

GI SPECIAL 4D26:

THE WAR IN IRAQ: DEFINITELY FOR SHIT



U.S. Army Spc. James Willis, of Argos, Indiana, burns shit at an outpost south of Baghdad April 17, 2006. (AP Photo/Jacob Silberberg)

NOTICE:

Because of organizing commitments, this issue of GI Special will not follow the customary news format.

Instead, below are 3 articles that are too long for that format.

- 1. A look at the war in Afghanistan, which is killing a higher proportion of deployed forces than the war in Iraq.**
- 2. A look at Blackwater, and how it kills its employees: "Blackwater: The Whores Of War."**
- 3. A look at how the man that ran the VA made millions from his own private business, that did work for the VA, and that specialized in denying veterans their benefits: "The Rat Got Rich."**

Hopefully, some of this information will be useful. T

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

Notes From A Lost War:

“The Locals Call The Taliban Piranaye, Or ‘Ghosts,’ Because Of Their Ability To Appear And Disappear At Will”

3.27.06 By SEBASTIAN JUNGER, Vanity Fair [Excerpts]

By all measures the situation in Afghanistan may be skidding dangerously off the rails. American military deaths in the past year—nearly a hundred—almost equal those for the three preceding years combined.

Colonel Stammer estimates that in Zabol Province—his “battle space”—there are probably fewer than 300 active Taliban, and half that many during the winter. As a military power they are insignificant, but therein lies the problem.

Because of the way the U.S. military is designed, the larger the army they are fighting, the faster it will be destroyed—a large army simply offers a broader target for America's superior weapons.

The one force the U.S. cannot seem to defeat, however, is a small-scale insurgency that is not supported by a central government.

This being Afghanistan—and this being the U.S. government—the development efforts have been tarnished by disturbing incidents of graft, inefficiency, and scandal. The American government has also been criticized for awarding development contracts to non-Afghans; the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway, for example, was built by a New Jersey company using Turkish and Indian workers.

The only thing keeping the Taliban from overrunning this place is American airpower,” one elderly Afghan man in Kandahar told me.

This man had fought the Soviets in the 1980s, and he said that the Taliban were using the same tactics that he remembers from his days with the mujahideen. He went on: “The Russians organized local militias with village leaders, and we took the village leaders and killed them. We made it difficult for anyone working for the government to move around. Gradually we got closer and closer to Kandahar, and finally we took the governor.”

Obviously, a government job is not something that many people can afford to turn down, yet working for the government may also put them on a death list. Unable to lure the

population over to their side through political persuasion, Taliban operatives have started leaving “night letters” in mosques that threaten people with execution unless they quit their government jobs. There is little that the police can do about it.

Late last November, for example, a night watchman at a children's school outside Kandahar was found hanged with his own turban because he had ignored such a warning. A night letter was pinned to his body that named 13 other teachers—all of whom quit. “I put a checkpoint at the school, but they were not willing to keep working,” the district police chief told me sadly when I asked about the murder. “The school has been closed ever since.”

“The conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose,” as Henry Kissinger famously said.

More than one million Afghans were killed during the Soviet occupation, and the mujahideen weren't even close to giving up.

These tactics have worked particularly well in the south. A childhood friend and former National Public Radio reporter named Sarah Chayes, who has lived in Kandahar since 2001, showed me around the city for several days.

She told me that zones of Taliban influence—where Westerners cannot travel safely and locals don't dare cooperate with the government—have crept to within 10 kilometers of the city center. That is almost the high-water mark of mujahideen control before they overran the city in the early 90s.

It was against this grim backdrop that I drove from Kandahar to an American firebase in Qalat to view the war—not from the perspective of the Afghans, but from behind the steel sights of an American gun.

‘GET DOWN!’ I mainly remember someone yelling.

The thing about violence is that later you can recall almost none of it.

Photographer Teun Voeten and I had gotten a ride into the mountains north of Qalat on a Black Hawk helicopter called Evil Monkey, which had dropped us off along with four body bags filled with food for a unit of Army Rangers.

That was 20 minutes ago; now I'm prone beside a soldier whose weapon has jammed, and I'm watching another soldier take aim from behind a rock wall and fire. I remember him firing exactly one round when in reality—I later learned—he emptied three and a half magazines. No memory. I was plugged in for a long, unpleasant burst of gunfire from Taliban gunmen up in the rocks above us, but I completely missed the rocket-propelled grenade (R.P.G.) that exploded 50 yards away.

We've hooked up with the third squad of the third platoon of Battle Company, which is one of the companies that comprise Colonel Stammer's command in Qalat.

Battle 3-3, as the squad is known, had flown in a week earlier to help out a unit of army scouts that had taken casualties when their Humvee was destroyed by an anti-tank mine.

The scouts had driven down a dirt road with no exit, and the Taliban—knowing that they had to come back the same way—dug the mine into the tire ruts and waited. The turret gunner was blown entirely out of the vehicle and then lost both legs after the Humvee rolled back over him, and his two companions were badly burned but managed to get out alive.

