, typically cheeky Liverpool lad, who could charm the knickers off a nun. He had been an enthusiastic member of 4 Para until the Government started on its first rounds of defence cuts, and he saw the writing on the wall. Until that moment he had been prepared to volunteer for an S-type engagement attached to one of the regular para battalions in Northern Ireland. Realizing that was not going to happen and thirsting for the adventure the Parachute Regiment had promised him, he looked around for an alternative. Becoming a mercenary seemed like the right thing to do, so he jumped on the first plane out of Liverpool's John Lennon International Airport and flew off to Africa. Armed with a list of dodgy companies hiring former soldiers, he first joined a civilian security company and gradually fought his way through various skirmishes from one side of the African continent to the other. Things started to quieten down, so jumping on yet another plane he got himself caught up in the war in Yugoslavia. Despite being involved in a few nasty incidents he managed to get through that conflict too, and make it back home to Liverpool. He knew a few people running security firms and through them was able to get some door work. Over the next couple of years he did the rounds of the close protection circuit, on one occasion working for the Barclay twins in the Channel Islands. Finally he ended up working for his brother as a doorman on the Liverpool club scene. Like me he hated being a civilian, and like me he missed the excitement of surviving in a hostile environment.

We first met while working together on one or two security jobs, and soon discovered that we shared a hobby - parachuting - and that we both belonged to Pathfinder, a veteran paratroopers' parachute club. Apart from the parachuting, it was a good place to compare notes about security and civilian defence jobs around the world. The club attracted former paratroopers and Special Forces soldiers. Many had their ear to the ground and passed on anything they heard about interesting jobs in interesting places. Alan and I had become firm friends,

but although we'd swapped information on potential security work in the past, neither of us had realised the other was applying to join this firm. It came as no big surprise, though. In this type of work it's a small world and you keep bumping into the same people.

John had a similar story. Slightly bigger than Alan, dark-haired with a weathered complexion, he was also more matter-of-fact and serious. He had first joined the British Army as a combat medic and served with distinction in Northern Ireland. Several years into his unblemished career, a serious problem developed at home and John had applied for compassionate leave. Now, any self-respecting commanding officer would have granted compassionate leave, as no soldier with home problems is a happy soldier. Not this one, though: he decided that he needed John for an upcoming exercise, and as far as he was concerned John's family could sort out their own problems.

This was the wrong decision. Definitely not good man management. After jumping over the OC's desk and punching him to the floor, John was dragged off by the Chief Clerk and Squadron Sergeant Major, thrown into the unit jail, put under close arrest, and charged. A short time in the glass house at Her Majesty's pleasure was followed by a military discharge. His discharge book read, "Services no longer required."

At his court martial it was considered that his OC had acted unfairly. In the circumstances they could understand John's frame of mind, given the extreme pressure he was under because of his problems at home. However they could not condone striking a superior officer, and so he had served a minimum sentence and was subsequently discharged. His papers didn't read "Dishonourable Discharge," as in the court's opinion there were mitigating circumstances. "Services no longer required" was still considered an honourable discharge by British Army standards. To put it politely and given the situation in which he'd found himself, he didn't give a fuck.

John was still a soldier at heart, though, and had followed a similar path to Alan's. He ended up on the front line in Bosnia on the opposite side to Alan, working as a medic. Like Alan he had been in some of the heaviest fighting, and at first he had played by the book. His Kevlar helmet bore the Red Cross identifying him as a medic, and he wore a medic's armband. On several occasions the enemy decided that this was too good an opportunity to miss and used his distinctive medic markings as aiming points. After these near misses John developed sense of humour failure. Picking up a discarded AK-47 assault rifle, he tossed away his armband, fought with his militia unit and then tended

the wounded after the battle. Many a time, he even found himself treating the very soldiers he had just helped shoot.

I first met John when I was preparing to leave the army and we both attended the same close protection course with Excel Security. I was entitled to over £10,000 from the army for resettlement training. This was to be used for a demob course to help me gain the qualifications I needed for my new career. I had completed twenty-two years of service, and my last few years had been with 63 Parachute Squadron, Royal Corps of Transport. I had all my driving licences and I knew I could easily walk into a driving job. It was a case of use it or lose it. I begrudged the army having that money, so I decided to let them spend it on something I could use as a fall-back job.

Excel was not stupid. It was a one-week, fully residential course which came to exactly the full resettlement entitlement due to the soldier, down to the last penny. It was run by retired service personnel. Why wasn't I surprised? The course itself was a good one for the average civilian. It was more of a selection course than a course of instruction, and tended to weed out the faint of heart and the idle, muscle-bound doormen pretty quickly. Many of the latter thought they could just use brawn to achieve results. By the end of the second day that had whittled down the number on the course by a third. This saved a lot of money for Excel, as there were no refunds for voluntary failures, and it also gave them more time to concentrate on the serious customer.

Most of the instructors were good at their job, except for an ex-marine called Andy. He was a bit of a muscle buster who really fancied himself and was something of a motor-mouth too. He talked a lot about action, but never quite got around to telling anyone who he'd served with, or what action he had seen himself. The civilians on the course listened to his every word, whereas the military personnel let it go in one ear and out the other. He wasn't hurting anyone and it sounded good for the company.

My own most vivid memory of the course concerns Peter Consterdine, of *Martial Arts Magazine* fame. He came in one day as a guest instructor to teach a few techniques of hand-to-hand combat. One of his demonstrations was of an up-close and personal flat-handed punch. I was the unfortunate guinea pig in the demonstration. Peter gave me six polystyrene floats to hold to my chest as protection and told me to brace myself. This I did by stepping back with one leg and leaning into the punch. I distinctly remember him smiling. I didn't see his hands move, but the next thing I was aware of was making contact with the wall about five feet behind me and sliding down in a heap. For the first few seconds I couldn't get my breath. God, my chest hurt! Peter bent over me, genuinely

concerned. "Are you Ok?" he asked. "I didn't mean to hit you that hard. I'm sorry." Not half as sorry as I was at that moment! To loud applause from the rest of the class, I got to my feet and pulled up my T-shirt. I could see a perfect red hand print forming on the surface of my skin. I decided at that moment to concentrate on improving my shooting skills and never let anyone get close enough to hit me that hard again; I also decided never to piss off this particular instructor!

A couple of days into the course found us on the pistol range at Minsterley Ranges near Hereford, run by the famous Mitch of SAS fame. John and I found ourselves paired up on many of the exercises we underwent, and got on well. The practice was a straight forward pistol shoot with Czechoslovakian-made 9mm CZs. John, I and four others made up the detail on the firing point. And then came the mistake. I didn't catch what it was, but John had made it. It couldn't have been anything too serious, as at that point we had only obeyed the orders to load and make ready. All weapons were facing down the range and in a safe condition.

Andy was one of the safety coaches on the range, standing immediately behind John and me. He went ballistic. His face was just inches away from the back of John's neck, and foam and saliva from his ranting covered the back of John's collar. Being careful to keep my weapon pointing down the range, I turned my head to the left to take in the scene. I could see the muscles in John's face twitch. A red mist had come down as he turned round, bringing his pistol to bear on Andy.

To this day I firmly believe John was going to shoot him. As he turned, I reached across with my left hand and held the action of his automatic pistol in a death grip. This successfully prevented John from firing the weapon; he glanced at me and then fixed Andy with an icy stare. "He's not worth it." I said. The two men were eye to eye and I saw Andy gulp. Something in John's expression told Andy he was in a world of shit. It had gone deathly quiet on the range and you could have heard a pin drop. I'm sure more than one man secretly hoped John would pull the trigger. Suddenly he relaxed and turned back to point his weapon safely down the range. Not a word had been said between the pair, but John had made his point. As he turned, I released my grip. My knuckles were white and my hand ached from the exertion. Andy, now visibly shaken, turned and stormed off the range without saying another word, and a different instructor took his place. The shoot then went ahead with no further mishap.

That evening I returned from dinner to find John packing his kit. He had no hope of passing the course because the other instructors would go out of their

way to fail him. I knew that and so did he, and he wasn't prepared to give them that satisfaction. We swapped addresses and promised to keep in touch. If one of us got the word on a job, he would let the other know. That's how these things work - it's jungle drums. I watched John shoulder his Bergen and walk down the drive towards the waiting taxi at the main gate. It was Excel's loss.

The course started again in the classroom the following day. John's name and the incident on the range were never mentioned again, although everyone was aware of how quiet Andy had become. Maybe he had learnt a valuable lesson. John and I kept our promise to each other, though, and we worked together on many occasions afterwards. He always struck me as level headed, with good business sense. He was a good soldier, and I considered him wasted as a medic.

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So here we were at Armor Group's presentation, passing the time with small talk and waiting for our turn to be interviewed. John was called first. He walked into the interview room and the door shut behind him. After about fifteen minutes he emerged with a big grin on his face. "I got the job as team medic. That'll do for me!" he said. He'd been told he would be escorting convoys. The supply convoys in Iraq were getting hit daily, and were suffering a lot of casualties. They needed good medics and I had no doubt that in John they would be getting a good one. He was going to have to run to catch his train, so he wished me and Alan luck and told me to phone to let him know how we got on. "It's a piece of piss, Mate! You'll walk it," he said as he left. I was beginning to feel more confident. It wasn't as if I was young and foolhardy; I was a mature older soldier with a ton of experience, so why would I *not* be given a job?

