

CRITICAL IMPACT REPORT

THE POLITICS OF PROFILE AND THE PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY CONTRACTOR





CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	2	Glossary
			AHRC Arts and Humanities Research Council
			AQ Al Qaeda
2	THEORETICAL FRAME: IDENTITY WORK	4	BG Bodyguard
2.1	METHOD AND IDENTITY TALK		CP Close Protection
			CTW Career Transition Workshop
			CV Curriculum Vitae
3	REFLECTING ON SECURITY PROFILE	6	ELC Enhanced Learning Credit
3.1	CONTRACTOR PERCEPTIONS		ESRC Economic and Social Research Council
3.2	DRIVING		FCO Foreign and Commonwealth Office
			GMC General Motor Corporation
			GPMG General Purpose Machine Gun
4	‘LOOKING THE PART’: APPEARANCE AS IDENTITY WORK	12	GPS Global Positioning System
4.1	‘GEARDOS’ AND EQUIPMENT		IBA Interceptor Body Armour
4.2	‘HEADS THAT MIGHT POP OFF THE BODY’: STEROID USE AND BIG MEN		ICoC International Code of Conduct
			IRA Irish Republican Army
			KIA Killed in Action
			LN Local Nationals
5	REFLECTING ON HOST POPULATION PERCEPTION	17	MoD Ministry of Defence
			NFL National Football League
6	FACTORS BELIEVED TO INFLUENCE SECURITY PROFILES	22	NGO Non Governmental Organisation
6.1	INSIDE THE HIGH PROFILE MINDSET		NI Northern Ireland
			PMC Private Military Company
			PMSC Private Military and Security Company
			PR Public Relations
7	‘YOU NEED TO HAVE SOMETHING ABOUT YOU’: LOW PROFILE	25	PSC Private Security Company
7.1	EMPLOYING LOCAL NATIONALS		PSD Personal Security Detail
7.2	CONTINGENCY AS KEY		RMP Royal Military Police
			RUC Royal Ulster Constabulary
			SAS Special Air Service
8	THE ROLE OF MILITARY BACKGROUND	34	SF Special Forces
8.1	STAYING AND FIGHTING		SIA Security Industry Authority
8.2	MILITARY RANK AND ATTITUDE		SNCO Senior Non Commissioned Officer
8.3	ADAPTABILITY: THINKING ON YOUR FEET		SOIs Standard Operating Instructions
8.4	CONTRACTORS AND THE ARMED CP ROLE: CIVILIAN VERSUS MILITARY?		SOPs Standard Operating Procedures
			SUV Sport Utility Vehicle
			SWAT Special Weapons and Tactics
			TCN Third Country Nationals
9	CONCLUDING DISCUSSION	39	TL Team Leader
			VIP Very Important Person

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

HIGH PROFILE VERSUS LOW PROFILE? ALL I CAN SAY IS THIS, FOR THE LAST 17 YEARS I HAVE WORKED IN COUNTRIES WHERE MOST GUYS WOULDN'T WORK, BECAUSE THEY HAVEN'T THE ABILITY. AT NO TIME HAVE I EVER RAISED MY WEAPON (IF INDEED I HAD ONE) IN ANGER, NOR HAVE I EVER BEEN SHOT AT. THAT MUST SAY SOMETHING. WORKING AS A LOW PROFILE OPERATOR IS INDEED A UNIQUE SKILL. SOME TRY, BUT DON'T GET IT. THEY NORMALLY GET COMPROMISED, KILLED OR KIDNAPPED, WHICH HAS HAPPENED ON MANY OCCASIONS. (BRITISH CONTRACTOR; EXTRACT OF EMAIL TO AUTHOR, OCTOBER 2012)

Over the last decade or so, the PMSC industry¹ has grown exponentially in both size and significance and has generated interest from scholars, NGO's, charities, pressure groups, the media, governments and the industry's trade bodies themselves. This has led to initiatives ranging from attempts to regulate the private security industry, through to critique of PMSC's presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. In the simplest of terms, commentary on the industry from this broad community of stakeholders can be condensed into two positions; that there exists 'problems of the industry' (to be solved through regulation and related initiatives), or that the industry itself 'is a

problem' (requiring that it be outlawed or limited in some way, however unlikely that might be).²

No matter what normative position is taken towards an industry of growing centrality to conflict and its aftermath, it's clear that PMSCs are of indisputable relevance to the times in which we live. Given their importance, and the extensive debate they stimulate, it is striking to note the paucity of closely focused, thick description of the very people to which much discussion alludes, yet rarely considers in anything other than an impressionistic and anecdotal sense.³ Rather, in the absence of rigorous empirical research into the identity of these

(mainly) men, those supportive or otherwise of the industry have tended to represent contractors in two-dimensional terms. For example, following critical commentary typically associated with academics, NGO's and the media, contractors are frequently labelled in a derogatory sense as modern day, trigger happy mercenaries. At the far end of the spectrum and in contrast, lobbyists and others broadly sympathetic to the industry often frame contractors as professionals working in extremely challenging conditions who are tainted by a small number of bad companies employing so-called cowboys.⁴ Meanwhile, running alongside these polarised contractor representations are ongoing initiatives to reform the industry through self regulation,⁵ underlined most notably in the 2011 ICoC that had been signed by 592 companies at the time of writing.⁶

Set against this backdrop, the current report contributes towards the growing interest in contractor identity derived from the actors themselves about whom much is assumed, a good deal has been written, yet little is known. It does so through the eyes of former and currently employed contractors, and as such moves beyond the mercenary stereotype. Considered in specific regard to questions of security and professionalism – an agenda set largely by the respondents themselves - this report provides an in-depth snapshot of contractor's self-image as it is constituted in relation to those of their directly experienced and sometimes imagined peers.

Overall, this research shines a light on the largely hidden social world of the private security contractor that continues to feed enduring, yet misplaced assumptions about the kinds of individuals that work within the industry, along with scant knowledge of what it is they actually do.⁷ While the qualitative material detailed below should not be generalised to a diverse workforce that has a global presence, is engaged in a range of evolving roles and comprises individuals from the global North, the global South and beyond, nonetheless these

findings are intended as a rigorous empirical resource of potential interest to those who seek a dispassionate window onto the social universe of the private security contractor.

Given the complexities of the human condition, it is important to note that in foregrounding the views, perceptions and attitudes of contractors asked to talk about what security means to them in their professional practice, findings are at certain points inconsistent and contested. In this way, narratives included below often speak as much to the identity of the respondents themselves, as they do to those 'other' contractors both imagined and known personally to members of the sample. Thus, the report is not presenting some kind of definitive truth about who is most competent for example, or what kinds of approaches to security work are the best. Rather, it provides an insight into the social-relational dynamics shaping perception of self and other, the likes of which have a political importance for not only how security contracting is seen from within, but also in regard to how contractors may be perceived by local communities who have no choice but to host them on their streets, and in their towns.

¹ The word industry is used here in its broadest sense to capture the breadth of activities undertaken by security companies working in a global context. However, how far armed CP (a key focus of this report) can be labelled 'an industry' is a moot point; rather it is a specific role constituting a tiny proportion of overall security activities.

² Another voice here (albeit one that might be categorised in its problem solving guise), is that of contractors themselves in regard to what they perceive as particular injustices of the industry, including one respondent who bemoaned the 'top heavy' organization of some companies.

³ For an exception, see Volke Franke, *Attitudes, Values and Professional Self-Conceptions of Private Security Contractors in Iraq: An Exploratory Study* (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2010) for provisional research into questions of contractor identity.

⁴ However, there are complexities here in regard to the churning of contractors on the circuit such that a number of contractors may have worked in companies with poor reputations prior to moving to more professional outfits.

⁵ By no means is there a consensus around the extent to which self-regulation is desirable. For example, after reading the current report in its draft form, a British contractor contacted the author via email to say that, 'self governing security companies [were] ... an absolute waste of time and resource. Those who [support] this most probably work for a huge company who profit from self governance'.

⁶ See icoc-psp.org/ accessed 5th February 2013.

⁷ Apposite in this respect is the recent visit of a television camera crew, producer and presenter to a company training armed CP and allied skills for so-called hostile regions. On arrival at the training facility, it was clear that the crew were seeking an evocative and sensational 'bullets and guns' frame for their popularist, prime time show. The reality was somewhat less glamorous. Endless camera shots of instructors and students working diligently at laptops planning for both the routine and the contingent aspects of CP operations hardly make for compelling viewing. It remains to be seen whether or not it is possible to produce a programme that can balance the realities of armed CP work with audience expectation around the stereotypical action world of the mercenary.



2 THEORETICAL FRAME: IDENTITY WORK

IDENTITY IS A KEY CONCEPT WITHIN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND CARRIES A WIDE RANGE OF DEFINITIONS. IN ORDER TO BEST EXPLAIN CONTRACTOR IDENTITY, I USE THE CONCEPT IDENTITY WORK WHICH MOVES BEYOND THE NOTION THAT IDENTITY IS A ‘THING’ IMPOSED ON OTHERS, TO SEEING IT AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS THAT ONE DOES IN AN ACTIVE SENSE.

Identity work refers to an ongoing, fluid practice that develops in tandem with the meanings attached to it from the actors themselves. This conception of identity work depends on moving beyond theoretical abstraction through noting that individuals’ performance of identity is both material and symbolic.

Identity work transforms the social environment of those involved - as well in the current case - influence the ways that operations are carried out; identity and practice are co-constitutive. To illustrate: the use of steroids by some contractors to fulfil a particular identity-ideal of musculature and masculinity can be seen as one element of the wider sub-cultural context of the contractor’s social world relevant to this theoretical formulation. Here, identity work turning on the ingestion of steroids may hinder operational effectiveness through (1) limiting physical agility, (2) inducing an unpredictable temperament in the contractor, and in turn (3) potentially lead to the intimidation of the host population who may already have experienced hostile forms of over-bearing, militarised masculinity. Following the approach taken by symbolic interactionists⁸ and interpretive anthropologists⁹ and to summarize, identity is always in the making and emerges intersubjectively through interaction. This theoretical approach provides insightful explanations as to why contractors act in the ways they do, as conveyed in terms of their own making within contexts that both constrain and liberate identity possibilities. What kind of security contractor is it possible to be? As we will see, these possibilities are shaped by numerous variables, chief amongst which – at least as far as many of the respondents understand it here - are narratives (and practices) associated with UK/U.S identity.

2.1 METHOD AND IDENTITY TALK

This research draws on findings from participant observation and observation of contractors in a mix of operational and training environments in Afghanistan, the

U.S, Eastern Europe and the UK. It is also informed by face-to-face interviews, on-line interviews, telephone interviews,¹⁰ written responses to email, and other less formal means of data collection,¹¹ for example idle exchanges in non-interview settings. Findings are presented primarily in the form of identity talk through which personal identity was made meaningful to the actors concerned and the author. Given that contractors are often imputed with the social identity of mercenary (a label rejected by the majority, though embraced by a small number), the approach to understanding identity used below focuses on how members of the sample set about self designation;¹² in other words, how did they present themselves? In conveying aspects of their inner life articulated through identity talk, contractors are observed making considerable efforts to distance themselves from the mercenary moniker and its allied identity attributes of self interest, greed and an overall moral deficit that those outside the world of private security may find objectionable.¹³ Findings reveal that for many in the sample, the identity of mercenary is found to be at odds with personal identity and this tension is dealt with by associational distancing from others within the wider professional community¹⁴ through their derogatory labelling as cowboys.

As we will also see, associational distancing turned on the heuristic of low versus high security profile – notwithstanding the numerous external constraints dictating such stances. In turn, security profile becomes a metaphor for professionalism and functions as the prime symbolic and material manifestation of contractor identity work. However, it is not simply that identity work and security profile articulate closely with one another, but also that security profile has a political dimension that underlies one of the principal ways in which contractors become labelled as mercenaries. High profile approaches that involve aggressive driving, pointing weapons at bystanders and an overall attempt to achieve security through

intimidation¹⁵ are – justifiably or not - more obviously linked in the minds of onlookers to self-interest flowing from an overall disregard for host populations. Infamous in this regard and taken to its extreme, are the shootings in Baghdad’s Nisour Square by members of a Blackwater¹⁶ PSD as the most tragic aspect of a wider pattern of contractor transgression. But, more than that, each and every aggressive, high profile act (when perceived as such by others in the contracting community or by local people), has served to damage the reputation of the private security industry, with questions remaining over how far aggressive stances have generated insecurity rather than its converse. Whether or not derived from sound operational intent grounded in the risk of death and injury to VIP/Principal or contractor, many have argued that at the very minimum, a good proportion of contractors’ approach to security has been excessive and detrimental to PMSC-civil relations. At the same time, the routine exercise of restraint and professionalism remains under-reported and of little interest to the media or indeed, most others.

Achieving the balance between a profile believed sufficient to ensure security of the person/s or materials in question, coupled with the ability to maintain the support of the local population will always remain a challenge, and this report offers a modest contribution to debate in this area through the analytical binary of high versus low security profile. As U.S Colonel Schumacher (retired) astutely notes ‘there is much controversy over how security contractors should dress, appear, and conduct themselves in a war zone.’¹⁷ Should contractors conceal weapons, or alternatively might they drive around ‘in black Suburbans, Yukons and Avalanches with the windows ... down and guns ... pointed out in every direction’?¹⁸ Should vehicles have a ‘gunner on the ready [wearing] black body armor and a ... pistol strapped to their thigh’?¹⁹ How far should these men be prepared ‘to shoot to kill in the blink of an eye’?²⁰ Is this the look of the

‘quintessential “arrogant American” [who aims to] give insurgents pause through an imposing and confident appearance’,²¹ or is this a ‘politically incorrect’ exemplar likely to alienate those ‘in international circles’²² and we might add, others whose country is being occupied by this armed presence? Do ‘contractors swear by’ this approach and does it ‘get the job done?’,²³ or does this stance ‘directly undercut a central theme of counterinsurgency doctrine’?²⁴ How far do aggressive, high profile operations exert a negative impact on the legitimacy of the international presence, and with the current report in mind, what can be said about the politics of profile as a key element of strategy? These and other questions are now taken up within the context of the empirical data, analysis and Concluding Discussion (see page 39).



8 Blumer, H. (1969 [1998]) ‘The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism’, in J. M. Bonivin [ed.] *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Pp. 1-60.
9 Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Perseus Books.
10 A combined total of 74 interviews were conducted using these three methods.
11 It also includes the use of contractor memoir material. For a discussion on the limitations of this form of data, see Paul Higate (2012) ‘Cowboys and Professionals: The Politics of Identity Work in the Private and Military Security Industry’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 40(2): 321-341.
12 D. A. Snow and L. Anderson (1987) ‘Identity Work Among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 92(6): 1336-1371; 1347.
13 This distancing can be seen as an informal – yet key element of wider attempts to professionalise the industry.
14 Snow and Anderson, ‘Identity Work Among the Homeless’, p. 1349.

15 Schumacher, G. (2006) *A Bloody Business. America’s War Zone Contractors and the Occupation of Iraq*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press. Pp 1-304; p. 170.
16 Despite the various name changes of the company Blackwater (Xe Services followed by Academi), the original name has become a shorthand for all that is negative about the private security industry and remains current in the language of contractors (and others) who wish to dissociate, or make a wider negative point about contractors of particular aggressive kinds.
17 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 169.
18 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
19 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
20 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
21 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
22 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
23 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*. p. 169.
24 T. X. Hammes (2010) ‘Private Contractors in Conflict Zones: The Good, the Bad and the Strategic Impact’, *Strategic Forum*, November 2010: pp. 1-16; 10.