The Humvee was just a couple of hundred yards from the mud-walled house where the scouts and Rangers had set up their camp, and the first thing Teun and I had done was to walk down with a couple of soldiers to take a look. The Humvee was a charred, cockeyed hulk sitting on four bare rims by the edge of the Hazarbus River, and it was while we were down there contemplating its sad remains that we got hit.

While I'm lying behind the rock it dawns on me that my leg is getting wet from seepwater coming up through the sand, and I shift my notebook out of my pocket so the ink doesn't run. There's a lot of shooting, but it's hard to tell where it's coming from. Little goutts of dust from a grenade machine gun operated by the scouts stitch their way along the ridgeline across from us, and tracer rounds pulse out of the Ranger camp and skitter into the jumble of rocks where the Taliban are shooting from.

Tracers are inserted into ammo belts every four rounds, which means that a steady torrent of invisible lead is hosing down the ridgeline. The grenade machine gun goes bang-schlack-BOOM very rapidly and over and over in a reassuring way. A mortar impact blossoms silently on the ridge, followed by a thud.

Ten minutes later it's all over and we are back at the Ranger camp. A cold, blue dusk settles over the mountains, and the temperature starts its nightly plunge into the teens.

Four scouts have crossed the river and moved up the ridge to the Taliban positions, but by then the enemy is long gone. All the scouts find is a pile of shell casings in the rocks, the 80 or so rounds that the Taliban fired at us.

As soon as American forces come under attack, the radio operator for that unit gets on his set and says something like "Break, break, break, we're in contact and this is our grid." The grid number is the exact location of American personnel on the ground so that they don't get bombed or mortared by their own side; "break" means that everyone not involved in that fight should stay off the network.

In our case, that call was received by Colonel Stammer's operations room in Qalat, and Stammer approved a request for air assets to be dispatched or diverted to our location. Within half an hour we had a total of five aircraft circling overhead at various altitudes, including a Predator drone flown remotely by a pilot at Kandahar airfield.

Predators carry infra-red optics that can pick out a man's body heat from 25,000 feet, and the one keeping watch over us quickly spotted a group of 10 men a mile to the south. Since no one here leaves his home after dark, these men were almost certainly connected to the attack. Captain Josh McGary, the commanding officer on the ground, listened in as information about the 10 men bounced back and forth across the net.

“Show a weapon, bitch,” I heard someone say under his breath. One weapon—just one AK-47—and all those guys would be dead.

There are consequences to omnipotence—practical consequences, not just moral ones. The enemy is forced to wage war while avoiding actual combat, which becomes—for a conventional army, at any rate—a much harder problem to solve.

In this case, the Taliban have tried—and to some extent succeeded in—reshaping the war as an American logistical problem.

Modern armies have to transport massive amounts of food, fuel, and ammunition in order to function, and insurgencies don't. If you can paralyze the logistics of a conventional army, you're winning the war. An attack last year provides a perfect example.

On August 21, four of McGary's men died when their Humvee hit an improvised explosive device (I.E.D.) while they were protecting a supply convoy returning from the Baylough Bowl.

The supplies were brought in by truck rather than by helicopter because helicopters are inefficient at moving large amounts of equipment. (They're also vulnerable to ground attack. Every time a helicopter goes down in Afghanistan, the consequences ripple through the logistics web for days.)

The decision to use a convoy solved one logistical problem but created another one. Because convoys are forced to travel on tortuous mountain roads, they run the risk of being hit by ambushes and I.E.D.'s. The road from Qalat to Baylough is only 25 miles, for example, but takes two days to drive; ambushing convoys on a road like that is not particularly hard to do.

Locals know everything that happens in their area, so if the Taliban put an I.E.D. in the road, locals won't drive until someone else has hit it. (In general, anything out of the ordinary in Afghanistan—a village with no children, a field with no farmers—means that something bad is about to happen.)

When they see that locals aren't using the roads, American soldiers move on foot.

But that engenders yet more problems. At his lightest, the American soldier carries more than 60 pounds of body armor, ammunition, and weaponry. In summer, the weight increases his risk of dehydration; in winter, it makes him sweat so heavily that he risks hypothermia when he stops. He won't get hypothermia if he has food and a sleeping bag, but that means taking a combat pack that, fully loaded, weighs another 100 pounds. “It's like having a dude on your back,” one soldier told me.

You can't hope to outmaneuver the Taliban at 10,000 feet with a dude on your back, and that puts you right where you started: with airpower.

All this becomes part of a very elaborate chess game that Captain McGary finds himself playing with a mid-level Taliban commander in the Hazarbus Valley named Mullah Kabir.

Kabir generally spends the winter in Pakistan, but attempts by American soldiers to move into his area of influence have kept him pinned down until late in the season this year.

He moves around on a motorcycle—but then again, these guys can cover distances that are unimaginable to an infantryman. They can go 20 clicks in a day.”