While I waited my turn I got to talk to some of the other hopefuls. The majority were Territorial Army soldiers, similar to United States Reservists, and most were senior Non Commissioned Officers. Most had not seen regular service, although for today's Territorials that is not considered the norm. They were all keen as mustard but personally I didn't think many of them had much of a chance. This work called for experienced combat soldiers, and I was feeling confident: I had definitely seen a lot of combat. "Don't count your chickens before they hatch!" my dad always told me, and I wish now I had listened more to his advice.

Alan was called for his interview next. He told me later that he thought things had gone well, and he had been promised a PSD (Personal Security Detail) job. He had shaken hands with Nick, who told him he would give him more details

over the phone in a couple of days. As he rushed off to get a train back to Liverpool he made me promise to call him on his mobile the moment I got out of the interview. With any luck we would be on the same team.

Then it was my turn, and I entered the interview room. One of the women, whose name I later learnt was Caroline, was already at a desk, talking to another hopeful, and I had drawn our friend Nick, who was sitting at a small polished table of light wood. Without looking up, he motioned for me to take the chair opposite. Stacked on the table was a large pile of completed application forms. I was obviously supposed to feel I was being picked from a cast of thousands. He checked my name off his list and then, without looking at my CV on the desk in front of him, he asked me about my time in the service. He outlined some of the work that was supposedly available, mentioning at intervals that I was the oldest applicant there.

After he had stressed this more than once I began to feel uneasy. I was in good shape for my age and had kept my skills up to date as a guest instructor on courses run by the WASF (World Wide Association of Special Forces), of which Alan was the Secretary. I had also kept my hand in as a Regimental Weapons Instructor with the British Army's Reserve Forces. My track record should have spoken for itself. Nick waffled on about the contracts they had. They were mostly convoy escorts, with a few teaching jobs. He stated that he could not see me carrying out convoy escort duties because of my age, but he thought I could be invaluable teaching Iraqi policemen how to drive and use small arms. If he had bothered to read my CV, which he obviously had not, he would have seen that I had transferred from the Parachute Regiment to 47 Air Dispatch Squadron, Royal Corps of Transport, and on from there to various other RCT units. Convoys were my bread and butter - every bloody aspect of them from carrying the loads, to anti-ambush drills. I was a driver maintenance instructor: I could teach a soldier to drive and maintain his truck, and how to recover it. I was a Warminster-trained weapons instructor: I had been trained to take a civilian off the streets and turn him into a killing machine, and now here was this jumped-up, part-time bootneck more worried about my age than anything else.

I was mad as hell and struggled not to show it. However, a job is a job and if teaching Iraqis was the only thing on the table, then I would take it. I bit my tongue and nodded my head in agreement with his suggestion. Nick smiled and said I had made the right choice. However, the teaching contract was not yet in place and he would be finalizing the small print in a few days. Would I mind waiting and he would phone me at home with the details? We shook hands on



the deal and he welcomed me to the company. As I turned to walk out the door, he handed me his business card, but I still had a bad feeling about this.

A short while later on my way to the tube station I called John and Alan in turn on their mobiles and voiced my concerns. They both reckoned I was worrying over nothing, but a few days later my fears were justified when a letter arrived in the morning post. It was from Armor Group and I just knew it was not going to be good news. I tore open the letter and quickly scanned the single page.

“Dear Sir, Thank you for attending ... blah, blah ... do not have a place for you in our organization ... blah, blah ... wish you luck in your future endeavours.” No explanation. It was not even signed by Nick, but by the Human Resources Department. It was about as final as you can get.

Bastards! They had given me the bum’s rush and I was not happy about it. I sat at my dining-room table, brooding. Luckily the family was out at work so I just fumed in silence. Then I remembered Nick’s business card, his big mistake. It was not going to get me a job, but I might be able to find out why I had been rejected. I suspected it was to do with my age, but I still couldn’t understand why someone with my qualifications had been turned down and TA soldiers with very little experience had been taken on.

The phone rang three times. “Hi, Nick here! Can I help you?” came the cheerful voice at the other end, and I reminded him politely who I was. He seemed briefly nonplussed, and then stammered, “I’m in a meeting at the moment. I can’t talk.” I told him not to hang up, as I would just keep ringing him. I wanted an answer *now*. Why had he as good as promised me a job when he clearly had no intention of employing me? “The police job is still being negotiated. You’re pencilled in for it. I don’t know when it will be finalised.” I told him about the contents of the letter and he tried to assure me it was a mistake; the letter should not have been sent. I hung up.

My next call was to the Human Resources lady whose telephone number was at the top of the page. I informed her pleasantly who I was, but omitted to tell her I had already been in touch with her boss. “I’m awfully sorry,” she said, “but it’s your age.” She lowered her voice as if to hide what she was saying from others around her. “I’m afraid the company doesn’t hire anyone over fifty, otherwise, they have to pay extra insurance premiums.” I thanked her for her honesty and asked her to pass on to her boss that I thought he was a lying turd and that I hoped to meet him in Iraq one day soon. I hung up.

A few days later John phoned to say he had received his plane ticket. His job didn’t start until the 1st of February, but at least he had a definite date and could

plan ahead. His job was confirmed, but he wasn't happy with the way I had been treated. I told him not to worry, shit happens, but if this was how they worked he'd be wise not to trust the company. Shortly after, Alan rang to tell me that he'd been sent the same sort of letter as mine, with no explanation of why he had been rejected. Maybe Nick just didn't like paras.

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Two of my American Military friends, Rob K and Dave S, had kept me up to date with information on potential security work. One name, 'Tom', had cropped up a couple of times so I decided to email the guy. Tom was a retired U.S. Army senior NCO who had been doing this kind of security work for a number of years. He was on a subcontracted job from an American firm I had never heard of, Blackwater. From the outset, I never received anything but honest answers from this guy. He gave me no bullshit or sob stories.

His best bit of advice was to hang in there and not to give up. Contracts were coming up for renewal and nothing would be happening until January at the earliest. If any firm told me different, it was crap. Something about Tom's honesty and positive attitude got to me, and I warmed to the guy. His advice was to get a civilian job for the time being and keep in touch. He promised to contact me the moment he had any news. I believed him.

Christmas was coming and bills had to be paid, so I reluctantly went back to driving trucks for a living. Tom mailed me with updates and occasional pleasantries, but things were moving slowly even for him. In the meantime I was receiving mail from the other firms I had contacted. "Thank you for applying. We now have you on our books." This usually meant they were bidding for a contract and just wanted as many names on their books as they could get, to impress the potential client. It was not a guarantee of work. Tom had told me the firm he was working for had bid for a big contract in November and would have an answer by January. It seemed a long way off, but I knew these things took time. The pay for this type of work was good, and there was no way I could earn that kind of money as a lorry driver, so it was worth waiting for.

My wife was justifiably scared for me. I tried to explain that I had done this kind of work as a soldier for less money and that the reward was worth the risk. She was not convinced, but knew I would be able to pay the bills, get rid of my overdraft and take a big chunk off the mortgage. My wife deserved something better than living from hand to mouth. I had dragged her round the world as the wife of a paratrooper and we'd had some really shit postings and grotty married

quarters. I wanted to give her a better, easier life. If that meant risking my neck, then so be it.

Christmas came and went and there was still nothing definite. Suddenly out of the blue an email arrived from a bloke called Cory, who introduced himself as a mate of Tom's working out of the same company. "Hi Roy, Tom put me onto you. Are you still interested in our type of work?" Bloody right I was! I typed the reply so quickly I swear there were friction burns on my keyboard. "OK," came the reply. "Your plane ticket is on its way. You are to report to our training facility in Moyock by the 10th of February. Look forward to meeting you." I was in a bit of a daze. After months of crap and being lied to by company reps I had finally got something positive. Mind you I had been told by a mate not to believe a word of it until I felt the camel shit oozing between to toe straps of my sandals. Something pretty deep and philosophical for a former para!

When I emailed Tom in Iraq he was as surprised as I'd been. He wasn't aware yet that things had progressed that far, and guessed that the major contract must have been finalised early. I was the first British National they would put through the American vetting system. They would be using me to test it out and see what problems arose, and with the know-how gleaned they hoped to be able to speed up the process and take on more foreign nationals. The company wanted to hire British SAS, paras and marines. Our troops were used to urban warfare after so many years in Northern Ireland, and would be an asset to their organization. I would be the first of many. In their own words, I was their 'Crash Test Dummy'. Tom wished me luck and said he might be in the States at the same time as me, and would look me up. I was glad I'd got the job, but not sure I liked the job description: 'Crash Test Dummy?' Mind you, I had been called a lot worse. I was on my way at last. I resigned from my job with the Driver Hire driving agency and spent the next few days getting my affairs in order. If anything happened to me, I needed to know my wife would be okay. I had to make sure everything would run smoothly for my family while I was away, as I didn't know when I would be able to contact them next. Within a couple of days Blackwater was as good as their word, and the airline ticket duly arrived. Carol drove me to Heathrow with my youngest son, Simon. It was a long quiet drive; neither of us felt like saying much. Naturally she didn't want me to go, but wouldn't dream of trying to talk me out of it.

We said an emotional goodbye in the terminal and I went on into the departure lounge. I hated goodbyes: we had been through more than our fair share in my army career and they never got easier. That familiar knot in the stomach

suddenly took hold, and I felt choked. I wanted to hurry through to Departures as soon as I could, but at the same time I hated leaving my wife and family like this. Each time we knew there was a good chance I wouldn't make it back. Why would any woman marry a paratrooper, knowing we are always in the worst trouble spots our country can find, and that there is always a real chance we could be killed? Carol was a wife in a million. She had stuck with me through thick and thin, and after all these years she was still looking out for me. Unfortunately I had not always made it easy for her. I had tried to make this departure as painless as possible but it was still hurting, and I only hoped Carol would be okay.