3 REFLECTING ON SECURITY PROFILE



As indicated, the most dominant theme to emerge during the pilot and subsequent phases of the current study was that of security profile where, unprompted, conversation flowed about respondent's perception of fellow contractors in relation to how they conducted security work, and in turn presented themselves to members of the host population during PSD or CP duties. In keeping with the centrality of actor meaning to providing a window onto contractor's identity work, the importance of profile was operationalised in the form of an open interview schedule where, in the first instance, contractors were asked to discuss their own definition of low and high profile. What did security profile mean to them? And considered in explicitly analytical terms, how was security profile constituted relationally through the lens of identity work and processes of associational distancing? In the first of numerous responses to these lines of enquiry and at its most basic, a British contractor said:

SECURITY PROFILE COULD BE DEFINED AS THE STANCE, ATTITUDE OR ACTIONS TAKEN BY SECURITY TEAMS IN ORDER TO INCREASE OR DECREASE THE AGGRESSIVENESS AND NATURE OF THEIR POSITION IN RELATION TO THE THREAT

While it was clear that there existed a degree of consensus around high and low profile approaches, in respect of the finer detail, contractors held in mind competing and sometimes contradictory definitions. In this way, the same contractor went on to argue that 'I do not see profile as [equivalent to] covert and overt. Whilst there may be overlaps I consider covert to be hidden and overt as open'. It quickly became evident that mention of security profile raised a good deal of complexity, and in the words of another British contractor, was framed broadly as that relating 'to the way security is conducted in the sense of what you do and how you do it.' At the same time another respondent stated that security profile invoked 'the resources,

dress, equipment etc that you have been allocated'. Security profile could also be 'changed independently of Team Operating procedures ... SOPs/SOLs may dictate the level of ... stance but the profile is generally adapted at team or even individual level'. This element of flexibility and discretion went so far as to influence the subtleties of weapon carriage, noted in this example by a British contractor invoking the military context where:

MUCH LIKE THE BRITISH ARMY IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND BASRA [A TEAM] MAY BE WEARING BODY ARMOUR ... AND CARRYING PLATOON WEAPON SYSTEMS SUCH AS GPMG/ LMG, BUT THE STANCE IN WHICH THESE WEAPONS ARE ADOPTED AND CARRIED MAY BE RELEVANT

He went on to explain that in Bosnia in the mid 1990's, procedures whereby soldiers carried rifles by their side had found their way into the commercial sector, though are taught on only very few training courses intended to prepare individuals for employment as contractors. This so-called 'G5 carry'²⁵ was designed to confer a less aggressive posture, help in the process of 'integration' (though precisely what was meant here remained unspecified) and was seen by the contractor as low profile. Other respondents (including both U.S and British contractors) would consider that keeping a weapon hidden, or not using one altogether is a more appropriate indicator of 'going low profile'. Differing views of what might constitute low profile emerge here between the British contractor-turned-author Luke Duffy and an American contractor he spoke with whilst in Iraq. The American contractor is criticised by Duffy who said, 'your weapons are supposed to be out of sight though. That's what low profile is.' Duffy continues, 'I looked down and shook my head, then looked back up to meet his gaze. "You ever done low profile? And I don't mean this shite that we are doing here. I mean proper low profile." Duffy concludes that the other contractor had

not, and went on to note that low profile 'is a completely different concept, and was more than just wearing your body armour under your shirt'.²⁶ A former member of the RMP drew on a policing analogy in his discussion of one of a number of rationales for why different security profiles may be used where:

ON A FRIDAY NIGHT AT THE END OF THE MONTH NEAR PAYDAY, IS IT MORE EFFECTIVE TO MAINTAIN A LOW PROFILE, IE REMAIN IN VEHICLES AND LARGELY OUT OF SITE IN A NON AGGRESSIVE POSTURE? [OR] ... THE BRONZE²⁷ COMMANDER MAY DECIDE TO FLOOD THE AREA WITH RESOURCES IN THE HOPE TO DETER OR PREVENT PUBLIC DISORDER

From the towns and streets of the UK through to what many would understand as the hostile contexts²⁸ of Iraq and Afghanistan, this high profile approach is often believed to discourage those intending to cause problems 'through the sheer weight of resources used ... that may deter an enemy' as he put it. This he saw as the 'simplest form of security and is physical security-centric.' Yet, it was also 'resource intensive, in both human and physical terms and lacks sustainability. The high profile approach relies on resources being available and ready at all times'. Impossible to know definitively, the key calculation at stake here is the 'perception of such a profile versus its actual effectiveness', as he then noted. Invoking the fluidity of the security situation as well as those who may target contractors, one British respondent stated 'security profiles change on a daily basis according to the threat level [raising questions around] the modus operandi and what is being used against you'. However, when a team or individual has committed to a high profile approach, it may be difficult to move towards a more discreet stance, thus 'once fully kitted-up and tooled-up it is difficult to de-escalate', as one British contractor working in Kabul noted. Having identified

yourself as a potential target and shown your hand as it were, the onus turns on ensuring that a potential attack is likely to fail. As the Kabul based contractor went on to say:

IF YOU'RE STICKING OUT LIKE SORE THUMBS IN VEHICLES, YOU NEED TO SAY 'WELL THEY KNOW IT IS US [AND SO WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO] SHOW THEM THAT WE ARE PREPARED TO TAKE THEM ON, [THAT] WE'RE IN THEIR FACE'. [WE ARE] SAYING 'NOT US ... TRY SOMEONE ELSE'

3.1 CONTRACTOR PERCEPTIONS

One of four female contractors to be interviewed relayed an experience she had when, after pulling to a halt in a vehicle with a diplomatic licence plate at the rear of an American military convoy 'a soldier lifted the rear window and pointed his weapon straight at me'. She went on to say that this 'aggressive act defied logic and common-sense' and left her wondering anew about the threats she faced in the city. In further discussion, she put this act down to 'their military training and culture ... including "their" gun culture', a view shared by British and U.S contractors alike in the wider sample. Making a similar point, a British contractor in a training role²⁹ drew attention to incidences of both contractors and military personnel 'pointing weapons at people, being aggressive, not showing humility and not caring'. His concern was with both the lower ranks and those in command, in this case a Colonel. He went on to say that 'we've just come back from training an American unit and their Colonel said "if anybody is seen carrying a weapon, we shoot "em. That's our rules of engagement"'. The contractor replied to the Colonel in the following terms 'you need to change ... this is bullying [and accounts for your] bad reputation, it's blind panic'. The contractor then discussed this aggressive posturing in regard to 'jumpiness seen on our [training] scenarios. They hear a bang, see someone with a weapon and shoot

25 Celik, M. (2005) *Comparison of the British and Canadian CIMIC and the U.S. CMO Doctrines to the NATO CIMIC Doctrine*. Masters Thesis. Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School. Pp. 1-99; 24. Thesis available at dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a443057.pdf accessed 7th August 2012.

26 Luke Duffy (2011) *Running the Gauntlet: The Private War in Iraq*. Authorhouse: Kindle Edition. p. 303.

27 National Policing Improvement Agency (2009) *Guidance on Command and Control*. London: Association of Chief Police Officers. Pp. 1-41; 13. Available at acpo.police.uk/documents/crime/2009/200907CRICCG01.pdf accessed 7th August 2012.

28 Can all agree definitively on what constitutes a 'Hostile Context'? Much like the numerous buzzwords and phrases in circulation in the private security sphere including 'Executive Protection', 'Tactical Shooting' and 'Threat Management', 'Hostile Context' may have as much a commercial utility – thought by some to stimulate demand for security services - as it does to capturing the empirical reality out on the ground, howsoever gauged.

29 In this particular instance, the data was derived from a period of participant observation on a training course in the U.S attended by the author who trained alongside other students eventually qualifying as a Close Protection Officer for employment in 'Hostile Regions'.



them’. While this is clearly unacceptable, it is also a problem because as he said, ‘it is too much liability’ and plays directly into the hands of those doing the agitating, ‘this is what these people want you to do ... they want you to react to that’.³⁰ In contrast, the U.S contractor J. T. Storm writes in his memoir of contracting in Iraq that reaction is key where, if ‘you do not react, if you do nothing, then you’re basically “DONE”, it’s like giving up. You have to do something!’ His view was that ‘if you don’t, you’re dead, and probably everyone with you is dead. You see, that is what they want! ... the whole terrorist theme [is designed to create] as much violence, chaos, and havoc as possible’. In turn, this engenders fear where ‘people [are] so scared and stunned that they do not even move, no reaction.’ His remedy – unlike the view of many in the current research - was to be pre-emptive to ‘always react and, if possible, act first’.³¹ As we note further below, Storm’s view that ‘it is always better to be on the offense rather than defense ... because you have a plan on the offensive’,³² was seen as problematic by the majority of the sample who discussed the importance of contingency planning designed to avoid confrontation in the first place rather than deal with it head-on.³³ In a deeper sense, Storm’s view – again challenged by respondents in this particular research at least – was that ‘unrelenting violence, has settled more disputes than anything else, contrary to wishful thinking ... but hey, it’s the truth and that is what this whole thing is about’.³⁴

A British contractor linked high profile approaches with particular kinds of personality and what he considered to be unprofessionalism indicated by ‘boasting and egos [which] are strongly detrimental to the industry’. Another British contractor who went on to author a memoir about his experiences in Iraq continued on the theme of over-response ingrained into security practice. Recalling one particular incident, he said ‘the Americans [military] were ambushed and a couple of days later [returned] and annihilated everything there, and everything around – this is more than death!’ He continued, ‘their story is “yeah man we used so many thousands of rounds ...”’. He said that the incident ‘sounded like the battle of the Alamo!’, and that ‘straight away I thought “I would not want to be with them”’. He contrasted what he saw as this heavy-handed response with his own approach where ‘[we had an incident] and had contact [were fired on] and returned fire, [but when we] were in line with villas I stopped firing’. He was keen to stress that his intention with this story was not to portray himself in a good light by saying ‘well done [names himself]’, but rather, ‘I’m just saying that they [the insurgents] had stopped firing’. This he saw as conferring a degree of ‘kudos on [his] post-incident report’ through exercising ‘restraint’ rather than its polar opposite where ‘they [contractors/military] might say “yeah man, I just kept spraying them, putting rounds down”’. He moved from personal experience to that of the most

notorious of recent incidents in Iraq (noted above), and stated:

LET’S PULL THAT BLACKWATER LOT OUT [THOSE INVOLVED IN THE NISOUR SQUARE SHOOTINGS] AND ASK THEM ‘SO WHAT WERE YOUR ACTIONS ON MATE?’ THEY WOULD PROBABLY REPLY ‘WELL MAN, WE GOT TAKEN OUT, SO WE JUST SHOT OUR WAY OUTA” THERE’

He saw over-response as ‘getting carried away with it all’, and that being professional was its converse, ‘a British sort of thing’ where ‘I know the value of being stiff upper lip³⁶ ... without being posh’. He stated that ultimately, he had a lot of respect for ‘someone who is calm’. Storm, as did others in the sample, took a less judgemental view of those involved in the Blackwater incident and stated:

I AM CERTAINLY NOT STANDING UP FOR ATONING FOR OR TRYING TO JUSTIFY ANY OF THE BLACKWATER INCIDENTS ... LIKE I’VE SAID MANY TIMES, [THEY] HAVE THEIR FUCKUPS JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE. BUT UNLESS YOU WERE THERE, YOU CANNOT JUDGE ANYTHING OR ANYONE. I’M SURE IT HAS BEEN

‘MONDAY-MORNING’ QUARTERBACKED TO DEATH, BUT WHAT I’M SAYING IS THE GUYS WHO WERE THERE, RIGHT THEN, HAD TO MAKE A SPLIT DECISION³⁷

There was evidence for a U.S./British contractor divide within the methodological confines of the current study in terms of the latter’s frequent denigration of the former’s professionalism. Yet - albeit tongue in cheek in the following example - the British contractor Phil Campion said ‘recently, I’ve struck up a friendship with a US Marine Corps Colonel, at his base in Kabul. I love his gung-ho approach to things!’³⁸ The British contractor in the training role discussed above relayed the more dominant line emerging from the research around what he saw as the inherent contradictions in the ways that U.S troops were taught, and subsequently conducted themselves in the commercial world where:

THEY ARE TEACHING THEM TO POINT THEIR WEAPONS [AT PEOPLE] ... THAT’S THE WRONG ATTITUDE TO HAVE BUT [AT THE SAME TIME], THEY WON’T ALLOW THEM TO RUN AROUND ON THE RANGE [WEAPON TRAINING FACILITY] WITH THEIR SAFETY [CATCH] OFF! THIS IS MORE APPLICABLE TO A CONTACT [COMING UNDER ENEMY FIRE] SITUATION. THEY HAVE DOUBLE STANDARDS AND DOUBLE VALUES ON THINGS ALL THE TIME

Unlike U.S respondents and authors included here, this contractor went on to argue that it was ‘not glamorous to use one’s weapon ... you need to think about security with “this” (points to his head), rather than with this (simulates a weapon)’. His stress on security as a ‘thinking man’s game’ was elaborated

further when he asked how many in the class had children/partners, and what we would think if they got injured or killed by a ‘trigger happy’ contractor using a weapon recklessly. At this point, the majority of the course members raised their hands, and he encouraged us to put ourselves in the shoes of the host population who have experienced such intimidation and violence³⁹ from contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan and continue to do so, albeit to a lesser degree than in recent years. In the view of the training contractor, the balance to be struck was between confidence in every aspect of the weapon systems used on the course, from stripping arms down, cleaning, servicing, and successfully reassembling them, their safe, competent and accurate use, and the wider over-arching principal that ‘the psychological training should be not to use a weapon as the ‘key and most important starting point’, as he put it. Rather than pathologising the problem solely as one of incompetent contractors, he argued that the key was ‘good training’. Drawing on the example of what were disparagingly described as the ‘retard’ military trainers ‘in Afghanistan and Iraq ... we’ve had those guys here [on training courses] and some are idiots’, he went on to express concern at ‘their weapons handling’ which was described ‘as absolutely disgustingly atrocious and they are teaching people! You are only as good as the people teaching you ... there is never a bad dog or a bad child, only a bad trainer.’ Making a similar point about training but in regard to understanding risk, a British contractor noted:

FROM SOUND TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE YOU GAIN IMMENSE KNOWLEDGE OF ASSESSING THE RISK, SOMETHING MANY ... TRAINING COURSES DO NOT COVER WITHIN THEIR PACKAGES. THEY LACK THIS [EXPERTISE] BECAUSE MANY OF THE INSTRUCTORS HAVEN’T A CLUE OF HOW TO OPERATE, SO THEY PASS

30 Having completed this course, I too over-reacted during an exercise and would have killed a non-threatening civilian, as did many of my (non- U.S) student peers undergoing CP training.

31 J. T. Storm (2008) Pushing the Envelope: *The Story of A Hired Gun in Iraq*. AuthorHouse: Kindle Edition. Location 2017-2018.

32 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 2032.

33 The observations made here and throughout the report resonate closely with controversial commentary by (British) Brigadier Aylwin-Foster on the U.S military’s approach in Iraq from 2003. See Aylwin-Foster, N. (2005) ‘Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations’, *Military Review*, November-December, pp 1-15.

34 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 2807-2810.

35 Put simply, ‘actions on’ refers to any probable activity (often defined in SOPs) requiring a specific response.

36 While appearing at first glance somewhat whimsical, the notion of the British ‘stiff upper lip’ has considerable explanatory valuable for how many in the sample set about their identity work in respect of security profile. The historical and cultural genesis of the ‘stiff upper lip’ has most recently been the subject of a major, three part BBC documentary (see: bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01n7rh4 accessed 11th October 2012), and is also the topic of the author’s forthcoming book focusing on the emotional heritage and trajectory of security contractor identity as it plays out along U.S and UK national lines.

37 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 2015.

38 Phil Campion (2011) *Born Fearless: From Kids’ Home to SAS to Pirate Hunter - My Life as a Shadow Warrior*. Quercus. Kindle Edition. Location 2828.

39 Although it is important to reiterate that the everyday professional practices of security contractors involving restraint and measured response pass largely beneath the radar since they are simply un-newsworthy.

40 Have those that have been injured or even killed as a consequence of getting within 100 metres of these convoys consciously ignored instructions, or rather, have they been unaware of, or perhaps misunderstood them?

41 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 86.

42 Bjork, K. and Jones, R. (2005) 'Overcoming Dilemmas Created by the 21st Century Mercenaries: conceptualising the use of private security companies in Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, 26(4-5): 777-796; 78. Those with knowledge of the academic discipline of International Relations will immediately recognise the security dilemma here.

43 Tim Beckman (2010) *Blackwater: From The Inside Out (The Path Less Travelled)*. HDTI. Kindle Edition. Location 2056

44 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p.136.

45 Bjork and Jones, 'Overcoming the Dilemmas', p. 785.

DOWN THEIR LACK OF EXPERIENCE TO THOSE ATTENDING THE COURSE. THE END PRODUCT IS THE SAME, AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS POORLY TRAINED AND ON THE STREETS WITH A GUN

However, a different view was expressed by Colonel Schumacher in regard to the perceived over-response of some contractors alluded to in the following quote. Commenting on the rules of engagement that permit military personnel and security contractors to open fire on vehicles (and potentially their drivers/passengers) that get within 100 metres and fail to heed warnings of various kinds, he notes that, on the contrary:

IT IS A TESTIMONY TO SELF-RESTRAINT ON THE PART OF BOTH MILITARY UNITS AND U.S CIVILIAN SECURITY CONTRACTORS THAT MORE INNOCENT PEOPLE HAVE NOT LOST THEIR LIVES FOR FOOLISHLY IGNORING⁴⁰ THESE RULES⁴¹

Revealing his deep unease with aggressive approaches, a British contractor who worked for a company with an exceptional record for protecting Principals/VIPs through an altogether more discreet, low profile approach told me that:

EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT THE BLACKWATERS OR THE TRIPLE CANOPIES RUNNING AROUND IN 6 OR 7 SUV’S WITH GUNS HANGING OUT ... TO US THAT MEANT EFFECTVELY PEOPLE WERE GOING TO BE GOING HOME IN BODY BAGS

In accounting for this high profile approach, a U.S contractor with military experience said that:

THE COMBAT ARMS OF THE U.S MILITARY LIKE TO BE AS HIGH PROFILE AS POSSIBLE. THEY BELIEVE THAT BEING THE BIGGEST, MOST WELL ARMED AND ARMOURED SCARY THING ON THE STREET PROVIDES YOU WITH THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF SECURITY

Yet, as the academics Bjork and Jones note:

THE HEAVILY ARMED SECURITY ACCOMPANYING DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS CAN ALSO UP THE STAKES IN THE EYES OF THE REBELS, CRIMINALS, SUICIDE BOMBERS AND KIDNAPPERS, AND MEANS THAT THEY WILL USE MORE FORCE AGAINST A WELL EQUIPPED ‘ENEMY’⁴²

With clear influence on the ways that many U.S PMSC’s employing former U.S military personnel approach the question of security stance, a U.S contractor said that ‘I do disagree with this [aggressive approach] but it was an attitude that I encountered during my time in the military’. Making the comparison with a British company, he noted that ‘in the private sector a lot of ... guys are [even] upset that they have to label their vehicles with signs that say “Private Security Company”!’ He believed that ‘they would prefer as low a profile as possible and to look as unimportant as possible’. Imbuing restraint with a positive meaning, and resonating with comments above, he stated that:

WE HAVE GUYS THAT BRAG THAT IN THEIR TIME ON THE CONTRACT THEY HAVE NEVER PULLED THE TRIGGER AND THAT TO THEM IS A POINT OF PRIDE, WHEREAS IN THE MILITARY, PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR EVERY EXCUSE THEY CAN TO SHOOT SOMETHING

However, while that was the case, in contrast to the prevailing conditions at the height of the insurgency, he also reflected on the very different context of Iraq during his deployment as a contractor, ‘maybe if I was in security back in 200*, I would see things differently’. At this time, he argued ‘there were a lot of cowboys just running around like crazy people. They were involved in small arms incidents and the illegal trading of arms’. He linked this phase of the industry to ‘the contracts they were on ... and the places that they were going to’. He continued, ‘you cannot run around Iraq like a cowboy anymore. You will get arrested by Iraqi forces ... we’ve seen dozens of arrests of private security contractors’. Other factors that may militate against the adoption of high profile approaches to security in current-day Iraq, turn on the fact that:

THE MILITARY HAS REALLY PULLED BACK AND THE CLOSEST HELP COULD BE 6 HOURS AWAY. PRIVATE SECURITY HAS SCALED BACK THEIR AGGRESSIVENESS ... THEY UNDERSTAND THERE IS NO CAVALRY COMING, AND THEY BETTER PLAY IT TO AVOID THE FIGHT

Making a similar point around the scope for aggressive posturing or what some might see as a high profile ‘all guns blazing’ mind-set, a U.S contractor also referring to Iraq said that, ‘in the past I would say that private security companies were more aggressive ... because some of them were backed by military forces’. Highlighting the asymmetrical nature of conflict more generally in Iraq (and similarly Afghanistan), and the limitations of a traditional armed military response, this contractor rounded up his contribution – in contrast to Storm’s view noted above around the unquestioned effectiveness of military violence by saying ‘there are no guerrilla or insurgent campaigns that I’m aware of for at least the last 50 years that have been won on the basis of firepower’. Framed in somewhat

counter intuitive terms, yet dovetailing with previous comments, a British contractor belied his ambivalence around the use of arms in the CP role when he argued that:

A WEAPON IS A REMINDER NOT TO USE IT. YOU NEED TO SHOW CONFIDENCE, NOT AGGRESSION AND INTIMIDATION. YOU MUST TREAT PEOPLE WITH RESPECT AND HUMILITY. THE KEY TO SECURITY IS ABOUT GETTING THEM [THOSE CONSTITUTING THE POTENTIAL THREAT TO THE PRINCIPAL] TO DO WHAT YOU WANT [USING A PARTICULAR] PRESENCE THAT DETERS IN A MODEST AND MEASURED WAY

3.2 DRIVING

A further widely discussed dimension of the high profile approach concerned the assertive, and as one British contractor put it, ‘aggressive and crazy’ driving of vehicles through dense traffic, a practice that, stated a U.S contractor ‘I knew the Iraq’s didn’t like’. Tim Beckman, a former contractor with Blackwater writes in his memoir of how best to move through the congested cities in today’s Iraq, ‘there is no more “making a hole” or “creating a bubble” allowed’.⁴³ This in contrast to earlier conditions where in referring to flexibility in approach and sensitivity to over-response, the British contractor Duffy recalls that:

TRAVELLING THROUGH THIS PART OF TOWN [IN IRAQ], WE ALWAYS USED MAXIMUM AGGRESSION BUT WITHOUT OVERREACTING RATHER THAN PASS THROUGH WITH GUNS BLAZING LIKE SOME COMPANIES WOULD HAVE DONE ... BEFORE ANYONE KNEW WE WERE THERE, WE WERE GONE FROM THE AREA. WE DIDN’T ALWAYS USE SIRENS EITHER. SOMETIMES IT

WOULD JUST BE A CASE OF USING THE LIGHTS WHEN WE THOUGHT IT BETTER⁴⁴

Aware that ‘arms do not provide total protection’, this contractor was most likely cognizant that the ‘all guns blazing approach can engender insecurity’⁴⁵ in certain contexts, as noted above and elaborated upon further in this report.

4 ‘LOOKING THE PART’: APPEARANCE AS IDENTITY WORK

ASIDE FROM GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON SECURITY PROFILE ALREADY NOTED, RESPONDENTS ALSO DISCUSSED THE PERSONAL APPEARANCE OF CONTRACTORS TO WHICH ATTENTION NOW TURNS.

4.1 ‘GEARDOS’
A former U.S contractor working in Iraq posted a photograph of himself on the web and recalls the response of a friend when he saw the image. He takes up the story:

I WAS WEARING ... A [NAMES COMPANY] POLO SHIRT AND [NAMES COLOUR OF] PANTS, IT WAS QUITE A [BORING LOOK] ACTUALLY, AND ONE FRIEND OF MINE ... SAID THAT HE WAS REALLY DISAPPOINTED IN THIS, ‘WHERE’S YOU GOATEE AND YOUR HOCKEY HELMET AND 3 DIFFERENT GUNS HANGING OFF YOUR BELT, YOU KNOW WHAT’S GOING ON? WHERE’S THE INDUSTRY GONE?’

Reflecting on his friend’s expectation of how a ‘proper contractor’ might choose to present himself, he discussed this ‘look’ marketed in magazines and aimed, amongst others, at the contracting community; ‘clearly that is the civilian [contractor] look and if you look at magazines, this is also the look marketed by *Blackhawk* magazine and *Soldier of Fortune* magazine’. Colleagues working for a well known British company in Iraq ‘did not look like that’, he stated. Indeed, he saw individuals dressing in this magazine-influenced style as buying into ‘a real prima donna kind of look, ie Blackwater’, linked in his experience with ‘guys who work for the State Department’. He then said:

IF I SAW SOMEONE WHO LOOKED LIKE THAT I WOULD MORE OR LESS THINK ... THEY WERE A JOKE ... IT’S JUST TOO ... SHOWY, YOU KNOW IT’S NOT NORMAL. IT LOOKS LIKE THE WAY WOMEN PUT ON MAKE-UP TO EMULATE [MODELS] IN COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE.⁴⁶ THEN YOU SEE OPERATORS AND THEY BUY ALL THE COOL GUY KIT AND GROW

THE GOATEE, AND THEY DRESS LIKE THE GUY THEY SEE IN THE MAGAZINE. THAT’S NOT ... RELATED TO COMPETENCY THAT’S JUST TRYING TO LOOK COOL

In contrasting his own working practice to those of contractors ‘with all the gear’, a British contractor said ‘I’ve seen such guys all over the world... [but] when I work I [only] have a med[ical] bag, compass, GPS, map and sat[ellite] phone ... not always a gun’. Other respondent’s talked of contractor’s ‘queer gear’, and one British contractor used the word ‘geardos’ to refer to those he believed felt compelled to fit in through wearing ad-hoc uniforms covered in various forms of ‘useless gadgetry’. In the view of another, a link existed between ‘sound guys ... who don’t come over as all Special Forces and kit accumulating ... who are ordinary’, in comparison to others ‘who I can’t stand ... [they are part of] the Gucci wearing crowd - all that gear ... why?’ He then said that he would ‘be really embarrassed wearing all that’. Further discussing his reservations, he stated that:

IN THE LEGION [FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION] WE WOULD HAVE TO WEAR WHAT WE WERE GIVEN ... YOU GET TO BAGHDAD AIRPORT AND YOU SEE CERTAIN PEOPLE STRUTTING AROUND WITH PISTOLS ON THEIR LEG, CHEST WEBBING AND YOU SORT OF THINK – DO THEY REALISE HOW STUPID THEY LOOK? MAYBE THEY ARE THE BIGGEST, TOUGHEST, MEANEST [CONTRACTOR] GOING. BUT TO ME THEY LOOK LIKE COMPLETE AND UTTER PLONKERS [STUPID PEOPLE]!

Campion records his experiences of a fellow contractor who he believed ‘was frightened of his own weapon. It’s a case of all the gear, no idea. And how many

of those bloody types have I met in this business before?’⁴⁷ he added. Picking up on what many in the sample saw as the ‘tough guy image’, the training contractor believed that they ‘wore this stuff because it makes them feel like the big man’. As the contractor turned author John Ashcroft argues, contracting is ‘not about proving manliness, or adrenalin or macho adventure. It’s just another job’.⁴⁸ Storm’s disillusioned view of the industry in Iraq was influenced in-part by the attitudes of some contractors. He states that:

THERE ARE ATTITUDES ABOUNDING IN THE CIVILIAN CONTRACTOR POPULATION HERE. YOU HAVE GUYS WHO THINK THEY ARE SO FUCKING ‘BAD ASS’ THEY ARE SINGLE-HANDEDLY GOING TO WIN THE WAR ... IN APPROXIMATELY TWELVE MONTHS OR LESS.⁴⁹

The ‘gung ho’ mentality of these contractors is manifest in their enthusiastic purchase of:

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT. THEY HAVE MORE SHIT ON THEIR IBA, WHICH IS BASICALLY WHAT THE MILITARY CALLS A BULLETPROOF VEST, THAN MOST OF THE SOLDIERS WHO HAVE TO DEAL WITH THIS ON A DAILY BASIS, WHICH IS SAD IN ITSELF⁵⁰

Consumption of equipment reached its zenith in the case of those with a ‘crazy mentality’ who, Storm recalls, were ‘freaking out to buy Camelbaks’. This kit has been developed by cyclists and other athletes to provide easily accessible fluids when training or competing, but these particular contractors acquired ‘the high-speed “Special Forces” Camelbak to put on their back and lug around’. This, despite the abundance of bottled water ‘everywhere; there is actually a water plant that was made by the military ... wherever

you go, there is water around’.⁵¹ On a personal note, the author recalls one of his fellow students on the training course he attended in the U.S who, similarly, was rarely without his Camelbak. This accompanied him continuously, even when the carriage of additional equipment in temperatures upwards of 40 degrees (for example, on the firing range) added to the physical burden of drills involving moving and firing; breaks for bottled water were frequent rendering such equipment unnecessary. Fascination with equipment earned one of Duffy’s colleagues the nickname of ‘Buzz Lightyear’, though the ‘geardo’ in question insisted that this kit ‘made his life easier’. In keeping with the contractor discussed above, Duffy notes that his own approach ‘was minimalist’ and he worked to the principal of ‘keeping it basic’. His focus was rooted in operational concerns, where ‘the more gadgets you have, the more time you’ll spend thinking about them and fiddling with them, rather than the job in hand’.⁵² Of course, this acquisitive behaviour⁵³ was good for business for those supplying the equipment, as Storm notes here:

YOU CAN ... WATCH PEOPLE BUYING EXTRA HIGH-SPEED, TACTICAL, SWAT, SPECIAL-FORCES EQUIPMENT AT THE ON-SITE SUPPLY STORE. WHAT A GOLD MINE THEY HAVE. GUYS ARE BUYING EXTRA BOOTS, HOLSTERS, KNIVES, ANYTHING.⁵⁴

Also related to appearance, but with a more obvious functionality, was the use of body armour that was believed by one British training contractor to have a deleterious psychological impact on those wearing it, since it created within them ‘a false sense of security’. The theme of equipment has been much discussed by journalists and others commenting on the industry, with this example from Schumacher resonating with critical observations around the onus on gear, but in this particular case, weapons:



46 The gender ironies in this comment underscore this particular contractor’s importance as a key respondent to the wider research project.
47 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 3155.
48 John Ashcroft, comment available at makingakilling.co.uk/faq3.html accessed 9th August 2012.
49 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 425.
50 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 211.
51 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 218.
52 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 78.
53 Not only was it clear that contractors had sufficient funds to purchase equipment, but also that (hyper)-consumerist behaviour such as that identified here may well have provided a sense of normality within an otherwise exceptional, and dangerous environment.
54 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 126.

STATE DEPARTMENT CONTRACTORS ARE EXEMPT FROM MANY OF THE RESTRICTIONS AND PROHIBITIONS ON CARRYING WEAPONS. IN FACT, BLACKWATER AND DYNCORP CONTRACTORS WORKING FOR THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE ARE ARMED TO THE TEETH. A DYNCORP CONTRACTOR DESCRIBES HIS ARMAMENT: ‘OUR EQUIPMENT IS STATE OF THE ART AND EACH OPERATOR IS ISSUED ROUGHLY TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS WORTH OF GEAR’⁵⁵

Taking a step back, it is important once again to raise the question of how this explicit display of militarised consumption and subsequent presentation may be perceived by those looking on. The scholar Hugo Slim, moving from direct concerns

of private security, sees such displays as ‘the northern face and footprint of humanitarianism and development’ where ‘Rayban sunglasses and sophisticated weapons’ can lead to individuals looking like ‘Robocop’. Going further, he raises the question of how far this consumption smacks of ‘colonialism’, where it is impossible to know how ‘groups with different perceptions ... including extremists, the general public, religious leaders and politicians’⁵⁶ may make sense of such displays, and with what consequence for security. A further topic of conversation very much in evidence during field-work in Kabul, concerned vehicles and their associated equipment. Recalling the words of a contractor in Iraq, Schumacher went on to say:

OUR VEHICLES ARE ALSO ‘UP TO SPEC’. WE HAVE MODERN, LUXURY-TYPE SUVs [SPORTS UTILITY VEHICLES] WITH BULLETPROOF

GLASS AND ARMORED PANELS. OUR HUMVEES ARE ALL ‘UP-ARMORED’... IN THE ‘SPECIAL OPS’ WORLD WE WOULD BE CALLED ‘GUCCI’ OR PRETTY⁵⁷

However, he went on to explain that this equipment was absolutely not for show, but had demonstrable utility to the hostile environment within which they worked where:

EACH OPERATOR HAS EQUIPMENT THAT IS DESIGNED AND WORN FOR HIS OWN OPERATIONAL NEEDS AND CAPABILITIES. WE WEAR WHAT WORKS. NONE OF US WEAR STUFF THAT WOULD BE CONSIDERED ‘HOLLYWOOD’; NO RAMBO KNIVES, PEACE AND LOVE PINS, OR STUFF LIKE THAT. WE SELECT OUR EQUIPMENT

BASED ON THREE CRITERIA: IT MUST BE RELIABLE, DURABLE, AND OPERATOR FRIENDLY. SO WE DO END UP WITH A LOT OF ‘GUCCI’ STUFF THAT MIGHT BE CALLED FADDISH BACK HOME, BUT THAT’S NOT THE REASON THE STUFF WAS SELECTED⁵⁸

Tellingly however, and chiming with earlier comments revealing the macho connotations of identity work based on equipment of this kind, the Colonel also writes ‘I guess, if the truth be known, when you put all that equipment on, the testosterone just ekes through your pores’.⁵⁹ Put in simple terms, critical views about the centrality of equipment to identity work noted above, versus those alluding to equipment and virility framed here by the Colonel in regard to testosterone, are drawing on competing ways in which to present oneself as a particular kind of male contractor. In turn, these presentations speak to how security is understood and practiced, explanations of which invoke questions of cultural background, company culture, client preference, nature of the contract and the kinds of threat believed to be dominating at the time of operations, to touch on but a few of those possible factors influencing profiles of different kinds.

4.2 ‘HEADS THAT MIGHT POP OFF THE BODY’: STEROID USE AND BIG MEN

In a related sense, hyper-masculine appearance was also important to an unknown yet clearly visible number of contractors believed to be using steroids. Here, the motivation to bulk-up bodies in this way may be thought by the contractors in question to intimidate potential insurgents, as well as provide a sense of group belonging in those contexts where company sub-culture is heavily influenced by use of the gym and steroids. While heavily muscled bodies likely provided a sense of ontological security and invulnerability for these actors, somewhat ironically they also hindered operational effectiveness in ways that underscore the

clear tensions between identity work and professionalism. Storm’s view was that ‘there are more soldiers on steroids over here than in the NFL and professional wrestling’. Identifying them was simple since these ‘guys [were all] bloated up and [had] a tiny head that looks like it is going to pop off of the body.’⁶⁰ He goes on to argue that steroids ‘were easy to get’. The reaction from friends and family, notes Storm, might be to say ‘damn, what the hell have you been eating?’ He continues with the following scenario:

YOUR HUSBAND COMES HOME FOR LEAVE WITH AN UNUSUALLY QUICK TEMPER, INCREASED LIBIDO, AND ACNE, WHICH HE BLAMES ON THE HEAT. I KNOW THERE ARE A LOT OF WIVES WHO, IF THEY THINK ABOUT IT ... KNOW IT’S TRUE THAT THEIR HUSBAND HAS USED STEROIDS⁶¹

Wives may be in denial since they are ‘just too happy to have their husband home’ and parents might look at their sons and say “‘he’s a man; he is growing up” ... no it’s steroids and he is growing out, not up’.⁶² Drawing on the relevance of muscle bound bodies and overall aggressive appearance in the case of U.S military personnel, Campion locates potential response to appearances of this kind within the local context, in this example a taxi driver where:

THE CABBIE’S GETTING THE EVIL EYE FROM THESE TEENAGE AMERICAN GRUNTS, WHO LOOK LIKE THEY’VE BEEN GROWN IN BAGS OF MANURE, THEY’RE SO LUMBERING AND MUSCLE-BOUND. THEY’RE MANNING UP THE BORDER POST, AND THEY COME COMPLETE WITH BUZZ CUTS AND SUNBURN. THEY LOOK EDGY AND JUMPY – NOT TO MENTION TRIGGER-HAPPY – AS HELL⁶³

55 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 74.
56 Bjork and Jones, ‘Overcoming the Dilemma’, p. 787,
57 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 74.
58 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 74.
59 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 74.
60 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 583-585.
61 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 589.
62 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 593.
63 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 2978.



Duffy provides an even more colourful description of a bulked-up contractor in Baghdad's Green Zone, linking steroids with equipment and the clear attempt to cultivate an intimidating image. He takes up the story:

I SAW A HUGE GUY FROM ONE OF THE AMERICAN COMPANIES. JUDGING BY HIS SHEER SIZE AND LOOK, I COULD TELL HE WAS OBVIOUSLY ON STEROIDS. HE LOOKED LIKE A SILVERBACK GORILLA WITH ALOPECIA, CARRYING A SAWN OFF SHOT GUN ACROSS HIS BACK, A HUGE KNIFE STRAPPED TO HIS LEG, A PISTOL ON EACH HIP AND AN AK47 WITH ENOUGH AMMUNITION SLUNG AROUND HIM TO INVADE IRAQ ALL OVER AGAIN, ON HIS OWN. TO TOP IT ALL, HE HAD A BANDANA WITH A SKULL AND CROSS BONES ON HIS HEAD. HE LOOKED A TWAT AND HE WAS CLEARLY WRAPPED UP IN HIS OWN BAD ARSE SELF IMAGE⁶⁴

A U.S contractor who had run convoy protection teams in Iraq said ‘in the gym you’d get a range of guys. I was amazed because some looked like they’d been on steroids for weeks on end’. A British contractor in the training role linked steroid use with the reputation of the industry when he argued that ‘taking steroids ... is one of the things that gives the industry a bad name ... I know of many contractors being booted out of the country for taking steroids’. The point here, and to reiterate, was that identity work of this kind was believed to be in tension with contractors’ professionalism and was described by a British training contractor as:

CRAZY ... BECAUSE GUYS THAT ARE MUSCLE BOUND TO THAT DEGREE ARE EASIER TO GET ON THE GROUND. WE’VE HAD ONE OR TWO ON THE COURSE THAT COULD HARDLY BRING THEIR HANDS TOGETHER TO HOLD A PISTOL BECAUSE THEIR BICEPS WERE SO OVER-DEVELOPED!