Once fully boarded by its mixture of tourists and Americans going home, the British Airways flight for New York took off on time. A mood of finality settled over me. I'd made the decision to accept this job for better or worse, and now it was up to me to make the best of it and try to live long enough to collect my wages. Several hours, two feature films and a couple of in-flight meals later, we landed in New York. Through the cabin window I could see snow drifts around the airport and I wished I had brought a heavier coat. What happened to sunny America! There was no extra stress involved, as Blackwater had once again done their homework and I knew my connecting flight was to leave in forty-five minutes. Clearing Customs, getting my bag, walking through the terminal, and the coach ride to the small jet airliner took all of that. I produced my ticket for the flight attendant to check, and no sooner had I taken my seat than the aircraft was taxiing down the perimeter track towards the runway. Just as suddenly the pilot opened the throttle, the aircraft hurtled down the runway and we were airborne, winging our way through the night sky towards my final destination, Apache Security's training camp. The lights in the cabin were dimmed so I settled back in the seat and shut my eyes, listening to the steady drone of the engines until I finally nodded off into oblivion.

It was still early evening when the aircraft touched down. I'd had time to cat-nap on the flight but it was a restless sleep because of all the questions buzzing around in my head. What was I letting myself in for? How legal was what I was doing? How good was the company I was working for? I had suddenly realised how little I knew. Oh, well! In for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying goes. It was too late to think about turning back now.

As soon as I entered the airport building I could see its naval connections. A large portrait of U.S.S. Norfolk proudly dominated one wall of the terminal lounge and young ratings in uniformed blues, their kitbags stacked in neat piles, sat around waiting for their rides back to the base. According to my joining

instructions I was supposed to meet six other blokes, all arriving at different times. I was next to last on the list of names attached. The others would already be waiting for me, and together we would go to the hotel where Blackwater had booked rooms for us. Each group also had a hire vehicle allocated to it, to be picked up from one of the many hire firms at the airport. I hoped someone else had a driving licence, as I was still tired and jet lagged and not looking forward to driving at night on the 'wrong' side of the road in a strange country while looking for a strange hotel.

Walking over to Vehicle Reservations, I asked if my group had contacted them. The clerk behind the desk confirmed they had, but there'd been a change of plan. The others had arrived early and gone ahead with another group; I was to wait for two latecomers whose internal flights had been delayed. I was also asked to sign for a set of keys, and then the helpful booking clerk led me through a side door to the car park. I had been handed the keys to a Suburban SUV without a clue as to what the vehicle looked like, or how it handled. The clerk pointed to a large, gleaming black vehicle the size of a small bus. To make matters worse, it was an automatic, and I hadn't driven an automatic for years. There I was jetlagged, in charge of a very expensive rented car in a strange country at night, and with only a dubious looking tourist map to help me find my way to an unknown hotel in a strange town. This was not a good start! All I wanted was a bed and some sleep.

I went back to the airport lounge to wait for the other blokes. I tried to study the wall map showing the local area and tourist attractions, but my eyes were doing their best to close and I was having trouble concentrating. Luckily, it wasn't long before one of the late arrivals flew in. He was a short, stocky black guy and, as it turned out, a retired U.S. Marine. We shook hands, he introduced himself as Ben, and yes - he had a driving licence! I threw him the keys and breathed a sigh of relief: I'd got out of that one nicely. We packed our gear into the vehicle and sat back to await the last man. I had now been at the airport for nearly three hours and he still hadn't shown up. We checked with the flight desk and discovered that his aircraft had landed, but there was no sign of him. It was about half an hour before the arrival of the next internal flight he might be on. We gave it all of that and some more, and then decided to call the emergency number we had been given. There was no reply. It seemed to be switched off and a recorded message asked us to try later. This was not turning out as well as I had expected. It looked like the last man had changed his mind, so we decided enough was enough and called it a night.

With Ben at the wheel, we negotiated the exit ramp of the airport car park and drove down the highway towards the hotel where we were to stay. We got there in no time at all, thanks to Ben. This was a seaside town and a busy resort at the height of the Season, but now there was hardly anyone around and it was cold, wet and windy as we turned into the main drag leading to the hotel. In summer the place would be teeming with life, but on this winter's night it was a ghost town. Neon lights advertised the pleasures and wares that could be sampled inside the various establishments, but shutters on the windows told us these were false promises. 'Come back when the sun is shining and the tourists are here!' they seemed to say, with one or two signs swinging precariously in the wind, as if threatening to fall on any unwary pedestrian. We passed many expensive and luxurious looking hotels that were obviously full in summer but now only partially occupied by salesmen and suchlike, and then we spotted ours. We stopped at the lights for a few seconds and I noticed movement in the shadows ahead. A drunk staggered out of the dark and across the road, singing to himself. Oh well, there must be some entertainment around here; maybe we would get the chance to sample it. The lights changed and our SUV bumped over the ramp and into the sheltered car park of the hotel. We had arrived at our destination and all I wanted was a bed.

**While I was busy getting myself in country, other contractors working in support of the Coalition Forces were already dying in Iraq, and in ever increasing numbers.**

***Iraq Coalition Casualties: PSD, Convoy, and Site Security. JAN.2004***

Date	Name	Nationality	Incident
05/01/2004	Richard Flynn	Canadian	Killed by IED
06/01/2004	Unknown	French	Killed by small arms fire in Fallujah
14/01/2004	Unknown	Unknown	Convoy attack in Tikrit

<i>14/01/2004</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Convoy attack in Tikrit</i>
<i>25/01/2004</i>	<i>Habibur Rehman</i>	<i>Pakistani</i>	<i>Convoy attack in Tikrit</i>
<i>26/01/14</i>	<i>Arthur Linderman Jr</i>	<i>American</i>	<i>Convoy attack near Tikrit</i>
<i>31/01/2004</i>	<i>Francois Strydom</i>	<i>South African</i>	<i>Killed by a suicide car bomb in Baghdad. Francois was a PSD Bodyguard working for Erinys Security Consulting, protecting the Iraqi Labour Minister, Mr. Sami Azara al-Mujun.</i>

## Chapter 2

### Boot Camp Revisited

I had been put in a quiet, spacious double room by myself; Ben was sharing with another team member. The bed was comfortable, and there was a coffee-making kit - as long as I had my coffee I could face anything. I had fallen asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow but now somewhere in the background of my mind my alarm clock was ringing, desperately trying to wake me from the sleep of the dead. I had set it for early: it wouldn't do to be late on my first day. I woke with a mouth tasting like the inside of a gorilla's armpit, wondering what the day was going to bring. I showered and shaved and hurried down to reception to meet the rest of the blokes.

There were about thirty of us milling around in the lobby, and some hurried introductions were made. I was useless at remembering names but I hoped I would get to know who was who as time went on. The hotel didn't have its own restaurant and one of the blokes asked what we would do for meals. Another of the recruits said not to worry; Blackwater would be sorting that out. I certainly hoped so, as I hadn't eaten since yesterday's in-flight meal and my stomach was beginning to think my throat was cut. The leader of our group was Julius, a very big guy whose call sign I would later find out was Shrek. He was a member of a PSD already working in Iraq and would be acting as an instructor on our course. He led us into the hotel car park where several Suburban SUVs sat waiting for us. We formed an eight-vehicle convoy as we bounced out of the covered hotel parking lot onto the road and headed for the freeway.

I was impressed. A lot of money had already been spent on hotels and rental cars, and we'd been told we would be reimbursed for any expenses, including gas and tollbooth payments. You'd have to fight most companies tooth and nail to get any expenses out of them. It was winter, and Blackwater would have been able to cut a deal with the hotel, but a place like that on the beach of a tourist area wouldn't come cheap even out of season. All the hire vehicles we had picked up from the airport would be used for training on the course, as well as transporting us on the 45-minute drive to and from the hotel every day. With Ben at the wheel, I sat back and relaxed as we sped down the freeway towards Blackwater's own training camp. We drove through the toll and off into a small,



spread out farming community, passing through the town of Moyock and on into open country. We turned down a side road and about a mile further on passed through the electronic gates that guarded the entrance to Blackwater's ranch. Another three miles further and we came upon the main complex. These guys believed in maintaining their privacy. We had finally arrived at the headquarters of the world renowned Blackwater.

The place was a small township in its own right: 7000 acres of private military training area. To anyone who knows British Army training camps, it was Bulford and Tidworth rolled into one. Disney world for the SAS would be an even better description. It consisted of twenty-two individual target ranges and two killing houses, one of which was designed to be attacked by helicopter or by boat through the swamp to its rear. There were two 'unknown distance' target ranges for sniper training, and they had their own tin city of two dozen assorted houses and several streets, which enabled most scenarios to be played out. To one side was the hunting lodge, a deluxe, single floor wooden construction with two high-class lounges and the capacity to sleep sixty trainees in comfort. Next to this were the main headquarters complex and the cookhouse. On the other side of the complex were two dozen assorted cabins housing the stores, ammo bunkers, workshops and classrooms. It was a military camp in everything but name. I knew British regiments who would give their right arm for a training establishment half as good, and I was excited at the thought of using these facilities. We had nothing anywhere near as elaborate in the UK.