Discussing his time in Iraq working for Blackwater, Tim Beckman stated:

EIGHT GUYS GOT BUSTED FOR STEROIDS ... TURNS OUT A BUNCH OF IDIOTS WERE ORDERING [THEM] THROUGH THE GUY THAT MANAGED THE DESK IN THE GYM INSIDE THE EMBASSY GROUNDS [THEY WERE] WRITING WHAT THEY WANTED AND A CONTACT NUMBER AND NAME ON STICKY PADS RIGHT THERE AT THE DESK! THE IDIOT WORKING THE DESK WOULD THEN MAKE LINKUP WITH HIS IRAQI BUDDY IN THE GREEN ZONE, AT ONE OF THE HOTELS AND DO THE HAND OFF⁶⁵

It is also possible that clients derive reassurance from men fitting their sense of the stereotypical warrior figure, replete with robust physicality and an air of invulnerability such that:

THERE REMAINS A DEFINITIVE LINK IN MANY PEOPLE’S MINDS THAT ... BIG MEN WITH GUNS PROVIDE A SENSE OF SECURITY TO NERVOUS EXPATRIATES ... DESPITE THE TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES OF MODERN WARFARE, VISIBLE MEN WITH GUNS [CAN]

INVOKE SUCH A FEELING OF PROTECTION⁶⁶

In addition to changing the body from within through the use of steroids, was further concern expressed by a British contractor in the training role that highlighted both over-developed physiques and the sporting of tattoos. As part of his brief to ‘guys coming on the course’ he said:

I’VE TOLD THEM THAT WEARING TIGHT T-SHIRTS TO SHOW OFF HUGE, TATTOOED ARMS IS A PROBLEM OPERATIONALLY. THE MINUTE YOU COME THROUGH THE AIRPORT [IN A PARTICULAR SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY IN THIS EXAMPLE], THE BAD GUYS ARE CLOCKING YOU AND MIGHT SEE IT [THIS ‘MACHO MAN’ IDENTITY] AS A COME-ON [INVITATION TO FIGHT]

As part of wider rivalry with another training company offering similar services, he went on to say that the training staff ‘encourage their guys to get dove tattoos on their hands which are unveiled at a ceremony [at the end of the course] ... for fuck’s sake, what is that supposed to mean?’ His view was that those who valued huge physiques and tattoos were ‘just idiots’ because ‘they have no idea whatsoever about discretion’. As we saw above, for this and other respondents, discretion, modesty and humility rather than hyper-masculine or macho identities were often believed to be key to the success of those working in the CP role. With a wry smile and a hint of irony intended to further persuade course members of the hazards of arrogance as he saw it, the training contractor finished his final monologue of the day by saying ‘don’t forget lads, bullets travel through muscle far quicker than they do through fat!’

5 REFLECTING ON HOST POPULATION PERCEPTION



Respondents went on to discuss the impact of particular security profiles on members of the host population. Touching on questions of contractor appearance discussed above, one British contractor said in regard to those dressing and acting aggressively:

WHAT MUST IT BE LIKE FOR NORMAL PEOPLE, NORMAL FAMILIES ... TO LOOK AT PEOPLE WHO ARE IN THEIR COUNTRY? SOMEONE LIKE ... MY MUM MY SISTER - TO LOOK AT THESE PEOPLE? THEY MUST THINK IT IS ... OBSCENE

He was acutely concerned with ‘the way you carry yourself, your deportment ... [some of the contractors] have a black helmet on, sunglasses ... it must just be obscene [for people looking on], they must be disgusted’. After saying that he routinely encountered ‘Rambo types’ during his time in Iraq, he further qualified his beliefs; ‘I’m not going to walk around and say peace and love and all that because the attitude you’ve got to have is survival on those roads ... but it’s about how you do that’. Another British contractor raised the question of not only how far companies

may be undifferentiated from one another in the eyes of local people, but also that they may be considered negatively. He started with a question:

HOW DID CIVILIANS SEE US? WELL, I THINK THE WORD IS MERCENARY ISN’T IT? WHETHER YOU WERE CUSTER BATTLES ... OR ARMORGROUP [THE LATTER OF WHOM WERE DESCRIBED IN SUBSEQUENT COMMENTS AS ‘QUITE PROFESSIONAL’] OR SOME COWBOY MOB ... WE WERE [CONSIDERED TO BE] THE SAME. THEY [CIVILIANS] WOULD SEE US MAKING OUR WAY THROUGH BAGHDAD. A WEAPON OUT OF THE WINDOW IS A WEAPON OUT OF THE WINDOW ... THE BLOKE BEHIND IT MIGHT BE A LOOSE CANNON OR A COMPLETE SOLID OPERATOR.⁶⁷
ALL YOU’RE GOING TO SEE IS THAT WEAPON. THEY WOULD HAVE SEEN ALL OF US AS THE INVADERS, THE OCCUPYING POWER⁶⁸

64 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 8.
65 Beckman, *Blackwater*, Location 894.
66 Bjork and Jones, ‘Overcoming the Dilemma’, p. 787
67 Such phrases as ‘solid operator’ are of course, highly subjective.
68 As noted elsewhere in the report, it is important to note changes over time commented on above within the context of Iraq.

69 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 3223-3225.
70 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 54.

Making an allied point linked to the sense of obligation manifest in the cavalier behaviour of some contractors, replete as they were with attitudes characteristic of those who believe themselves to be member of the occupying power, a British contractor said:

MORE AND MORE OF THE BIG PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES ARE MOVING INTO SOUTHERN IRAQ. FEW RUN OPERATIONS LIKE WE DO, COVERT AND LOW-PROFILE. MOST BURN AROUND IN BIG CONVOYS OF SUVS, WITH WEAPONS STICKING OUT OF THE WINDOWS, MAKING LIKE THEY OWN THE COUNTRY⁶⁹

Still others reflected on how far host populations perceived them in a negative light and in the words of one U.S contractor:

THE POPULATION IN IRAQ ... PERCEIVE PRIVATE CONTRACTORS VERY, VERY NEGATIVELY. AND A LOT OF IT IS NEGATIVE IN THE SAME WAY THEY PERCEIVE THE U.S MILITARY AS NEGATIVE BECAUSE WE DO SHOVE PEOPLE OFF THE ROAD, AND FOR WHATEVER REASON WE DO FIRE INTO HOUSES OFF THE SIDE OF THE ROAD ... POPPING OFF ROUNDS LEFT AND RIGHT AND FIRING FLARES AND LASERS INTO PEOPLE’S WINDSHIELDS. PRIVATE SECURITY AND THE U.S MILITARY I THINK ARE BOTH EQUALLY GUILTY IN THIS

As a retired senior U.S military officer wrote in an email to the author, ‘contractors of all kinds are a serious irritant to the host nation population’. This is because ‘they are unaccountable ... and [can and do] impose their will upon the population in many daily

encounters’. He followed this up by writing that some contractor’s ‘force locals off the road, use the wrong side of the road and point weapons at civilians’. One British contractor believed that it was the:

STATE DEPARTMENT AND GENERALLY U.S PSC’S [THAT] MAINTAIN HIGH PROFILE STANCES ... THIS VISIBLY SEEMS TO ANNOY THE PEOPLE AROUND – IT UPSETS ROUTINE AND THEY BLOCK ROADS IN THE INTERESTS OF SECURITY

Another British contractor thought that ‘some [companies] had instructions to ram people off the road’. The problem as he saw it was that ‘they made no distinction between suicide bomber and children and women ... this really upsets people’. Echoed by this respondent and a point raised by others was the apparent ‘lack of discipline’ in the teams made worse by ‘the [poor] command structure or [non-existent] TLs’. Taken together, these factors increased the potential for ‘chaos ... once someone opens fire’. Capturing the challenge of working within this environment, Schumacher writes:

PMC MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE KEVLAR HELMETS, INDIVIDUAL BODY ARMOR, BULLETPROOF GLASS, ARMORED CARS, MEDICAL EVACUATION HELICOPTERS, ATTACK AIRCRAFT CIRCLING OVERHEAD, TRAINED MEDICS, AND A QUICK REACTION FORCE THAT CAN BAIL THEM OUT OF TROUBLE. IF A SECURITY CONTRACTOR THINKS HE MAY BE FIRED UPON WITH SMALL-ARMS FIRE, THERE CAN BE NO DELAY IN HIS REACTION TIME. RIDING IN STANDARD SUVS OR TRUCKS WITHOUT ARMORED PLATING, CONTRACTORS ARE VERY

EXPOSED. AND THEY KNOW IT! THEY COMPENSATE BY ASSERTING A LEVEL OF AGGRESSIVENESS THAT THEY HOPE WILL WARD OFF WOULD-BE ATTACKERS. THE CHALLENGE IS TO KEEP THEIR AGGRESSION WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT. THIS IS A FINE LINE TO WALK⁷⁰

As we have seen, some argued that high profile stances were at least partly responsible for stimulating the insurgency through alienating the local population, though a different view was conveyed by a British contractor who said ‘it is unlikely that it [high profile/aggressive posturing] creates more terrorists’. While the evidence from Iraq suggests that matters may be more complex than this respondent allows for, to support his proposition, he referred to the conflict in Northern Ireland where:

THE IRA CREATED DAYS OF DISRUPTION IN BELFAST IN THE 1990’S ... BUT HOW MANY PEOPLE ACTUALLY TOOK UP ARMS AGAINST THEM BECAUSE THEY WERE ANNOYED THEY COULD NOT GO SHOPPING ON SATURDAY, OR AGAINST THE RUC FOR IMPLEMENTING SECURITY MEASURES IS NOT CLEAR

The rationale for high profile approaches lay ultimately in the security of the Principal, an imperative that – understandably – transcended all other concerns. Yet, while this overriding objective had the potential to be achieved in ways that did not necessarily depend on high profile approaches as we have already alluded to and will expand on further below, companies such as Blackwater who report that they have never lost a client, were wholly vindicated (as they might see it) in this ‘tried and trusted’ method. Here, a British contractor stated:

MANY TEAMS (ESPECIALLY BLACKWATER) DO NOT HAVE THE WANT/NEED TO DROP TO A LOW PROFILE BUT THIS ALIENATES THEM CULTURALLY. IN THEIR WORLD, THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS TO PROVIDE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR THEIR PRINCIPAL. THE SIDE EFFECTS OF THIS [ON OTHERS INCLUDING CIVILIANS AND MEMBERS OF THE HOST POPULATION] ARE NOT CONSIDERED IN THEIR MISSION PLANNING AND ESTIMATES

Other respondents were more forthright and, noted one British contractor with experience of working in a senior role in Kabul:

THEY [NAMES A LARGE AMERICAN COMPANY] ARE A LAW UNTO THEMSELVES – FORCING PEOPLE OFF THE ROAD, AND POINTING WEAPONS AT PEOPLE. [THEY ARE] ‘RED-NECK HICK TYPES’ ... [THEY] THINK THEY OWN THE COUNTRY AND HAVE NO SENSE OF HEART AND MINDS AT ALL

And in the view of a Scottish journalist commenting on his experience of travelling in an easily identifiable vehicle:

MY REAL UNEASE STEMMED FROM ... THE AMERICANS’ HIGH PROFILE, ARMED AS THEY WERE TO THE TEETH AND TRAVELLING IN A VEHICLE THAT MIGHT AS WELL HAVE HAD ‘INFIDEL’ PAINTED IN BIG LETTERS ACROSS THE SIDE. WHILE I’VE NO DOUBT THAT THEY COULD HAVE UNLEASHED HELL, AND CALLED IN SHOCK AND AWE BACK-UP HAD WE RUN INTO TROUBLE,



I COULDN'T HELP WISHING I HAD BEEN SITTING ALONGSIDE MY TRUSTED AFGHAN DRIVER, MIRWAIS, IN HIS CLAPPED-OUT COROLLA THAT NEVER GETS A SECOND LOOK IN THIS CITY⁷¹

Alluded to throughout much of the data, and stated here unambiguously, were the views of one British contractor who argued that the low versus high profile approaches (respectively) were 'indicative of the British stance all over the world versus the U.S stance'. However, whether or not high or

low profile, it is believed that there is a tendency for many in the host population to see all companies in the same light where, it is 'hard to distinguish between private security company personnel working with: foreign military forces and reconstruction contractors and NGO workers',⁷² as one report puts it.⁷³ As further noted in this report into perceptions of security contractors by host populations in Afghanistan and Angola:

SEVERAL RESPONDENTS REFERRED TO INTERNATIONAL ARMED ACTORS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR ASSOCIATION ... AS FOREIGN FORCES OR A 'BUNCH OF AMERICANS'. THE ... LOCAL POPULATION ... HAD DIFFICULTIES IN CLEARLY DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN PSCS AND THE EXISTING MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT. PSCS WERE NOT SEEN AS INDEPENDENT ENTITIES BUT LINKED TO THESE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY FORCES IN GENERAL AND THE US ARMY IN PARTICULAR⁷⁴

With considerable candour, the Senior Vice President of ArmorGroup North America, James D. Schmitt, stated that contractors can be:

VIEWED AS A NECESSARY EVIL, AND AT WORST, AS TRIGGER HAPPY THUGS WHO SACRIFICE AMERICA'S REPUTATION AT HOME AND ABROAD AND DAMAGE ITS STRATEGIC OPERATIONS BY OPERATING AS IF WE ARE ABOVE THE LAW IN THE PURSUIT OF A QUICK OPPORTUNISTIC BUCK

Schmitt states that local population's negative perceptions of contractors shaped the wider image of the U.S, and that these perspectives were understandable given this 'expatriate laden presence careening through their neighborhoods'. With some

insight, and reflecting on the potential response to the presence of an occupying force in the U.S, he added that 'we might feel the same way [as the Iraqi people]'.⁷⁵

As noted earlier, the issue here may be the visibility (and use of) firearms that can exacerbate negative perceptions held by the host population in regard to the kinds of assets being secured where, in the case of reconstruction 'by being armed, an organisation is more likely to be considered part of the "aggressive foreign occupation"'. In turn the organisation 'may ... forgo the community liaison so vital to the success of reconstruction projects', and reinforcing a point made numerously throughout the current report, 'doing so [being armed] may in turn also increase the risk of being attacked'.⁷⁶ This view of the links between being armed and being attacked marks the widely observed difference between NGOs⁷⁷ and armed contractors of whom the latter view weapons as indispensable tools within high-threat contexts. Seen from the perspective of a number in the host population, and worthy of further reflection by security companies and their contracting workforce who likely see themselves as misunderstood and misrepresented, 'individuals [in the host population] expressed ... little sympathy for people [contractors] continuing to make money through weapons'.⁷⁸ This view of the host population was made possible by the historical conditions within which contractors are working where:

THE NEGATIVE HISTORY WITH GUNMEN OF ANY KIND VERY LIKELY INFLUENCED THE RESPONSES FROM CIVILIAN AFGHANS ... AS THE CIVILIAN POPULATION SUFFERED REPEATEDLY FROM ARMED MILITIAS, IT IS DIFFICULT FOR THOSE INTERVIEWED TO COMPREHEND THE PSCS AS A LEGITIMATE BUSINESS SECTOR⁷⁹

Again, worthy of further reflection by companies, was the impact on the host population of seeing weapons in plain

view;⁸⁰ 'what will the children walking to school learn when every morning they go to school and have to pass at least five men with guns guarding something?'⁸¹ The socio-cultural context here concerns gender roles, where the close association of men with weapons is believed to influence the host population's 'attitude ... and perpetuate a male image of men needing to be armed'.⁸² Here, focus group respondents in Afghanistan documented in the report believed that PSCs were 'perpetuating a "war-like" situation giving an image of ... masculinity being defined exclusively through violence, the carrying of guns and "macho behaviour"'.⁸³ Though PSCs are not present to convey role models associated with peace, nonetheless, their perception by host populations – particularly for those operating in high profile ways that local people might read as aggressive – was of great concern to respondents in the Swiss Peace report where it was believed that, 'PSC staff do not demonstrate/represent alternative role models such as the significance of education ... [and] non violent leadership'.⁸⁴ The cultural context is all important and:

GIVEN THE IMPORTANCE OF GUNS IN THE DEFINITION OF MANHOOD AMONGST PASHTUN MEN, MORE DETAILED RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF THE WAR, MILITIAS AND PSCS GENDER ROLE DEFINITION IN AFGHANISTAN NEEDS TO BE CONDUCTED⁸⁵

Probing deeper, and chiming with earlier comments around the ways that high profile stances (weapons in-sight, and particular aggressive approaches) can shape an overall sense of insecurity, a focus group in Kabul garnering the views of young leaders and members of civil society, argued that the presence of PSCs 'was sending subliminal messages that the security situation in Afghanistan is worse than it is in reality, keeping foreigners in fear and willing to pay for armed guards'.⁸⁶

71 David Pratt (2010) 'The Corporate Warriors who Make a Killing in Afghanistan', *The Herald of Scotland*. 24th July 2010. Available at [heraldscotland.com/comment/guest-commentary/the-corporate-warriors-who-make-a-killing-in-afghanistan-1.1043304](https://www.heraldsotland.com/comment/guest-commentary/the-corporate-warriors-who-make-a-killing-in-afghanistan-1.1043304) accessed 7th August 2012.

72 Bjork and Jones, 'Overcoming the Dilemmas', p. 786.

73 Joras, U. And Schuster, A. [eds.] (2008) *Private Security Companies and Local Populations: An Exploratory Study of Afghanistan and Angola*. Working Paper: Swiss Peace.

74 Joras and Schuster, *Private Security Companies and Local Populations*, p. 21-22.

75 Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs United States Senate (2010) *An Uneasy Relationship: U.S. Reliance on Private Security Firms in Overseas Operations Hearing*. Washington, One Hundred Tenth Congress. Pp. 1-166; 12-13.

76 Bjork and Jones, 'Overcoming the Dilemmas', p. 780.

77 Or at least for many in the NGO world, the aspired-to but rarely fulfilled reality, since the majority of those providing security to NGOs in Afghanistan for example, are likely to be carrying weapons the absence of which may leave NGO staff feeling vulnerable.

78 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 22.

79 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 22'

80 Of course, we do not wish to be idealistic and argue for the (wholly impractical) removal of weapons from view. The point here, however is not to underestimate the impact of seeing weapons from the perspective of those who have lived in societies ravaged by war, and may not wish to be further exposed to these and other symbols of violence as they might perceive them.

81 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 35.

82 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 35.

83 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 36.

84 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 36.

85 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 36.

86 Joras and Schuster, 'Private Security Companies and Local Populations', p. 27.

6 FACTORS BELIEVED TO INFLUENCE SECURITY PROFILES

High profile stances were thought to have their roots in particular national-military backgrounds where according to one U.S contractor, ‘the Americans make themselves a target driving around high profile’. Elaborating further, the contractor explained that these differences turned on SOPs grounded in:

CULTURE ... THAT’S JUST THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AMERICANS AND THE ENGLISH ... IN THE [U.S] MILITARY WHEN YOU WENT OUT OF THE WIRE ... YOUR FINGER WAS ALWAYS ON THE BUTTERFLY [TRIGGER] OF THE 50 CAL[IBRE]. YOU ARE ALWAYS SET UP AND READY TO GO, YOU ALWAYS DEFAULTED ON THE SIDE OF AGGRESSION OR SO IT SEEMS, RATHER THAN THE OTHER WAY ROUND

These views derived from what he saw as wider political differences between the U.S and the UK where ‘the death of a U.S citizen in unacceptable and will be defended at all costs, even to the detriment of the wider security situation’. Reinforcing respondent views noted throughout the current research, this meant that ‘in simple terms they believe they can defend every single American with sheer force’. And, in contrast a British contractor discussing his experiences in Iraq suggested that:

IT WAS DEEMED FAR LESS IMPORTANT TO LOSE A BRITISH AMBASSADOR AND A CP [CLOSE PROTECTION] TEAM THAN HAVE A BRITISH CP TEAM CREATE A SITUATION SIMILAR TO THAT OF THE INFAMOUS BLACKWATER INCIDENT

However, robust displays of force were not dismissed out of hand under certain conditions, and in making a comparison with his own ‘national approach’ as some respondents saw it, a British contractor stated that ‘the [effectiveness of] the sheer threat of U.S force [in comparison to] British diplomacy probably does work in particular cases’. Yet, in a related sense and located within the context of high profile/alienation versus low profile/relative acceptance by the local population and other contractors, according to one U.S respondent ‘if you look at the American versus British train of thought, it seems that the British assimilate themselves much more easily into local culture’. His view was that ‘Americans export America. We shove it down people’s throats ... I’m not trying to beat ourselves up, that’s just the way we are for the most part’. Another U.S contractor said:

‘IN TERMS OF [NAMES BRITISH COMPANY], THE BRITS ASSIMILATE BETTER AND ... I THINK THEY ARE JUST MORE IN TUNE WITH WHAT’S GOING ON AROUND THEM. THEY DON’T FEEL THAT THEY SHOULD REACT WITH SUCH AGGRESSION WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

As the author Campion sees it:

BY IMMERSING YOURSELF IN A FOREIGN CULTURE YOU CAN ACQUIRE A DEPTH OF KNOWLEDGE THAT ENABLES YOU TO MAKE THE RIGHT JUDGEMENTS AT THE RIGHT TIME. YOU CAN BE ‘STREETWISE’ IN THEIR WORLD⁸⁷

An alternative view was conveyed by a scholar who, in response to an email from the author suggesting that the ‘Brits’ were disposed to assimilating themselves with local populations, replied:

THERE’S THIS ROMANTIC VIEW OF THE BRITISH TOMMY BEING ABLE TO BLEND IN ... BUT I’M NOT SURE IT’S PARTICULARLY TRUE ACTUALLY. IN IRAQ IT WAS UTTER BALLS, FRANKLY. SOME OF THE STRATEGIES USED IN BASRA WERE FARCICAL

It was the view of one British contractor that ‘cultural differences are obvious from the point of view of the enemy’, and drawing distinctions between the persistent binary of the ‘British versus the American approach’ noted throughout interviews and observation, said that ‘Brits are generally uncomfortable with “laying it on thick” [security]’, and as a result they tend to believe ‘the security situation is worsened by a high profile’. He supported this proposition through recounting a recent experience where the Regional Security Officer in the U.S Embassy in Baghdad ‘informed U.S diplomats and staff that under no circumstances are they allowed to travel with [the British company *****] as they don’t do security like us [the State Department]’. Rather than taking this directive as a snub, the contractor went on to say that ‘the British security teams that ... guard the U.S Forces 2nd in command in the country were immensely proud of this comment as it was a realisation as to how we do business!’ Their pride flowed from being seen as different from those providing security for the State Department whose approach was frequently disparaged by members of the sample. He then outlined a business case for the more discreet approach, where ‘because the profile is lower, less resources are used and it is therefore cheaper’. Framed in pragmatic terms, and suggested above, he noted finally that ‘deterrence cannot be measured so the cheaper option in security is normally the more favourable’.

However, while national-culture may go some way to explain attitudes towards, and particular practices of security profile,

matters are considerably more complex. For example, a British contractor noted that the:

GOVERNMENT OF ‘CLIENTS’ AND THEIR RESPECTIVE INSURANCE PACKAGES STATES THAT THE CLIENT MUST HAVE AN ARMoured SUV AND TEN OPERATORS ETC ... ONE AMERICAN I SPOKE WITH IN BAGHDAD YEARS AGO LOVED THE WAY I WORKED, AND THOUGHT IT WAS GREAT, BUT COULDN’T ACHIEVE THE SAME BECAUSE HIS CLIENT’S INSURANCE STATED HE HAD TO HAVE MEN WITH GUNS AND USE ARMoured VEHICLES

Given the constraints faced by PMSC, it is unclear how many might opt for a less visible approach, as external criteria (insurance requirements, health and safety directives and so forth) shape their working practices on the ground.⁸⁸

6.1 INSIDE THE HIGH PROFILE MINDSET
What does it mean for contractors to practice such conspicuous and aggressive approaches as perceived by respondents above? How are these stances seen from the inside, as it were? The former Blackwater employee Beckman writes ‘typically we drove aggressively from the second we left til the second we came back into the Green Zone’. He went on to note that ‘the lead vehicle had the responsibility for “making the hole” for the rest to follow’. This involved ‘herding cars to the sides of the road ahead of us ... top gunners would throw bottles of frozen water [to warn drivers]’.⁸⁹ One of his team would use a shotgun to ‘spider the windshield of the oncoming car ... scary enough for the driver to always jam on the breaks [sic]’. He then shifts from a description of these

87 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 1038.
88 These constraints go further still and in addition to the author’s observation of what might be called the contractor ‘visa debacle’ in Afghanistan in 2010 (likely to be ongoing in various forms), turned on the incessant bureaucratic demands placed on companies and contractors in Iraq to the current day.
89 Putting ourselves in the shoes of the host population, what would it mean to have a bottle of frozen water thrown in the front of one’s vehicle? The throwers intent may not fit with the drivers understanding of this practice, or at least reading this act as a ‘warning’ may take time to permeate local stocks of knowledge. (Also see also footnote 40).

7 ‘YOU NEED TO HAVE SOMETHING ABOUT YOU’: LOW PROFILE

Though the limits of high profile approaches to security have been considered through the eyes of respondents and their allied identity work turning on self designation and disassociation from the mercenary caricature, notwithstanding the specific nature of the services they provided, other companies operated at the far end of the spectrum. It is to a consideration of these that discussion now turns.

One British contractor – perhaps with a hint of irony since it is difficult to imagine that he had the abundance of time to which he alludes - nonetheless paints a qualitatively different picture to that considered above, ‘low profile?’ he said, ‘to me ... this means you spend the first 6 weeks in a new country just chilling-out and tuning into the vibe’. Presented in different terms but striking a similar chord, Campion notes that ‘getting in tune with the daily pulse of a place is key to survival’.⁹⁵ Though stated in a nonchalant fashion given the context within which the former contractor worked, was evidence of a very much more measured and instrumental process that involved him, somewhat intuitively, in a close study of the identity work of local men. This ongoing observation informed the means by which the contractor was able to mimic local body language in order to reduce profile, as he provided security to clients within the city and beyond, in the provinces. To illustrate, the contractor simulated ‘smoking in a certain way ... like the locals’, and discussed both experience and scenario as a car passenger waiting in a slow moving queue of traffic at a vehicle check point. Here, he bent his head over to one side, pushed out his right arm as if it were perched on the car’s door frame, and blew a cloud of cigarette smoke up to his right (he was smoking at the time). Campion also notes that while in the military, he was ‘taught the subtleties of learning to read body language.’ This experience helped him ‘to detect when someone was actually posturing for trouble’ because ‘people often telegraph their intent [which is useful for] dealing with local warlords, militias and other volatile groups’.⁹⁶ With relevance for earlier comments around high profile approaches as a form of compensation for

the sense of vulnerability experienced by those contractors driving on roads where they could be killed in an instant, Campion also goes on to argue that:

PEOPLE WHO ARE EASY IN THEIR MINDSET DEMONSTRATE IT IN THEIR APPEARANCE: THERE’S NO NEED TO STAND UP AND MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR BIGGER, OR THRUST OUT THEIR CHEST. THEY MOVE SLOWER, AND ARE NOT ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR BACK-UP OR AN EXIT POINT. AND THE GUY WHO REMOVES HIS WATCH, OR HAS A HAND BEHIND HIS BACK GRIPPING AN ASHTRAY OR PISTOL, IS UNLIKELY TO BE YOUR BEST FRIEND. IN A SENSE, A LOT OF THIS IS SECOND NATURE. BUT MAKING THE PROCESS CONSCIOUS AND OVERT BY LEARNING IT SERVES TO SHARPEN IT⁹⁷

The previous contractor observing and replicating the idiosyncrasies of ‘smoking like a local’ also recalled how he used the car’s sun visor to partly obscure his face (a prime indicator of his Western origins) so as to further ease passage. His small-arm was hidden from view and his local driver was employed by the company, with a further role of conducting negotiations with (familiar) local men at the numerous check points they would encounter on any one trip. His colleague discussed a similar scenario, going on to provide a rationale for why such an approach might be used where he noted:

I WOULDN’T GET YOU TO DRESS UP [PUT ON A DISGUISE], BUT I WOULD STILL PUT YOU IN THAT LOW PROFILE CAR. THIS IS BECAUSE IF THERE IS SOMETHING NASTY AT THE CHECKPOINT, BY THE TIME THEY GET THEIR FIRST GLANCE, IT CAN BE TOO LATE FOR THEM TO MAKE A DECISION

⁹⁵ Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 2083.
⁹⁶ Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 1059-1061.
⁹⁷ Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 1062-1065.

⁹⁰ Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 68.
⁹¹ Though statistics detailing contractor deaths are difficult to substantiate, the following link provides one possible starting point: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_private_contractor_deaths_in_Iraq accessed 4th October 2012.
⁹² See John Nagl's work that sheds some light on the potential differences between US and British military culture in respect of the relative hierarchical rigidity in the U.S military and its concomitant narrow decision-making parameters, versus the looser structure in the British Army. [Nagl, J. (2005) *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife. Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam*. Chicago: Chicago University Press]. Also see Coalition Provisional Authority Number 17 which is widely understood to have provided contractors with immunity from prosecution with unknown implications for subsequent approaches to conducting security work. Available at: usace.army.mil/Portals/2/docs/COALITION_PROVISIONAL.pdf accessed 4th October 2012.
⁹³ Beckman, *From the Inside Out*, Location 860-874.
⁹⁴ Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 136.

practices to the ways that they made him feel where he recalled how ‘the sound of the shotgun booming behind us was always a rush’. With some clear masculine pride, Beckman discusses the ‘pimped out Ford F150s with lacquer camouflage paint jobs ... all dressed in tons of assault gear’ which resulted in ‘feeling [our] testosterone rage all the time’. As the British contractor Duffy argues and an observation relevant to the current case, ‘when the profile [is] aggressive ... inevitably the team itself would be pumped up with adrenaline’.⁹⁰ Some will be concerned at reading of Beckman’s reverence for the aggressive approach and this is understandable. However, it should not be taken entirely at face value, and likely derives from a combination of literary framing and sense of sub-culturally institutionalised defiance within the context of the mounting toll of contractor deaths and injuries.⁹¹ Nonetheless, the ways in which the text speaks to a normalisation of - and critically from the perspective of those who abhor this aggressive approach - outright celebration of these activities, it could be seen as a problem and in microcosm help to explain one of the numerous dynamics underpinning Iraq’s spiralling insecurities at this time. More striking, and a point reinforced throughout the current research, this presentation of events is shaped by the continual sense of amazement that he and his colleagues were able to conduct themselves in ways that would otherwise attract severe sanction in their home country. Free of many of the social, legal and military constraints⁹² that have shaped behaviour to this point, the exceptional conditions of Iraq provided opportunities for the use of ‘initiative’ under pressure that might not always be beneficial for the wider security climate. One such story recalls how Beckman and his team ‘T-boned’ a suspicious pick-up truck using their ‘big bumper ... (big kudos to the KBR guys that made that it)’ that led to the truck ‘cleanly breaking in half ... right behind the driver’s seat’.

Following this incident there was ‘chatter on the radio from the trucks behind saying “holy shit did you see that hit?”.’ Yet, the reader remains ignorant, as is common in the regaling of many such tales, of what followed once the PSD had left the scene; what were the far reaching repercussions of such an incident? Was this truck central to the livelihood of the Iraqi(s) concerned? How far did it anger the local population? If angered, how did this manifest itself? Was this the only course of action open to these contractors? His attention then turns to the ‘detail that was running what ... was called the “hate truck”.’ Beckman described this as ‘a Suburban with the back and rear side windows removed so guys could sit in the back and operate several machine guns’,⁹³ a phenomena further underscoring identity work that turned on the primacy of security through intimidation and hardly likely to win hearts and minds. Yet, at times British contractors also worked on contracts with SOPs that troubled other of their national peers. As the British contractor Duffy writes in his recollections of working on a high-profile State Department contract:

LIKE ALL OUR TRUCKS, WE HAD THE WARNING SIGN ATTACHED TO OUR TAIL GATE, TELLING EVERYONE TO STAY BACK AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED METRES. ANYONE BREAKING THIS RULE WOULD EITHER BE A SUICIDE BOMBER OR A COMPLETE FOOL, WHICH IN MY EYES ARE BOTH ONE AND THE SAME⁹⁴

The suicide bomber/fool binary, while providing for a decisive approach to security for the contractors, nevertheless overlooks the likelihood that local drivers may, and undoubtedly do at times, make simple mistakes that has resulted in the death and injury of an unknown yet significant number of them, as indicated above.

In this way, as the respondent noted, the ability for the men at the checkpoint to react to conditions of their own choosing would be undermined, ““Shit!” ... they might say “I should have seen him coming 2 miles ago!””. Consequently he argued, their ‘whole dicking procedure – [the means by which they communicate between themselves in order to obtain a tactical advantage] ... would be disrupted. You pull that percentage back in your favour [and they’ll probably think] “we’ll let this one go, maybe next time”’. As he put it:

DON’T GIVE THEM ANY REASON TO GIVE YOU A SECOND STARE OR A SECOND GLANCE. REDUCE EVERYTHING TO THE LAST MINUTE ... MOST CHECKPOINTS YOU ARE DRIVING THROUGH, THE [LOCAL] DRIVER CAN DO ALL THE TALKING

He also recalled how some contractors ‘wore a shemagh, grew beards and put on make-up’, though recognised that local men would eventually, and in most cases, rapidly identify foreigners trying to pass themselves off as indigenous men. In a similar sense, as Schumacher notes:

ONE COVERT TECHNIQUE, WIDELY USED BY ARMED CONTRACTORS IN THE DAYS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE INITIAL OCCUPATION, INCLUDES DRIVING STANDARD IRAQI VEHICLES, SUCH AS MAZDAS OR TOYOTAS. THEY IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN THE LOCAL POPULATION, HIRING LOCAL CIVILIANS TO WORK WITH THEM AND DEVELOP CONTACTS AND FRIENDSHIPS IN THE AREA. TO FIT IN WITH THE LOCALS, THEY DRIVE WITH THEIR WINDOWS UP AND AIR CONDITIONING ON, HAIR UNKEMPT, MUSTACHES AND BEARDS GROWN OUT. WOMEN CONTRACTORS WEAR HEAD SCARVES, WHILE MEN WEAR LOOSE-FITTING SHIRT AND SANDALS⁹⁸

The point however, was that these kinds of approaches were on the extreme end of the spectrum to those involving ‘driving 6 miles of road in 6 high profile vehicles’ and, linked to this, a contractor stated that one U.S media network ‘didn’t want to work with the Americans [high profile] because they knew

they could never achieve their aims’. It was believed that the low profile approach had a number of benefits, and as Schumacher puts it:

IT REDUCES THEIR VISIBILITY AS FOREIGNERS AS WELL AS THE NUMBER OF ATTACKS AGAINST THEM. THESE TECHNIQUES HAVE THE ADDED BENEFIT OF MUCH GREATER ACCEPTANCE IN THE LOCAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY⁹⁹

It wasn’t just the relative acceptability to be gained from locals (though Schumacher makes a somewhat speculative point here) that is important, but also the potential psychological effect on contractors themselves of carrying out their work in a low profile stance. Reflecting wider comments from the research of those that felt more at ease with this approach, was the possibility for some to develop a different kind of – albeit transitory - relationship with local people with whom they had necessarily to share the congested urban space. Looking back on his previous role, the British contractor Duffy stated that ‘when I had travelled through in a low profile team, I had felt almost part of the indigenous population to a degree and no one paid any attention’. The key point here was that being ‘in the traffic jams with them [we] saw the beggars and filth up-close and personal’. In contrast, the combination of speed (traffic permitting), together with the explicit attempt to differentiate themselves from their environment through a high profile stance created a sense of psychological detachment and unreality. As he notes:

NOW, FLYING THROUGH AT WARP SPEED, I FELT COMPLETELY DETACHED AND IN MY OWN LITTLE BUBBLE. IT WAS ALMOST LIKE GLANCING AT PICTURES IN AN ALBUM AS YOU FLICK THROUGH WITH DISINTEREST; NOTHING SEEMED REAL AND THE

PEOPLE THEMSELVES WERE JUST A BLUR¹⁰⁰

While that might be the case, and is certainly an argument for approaches less likely to alienate the local population and others intending to cause injury and in some cases death to contractors, another conceded that, despite his preference for a discreet approach, there was ‘also a time and place for what I would call the high profile “bully boy presence”’.