The vehicles parked up next to the main building and we debussed and followed Shrek down through the maze of cabins and huts to a long, single floor lecture room. The group of candidates assembled in one of the trailers, which was to serve as both teamroom and classroom. We had a total of 42 men of all ages, shapes, colours, and cap badges. This was the first large group of its kind that this security company was to deploy. As I was to find out, most of the hierarchy were former SEAL team members. The rest of the staff were retired Special Forces with a few police specialists retained for additional specialist subjects. For anything else that needed to be taught, qualified people would be brought in from the outside world. We were split into two groups, each with a designated senior instructor. After a pregnant pause of just a few minutes while all the instructors got their briefing for the rest of the day we started with a roll call and personal administration, followed by a whistle stop tour of the facilities. After filling in all the usual banking forms, next of kin forms, medical declarations and several other forms of a similar nature we began the six cents tour. We started with Blackwater's 'bread and butter', their ranges. These covered every

conceivable type of shoot you could think of and which we would need to practice - falling plates; ETR (electrical target range); moving targets; CQB (close quarter battle) and FIBUA (fighting in built-up areas), plus a few more especially tailored for the Special Forces. The two 'killing houses' had an overhead gantry, so the instructors and your fellow team members could see what you were up to and could give you an 'End Ex' report at the end of the exercise. They would of course be merciless.

At the other end of the facility was the CQB village where FIBUA and CQB could be taught, as well as motorcade ambushes. It was an impressive construction, the size of a small rural village. Paint ball guns were used here to simulate actual hits. You don't get hit that often because you quickly learn to move fast and keep low, 'duck!' being the operative word. Even a paint ball hurts when you get hit, and no one wants that!

In the main complex there was a full military specification cook house, and we were told that all trainees were provided with three square meals a day. The ladies who prepared the meals took pride in their cooking and nothing was too much trouble for them. The food was good, healthy and freshly cooked on the premises. As a foreign national, I had a few early problems trying to identify some of the dishes, but in true airborne fashion I soon learned to survive.

Just before the tour had brought us full circle we were shown the company's own K9 section. As I was to find out later, these highly trained animals would be worth their weight in gold in Iraq.

Back in the classroom, each man was asked to stand up and say a few words about himself. The first thing I noticed was that no two people had exactly the same specialist qualifications. It was as if someone had handpicked this first group with as many different skills as possible to test which formula would work best in the field conditions for which we were heading. Apart from the one or two obvious arse-holes that you'll always get in a group of this kind, the majority were good blokes and I made a few new friends. I was the only British bloke there in fact, I was the only foreign national in the group. Cory was right; I was the "Crash Test Dummy." I had a lot to think about and so the drive back to the hotel was a quiet one. I went to bed early.

Day two was to be crunch day. No one had mentioned a test week but I had expected as much. Although I had not been told there was to be a selection process to survive, I had worked it out from all the PT (physical training) kit included on the list I'd been sent. It seemed to come as a surprise to some of the candidates, though, and there were a few worried looks. I was slightly nervous

myself and I had good reason to be. I had neglected to inform the company that I'd broken my back parachuting eighteen months previously and this would be the first physical exercise I had performed since then. I had passed my GP's medical and he'd signed me off as fit because I told him I was about to do light security work. Okay! I stretched the truth a little because I knew it would have to be all or nothing. I wanted the work and needed the money and so I was going to give it my best shot.

To a certain extent I'd come prepared, having purchased a Neoprene sports back support and a big supply of good old 'soldier's friend' Ibuprofen tablets. I knew from experience that you could run through most pain after taking a couple of those little blighters, and the brace would help too. Just to be on the safe side, I swallowed four of the pills at breakfast. That was two too many but I thought, what the hell! In for a penny, in for a pound!

The PT test was the standard American military one, very similar to our own and graded by age groups. We would be on a U.S. Department of Defence contract, which required we be at the same physical standard as American soldiers, which seemed only fair to me. Men over fifty would have a slightly easier time on pull-ups and sit-ups, but it was still going to hurt. If we had the timed run first and then the PT test, I reckoned I was in with a chance - and it would give the painkillers time to kick in.

Cory was to be our instructor for this phase. He was a retired Marine Corps NCO. Short, muscular, and a no-nonsense type of guy, he had been through a lot of shit in some nasty places and was a very experienced operator. He gathered the group together and outlined the programme. Then he split us into age groups. There were seven of us in my age bracket, so at least I was not the only 'older' soldier there. As it turned out, we were scheduled to complete the PT test first. Shit! I would have preferred the run, and I was convinced I was going to struggle. I discreetly tightened the Neoprene sports brace to give as much support as possible to my weakened back muscles, and I had worn a baggy t-shirt to try to hide the fact that I was wearing it. I wasn't doing anything wrong because my doctor had signed me as fit. I was just taking precautions, I told myself.

The first test was to drag a human-sized dummy over a 50-metre course. It weighed about the same as the average adult. All the limbs were jointed, which meant it would be limp like an unconscious human. This made it extremely hard to pick up, just like the real 'dead weight'. The best way to complete this task was to grasp the dummy under the armpits, lock your hands together around its waist, straighten your back and then drag it backwards for the distance. I

watched one or two of the others struggle with different methods before it was my turn. I only hoped my injured back would hold out.

I bent my knees, grasped the dummy under the arms and locked my hands tight. Gritting my teeth, I straightened my back. The tablets were working and I was able to lean back and support the weight. The angle was good and as soon as I was given the word, I stepped back and got a rhythm going. The ground was flat with no obstructions and so all I had to do was keep moving. "Stop! Well done!" Cory said, and that part was over almost as soon as it had begun. So far, so good! I then had to complete as many sit-ups, push-ups and pull-ups as I could for one-minute durations. It was just a case of dig in and go for it. I had always been weak on upper arm exercises and I didn't do too well on the pull-ups, but luckily I wasn't the only one, so I didn't stick out like a sore thumb and I managed a pretty good score on the rest of the exercises.

Next came the run, which was over a mile and a half of road. Cory waited until we were all ready and then started his stopwatch. "Go!" I started off at a steady pace but was soon left behind by the younger, faster runners. It was a bit embarrassing really, when you consider how much I used to enjoy a good cross-country run. There were several runners behind me, though, and I was determined they were going to stay there. I most definitely was not going to be the last one in.

I soon started to sweat badly. I think maybe my body was trying to sweat out all the extra medication I'd taken. Every step onto the concrete road surface hurt, as if the cushioning between my spinal vertebrae was non-existent, and I felt every thump of my training shoes on the iron-hard ground. As the pain became ever more excruciating I could feel my eyes watering and the tears welling up, and my breathing was rapid and painful as I sucked in lungfuls of air. About a third of the way round the course the younger group up front developed stragglers. Some of them had been over confident and had started too fast. I was overtaken by one or two of the guys behind me, but I could tell by the way they were running that they wouldn't last. Feeling much more confident now in myself and in my ability to finish the run, I put my head down and dug in.

By the half-way point I had managed to ignore most of the pain in my back and switch off, something we'd been trained to do in the Paras: forget the other runners; just dig in for the end; mind over matter; no pain no gain. I was opening up my lead on the guys behind me and gaining on a couple of those in front. I knew I wouldn't be able to catch them, but if I could just gain a bit of ground I could improve my time. After all, we were not really competing against each other, just trying to beat the clock. I was sweating like a pig with

the exertion but the end was in sight. I could see Cory looking at his watch while another staff member took the runners' names and timings. A few were doing warm down exercises, one or two just lay on the grass, and at least one was throwing up in the bushes. The last couple of hundred yards I really pushed and finished well. Cory smiled and said "Well done!" as I passed him, but by then I'd lost interest in everything except trying to stand up and breathe. Blimey, that hurt! I had really let my fitness slip and I knew it wasn't just down to my injury. I'd become lazy and would have to do something about it if I wanted to succeed in this tough new environment.

Cory came up behind me and said, "Good job! You worked hard for that," and patted me on the back, his hand contacting the sports brace I thought I had hidden. I hesitated and then thought honesty was the best policy under the circumstances.

"I suppose I'd better come clean about this," I said reluctantly. Cory gave me a stare as I started to explain. "It's a recent parachuting injury that's still giving me a bit of trouble."

He just smiled and held up his hand to stop me before I dug a hole for myself. There were different ways to earn respect, he said, and I had earned his for the effort I'd just put in. I had passed fair and square - no problem! I didn't know it then, but Cory later reported me to the bosses, as he was duty bound to, but told them I was doing okay, and it was worth keeping me in the program. On the strength of his recommendation they all agreed, but the instructors were told to keep a watchful eye on me over the next few days to see if my injury would stop me from doing the job. Thanks to my painkillers I was able to carry on normally, and I guess I must have impressed them.

We dried ourselves down in the trailer, which now stank of sweaty bodies and socks, a familiar smell to us all. Unfortunately we were going to have to put up with it. We weren't paying guests, and therefore not allowed to use the showers in the lodge. We would just have to wait till we got back to the hotel. As we were changing back into our day clothes a couple of the recruits who had come in last were taken outside by a member of staff and didn't re-join us. This was getting like P Company, the Parachute Selection course you have to go through to become British Paratroopers. In the event, our numbers would be whittled down each day until the instructors were left with the best of the bunch, or at least the survivors.

Another instructor came in and asked us to take our seats. He handed out more paperwork for us to read and we filled in more forms, this time requesting

information for passport renewals and visas. All the over-forties would be having an electrocardiogram, something that was required by the insurance company. This was a first for me and I wondered how I would fare. Those of us who had been called forward for this procedure assembled in another trailer that served as the company's Medical Centre, with two doctors and a nurse in attendance. When it was my turn, the nurse asked me to take my shirt off and lie on a couch. She heated a few contacts and attached them to my chest and head, and I was wired up to the monitor and told to relax for a few minutes. I should have brought a book to read. After a short while, the nurse removed the pads and said I could put my shirt back on. As I did so, the doctor was looking at the readout.