7.1 EMPLOYING LOCAL NATIONALS

Picking up on a point made by Schumacher and touched on earlier, one contractor went on to stress the importance of ‘using local support’ (employing local men in a security role) in sharp contradistinction to many, perhaps the majority of companies who actively distanced themselves from the host population, underscored here in the words of a U.S contractor who said that he had ‘never seen a local national working for Blackwater in a Personal Security Detail’. He went on to say that ‘while there’s issues involved with that [employing local people] ... (you have to do your background checks etc) ... if you are in someone else’s country, to negate using them is an insult’. He recalled that:

WE WERE THE FIRST TO USE LOCALS AND OTHER COMPANIES WERE TURNING AROUND AND SAYING ‘HOW THE FUCK CAN YOU USE LOCALS?’ ... ‘QUITE EASILY WE WOULD SAY. IT’S NOT THE FIRST TIME THE BRITISH AND OTHERS HAVE USED LOCALS IN IRAQ’, BUT THEY JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND

And as Campion also stated, ‘during my years serving in the military I’d learned to appreciate the value of local knowledge, and the intelligence it can yield’. For him, ‘the advantages of satellite imagery, surveillance drones and communications intercepts’ was helpful, but ultimately

98 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 169
99 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 169.
100 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 70.



‘nothing beats the intel you can glean from a local person on the ground’.¹⁰¹ He goes on to report how a group of local men were ‘transformed into a force that acted as a barrier, should it all go noisy, allowing us to escape with the clients’. Their use is to be instrumental and measured such that Campion intended ‘to use Ahmed’s guys to buy us time, so we can get the client into a vehicle and hit one of our escape routes’. The key here is to provide them with limited training¹⁰² where:

WE DON’T GIVE THEM LESSONS IN MARKSMANSHIP, AND WE DON’T TEACH THEM TO USE THEIR SIGHTS PROPERLY, OR TO HIT A TARGET. THE AVERAGE GUY ON OUR DETAIL STILL COULDN’T HIT A BARN DOOR AT TEN PACES, EVEN AFTER COMPLETING THE COURSE, AND I WANT IT TO STAY THAT WAY¹⁰³

The U.S contractor Russell Blair discusses his suspicion that local Iraqi’s working on his compound ‘were giving coordinates to the enemy to help direct their bombs in’. In turn, and tellingly for this particular line of enquiry, he argues that ‘you don’t trust nobody that’s not an American ... Nobody’.¹⁰⁴ Continuing with the theme of building capacity through employing local national men, the contractor in favour of using local employment went on to say ‘well it’s their country they know where to go, they’ve got the relationships and they’ve got the contacts’. Not only was there a business case for employing local people, but also that this practice had the potential to enhance cultural understanding between contractor and host where:

WE CAN SIT BACK HERE AND DO LESSONS ON CULTURE, BUT YOU WILL NEVER KNOW ABOUT THE CULTURE FROM A CLASSROOM SETTING. ITS GOTTA’ COME FROM EXPERIENCE ... WE’VE ALWAYS OPERATED ON THAT ETHOS

As Duffy notes of local men working for his company in Iraq:

GUYS LIKE THEM IN THE TEAMS WERE A GREAT ASSET BECAUSE, NOT ONLY DID THEY KNOW THE ROUTES BETTER BUT ALSO, BEING LOCAL, THEY WOULD NORMALLY BE ABLE TO TELL IF SOMETHING WASN’T RIGHT OR OUT OF PLACE AND COULD BE AN ADVANCED WARNING TO US. THEY WERE USUALLY EXPERIENCED MEN TOO. THEY HAD FRIENDS AND CONTACTS ALL OVER SO THEY COULD ALWAYS GET YOU AROUND THE RED TAPE OF THE YOUNG IRAQI GUARDS¹⁰⁵

And in a similar vein, potential benefits of employing local men are captured here where, as Schumacher states ‘the indigenous workers will frequently tip-off contractors to impending enemy activity, either by their sudden absence from work or by directly furnishing information’. Yet, on the down side, he also argues that ‘one never knows when an Iraqi employee has sold out to the enemy’.¹⁰⁶ This approach necessitated an intelligence-led, low profile presence that many clients preferred, as indicated above in the case of the journalist and the media organization. A further point to note is that use of local people could help to shape perception of the company in question where:

FOREIGN ORGANISATIONS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE PERCEPTIONS HELD BY THE COMMUNITY; ON THIS BASIS THEY ... [CAN ADDRESS] THE ‘VISIBLE’S [INCLUDING] A SIEGE MENTALITY AND A LACK OF DIALOGUE WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES’¹⁰⁷

As Storm puts it in regard to his peers’ unfamiliarity with anywhere but the U.S, the ways in which the so-called siege mentality may be facilitated through recreating a



sense of home within the wire,¹⁰⁸ and the implications for exposure to different contexts, ‘some of these guys have not been out of their home state, much less out of the country. What a sight to see: grown men in awe of the rest of the world’.¹⁰⁹

7.2 CONTINGENCY AS KEY

During an informal conversation with members of a company specialising in low profile approaches, one contractor reflected on the importance of detailed contingency planning, contrasted with those he perceived were constrained by a fixed mind-set whereby their only response was to hit the roads ‘all guns blazing’. The contractor elaborated further on this aggressive approach when he said that:

ONCE THE PATTERN HAS BEEN SET, THE MINDSET IS FIXED AND WHEN GIVEN A JOB, [THOSE GUYS] WILL SAY ‘RIGHT WE NEED THIS NUMBER OF ARMoured VEHICLES, THAT NUMBER OF MEN ETC’, WHEREAS CONTINGENCY PLANNING IS KEY

The author recently encountered a similarly fixed mindset within the context of his attempt to carry out participant observation of a CP course to gather data for the current research, in this case run by U.S former military personnel. An email from the company stressed the importance of ‘combat training’ and ‘combat experience’ as essential course pre-requisites that in turn, meant I failed to meet the attendance criteria despite my successful completion of a similar course in the U.S a few months earlier. Probing my suitability for their particular course, an instructor writes:

TO START OFF I NEED TO KNOW HOW RECENTLY YOU WERE IN THE [BRANCH OF THE BRITISH MILITARY] AND WHAT YOUR JOB WAS, I ALSO NEED TO KNOW WHAT TACTICAL AND WEAPONS TRAINING YOU HAVE HAD AND WHAT COMBAT EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE HAD ... YOU MUST [HAVE HAD] A COMBAT JOB DESCRIPTION WHILE IN THE MILITARY

The key omission in my experience was recent (in the last 3 years) combat experience meaning that I was refused permission to attend. Given what is presumed to be the combat focused nature of the training provided in this instance, and the associated ways in which the role is approached on operations, it is unsurprising that this kind of experience is required. Yet, it does highlight the unquestioned starting point for many training companies and others providing and using CP services in regions deemed hostile that, as we see below, may cause problems out on the ground through incorrigible, combat oriented (high) profile approaches. It is the unquestioned assumptions around the manner in which particular services are to be provided that concerned this British contractor when he argued, ‘they will say “the threat is out on the road so let’s put 10 cars instead of 3 cars out there ... that will protect us”’. An alternative approach was advocated by two contractors during an informal discussion, of whom one said:

LET’S REDUCE OUR PROFILE, CHANGE HOW WE LOOK, AND RATHER THAN GO DOWN THAT ROAD, GO

101 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 1022.
102 Though, views differ amongst contractors around how far local national's should be trained, with others arguing that they should be as highly trained as their Western expatriate superiors.
103 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 3116.
104 Russell Blair (2007) *Contractor Confessions: Tales from Iraq*. The Independent Texan Press. Kindle Edition. p. 24.
105 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p.8.
106 Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 169.
107 Bjork and Jones, ‘Overcoming the Dilemmas’, p. 791.
108 The growing tendency for members of the international community (conceived of in the widest sense), to be physically isolated from their beneficiaries/ host populations is documented and analysed in its architectural manifestation in work by Mark Duffield. See Duffield, M. (2010) ‘Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Everyday Life in Post-Interventionary Society’, 4(4); 453-474.
109 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, pp. 164-165.

110. Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 3004-3006.
111. Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 2810.
112. Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 303.
113. A British contractor stated that ‘most guys operating wouldn’t understand the term risk assessment as they see every passer-by as a target or threat. As I witnessed in Iraq (I lived there for years), many chaps with guns opened up on civilians as a matter of daily occurrence because they had no idea at all of how to assess the risk. [How to understand risk] should be [formalised] with everyone from company directors down to guys on the ground, set in SOP’s and established in their training’ (Personal email to author).
114. Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 2993-2994.
115. Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 3078.

DOWN ANOTHER ROAD. OR WE’LL CHANGE THE TIMINGS AND ENSURE THAT OUR LOCAL GUYS ARE TOLD AT THE LAST POSSIBLE MINUTE ABOUT ROUTES AND OTHER PLANS FOR THE JOB. IT’S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE. IT’S ABOUT SITTING BACK, TAKING A DIFFERENT APPROACH AND USING COMMON SENSE

As Campion noted of one particular company in Iraq:

THEY DO THE RUN USING TWO 4×4S. THEY USE ONE AS A BACK-UP VEHICLE, BUT NEITHER OF THEM IS ARMoured. THEY HAVE NO OTHER WAGONS, AND NO COVERT VEHICLES OF ANY SORT. THEY DON’T APPEAR TO VARY THE ROUTE THEY DRIVE, AND THEY HAVEN’T SPOT-CODED THAT ROUTE, OR ANY ALTERNATIVES. PLUS THEY’VE NOT RECCED [MAPPED OUT] ANY ESCAPE OPTIONS¹¹⁰

In contrast to his obvious delight at the U.S tendency to be ‘gung ho’ noted above, he also states that his own preference was to be as low a profile as possible – ‘just as we always had done when on operations with the elite military units that I’ve trained and served with’.¹¹¹ As Duffy notes:

KEEP WEAPONS COVERED UP ... THE VEHICLES YOU USE [SHOULD] LOOK LIKE ANY OTHER VEHICLE YOU’RE LIKELY TO COME ACROSS ON THE ROADS OUT HERE, NOT WHITE SUVS WITH A BUNCH OF CAMMED UP RETARDS IN THE BACK. SECONDLY, THE TACTICS AND SOP’S ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. YOU GO WITH THE FLOW OF THE TRAFFIC, YOU MAKE SURE THAT YOU DON’T DRAW

ANY ATTENTION TO YOURSELF; YOU DRESS LIKE ANYONE ELSE ON THE ROAD OR THE STREET. EVERYTHING YOU DO IS KEPT ON THE COVERT SIDE, WHETHER IT’S COMMS OR EVEN THE WAY YOU APPROACH A CHECK POINT. YOU MAKE SURE THAT IF ANYONE LOOKS IN YOUR DIRECTION, THAT THEY SEE NOTHING THAT WOULD CAUSE THEM TO GIVE A SECOND GLANCE. AND THAT INCLUDES WEARING A PAIR OF BIG SUN GLASSES THAT I SAW YOU WEARING JUST FIVE MINUTES AGO AS YOU ARRIVED, SAT IN THE FRONT SEAT OF YOUR BIG WHITE SUV¹¹²

The aim for Campion and others operating in a similar manner, was to ask the following questions ‘how will I be targeted? What is the threat? What are the risks to us and how can we minimise them? It is all about ‘risk mitigation’ said a British contractor.¹¹³ While there is little doubt that these questions will be at the forefront of all contractor’s minds, and it might be assumed, factored into SOPs, no matter what their profile, the stress here was on the ‘best possible procedure ... that was not fixed’. As this British contractor went on to say, this sometimes involved ‘creative thinking’ to ensure that ‘the client gets back safely’. To illustrate, another contractor working for the same company recalled when they were provided with ‘2 brand new, bright red [Toyota] Landcruisers’ by one of the organizations they were working with. The first thing they did was get them re-sprayed in a bland greyish colour and put stickers on them, thereby bringing their appearance more into line with comparable vehicles in the city. As Campion records in a similar sense, ‘we mount up their gleaming 4×4, and I ve got one thought foremost in my mind: bullet-magnet’. He provides a further example when recalling ‘driving this pristine white Toyota Land Cruiser, which is unarmoured. It practically screams out who’s inside it: Westerners, and a prime prospect for a very lucrative kidnapping’.¹¹⁴

Alternatively, dressed in ‘shemaghs, dishdashes and shades ... and driving a battered GMC’, Campion even goes so far as to strap a ‘giant pink sofa’ on to the back of the vehicle, describing the team’s rationale in the following terms:

NO ONE WILL EVER SUSPECT THAT A PINK-SOFA-CARRYING GMC IS BEING DRIVEN BY A COUPLE OF ‘WHITE-EYE’ PRIVATE OPERATORS. WE’VE HAD TIME TO GROW BEARDS AND ACQUIRE A PROPER TAN, AND WE FIGURE WE’RE PRETTY MUCH INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE LOCAL FURNITURE-DELIVERY GUYS¹¹⁵

Though inviting readers to reflect on what must have been something of a bizarre sight, once again caution should be exercised about the empirical validity of this claim given its literary framing. In addition, frequent mention in the text of the vehicle over time and in different contexts - replete as it is with a pink sofa - might conversely, arouse suspicion since delivery of furniture is usually a one-off affair and even in the chaos of Iraq, it might be assumed that a giant pink sofa is conspicuous and thus memorable. In graphically demonstrating the ways that a more discreet approach had the potential to challenge convention, the contractor hailing from a Commonwealth country relayed the following story, reproduced here in full:

WE HAD THIS EX U.S COMMANDER WHO WE HAD TO GET TO ***** IN 200*, WHERE HIGH PROFILE CONVOYS WERE GETTING HIT REGULARLY. AND WE SAID ‘RIGHT, WE ARE GOING TO HAVE 4 CARS WITH ONE 30 MINUTES UP THE ROAD AND 2 CLOSE TOGETHER WITH THE OTHER AT THE REAR (ALL LOW PROFILE).’ AND HE SAYS ‘WHAT THE FUCK, YOU MUST BE MAD!’ WE REPLIED ‘WELL OF COURSE WE ARE

FOR BEING HERE, BUT FROM OUR OWN EXPERIENCES THIS IS WHAT IS GOING TO WORK WITHOUT ANYONE BEING INVOLVED IN ANY SHOOTING MATCHES OR SHOWING WHO HAS THE BIGGEST BICEPS OR ANYTHING ... IT IS GOING TO BE QUITE BORING, BUT WE WILL GET YOU TO WHERE YOU WANT TO GO WITHOUT INCIDENT.’ WE GOT THERE WITHOUT INCIDENT, AND HE SAID ‘THAT WAS AMAZING. I WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT THAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE’. AND DON’T FORGET, THIS WAS COMING FROM AN AMERICAN COMMANDER!