"How did I do, Doc?" I asked, genuinely interested.

"No problems, perfectly normal." Now that was a first for me. Normal!

Two of the older guys had not done so well on the ECG. One was found to have an irregular heart beat and the other suffered from high blood pressure. Both were told that for their own good they could not continue with the training. You could see the disappointment in their faces. They were good soldiers, but their bodies and age had let them down, and they were sent home that evening: I considered myself lucky. Our group was getting smaller by the minute now, and at this rate Blackwater would soon not have enough bodies for a team, but I guessed they knew what they were doing.

On the company staff list Blackwater had a psychiatrist whose door was always open if you had any 'issues'. I thought this was a waste of money: we all had to have a screw loose to be here! One afternoon one of the younger ex-SEAL team members asked for a consultation. As we heard through the grape vine afterwards, he told our lady psychiatrist that he was having a recurring nightmare in which he could see all the team getting killed. I had a recurring dream where I won the lottery, but it had never happened to me. He was sent home immediately. We couldn't figure out what had possessed him to tell her that, even if it was true. Maybe he'd had second thoughts about the line of work he was about to let himself in for, and wanted to get out without losing face - who knows! Maybe he was the sensible one.

Shrek had a discreet word with a few of us. "Ok, Guys! The selection process is over. Now we're gonna train you up the way we want you to do things. No one else gets sent home unless they're stupid or just plain unlucky."

After a light lunch we reported to the armoury to be issued with our AR-14 Bushmaster rifles and Glock 17 pistols. The rifle would be altered to fit our

needs. The company used a lot of equipment made by Blackhawk Industries, one of the world's leading manufacturers of law enforcement and military specialist equipment. It therefore followed that we would be issued with the best the budget would cover; after all, we would become a walking advertisement for them so everything had to be on the ball. We were shown how to remove the old shaped Armalite hand guard and replace it with a rail system. This in turn would allow us to fit all sorts of extra equipment to our weapons, and most of the rifles were fitted with EOTech sights. Everyone was issued with night vision goggles or scopes which could be fitted on the rifle or worn on a headband, whichever you felt the most comfortable with. A lower pistol grip and Sure-Fire flashlight were added for good measure.

Somewhere in the company it had already been decided who was earmarked for which jobs. Many of the ex-army guys were pissed off that all the SF (Special Forces) and SEAL team members had already been selected for PSD duties, while the rest of us got the scraps. I understood why they had done it but I still wasn't happy with it. The company was run by retired SEAL Team members and it was understandable they would favour guys from their own system. I was earmarked for site security, not the most glamorous job but for the money I was being paid I could grin and bear it. Many of the young SEALs had never seen a shot fired in anger, so in my book they were an unknown quantity. As it turned out, the site teams were to see more action than the PSD.

As we got used to working in our groups the days were filled with first aid lessons, weapons handling lessons and range work. We fired from windows and doors. We fired prone, kneeling, standing and sitting. We fired at targets from every conceivable angle, static and moving. To cap it all, we were already on the payroll and being paid \$100 a day, with food, lodging and transport thrown in. I was getting paid to enjoy myself, and I was.

Our one and only night familiarisation shoot was from the building fronts on Range 8. These were two-story facades like something you might find on a film set. They had a staircase in the middle and then stairs left and right. A shooter could practice firing from upstairs or down, and from the doors or windows. Working in firing teams, you could cover each other while other shooters ran the 50 metres to the second house. This range had everything from falling plates to moving targets, and all had to be neutralised to complete the exercise. The only illumination was provided by hand-thrown flares, and we had three magazines of rifle ammo and three magazines of pistol ammunition. It was up to the shooter which weapon he used first, but both weapons were to be utilised until all the ammunition was spent.

We arrived on the range just before dark, having had our evening meal earlier, and began preparation for battle by cleaning and lightly oiling our weapons. Then as darkness was falling, one of the other instructors came rushing up to tell us there was a cock-up with the range bookings and we would need to wrap up within the hour. The senior instructor swore out loud. He had worked hard on this evening's time table and now it was well and truly fucked. He thought for a moment, and then ordered the entire group to take up firing positions in the two building fronts. He tossed several hand flares out onto the range to illuminate the targets and gave the order to fire. Everyone opened up at the same time on everything illuminated to our front. Forty shooters took 30 minutes to take out every target on the range and totally expend all their ammunition. The noise was deafening and the local civilians must have thought they were in the middle of a terrorist attack. It was an exhilarating shoot, though, and I definitely got a buzz. I felt my heartbeat quicken and I knew I had a big grin on my face. It was the nearest the new boys could get to the feel of a real fire fight, and I don't know about them, but I had enjoyed the exercise - even if it was a bit short.

We finished earlier than had been expected, and the range was cleared. Someone suggested going for a beer. Now that sounded like a good idea! Every available vehicle was pressed into service, and the entire course and a few instructors drove to the row of pubs back at the beach front. We all hustled into the bar opposite the hotel we were staying in, as that way we wouldn't have so far to crawl back to our beds. Preparation and Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance as my old Sergeant used to say. 'Always remember the six P's!' The young barmaid didn't bat an eyelid as we all piled into what had been her quiet bar; the orders for beer and food flew thick and fast, but she and her cook just took it in their stride.

No one tore the arse out of the beer drinking. I suspected we were still being assessed, possibly to see who got on with whom within the group. Despite my initial reservations, it was turning out to be a pretty good night. All those present seemed to be getting on well together as they chatted about guns and equipment. It looked as if the powers that be had been good judges of character, and all the guys seemed to be of similar minds. One or two were trying a bit too hard to fit in. Hal and Mike were ex-Navy and had known each other in a previous posting. Hal was of Puerto Rican descent, about 25 years of age; Mike was Mexican and the older of the two by a couple of years. I had noticed during training that Mike was going out of his way to impress the instructors, but it was having the opposite effect and he was just making himself look stupid. Sometimes it pays just to be the 'grey man' and keep your head down. Some of



the other blokes had already made comments about him, and he was getting noticed for all the wrong reasons. Mike and Hal were sitting at a table with me and two others. I'd ordered a shrimp platter and they thought it funny that I was now facing several pounds of the bloody things. I like shrimp, but didn't realise how large a 'large' portion was. They kindly volunteered to help me eat them and soon the table was covered in shrimp shells. Mike said there was another bar down the road where there was a break dance contest on; these were normally good for a laugh, he said. I looked around the crowded bar and decided it might be a good time to get a bit of fresh air, so we paid the bill and the three of us walked out into the Night.

It was cold outside and I pulled up the collar of my jacket against the evening chill. The other bar turned out to be a few hundred yards along the main street and was just as full and noisy as the one at the hotel; two very large doormen said, "Good evening, Gentlemen!" as we went in. This kind of place wasn't really my scene but I was out to get to know the guys in the team and so I was being sociable. I ordered three Millers and carried them down to where Mike and Hal were watching the dancing. It was pretty noisy, but entertaining watching the competing dancers spin around on their heads and do things with their bodies that I am sure will come back to haunt them in later life. After a short while I noticed Mike had gone. "Hey Hal, where's Mike?" I asked.

Hal was preoccupied with a young lady who was body popping along the floor. He nodded towards the door. "He's gone to get some fresh air I think." I'd noticed Mike had been going pretty heavy on the Tequila - every beer we'd had he'd followed with a chaser; it was starting to affect his speech. I knew he was going to suffer in the morning, so I told Hal I was going to check on Mike, and pushed through the crowd towards the street.

Just ten feet outside I could see Mike was about to get into serious trouble. He was facing down two of the biggest bouncers I had ever seen, and I could hear him gobbing off even above the din from the club. So far he had managed to insult their mothers and most of their families and was attempting to force them both into a scrap. From where I stood, the bouncers were being pretty controlled but how long that would last was anybody's guess. If we got into a fight, we would be thrown off the team. If I walked away and was seen by one of the company staff, I would probably be accused of leaving a team mate behind. I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

It looked like it was all about to kick off, so I stepped in front of Mike and the doormen with my hands up to show I wasn't carrying anything that could be

mistaken for a weapon. “Whoa! Hang on blokes! He’s had a hard day and too much to drink. We don’t want any trouble!”

A crowd was beginning to form and Hal had pushed his way through to stand beside me. The doormen were happy to see the end of the incident and advised us to take our pal home and put him to bed. Mike, on the other hand, now thought he had back-up and wanted to take on everyone there. I exchanged looks with Hal, apologised to the doormen, spun Mike around and grabbed him by the arms, and then between the two of us we frog marched him towards the hotel.

The fresh air and alcohol took their toll, and it was no problem getting him into his room and dropping him onto the bed, where he promptly passed out. We put him in the recovery position with a pillow behind him so he couldn’t roll over during the night and choke in his own vomit. Hal said he’d check on him and make sure he got up in time to go to the ranch with the rest of us, so I grabbed a cup of black coffee from the machine in Reception and went to my room. I thought we were very lucky to have got away from that with no bloodshed. Despite their suits, those doormen looked a couple of hard bastards, and I had no doubt we’d have had a job getting Mike away from them had it all kicked off.