However, he argued that ‘not everyone can operate in that [low profile] way. You know, you have to have something about you’. His belief - far from consensual since it was countered by others below - concerned the importance of ‘having a Special Forces background [and] a British background adds to that ... the Southern hemisphere countries seem to be very good at it as well’. To work effectively in this way, he registered the importance of ‘attitude. We have [tried to work with] people who cannot operate in low profile. They love the comfort of having 10 vehicles and 6000 guns hanging off them’. He understood this to be linked to the ‘level of the skill they have had through their [military] careers, and they’ve probably never operated outside of that’. He then said ‘I look at these people and see them as one dimensional. They’ve probably gone down a different route in the military and they don’t know any different’. Picking up on a theme discussed further below in regard to the transition from military life to the world of the contractor via the old boy’s network, he stated that ‘contracting is [often] done in the sort of environment you go to if you don’t know any different. It can be quite intimidating to explore different options’. In contrast to the bigger companies he sought out individuals with:

BACKGROUNDS [THAT] REPRESENT SOMETHING A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT ... [THEIR] SKILL SETS ARE A BIT OUT OF THE ORDINARY AND ALSO I BELIEVE IN INFLUENCING THE GUYS WHO ARE COMING UP. A LOT OF THIS IS ABOUT SELECTION OF PEOPLE COMING IN. WITH BIG COMPANIES, IT IS JUST ABOUT BUMS ON SEATS AND ... A LOT OF THEM HAVE DILUTED THEIR CONTRACTS. THEY SAY ‘RIGHT WE’VE GOT A BIG CONTRACT SO LET’S JUST GET A HUNDRED GUYS. WE’LL GIVE THEM A BIT OF IN-COUNTRY TRAINING AND THEN SEND THEM OUT ON THE ROADS’

A key element of those selected to work for the company concerned how far they were ‘comfortable with themselves’, he noted. This respondent continued in more specific terms:

I DON’T WANT SOMEONE TO GO ON THE GROUND AND FIGHT. I WANT SOMEONE TO GO ON THE GROUND AND TALK, PLAN FOR CONTINGENCIES AND NEGOTIATE. EVERYONE WHO GOES ON THE GROUND SHOULD UNDERSTAND CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND THE PROCEDURES THAT NEED TO GO INTO PLACE – YOU HAVE [ALWAYS] TO PLAN FOR SOMETHING GOING WRONG, YOU KNOW, WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DON’T GET THE PERFECT DAY? IF IT DOES GO WRONG, THE GUY ON THE GROUND NEEDS TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE SITUATION FIRST ... THEN HE FEEDS IT BACK HERE OR WHEREVER THE DEDICATED CRISIS TEAM MIGHT BE

A further example of what is perceived as ‘the wrong mindset’ is discussed next, where another contractor recalled ‘working with Delta [Delta Force]’ in Iraq ... ‘they were doing surveillance work but they had black BMW cars with huge black wheels, and 4 in each vehicle’. In his view, they ‘looked just like gangsters in pimp’s cars!’ He was unable to understand how these contractors could believe themselves discreet in their appearance and argued that ‘they just don’t get it’. What he understood as a lack of insight was put down to ‘their training ... if you look at anything they do it is always in numbers [of people]’. He elaborated further, ‘I’m not sure if it is a lack of belief in themselves, or the skills, or just their confidence. It’s a different mentality’. Campion also records his experience of ‘U.S intelligence types’ who appear in the airport terminal building upon the arrival of himself and a colleague into Kabul International Airport where:

THEY FOLLOW US INTO THE TERMINAL, WHICH IS MORE OF A RUINED OLD SHED. THEY’RE SHADOWING OUR EVERY MOVE. EVERY TIME WE STOP, THEY STOP. EVERY TIME WE MOVE, THEY MOVE. THEY HAVE THE SURVEILLANCE SKILLS OF A CLOWN ON A UNICYCLE. TOMMO AND I ARE TORN BETWEEN FINDING IT HILARIOUS AND HUGELY ANNOYING¹¹⁶

Once again, we note diversity of perception and divergent understandings of what might be seen to constitute a particular profile, in this case with regard to surveillance. Returning to earlier comments about the criteria for specific profiles, on the topic of the frequently invoked ‘benchmark experience’ of Northern Ireland, a British contractor said:

SOME THINK THEY ARE LOW PROFILE, BUT THEY STILL HAVE THE GUNS HANGING OUT. THEY JUST DON’T HAVE

THE EXPERIENCE TO CARRY IT OFF. THE BRITS HAVE THIS AS THEIR FORTE WITH NI, BECAUSE THAT WAS THE ONLY WAY YOU COULD OPERATE

Reflecting in a more speculative sense on the use of a discreet approach, another contractor believed that ‘a low profile may create an air of uncertainty amongst the enemy’. In this way, ‘they [insurgents] may see a team being discreet and either believe it to be weak or ... too soft to actually be important’. Alternatively, this stance may indicate the presence of ‘a number of covert assets (snipers, counter surveillance etc)’ in ways that might trouble potential attackers. In those situations where options were limited, a U.S contractor said ‘it was ... good to use low profile because [in] some of the places ... there is only one way in and one way out’. Easily identifiable, the vehicle movement could come to the attention of insurgents who may plan ahead, ‘in Baghdad if you came in with the typical 3 or 4 SUV’s everyone knew who you were, and then they can ambush you on the way out’. This in contrast to ‘other missions travelling across the countryside [where] it was better to go high profile – because you were going to be too far away [if things went wrong]’. Yet, the hazards of going low profile are that friendly forces may mistake teams for hostile actors leading to blue-on-blue incidents where according to a U.S contractor, ‘you could end up getting stuck in a firefight with everybody ... things can go bad and that was always something you had to keep in mind’. Recalling his experiences in Iraq, he said:

IT HAPPENED A COUPLE OF TIMES – YOU HAD A COALITION TEAM OUT THERE AND SUDDENLY THEY WERE IN A FIGHT WITH THE BAD GUYS AND ANOTHER TEAM. IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO REALLY IDENTIFY THEMSELVES

In Duffy’s view:

THE AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN VERY TRIGGER HAPPY AND THERE HAVE BEEN NUMEROUS OCCASIONS OF BLUE ON BLUE (FRIENDLY FIRE) INCIDENTS BETWEEN U.S AND OTHER COALITION FORCES. BUT IT WASN’T JUST THE AMERICAN ARMY, OTHER PSD TEAMS IN HIGH PROFILE VEHICLES TORE AROUND THE CITY LIKE IT WAS THE WILD WEST, SHOOTING UP ANYTHING THAT MOVED. SOME HIGH PROFILE COMPANIES WERE PROFESSIONAL AND CONDUCTED THEMSELVES IN A MUCH MORE CONTROLLED MANNER, AND THESE TENDED TO BE MAINLY BRITISH COMPANIES. SOME OF THE AMERICAN COMPANIES BEHAVED LIKE THEY WERE IN THE MAD MAX FILMS¹¹⁷

A British contractor stated with some sadness that ‘there was a team that took a low profile and three got killed’. This incident had affected him personally since he had ‘worked alongside one of the blokes involved ... I bet [the others] are still beating themselves up thinking “why did we do that?”.’ As a British contractor reported ‘we have been shot at about 4 or 5 times, but it has all been by the Blackwaters. They will run you off the road, and their argument is “well you chose to be low profile”.’ As Schumacher notes:

THE DOWNSIDE TO THE LOW-PROFILE CONCEPT IS THAT MILITARY AND POLICE PERSONNEL MAY BE WARY OF THESE DISGUISED CONTRACTORS AND IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT BECOME HIGHLY SUSPICIOUS. IF THEY ARE SPOTTED WITH HIDDEN WEAPONS, THEY CAN BE MISTAKEN FOR INSURGENTS

AND SUBSEQUENTLY FIRED UPON BY COALITION FORCES¹¹⁸

Yet, in the case of Duffy, a contractor who had worked predominantly in a low profile role, the opportunity to be hired by a company with a U.S contract meant that he had necessarily to switch to a high profile approach. Though he stated that ‘it wasn’t his cup of tea’, and that it was a stance he felt ‘uncomfortable’ with, his view was that a ‘well trained and experienced team’ helped the profile ‘to work’ and that ‘we conducted ourselves like it should be done and not like some of the cowboys we had seen elsewhere’.¹¹⁹ Here, he explains the challenges faced in making the transition from a low profile to a high profile mindset:

I DIDN’T CHERISH THE THOUGHT OF WORKING OVERT BECAUSE, FROM WHAT I HAD SEEN, THEY WERE NOTHING BUT BOMB AND BULLET MAGNETS. I HAD A FEW FRIENDS WORKING FOR SIMILAR COMPANIES AND WHAT I WAS HEARING, DIDN’T FILL ME WITH ENTHUSIASM FOR THE JOB. AFTER WORKING IN IRAQ FOR OVER A YEAR, CONDUCTING MY SOP’S AND TACTICS IN A WAY IN WHICH THE MAIN AIM WAS NOT TO DRAW ATTENTION TO MYSELF AND TO BLEND IN, GOING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION FELT ALIEN TO ME¹²⁰

While conducting high profile operations, this particular contractor felt compelled to distance himself and his team from the ‘scourge of the industry’, the archetypal cowboy figure. Despite working to a broadly similar agenda, the consequence of security actors adopting sharply contrasting security profiles likely adds to the overall sense of chaos and confusion for local people, the military and contractors alike.

¹¹⁶ Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 919.
¹¹⁷ Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 8.
¹¹⁸ Schumacher, *A Bloody Business*, p. 169.
¹¹⁹ Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 91.
¹²⁰ Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 64.

8 THE ROLE OF MILITARY BACKGROUND

IN FURTHER EXPLAINING HOW AND WHY PARTICULAR CONTRACTORS DRESSED AS THEY DID, PRESENTED THEMSELVES IN HIGH AND LOW PROFILE WAYS, AND WERE BELIEVED TO BE SUITABLE (OR OTHERWISE) FOR EMPLOYMENT IN PRIVATE SECURITY – SPECIFICALLY THE ARMED CP ROLE – RESPONDENTS DISCUSSED THE RELEVANCE OF MILITARY BACKGROUND.

Overall, they acknowledged that the industry was run ‘on the old boys network’ and as one of a number of the longer term legacies of military service, ‘it is a fact worth reiterating ... that you get into the industry by who you know above all else’, believed one British contractor. However, his view was that ‘this should be stopped’, because ultimately nepotism ‘was bad for the industry’ since it was more likely ‘to let contractors in who were below par’.

8.1 STAYING AND FIGHTING

In a related sense, respondents’ frequently saw the behaviour of the contracting community as a product of their previous military role and sub-culture. For example, one British contractor said ‘well, the Paras [talking of former members of the Parachute Regiment] like to punch a guy and have a pint’. He went on to argue that those who were ‘the problem’ and responsible for ‘random shootings’ were generally from the combat arms and elaborating further said, ‘you know, Infantry, Rangers, Marines and guys from that kind of background ... their way was kill “em all, shoot “em up’. Running counter to views expressed above around the suitability of former British Special Forces personnel to low profile CP work discussed within the context of a particular company, and a reminder of the wide range of inconsistent perceptions about one another’s aptitude for particular kinds of security work, a British training contractor asserted that ‘even the Special Forces don’t have the right mindset to do this job ... because of their aggressive nature and their aggressive roles. It doesn’t cross over’. He believed that the long-term legacy of their former military occupational culture was seen to be responsible for their lack of ‘the good communication and social skills [one needs] to do this job’. Those military backgrounds thought to be useful for CP and PSD were mentioned by a U.S contractor who stated that:

I DID SOME TIME DURING MY [NAMES A PARTICULAR BRANCH OF THE U.S MILITARY] DAYS WITH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE REGIMENT AND SO LEARNED A LOT ABOUT HOW TO OPERATE IN AN

URBAN ENVIRONMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The key here was the use of minimum force, seen by another U.S contractor to be the preserve of:

COPS, AND SOME SF [SPECIAL FORCES] PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND FORMER MILITARY POLICE ... [THEY] WERE GOOD BECAUSE THEY HAD WORKED WITH LIMITED USE OF FORCE POLICIES AND HAD WORKED IN PLACES WHERE YOU CAN’T SHOOT EVERYBODY!

While something of a throwaway comment and with some humour, he finished with an important observation, ‘and remember the cops, unlike the Ghurkas, are better drivers!’ He went on to argue that ‘the SAS guys had one way of doing things which was good ... and it was my way of doing things’. Another U.S contractor argued that the ‘Royal Marine kind of guy is just another version of the U.S Marine ... you know “we can bring more weapons to bare”, and that sort of thing. It was just the way they were schooled’. Appearing to contradict this respondent, depending on how one defines ‘good soldiers’ and the extent to which particular skill-sets crossover into the commercial world, a British contractor said ‘most of the [Royal] Marines are switched on – they are bloody good soldiers’. In concurring with this view, another British respondent said that:

[ROYAL] MARINES HAVE DONE POLICING WORK AND THEY ARE PARTICULARLY GOOD IN THE ROLE SINCE THEY COMBINE POLICING AND OTHER MILITARY SKILLS ... THEY HAVE THE MENTALITY OF THE INFANTRY/ ROYAL MILITARY POLICE, BUT IT IS ‘TAMED’

The reference here to restraint, where the RM ‘mentality’ was believed to be ‘tamed’ in contrast to others in the combat arms, stood in contrast to the views of a U.S contractor who argued that the SF backgrounds of Blackwater employees disposed them to ‘fight [their] way out with guns rather than putting the pedal to the metal, and driving down the sidewalk’. In a similar sense, Storm recollects veteran colleagues’ frequent discussions about their military experiences, where they would ask one another about previous ‘confirmed kills, trigger time and how many KIAs there had been’. Within the context of his current contract, he notes how peers would start the shift by saying ‘how are you today, did ya” get trigger time yesterday?’ Storm’s own view was that discussions of this kind ‘were pretty stupid’ and he made an active attempt to distance himself ‘from any conversation that involved these questions’. While valid ‘in the proper forum and situation’ he concluded that ‘they shouldn’t be asked on a daily basis’.¹²¹ A U.S contractor reflected with obvious pride on the ‘10 or 12 situations when I could have shot people and would have been justified in doing so ... I’m a fair to middling weapons operator.’ As he saw it, contractors who failed to exercise restraint were a product of their (military) ‘background ... all they want to do is kick down the door and throw the grenade in ... you’ve been taught that all your life, or for years of active service and you will continue to do that’. He saw this as ‘a real problem that companies struggled to keep under control.’ Another U.S contractor made a similar point and argued that the CP team’s aim, was ‘not sticking around but getting themselves and their people out’. He framed this approach in terms of his own military background, ‘I’m a [names military branch] guy and my experience of operations is that we sneak in and sneak out. We don’t stand around and fight’.

A British contractor said ‘we had trouble [in the company] with some people who wanted to stay and fight ... basically we just run, running is our big thing!’ Ultimately, he noted that while ‘companies wanted their people protected, we are not the military,

you know we’re not gonna call in airstrikes and that kind of thing’. As Campion argues:

THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH RUNNING. ELITE SOLDIERING ISN’T ABOUT BEING BULLETPROOF, OR SUPERHUMAN. IT’S MORE OFTEN ABOUT GETTING YOURSELF AND YOUR MATES OUT ALIVE, AND KNOWING WHEN TO STAND AND FIGHT AND WHEN TO MAKE YOURSELF SCARCE¹²²

Fuelled in-part by the commercial imperatives shaping contractor’s competitive culture, and exacerbated by deeply entrenched inter- and intra-military rivalry, many in the sample criticised the ‘stay and fight mindset’ thought to arise from particular military backgrounds.

8.2 MILITARY RANK AND ATTITUDE

Though less prevalent in discussion, the question of former military rank was also raised by a small number of respondents, with one British contractor arguing that ‘rank should not crossover into the security industry’. During a telephone conversation another British contractor bemoaned the difficulties of getting his current company to accepts that he was now educated to higher degree level, and that placing him in a role suitable for ‘SNCO’s’ may not have been the most appropriate way in which to recognise his current skill set. Another contractor argued that ‘whether or not they were commissioned [in the military] or not matters a lot’. He noted further that ‘every single ex-commissioned [we’ve sent out on the ground] has walked out [on us] and ... failed’. The respondent’s concern was with the abilities of these contractors, ‘I’ve used [them] in Somalia and places like that, but good ones are few and far between’. The main issue was one of both self sufficiency in the field and expectation about what the company can provide where:

EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO BE GIVEN A PASSPORT AND A WADGE OF CASH ... AND WORK WITH THAT. [FORMER] OFFICERS SAY ‘OH, WE HAVE TO CHECK THE CONTRACT TO MAKE SURE IT LOOKS AFTER MY FAMILY’, WHICH IS FINE BUT I SAY ‘GET ON THAT FLIGHT AND WE WILL MAKE IT UP AS WE GO ALONG. LOOK, JUST GET ON THE FLIGHT AND WE WILL HAVE A CONTACT FOR YOU AS SOON AS YOU LAND’. GETTING [GOOD] GUYS [WITH A COMMISSIONED BACKGROUND] WHO CAN DO THE JOB IS PRETTY RARE

He argued that contractors operating independently might benefit from cultivating a somewhat unremarkable, street-wise character able to read and respond to their social surroundings both appropriately and with confidence. He went on to say that ‘[our people] might be described as blaggers [those who can gain acceptance through conversation or banter] in some respect’. With the hint of a smile, he noted further that ‘some of them are good for next to nothing but they turn up to the job ready to deliver. What you don’t need is people who say “give me body armour, give me this, give me that”’.

Aside from concerns around background in regard to those best suited to work as armed contractors in the PSD or CP role, and the view recorded above that former commissioned personnel may be ill-suited to work in certain situations on the ground, respondents also elaborated further upon military rivalry alluded to above. One British contractor was of the view that former SAS ‘will back their own up [and were] more favourable to their people’. He argued that ‘they [shouldn’t] do that and, I know it is a bit Hollywood ... but you are there on the ground with these people that you going to fight and die with’. Alluding perhaps to what some might read as a form of elitism, another British contractor said:

121 Storm, *Pushing the Envelope*, Location 1454.
122 Campion, *Born Fearless*, Location 1387.

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM FOR ME WAS “THE REGIMENT” [FORMER SAS]. THEY ARE SWITCHED ON, BUT IN A DIFFERENT WAY ... IN IRAQ I WAS DRIVING THROUGH CORRIDORS OF DEATH, SCARY STUFF, BUT I DIDN’T SEE MANY REGIMENT BLOKES DOING IT. THEY RAN THE JOBS FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE AND WON’T DO THEM [DIRECTLY] BECAUSE THEY [WERE] SAS. THERE WERE EGOS EVERYWHERE, AND THIS BROUGHT STRESS

A non-British contractor from a Special Forces background said ‘I won’t have just SF guys. You have too many Chiefs, everyone is an expert and everyone has to have their say like the old Chinese Parliament’. Recognising the ways that cabals based on former military identity can undermine operational effectiveness, he said ‘to counter this we break it up [and

include] other guys from the green army, the Paras [British Parachute Regiment], the Marines [the British Royal Marines] whatever’. Invoking a theme that has appeared elsewhere in the report, he argued that ultimately, ‘it is through the correct management system that we can get the best from our people’.