Next morning Mike appeared looking decidedly the worse for wear, and wasn’t saying much to anyone. He slept most of the way to the camp: I guess he needed it too! As I looked at his dishevelled appearance I made a mental note to keep Tequila on my ‘Things Not to Touch with a Barge Pole’ list. Now that we were familiar with the route it was taking less time to get there, and I was soon punching in the code numbers on the gate key-pad as usual. The gates swung smoothly open, I jumped back into the front passenger seat of the SUV and we swept through, with the gate shutting automatically behind the last vehicle. Today though, I wondered if there were going to be any repercussions from last night. I felt pretty sure we had stopped any problems before they started and I didn’t remember any faces in the crowd from the course, so I thought we might be lucky and get away with it. Having come this bloody far, the last thing I wanted was to get ‘binned off’ the course. We would just have to wait and see.

Once inside the camp we quickly parked up and made a mad dash to get in the cookhouse queue, ready to help ourselves from the well stocked hotplates. Judging by the amount of food the Blackwater ladies provided, they must be used to cooking for an army! In the British Army it used to be a chargeable offence not to eat breakfast, and it was classed as Scale A parade: everyone had to attend. But if you were involved in the type of physical activities we were

going to be put through, you really *needed* a good breakfast before starting the day's training. We would certainly be burning the calories off before the day was through.

I had just sat down to mine when I saw Cory beckoning me from the doorway. Reluctantly leaving my steaming plate of eggs, bacon and hash-browns I followed him through into the main office area. "I want to have a chat," he said seriously. I accompanied him into the reception area and sat down on one of the sofas opposite him. "Have a good night?" he asked. I could see immediately where this was going.

"Could have been better," I replied. "Could have been a lot worse!"

"I hear you did a good job of defusing the situation." I nodded sort of noncommittally and tried to leave it at that.

Then Cory asked me what I thought of Mike. I replied that I thought he was okay, and that last night had just been down to the effect of the drink on an empty stomach. "Funny," he said. "I thought he ate quite a lot in the bar earlier." I was running out of excuses. I couldn't remember seeing Cory in the bar but then there had been quite a few of the instructors in there and it was crowded.

"What do you think we should do with the guy?" he asked. I thought that an unfair question. I was not going to be responsible for getting another bloke sacked, and told him so. "OK, let's make it easier on you. If you were making an assessment on the basis of last night's antics, would you pass him?" I paused, trying to think of a way out of this. "OK, let's make easier still! Based on last night's performance would you feel safe with that guy watching your back in a fire fight? I want an honest answer."

I had to admit it. "No, I wouldn't trust him to watch my back."

Cory smiled. "Right answer! I just wanted to hear you say it. But don't worry - the decision's already been made. Just wanted to see how you'd handle it." Bastard! I thought.

I didn't feel like finishing my breakfast after that, so I just had a coffee in one of the plastic disposable cups and sipped it as I took a slow walk to the classroom. I didn't feel very good about the situation. As the others started to trickle in, Hal came over. "Guess they asked you the same questions," he said, and without waiting for an answer he went on. "It's his own fault. He never could hold his drink - it got him into trouble in the Navy a whole lot." I think we both

realised at that moment that we would still have to watch out for each other in future. There was no telling how long they would continue to assess us.

Cory later told me that because Norfolk is a small town everyone knows everyone else. Both bouncers were ex-SEALs, despite their size, and had only held off ripping Mike apart because they'd been told he was from Blackwater. The whole thing had been witnessed by Cory and a few of the senior instructors, so Hal and I had been seen to do the right thing. We had been lucky, as Blackwater appeared to have eyes everywhere. Well, it was their home town after all.

The lessons that day were going to be mostly on self-defence, with or without a weapon. We were shepherded into one of the classrooms near the K9 compound and the first lesson was to be unarmed combat, so the room was totally devoid of furniture. We had been split into two groups because of the large numbers and placed in separate rooms: there were about 20 individuals in my class. Our instructor was a small, smartly dressed man in his late thirties with a shock of black curly hair. He struck me as being a bit effeminate but I knew better than to judge a book by its cover. He introduced himself and his assistant, who turned out to be his brother, although they looked completely different. The brother was a short, squat, muscular type, who looked well-suited to throwing troublemakers through the windows of pubs. Must be adopted, I thought to myself. They both ran Police courses in fighting, and had a number of qualifications in various unarmed combat techniques. Both were experts in street fighting, which as anyone will tell you is downright dirty. I was pleased I hadn't voiced my initial thoughts aloud: pissing off either of these two could have been painful.

It was to be a typical military-style course of instruction. EDIP - Explanation, Demonstration, Imitation, and Practice. The demonstrations were fast and furious, a blur to the naked eye. The brothers kept apologizing for being too quick, and had to keep slowing down the moves to an almost painfully slow speed so we could follow their instructions. Most of the moves they taught lacked the finesse which is normally associated with martial arts. There was no meditation, no deep meaningful explanations. This was dirty fighting, solely designed to disable an attacker. You don't fight to lose, you fight to win and by any means at your disposal. Anything struck got hurt. We were taught different techniques for disarming an attacker who was in too close to us and pulling a pistol on our principal. This could be achieved from different angles, and up very close and personal. Shout, "He has a gun!" Grasp the pistol - not the wrist -

turn into the attacker's body, forcing him to release the gun, then follow with a jab to the throat.

In a short space of time we were all sprouting bruises on our face and arms as we misjudged distances and inadvertently struck each other. Nevertheless, it was very good training. I learnt more unarmed combat and dirty fighting moves in two days in this camp and with these instructors than I had in my entire career in the British Army. One of the more interesting moves which I had never seen before was defending yourself from an attacker while on your back on the floor. This was achieved in two phases. First you kicked at your attacker with both feet in a windmill fashion, as if you were trying to ride a bike. Secondly, you spaced your elbows apart to give a sturdy base and pushed your body around in a circle away from the attacker. This was completely knackered, but it gave you the few seconds needed to pull your pistol and shoot the guy. Working in pairs we played both parts, attacker and defender. We quickly found out how tiring it was to be the defender, but it also proved how difficult it is to get at the man on the ground with a knife if he's defending himself properly. It was an exhausting exercise but we enjoyed the adrenaline rush that always comes in the moment of danger - particularly if some bastard is going out of his way to kill you. At the end of these sessions I was black and blue and I ached from head to foot, but I had the satisfaction of knowing I'd learnt some new tricks and could now handle myself in a tight spot a bit better than before. It was all about giving us confidence when the shit hits the fan.

By this time we had lost quite a few people off the selection course. Some went for medical reasons, some for safety infringements on the ranges. All weapons were carried live on the range, with one round up the spout. The Americans refer to this as 'carrying hot'. We would be carrying our weapons like this most of the time in Iraq, so we had better get used to it now. No mistakes could be tolerated or someone would ultimately get injured or killed. If you can cock up in training then you can do it in a real situation and no one wanted a friendly fire incident. There had been too many of these in Iraq and Afghanistan already.

One or two of us were having documentation problems. All our passports had been sent to the Kuwaiti Embassy through an agency that specialised in this sort of thing. Blackwater had paid a lot of money for this to be done right, but so far their local representatives had managed to screw up most of the vital admin. One guy's passport had been lost and others had been wrongly processed. Mine did not come back with the batch it had been sent with and there was a danger I wouldn't get in-country at the same time as my team mates. At the rate this was going, it would be a miracle if any of us got there by the contract start date. This

was a big government contract for Blackwater, but they were getting little or no help from their Departments of State or Defence. One of the biggest problems was the individual operators' contracts. No one had seen one. Everything we had been told about the job was by word of mouth. Some of the guys who had carried out this type of work before asked about the contracts and insurances but were told the company was having problems with the wording, and all contracts had gone back to their legal people to be reworded. We were told this was because the work contract we were supposed to be on for the DOD had changed again for the umpteenth time. Without proper contracts we had no way of knowing if we would get adequate medical care if we were wounded, or if our families would get the Defence Contract Life Insurance should we be killed or badly injured. We were assured by one of the company representatives that we were not to worry and that we would get the finished contracts well before we were to be deployed. They were being altered to give us the best possible cover in case of injury. This was my first foray into the Mercenary World and I suppose I was a bit naïve, a bit too trusting for my own good. I had come from a military system that looked after its own, and I had no idea how the corporate world looked after its soldiers. This was not the world of mercenaries I had read about where you made up the rules as you went along; where there was no back-up and you relied on your own wiles and initiative to survive. This was the modern world and we were legal now. We were contractors. I had believed the Company's patter hook, line and sinker and would live to regret it. A couple of days later my passport arrived back at the ranch. It cost the company an extra hundred dollars because I was a foreign national. Just for a rubber stamp.

Most days were a mixture of lessons on medical training, security lectures and half a day on the ranges. With the number of gadgets attached to our Bushmasters we were beginning to resemble storm troopers from *Star Wars*. The Company tended to favour an elasticised sling on the rifle with a snap hook on one end, which came in handy on the range when practicing 'transition'. This was something I had not been taught in the military. It involved simulating running out of ammunition for your rifle, letting it drop to your side, and then drawing your pistol to continue the fire fight. It was not the sort of tactic you could use very successfully in open countryside, but was very effective in a built-up area because it would give you a breathing space. You could draw your pistol and keep up a steady rate while you got to cover, and then reload. Most of us were able to practice this until we could manage a seamless transition from rifle to pistol.