8.3 ADAPTABILITY: THINKING ON YOUR FEET

One British contractor believed that ‘what is needed, but what is often missing in [ex] military, is adaptability’ presented as the ability to ‘think on their feet’. Commented on extensively by all of those working in the CP training role (the entirety of whom were also carrying out CP operations between training courses), was discussion of the many disjunctures between military skill sets/attitude and the particular skill sets required for ensuring the safety of the VIP or Principal. A number of (former military) argued that suitability to the commercial sector was often undermined by military experience through what training instructor

respondents referred to as ‘training scars,’ as we noted earlier in those who stayed and fought. A majority view amongst these respondents directly challenged the assumption that former military personnel were - by virtue of their background – indubitably and unquestionably disposed to excel in the armed CP role; said one ‘it’s easier to train someone who hasn’t had military experience’. Though based on a small directly observed sample, and further supported by wider secondary data within the context of the training instructors’ combined experiences in different geographical locations and with diverse (military) students, the author’s findings bear this out. Thus, shortly after arrival at one of the CP training facilities, I hear that a former military student had won a ‘gallantry award’ during his time in the service.

Consequently, expectations around this individual’s performance on the course are heightened amongst fellow students and instructors alike. Somewhat surprisingly however, the student’s ability to think on his feet appear limited in comparison to his peers, especially when it comes to CP foot drills, extrication of the client under live-firing conditions, and accuracy in using a weapon.¹²³ He seems hesitant, under-confident, and reactive rather than proactive. He awaits commands when scenarios arise, which in turn threaten his security, that of his team, and crucially, the Principal.¹²⁴ In contrast, I am struck by the learning capacity of a non military student who seems to be something of a ‘natural’ in this particular role. Having never handled weaponry prior to the course, he rapidly masters live firing drills, foot drills, and is better able to make quick decisions under pressure. He demonstrates common sense and his communication skills are also better developed than his ex-military peer as a consequence perhaps, of his long term experience of working in the civilian paramedic role. He quickly strikes up a measured and professional rapport with the Principal (unlike his former military peer) that may prove to be central – ultimately – to the former’s security since a functional Principal/BG role should be built on trust, above all else.

8.4 CONTRACTORS AND THE ARMED CP ROLE: CIVILIAN VERSUS MILITARY?

Trainers were highly receptive to the right ‘civilian’ who was open to learning, was highly motivated and possessed valid, transferable life skills, with one instructor noting that ‘at the end of day it is all about the individual’. Civilians hoping to work in the CP role in ‘hostile conditions’ often took a back-seat in the ex-military dominated student cohorts and were particularly conscientious and keen to prove that they were ‘up to the job’. It seems that they perceived themselves as inferior to former military personnel or at least ‘outsiders’, thereby demonstrating the wider allure of soldiering to many without experience of the armed forces. When coupled with the ways in which military personnel are deeply socialised into believing their own superiority over those of the lesser civilian, the latter had necessarily to work harder, had nothing in the way of (military) laurels on which to rest, and were attempting to break into a world dominated by a particular closely-knit group. To-date, well-trained civilians had performed competently on operations and feedback from those companies willing to hire them was positive.

Unlike the experiences of working with former soldiers, trainers did not have to encourage a wholesale re-learning of skill sets practiced intensively in the military over many years, and often drawn on spontaneously in life or death situations, for example when coming under enemy fire.¹²⁵ One trainer expressed particular concern around former ‘Special Forces, or government agency people [like the] Secret Service. In his view, ‘these people are in theory, intelligent, resourceful and flexible in what they do’. However, the potential downside of being intensively trained ‘over 20 years or more’ means that change ‘may be difficult’. He saw this in terms of the ‘brainwashing that the military does’ which also helps to explain not only ‘why the military cannot adapt to civilian life’ as he put it, but also that military institutionalisation may prove a hindrance to operate in the ‘constantly changing commercial world’. He provided particular

examples invoking the tenacious U.S/British binary, yet in the following example, neither nationalities emerge as consummate in their professionalism:

THE WEAPONS TRAINING IN THE MILITARY IS SO FUCKING REGIMENTED. IT DOESN’T ALLOW YOU TO THINK, EVEN IN THE CASE OF BRITISH MILITARY TRAINING. [SOME OF IT] IS GOOD, LIKE THE IMMEDIATE ACTION [WEAPON’S DRILLS] ... BUT THEY DON’T ALLOW PEOPLE TO ASSESS THE SITUATION. THE AMERICAN MILITARY IS PROBABLY THE WORST. IT IS SO REGIMENTED ... THEY TAKE YOUR BRAIN AWAY. THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO STRIP THEIR WEAPONS DOWN TO CERTAIN PARTS BECAUSE THEY JUST DON’T TRUST THEM

In his view, ‘this is no good for the industry’. Though this instructor had positive experiences of training those without a military background, in the absence of adequate preparation for work as an armed contractor, a U.S respondent presents a contrasting view where:

WE WERE HAULING PEOPLE WHO LITERALLY HAD NO MILITARY BACKGROUND WHO HAD NEVER USED A WEAPON. YOU HAD TO SHOW THEM HOW TO HOLD A WEAPON AND HOW TO WEAR BODY ARMOUR. THEY WOULD PUT IT ON BACKWARDS - YOU'D SEE SOME OF THE GUYS TRYING - WE WOULD BE HOLDING OURSELVES IN FROM LAUGHING SO MUCH!

A British contractor had experience of ‘civilian doormen straight off the doors with [only] 3 days training,’ and argued that these men can quickly ‘become zombies

123 Though never having handled firearms before, the presenter of the TV programme noted above mastered his pistol swiftly, outshooting many of those on the course with military backgrounds.
124 A student on this course discussed how many of her colleagues who were either leaving the British army voluntarily or being made redundant, were looking to a new career ‘in private security’. This particular respondent revealed the considerable time she had dedicated to finding the training course that best suited her aspiration to employment in CP, while other leavers she noted, ‘didn’t seem to have a clue about contracting but just thought they could walk into a job because it was a natural progression [of their military career]’. She also recalled that during the British armed forces CTW, civilian advisors had ‘quickly sold working in private security to a lot of the younger lads’, facilitated in no small way by the MoD’s ELC scheme that could be used on ‘approved training company’ courses. These training companies were linked to others who provided security services out on the ground, though jobs could not always be guaranteed for those graduating from the CP/PSD training courses. Those debating the cost effectiveness of contractors might wish to consider that the taxpayer is paying three times for those contractors with a military background in these particular cases, first in respect of military training, second for MoD provided ELC’s for transition to ‘civilian life’ (although how far moving to private security can be conceived of as a ‘transition’ is surely a moot point), and finally for payment to the companies themselves in the case of government contracts.
125 For a theoretical explanation of this phenomena, see Paul Higate, (2012) ‘The Private Militarized Security Contractor as Geocorporeal Actor’, *International Political Sociology*, 6: 355-372.



9 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

THE FINDINGS DETAILED IN THIS REPORT PROVIDED A FLEETING GLIMPSE INTO THE IDENTITY OF PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY CONTRACTORS WORKING MAINLY IN THE ARMED CP ROLE FROM AROUND MID 2003 IN IRAQ AND TO A DEGREE, AFGHANISTAN DURING RECENT YEARS.

While they have highlighted problems of the industry, it is important to note that much professional practice, myriad examples of restraint and approaches to security that directly counter the national stereotypes discussed above, go unreported and unacknowledged. It is also important to draw attention to some of the ways in which the material has dated as the industry can be said to have matured in specific ways. For example, increasing proportions of individuals from the global South (both TCN and LN) now work in the industry, part-consequence of which has been an erosion of the high wages generated by Western contractors during the so-called Iraq Goldrush. State authorities in both Iraq and Afghanistan have also influenced the conduct of companies, as has the ICoC, though little is known about the particular impact of this key initiative on the ground. In addition, the role of maritime security has attracted increased attention while concomitantly the activities of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan are considered less newsworthy. However, while the industry is in a constant state of change, it is likely that numerous of the findings outlined above remain current. Here, sometimes intense rivalry around questions of professionalism are almost certain to persist in today's industry, as are those questions raised of the dynamic interplay between security profile and the wider security climate.

The report was centred on contractor identity, operationalised through the sociological concept of identity work that foregrounded the intersubjective generation of sense of self in relation to those known personally, or more commonly, imagined others. The (invariably) 'less than competent' practices of these others was often explained by recourse to national identity turning on the U.S./UK binary where cowboys represented all that was unprofessional as captured in the metaphor of high profile. Drawing on a wide range

of primary and secondary data, the report considered how contractors understood security profile through focusing on the relevance of driving and the significance of appearance in respect of clothing, equipment and bodily modification including the use of steroids. Questions were raised here about who or what kinds of men these individuals wished to be that in turn, rested on how they practiced and in implicit terms, thought about security in their identity of, and role as contractor.

Discussion then turned to how a number of contractors reflected on the impact of these varying presentations of self to local people who had little choice but to host them in their communities. What might it mean to conduct security through intimidation to war weary individuals? What were the cumulative effects on the local population of seeing weapons pointing out of the windows of vehicles driven aggressively through their neighbourhoods? Was it possible to set about conducting security work in a different way characterised by a more discreet impact less likely to exacerbate local tensions? How far were approaches to security shaped by a fixed mindset as some claimed, or rather did contractors give little thought to alternative practices on account of the criteria to which they were subject as part of their company's contractual agreements? More likely, the ways they set about security work flowed from a complex amalgam of interconnected factors, prime amongst them was the very real risk of injury and death; to outwit or outgun? Yet, based on the illustrative and insightful memoir of a former Blackwater employee, we witnessed the extent to which an aggressive high profile approach (albeit justified on the grounds of survival), chimed with key markers of masculinity grounded in testosterone and power against the backdrop of employer autonomy. If the label of mercenary remains largely undefined at

when put under pressure'. Duffy noted that 'the twenty men working on our team all had extensive military experience and had served in numerous conflicts and operations worldwide', though interestingly, and in-line with previous comments, he went on to say that 'I don't necessarily mean that you needed to be ex- military to work in Iraq, but serving in the army gives you a set of base skills that are a good starting point'. Further justifying the validity of military experience, he argued that:

ANYONE WHO HAS SERVED IN THE FORCES WILL KNOW THAT, ONCE YOUR WEAPON HANDLING SKILLS ARE UP TO A GOOD STANDARD ON ONE WEAPON SYSTEM, IT BECOMES MUCH EASIER TO LEARN DIFFERENT WEAPONS SYSTEMS¹²⁶

An alternative view discussed further below, was conveyed to the author via email from a British contractor who argued that:

NOT EVERY SINGLE GUY IN THE MILITARY ESPECIALLY [THOSE IN THE] INFANTRY BATTALIONS HAVE BEEN IN 'CONTACT' WITH AN ENEMY. PERSONALLY I WOULD TAKE A CIVILIAN AND TRAIN HIM/HER AND DO IT WELL. THEY HAVEN'T [DEVELOPED] BAD HABITS AND ... EGOS, WITH NO BULLSHIT STORIES OF TAKING THE TALIBAN OR AL-QAEDA ON SINGLE HANDEDLY. SOUND SOLID TRAINING BY EXPERIENCED OPERATORS IS THE KEY

The debates these questions raise are long-running, and often heated. Those who firmly believe that former military are the most appropriate for the armed CP role express concern at how civilians 'will react under contact' within the context of the ways that the military 'gives people a professional attitude and generally mental and physical toughness'. As one forum¹²⁷ contributor put it:

WHO DO YOU WANT TO TAKE WITH YOU TO LOOK AFTER YOU IF THE PROVERBIAL HITS THE FAN? ... THE GUY WHO HAS BEEN DRILLED TO BITS ON WEAPON SAFETY, HANDLING AND MARKSMANSHIP FOR A MINIMUM OF FOUR YEARS, AS WELL AS HAVING TO USE THOSE SKILLS REGULARLY IN CONTACT SITUATIONS OR ... THE GUY WHO'S FIRST AND LAST EXPERIENCE WITH A WEAPON WAS THE 5 DAYS HE DID ON HIS CP COURSE ON A ONE WAY RANGE IN EASTERN EUROPE?

The assumption by the particular author of this post is that there does exist a clear and unambiguous cross-over between the appropriate response when under contact in the military, and how one should respond when working in a CP role. With some weariness, training instructors pointed out that the criteria for acceptance into the industry is a minimum number of years' military service. In effect 'the industry' is a 'closed shop' as one of the forum contributors put it, and 'companies are really missing out on some talent because there are civilians out there who could be really good at the job'. And yet, as indicated above, it remains the case that 'many clients want ex military ... there is a mystique about the military and what it is they do ... [this] provides them with this sense of illusion'. Another blogger writes:

I HAVE GUYS WITH NO MILITARY TRAINING ... [THEY] WERE BLOODY NATURALS AND YOU COULD COUNT

ON THEM. IT WOULD BE NICE IF EVERYONE COULD BE ASSESSED ON A CASE BY CASE BASIS, BUT TIME AND THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO DO THAT ARE NOT THERE

'It's not so much whether civilians should actually be employed' continued another contributor, 'but that a complete fixation with ex-military may preclude the possibility of recruiting a really good civilian'. In the final analysis, it was argued on the forum that:

THERE IS A PLACE FOR EVERYONE, BUT THAT MIGHT NOT BE THE SAME PLACE - PEOPLE NEED TO BE HONEST WITH THEMSELVES ABOUT THEIR SKILLS, ABILITY, WHAT THEY BRING TO THE TABLE ... AND THAT GOES FOR CIVILIANS, EX-MOB [MILITARY], EX-PLOD [POLICE] ETC

A key point of the current report, and developed further in the Concluding Discussion below, is concern with how far the problems associated with private security - particularly in Iraq from late 2003 on - emanate from certain of its excessive military-cultural dimensions where:

THE MANNER IN WHICH PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES PROTECT THEIR CLIENTS ACTIVITIES IS PRIMARILY BASED ON MILITARY PHILOSOPHY. THIS GIVES RISE TO A CONTRADICTION: THE EMPLOYEES WORKING FOR PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES PROTECTING THEIR RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS [IN THIS PARTICULAR CASE] BASE THEIR WORK ON A MILITARY PHILOSOPHY OF SECURITY PROVISION¹²⁸

126 Duffy, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 136.

127 The excerpts included here can be found at the following URL: closeprotectionworld.com/close-protection-forum/ accessed 20th September 2012.

128 Bjork and Jones, 'Overcoming the Dilemmas', p. 782.

IT IS CLEAR THAT THE INDUSTRY’S CONTRACTING WORKFORCE REMAINS UNDER-RESEARCHED AND FUTURE WORK MIGHT FOCUS DIRECTLY ON THE IMPACT OF THE ICOC ON SECURITY PRACTICES OUT ON THE GROUND IN REGIONS OTHER THAN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, AS WELL AS MAP MORE CLOSELY THE MOST RECENT EVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INDUSTRY.

the level of lay understanding save for its association with aggression and negativity, then it is perhaps unsurprising that it has remained tenacious amongst a number of stakeholders when the phenomena of the ‘hate truck’ for example, is canonized in such ways.

The report then takes a step back through a considered look at what it might mean to conduct low profile operations. Employing local nationals – while anathema to many companies – nevertheless signalled one aspect of this approach as did the centrality of contingency where individuals may not be geared up for a fight, but rather be prepared to negotiate, be flexible, think on their feet and be pro- rather than reactive. Of course, it is important to note that such approaches were made possible by the presence of much demonised contractors explicitly and visibly prepared for hostilities since they may well have acted as magnets for the diverse insurgent actor intent on doing harm. Further elaborating the ways that respondents accounted for differing profiles or mindsets, the spotlight then switched to the provocative question of military background and its potential tensions with armed CP work where staying and fighting may prove operationally dubious through undermining the security of the Principal. Though undoubtedly a minority view within the industry, the question of how far a highly motivated, and well trained individual devoid of a military background might be more suitable for the armed CP role than his armed force counterpart was raised primarily amongst respondents who combined a blend of both training and operational experience.

In the eyes of the majority of the sample, high profile approaches that were conflated with the archetypal cowboy and were seen to have their roots in ‘the American way’, replete as this culture was believed to be with an insidious gun culture, Hollywood, the siege mentality, and other largely derogatory reference points. However, these perceptions engaged ‘the American’ not so much in a literal or malicious sense, but rather

as an idea, a concept or in sociological terms, an ideal type that captured what respondents saw as the limitations of particular companies and their contracting workforce.¹²⁹ Given that the American presence dwarfed all others in the Iraq and Afghan theatres in regard to contractor numbers, it is perhaps unsurprising that their transgressions should fall under the critical spotlight. When combined with a sample that was comprised in the main of British respondents, the dominance of this view can be further accounted for, and somewhat unsurprisingly the critical focus was turned by the British on others rather than closer to home.

In conclusion then, rather than revealing two-dimensional, stateless individuals driven by greed, self-interest and a moral deficit captured in the label of mercenary, findings discussed above signal complexity in contractor security subjectivities that point to the flourishing of a professional conscience expressed symbolically and materially through the low profile approach. Howsoever the label mercenary is defined, locating analysis within the process of identity work reveals the importance of ‘othering’ as well as strong views about who, or what might be deemed professional in the world of the contractor. Yet, while this may be the case, contractors are primarily political actors insofar as they can be seen as vectors of particular (controversial) forms of privatised power played-out on the ground, often for reasons of self and company gain notwithstanding the significant number of governmental contracts that point to the meshing of foreign policy with private company interests. Finally, it should also be noted that the findings documented in this report, while derived from in-depth, rigorous methods nonetheless remain somewhat provisional based as they are on a relatively small sample of mainly self-selecting contractors.

129 For an in-depth explanation of how this view might come about, see Higate ‘Cowboys and Professionals’, pp. 130-131. I am also grateful to Steven Watson and Shaun Gowland for their help in thinking about respondent views in this particular way.



Report Author

Dr Paul Higate
Reader in Gender & Security
Global Insecurities Centre
School for Sociology, Politics and
International Studies
University of Bristol
11 Priory Road
Bristol BS8 1TU
Paul.Higate@bristol.ac.uk
Phone: +44 (0) 117 331 0848

Report supported by

Research Councils UK, ESRC/AHRC
funded project entitled Mercenary
Masculinities Imagine Security:
The Case of the Private Military
Contractor (RES-071-27-0002)