Another piece of training I enjoyed was the killing house. This was a good exercise for concentrating your self-control and fire discipline, while at the

same time testing your aim and reflexes. It was also good fun. Everyone likes a challenge, and in the army I used to get quickly bored with firing at stationary targets on a range. Instead I much preferred what we called a 'tin city'. This was where you would walk down a simulated street with buildings either side of you and targets would pop up in the most unlikely places. It was sheer snap shooting with no real time to aim, and it certainly honed your reflexes. The killing house had the same effect, giving you only a split second to identify and kill your target. Similar in construction and design to the SAS killing house in Hereford, the walls could be changed around to form differently shaped rooms and hallways. An overhead gantry allowed pairs of your team mates to watch your progress through the house, and then assist the instructor with your critique at the end of the practice.

The beauty of this system was that you used your own individual pistol and rifle, not training weapons. We simply replaced the ammunition with plastic capped, low-power training rounds known as 'simuntion'. These would still penetrate the paper targets and record direct hits, but only give you a bruise if you were accidentally shot by your mate. Of course, the general idea was *not* to get shot by your mate.

At a given command we positioned ourselves in pairs on either side of the entranceway to the building. On the word GO! We moved in rapidly, heading alternately left and right. To get us warmed up we were brought face to face with life-sized 'armed' targets as soon as we entered the building. Two rounds to the body mass and one to the head for good measure was the method favoured by the Blackwater instructors. My partner and I took out the first two with our Glock 9mm pistols and cleared the room. The next room was at right angles to our position and we had to check the doorway prior to gaining entry. This time my partner's target was to the left but mine was behind the door. He hit his with all three rounds; I missed with the head shot, but got my first two rounds in the body mass. "Well done, Heroes!" the instructor shouted as the building echoed with the last burst of fire. "You just took out a friendly." My partner's target had been unarmed. Oops! Shit happens. At the debrief everyone was once again berated about the vital need for positive identification of targets before engaging.

Another interesting lecture was on IEDs, (Improvised Explosive Devices) the favourite weapon of a cowardly enemy, just like in Northern Ireland. Unlike Northern Ireland, though, where everything was smuggled in from abroad, in Iraq there was an abundance of discarded explosives lying around for anyone to pick up. The Coalition Forces had tried to secure all the ammo dumps and

recover battlefield ordnance too late, and much of it had found its way into terrorist hands. Any of it could be turned into booby traps. Some of the concoctions were downright overkill, like 120mm artillery shells buried at the side of the road, triggered by an anti-personnel mine or hidden inside the rotting carcass of a donkey. Some could be triggered by using a cell phone. The many ways to kill our forces were ingenious, and at the same time use of the suicide car bomb was on the rise.

How gullible could a would-be terrorist be? If an eighty-year old cleric told me that by killing myself and my enemies I would go straight to Paradise to be waited on hand and foot by 74 virgins I would definitely smell a rat. Apart from the impossibility of finding all those virgins, if heaven was such a sure thing how come he was still alive, and eighty into the bargain! Shouldn't he set an example and be one of the first to blow himself up? No, the suicide bomb tactic was devised simply to cause terror, enabling the potential martyr to take the maximum number of victims with him. It was not a well-aimed weapon and usually succeeded in killing and maiming many innocent passers-by - and all in the name of Allah.

I had read a bit of the *Koran* and if I remembered rightly, in many ways it echoed the New Testament. A gentle book, it spoke of protecting others' faiths and beliefs. Nowhere did it say you would get to Heaven by killing innocent women and kids, or by chopping the heads off unarmed civilians. This was the fanatics' interpretation and it was completely twisted. I could only hope they'd discover that when they passed through the gates of Hell and discovered not a virgin waiting for them, but a devil.

Our instructor had several gory pictures to accompany his lecture and obviously relished his work. His descriptions of the photos were graphic and left a lasting impression on those of the group who had not come across this kind of warfare before. Hopefully, it would make them more alert in-country. Apparently MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), or 'compo' as we call them in the British Army, were causing a problem out there. Soldiers were throwing some of their rations to starving children begging at the side of the road, but the cartons were being recycled as booby-traps and left near military vehicles. Several soldiers had been maimed with this type of device, but it had killed many more innocent civilians and in particular children. The simple rule was, 'If you didn't drop it, don't pick it up!' Anything could be an IED, no matter how big or small.

This lecture was followed by a lesson on searching for devices on vehicles. Everyone was very attentive; no one wanted to be blown up. We had already been given clothing and equipment so that we were uniformed up to a point, but



now we would be required to wear our body armour for the rest of the training to get accustomed to the weight. This was a good idea for those of us who had never had to wear body armour before. It does tend to make you feel restricted at first but you soon get used to it. The most uncomfortable feature was the heat: it could get unbearably hot wearing body armour.

The FIBUA village was an experience all of its own. I had been set up in response to some extremely difficult and unique problems arising in the wake of a couple of horrific school massacres. It was an intensely serious area where every conceivable scenario we could face could be played out to its ultimate conclusion, and was a very popular training ground, used by many of America's Police SWAT teams. Three cars were positioned in the parking lot opposite the main building. The first squad was given its positions and we were then shown the procedure recommended by the State Department for getting in and out of cars with a principal in tow. Most of us had done similar work but had evolved different ways of doing things, so the company instructors had to ensure we were all working on the same wavelength.

Next came walking drills and the formations required to give all-round protection while moving to and from the venue. Once the instructors were happy with the drills they began throwing in scenarios.

"Attacker with a knife from the rear!" He is quickly dealt with by one of the team, with the others closing ranks around the principal.

"Gun right!" Two guys on the right flank kill the assailant while the others form a human shield and bundle the principal unceremoniously into the waiting car.

Then we were issued with paintball guns and eyeglasses. The cars were driven through the streets, where we played out more scenarios.

"Principal's car disabled!" A second car pulls alongside to recover the Principal. (If the crew of the disabled car can get in as well, it's a bonus. If not, you're on your own).

"Ambush from the front!" Reverse, turn, rear car falls in behind and blocks, and you speed away.

The only thing we didn't like was not being unable to fire back. When you're in an armoured car, for instance a level 14, the windows don't usually wind down, so all you can do is get away from the site of the ambush. This is known as 'getting off the X', the X being the immediate point of ambush. We had to be reminded constantly that our job in an ambush is not to take the fight to the enemy but to protect our principal, who has to be removed out of harm's way.

This was the hardest part of all because it went against all the military anti-ambush drills I had ever been taught. The only car in the formation able to fight was the CAT car. 'Counter Assault Team' to give it the correct name. The crew of this vehicle *could* fight. Their car was usually a 'kit' car, partially armoured but with gun ports and a rear machine gunner, so that it could attack and defend the principal's vehicle.

Now that we had mastered the basics, a full ambush was sprung. A simulated burning car was pushed into the end of the street blocking our way. Our three vehicles attempted to reverse out, but a pick-up truck with gunmen on the back blocked our escape. "Debus!" the team leader called over the radio. "I have a blue door right!" I identified our escape route and moved towards it. Paintball shots rained down from snipers in upper windows as we removed the principal from his vehicle and headed for the identified door. The first two members of the PSD to enter the building cleared the room. "Room clear!" The principal was pushed into a corner with the senior bodyguard shielding him while the rest of us returned fire. Meanwhile the first two men cleared the rest of the ground floor and looked for a way out. You don't want to get bottled up in one place. The idea is get into cover, and then keep moving from house to house, cover to cover until help arrives or you are able to get other transportation out of the killing zone. *How* you get the extra transport is up to you. 'Hijacking' is such a nasty word - whatever it takes to survive! We had just reached the third building, moving at speed and killing a couple of bad guys on the way, when "End ex!" was called. All the guys regrouped around the cars, feeling quite pleased with themselves.

The instructor told us we had done well. The drills had been good, cover was well used, return fire had been swift, the principal had been extracted and protected correctly, and we had indeed killed more than our fair share of the attackers. However...and he paused to look at our team members. I followed the direction of the instructor's stare and noticed how many of us had red splotches of paint on our bodies from enemy weapons. I'd been hit twice and didn't even remember it happening: one on the arm and one on the leg - not killing shots but I would certainly have been disabled and probably wouldn't have made it to cover. It wasn't good knowing that in 'real life' I would be still out in the street being used as the 'duty target' by enemy snipers. Not one person remained unscathed. One of the team, an ex-Marine, had been hit right in the centre of his forehead and a large golf ball-sized lump was starting to show. He was reassured that since he was a Marine the shot had missed his brain by five feet and everyone laughed, but it was the nervous laughter of people who were not comfortable. We all knew this would soon be the real thing. Our only bonus was

that the principal had not been hit. However, the principal's bodyguard had about six hits on his back, which brought home to everyone just how risky this business was: all we were replacing was a good old-fashioned sandbag. This had been a worst case scenario, but we had been put through it to make us all aware of how dangerous this job was, and to sort out once and for all anyone who might be having doubts.

That night two more candidates went home voluntarily. They had obviously thought about it and decided their chances of survival in Iraq wouldn't be that good. Our numbers remained about 40 strong on paper as other operators joined us from previous contracts. On one of the Operations Room walls was a list of places in Iraq with names written against them. These names changed daily, so it was not yet set in stone who would be going where. Contracts had already been finalised in three main locations, and it looked like I was earmarked for somewhere called Karbala. I didn't know anything about the place, so I spent that night reading the last company situation report on it that we had on file. It was a highly religious centre in the Muslim world with two important Mosques. Annual pilgrimages to these Mosques had traditionally been made on foot by several million Muslims, but were banned during Saddam's reign of terror. Now they had apparently been revived and Karbala was a hotbed of anti-American, anti-Christian activity. It was beginning to sound like it was going to be a case of 'never a dull moment', and thoughts flashed through my mind of Charlton Heston as General Gordon in the film Khartoum. I shook my head to banish them! If the Company was to be believed, we had a lot more back up than poor old Gordon. It could never happen to us - could it!

About this time we were joined by fifty Chileans. All were retired Special Forces men of one kind or another. Some were marines, others were army, and there were a few police personnel who would make up the remainder of our site security teams. Their qualifications mirrored our own. As one of four team leaders on our site I would have a platoon of about fifteen under my command. Great, I thought! I didn't speak a word of Spanish: all those years of watching Speedy Gonzales cartoons had been wasted. I only hoped I'd get one or two who spoke English.

I needn't have worried, as all the Chileans proved to be good guys, very nationalistic. They were extremely proud of their homeland, and keen to prove they were professional soldiers and could do the job. A few were in their mid to late forties with years of experience in counter terrorism, but the majority were in their late twenties. Many - as paratroopers, SEALs and SF - had the same skills as we did. Most, although young, were very enthusiastic and couldn't wait

to get stuck into the job. A number of them had seen action on the Peruvian and Bolivian borders and they had come to work for Blackwater because it offered better wages than they could get back home.

Quite a few had served under General Pinochet. The Socialist Government he handed his country over to, had replaced him quickly and fearing the military and what they were capable of, had reduced the size of the armed forces virtually overnight. The fact that the soldiers demobilised voluntarily and peacefully should have proved to the government they had nothing to fear from them; however, the deed had been done. Yes, there had been human rights violations, but these had been perpetrated by a few soldiers only. It was easy to forget that the people now in power, who had been the so called pro-democracy movement, had in their turn blown up government buildings killing innocent civilians, and had executed without mercy those police and soldiers who were found to have infiltrated their movement. As the saying goes, one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist.

Unfortunately, all Pinochet-era soldiers had been lumped in the same barrel as the few bad apples. For many of them, the chance had come to show that they had been wrongfully sacked; that they were first and foremost loyal to their country, that they were professional soldiers and not the thugs some people had made them out to be. But although the Socialists were the minority party in Chile, they made the loudest noise, and the people who had been the enemy of Pinochet's forces when he was in power saw this mercenary recruitment as a new threat. The former soldiers were now poor and downtrodden and treated as second class citizens in their own country, but if they got back into combat and came back with money in their pockets there was no telling what they might do! The Chilean government needn't have worried, though. The money these former soldiers would be making would be much greater than anything they could hope for at home, but the dollars they earned would be sent back to Chile, bringing much needed currency to their country. Like the rest of us, they just wanted to improve things for their families. It had been declared illegal under the Chilean constitution to be a mercenary, but after seeking advice from lawyers within the Chilean judicial system Grupo Tactico hired them perfectly legally as security guards. To reassure the government and people of Chile still further, a statement was published in all the media declaring that their sole purpose in Iraq would be to guard buildings and facilities belonging to the lawful government of that country.

Nevertheless, because of the adverse publicity their recruitment had caused in Chile, a Socialist parliamentarian by the name of Navarrete was starting

proceedings to have these men jailed as mercenaries. He saw this as a way to get himself noticed, and a way into a possible soft job with the UN. He figured kicking up shit over the so-called mercenaries and the hiring of former military personnel would get him noticed by the right people. His main argument seemed to be that it was morally wrong for former military personnel who may have been involved in previous human rights issues to be hired in any security roll. He hoped this was just the issue that would ingratiate him with the United Nations and its Human Rights Commission. Not many people in the present government took him seriously, after all the men were being hired as security guards and they would be bringing their wages back to Chile to spend. This would get a lot of unemployed people back into work. Where was the problem?

In all fairness to Blackwater the company was fighting in their corner, and had sent a legal representative to Chile insisting once again they were only being hired in a protective security roll. Triple Canopy, another top American Security Company was also hiring Chileans and had made their own representations to the Chilean government. The Chileans themselves were not too bothered either: it was only politics and they were doing nothing wrong. It was considered by all of them to be worth the risk to give their families a better life and they figured they had right on their side. I had to admire their guts. There had been some people within Blackwater's management that thought the hiring of former Chilean military was not a good idea but the company owner Erik Prince, himself a former SEAL, thought otherwise. He had served in Chile and respected their soldiers, and he was well up for hiring them. When the chance for overseas security work was advertised in Chile over 800 former Special Forces soldiers applied. Many who had been sacked from the military that had supported Pinochet had been living on the bread line ever since their discharge. For them this was their one chance to make a bit of money and drag themselves and their families out of the gutter where they had been dumped.

The recruiter was a guy called Mike Pizarro. He had his fingers in many South American pies and was a well-known wheeler dealer on the South American Security scene. A former Chilean officer himself, he had worked for the US Government and then CNN. Originally he had served as an officer in the Chilean Army, and then resigned to join the US Marines. He wanted to see action and didn't think he was going to get that with the Chilean Military. He had dual nationality so it was an easy move from one to the other. Once in the Marines he adopted the name 'Mike'. He was soon granted his wish for action and moved through the Latin American countries with the US Southern Command, working as a translator, and brushing shoulders with some of the highest ranking officers at that time. On leaving the army he saw a golden

opportunity to offer Blackwater a source of cheap but highly trained former military personnel from his own country's armed forces. His first attempt was brushed aside, but in due course he managed to get an interview with the company owner who told Mike to put his money where his mouth was. They agreed that Pizzaro would pick a group of his candidates, train them up and have them ready for a pre selection. If the owner liked what he saw, he would consider a contract.

Mike set up an office in Santiago and started recruiting. An advertisement in the Chilean daily El Mercurio started the ball rolling, but unfortunately rumours started circulating as well. Some said that Grupo Tactico was offering between \$2500 and \$3000 US a month. When you consider that the average wage for a Chilean soldier was \$400 a month it was not an offer to turn down lightly. Many officers in the Chilean Military resigned in order to apply and this didn't help Mike in his efforts to keep out of the Chilean Legal System's bad books. Other rumours said he was working for the CIA. Mike hadn't really thought out his public relations and advertising too well, causing the volunteers and himself a lot of unnecessary bad publicity.

Despite all this, Grupo Tactico still managed to present their first 300 pick of the bunch at a secret location in Chile. Under Chilean law the guards could not be trained in their own country, so Mike had simply evaluated the candidates himself and then picked the best - those he considered already sufficiently trained and with the specialist knowledge needed to do the job. Luckily for him his choice of candidates was spot on. The Blackwater evaluation team liked what they saw and reported back favourably to their HQ. From the 300 tested, the first batch of 100 former Chilean military personnel were called forward by the company to their ranch for further assessment and training, prior to deployment. Of these, seventy-eight and Mike finally arrived. Of course at the time we knew very little of this. There were small articles about them in the News, but we were too busy getting ourselves ready to be worried about the foot soldiers. That was someone else's problem for the time being.

About this time a new addition to the office was nailed to the wall. This was The Battle Board, where all our group names began to appear. Blackwater had nominated team leaders for each contract and was building the teams around them according to the skills that were needed in each location. We still didn't know where we were going, though, as each location had a single code name. At this stage it was all on a 'need to know' basis, and we didn't need to know. One team leader had the call sign 'K2'. Names had already appeared underneath his, and mine was added to the bottom of the list. The name of one location

disappeared overnight because the company had not succeeded in securing that contract, and the names underneath the code words disappeared and reappeared elsewhere on the board. Karbala, Samawah, Hilla and Diwaniyah were some of the locations mentioned.

We didn't know at that time that in each location we would be looking after a politician and his administrative staff, and what the admin staff didn't know was that they were considered 'strap hangers' - in other words expendable. Our orders were to save and protect the principal at all costs, but his staff were secondary. I'm sure every effort would be made to save them in an emergency, but I hoped we'd never have to put it to the test. All these politicians belonged to the negotiating teams working for Mr. Paul Bremer the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), whose task was to negotiate a settlement between the warring Iraqi factions and thereby bring peace and stability to the area. It was a noble cause, but I thought a bit like 'pissing in the wind'. It was an impossible task in the present Iraqi political situation.

Early on in the training, during one of the many briefings on the country and places we were going to, we had been advised to grow facial hair and a full beard if possible. It seems our Arab friends respected anyone with a moustache and beard as showing age and wisdom. I was not convinced, and apart from the usual 'Mexican' moustache worn by most young British paratroopers in the '70s, I had never attempted to grow a beard. The fact was I could grow hair anywhere except my head. I'd always had thin hair, probably due to wearing a beret from an early age. I had started off as an army cadet and always seemed to be in the army wearing military headgear after that. Years of wearing helmets while driving armoured personnel carriers, jumping out of planes and performing similar military activities had taken its toll on my follicles and I doubted if I could grow a full set even if I was sprayed with compost. It had been a few days since I had stopped shaving and I was starting to look like a poor man's George Michael look-alike. It itched like hell, and I was beginning to wonder if it was worth it. The things we do for money! I thought.

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***Iraq Coalition Casualties***

***PSD, Convoy, and Site Security FEB 2004.***

<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Incident</b>
<b><i>08/02/2004</i></b>	<b><i>Tomasi Ramatau</i></b>	<b><i>Fiji</i></b>	<b><i>Killed by Mortar Baghdad</i></b>
<b><i>16/02/2004</i></b>	<b><i>Ray Parkes</i></b>	<b><i>American</i></b>	<b><i>Killed in Ambush Baghdad</i></b>
<b><i>23/02/2004</i></b>	<b><i>Al Clayton</i></b>	<b><i>American</i></b>	<b><i>Killed by IED, Unknown</i></b>