Kabir's fighters are village boys who hide their weapons up in the mountains at night and retrieve them in the morning. They're generally home by dark.

Dawn: Four scouts are belly-down on a ridge with their rifles leveled at a cluster of mud houses. The houses show up on a U.S. military map as the village of Kockay. Downslope, a squad of Afghan National Army soldiers moves through an apple orchard, setting the dogs to barking.

It takes five minutes to round up the men of the village and walk them down the hill toward the next village, where the process is repeated. A gray light touches the moonscape where these people scratch out their living. Dead grass twitches in the wind.

By the time the sun has hoisted itself over the last frozen ridges of the Shamali Kortke, three or four villages have been cordoned off and swept by the A.N.A., and several dozen men of all ages have been arranged in two lines in another orchard halfway down the valley.

They squat silently with their shawls wrapped around their thin shoulders, not talking, not looking up.

McGary and his squad walk up through the broken sunlight of the orchard 20 minutes later, unnoticed until the last moment because of their camouflage. The scouts have settled behind some rocks to watch the perimeter, and his “terp” (interpreter), Mike, is walking between the lines of village men, looking for anyone who seems too nervous—or not nervous enough—or who just strikes him as wrong. Hands without calluses are a giveaway. Sunglasses are a giveaway. Disdain is a giveaway. **[This is not a satire. This idiocy defines an insurgent as somebody without calluses, or who has sunglasses. Brilliant. No wonder the war is lost.]**

“Look at that guy,” one of the soldiers says, pointing out one young man, who refuses to look at us. “He's shot so many R.P.G.'s his damn eyes are sideways.”

McGary sits down on a rock under an apple tree and tells Mike to gather the village men around him. As usual, McGary lets a moment pass, and then another, and then he begins to speak. “My name is Captain McGary. I'm the coalition commander in Daychopan District,” he begins quietly. Mike translates every few sentences.

“And for all you hardworking honest men here, I apologize for what happened this morning; it brings me no pleasure to pull you from your beds in the morning. But unfortunately as we drove in here to check on your village the enemy blew up one

of our trucks, so our mission of peace and help became a mission of war. I apologize for bringing war to your valley.”

The men sit cross-legged on the grass, rapt.

[OK folks, get ready. Now comes the script: “Me really smart U.S. officer, you dumb shit native, me got lots of silly bullshit to lay on you now.” Can you believe somebody actually writes this crap? And expects the Afghans to buy it? The Afghans probably do stand up comedy riffs on this horseshit after the troops leave. This has to be something some genius in MI cooked up: nobody else could be stupid enough.]

“Your government has sent me food and supplies to feed this valley for five years. It sits in Baylough, but I can't get it here, because they shoot at us. Do they not want you to eat? I can bring the food here, but I need you to talk to these men in the mountains. Ask them what they fight for—why? If they want us to leave Afghanistan, the fastest way is to stop fighting. Believe me, we're ready to go home. I have a four-year-old son, and he asked me if he can go to Afghanistan sometime. I want to bring him here to see a strong Afghanistan, all the tribes united under Islamic law. That's what's in my heart. So please, if you see those men in the mountains, tell them what's in my heart.” **[What's in his heart is that he wants to make dog meat out of “those men in the mountains.” Duh.]**

McGary takes off his helmet and puts it on the ground next to him. “The men in the mountains are getting paid by Pakistan,” he says. Mike translates; heads nod. “Pakistan wants to see Afghanistan remain weak. So fight for Afghanistan and don't be a puppet of Pakistan!” **[Repeat: this is not a satire.]**

Meanwhile, an average of nearly two American soldiers now die every week in Afghanistan—proportionally almost the same casualty rate as in Iraq, where there are seven times as many troops. [Looks like they ain't buying what he's selling. They've only had about 4000 years experience fighting off would-be Imperial conquerors. That's all.]

“At 12 Z we're probably going to take some small-arms fire, so stay close to the walls. Once it gets dark the Apaches will come in and there'll be no problem. Get ready for rockets—the radios just picked up radio chatter that they got one rocket on a self-timer and they'll adjust with the second one. What's the burnout rate for an R.P.G. with plunging fire?”

The afternoon light is dying in the Hazarbus Valley, and Captain McGary has his men around him in the courtyard of the mud house where they've been living for the past week.

His terp has picked up radio chatter that the Taliban have what they refer to as “the big machine” up on the mountain above us, and he's worried about it. If it's a Dishka machine gun—which can easily shoot down aircraft—then Task Force Storm won't send helicopters anywhere near this valley. If it's a 107-mm. rocket—which is more likely—then the only thing McGary has to worry about is a lucky shot that hits the compound.

The Taliban shoot rockets out of PVC pipe using a primitive timer that relies on water dripping out of holes in a bucket. One wire is attached to a sponge that floats on the surface of the water, and another wire is attached to the bottom of the bucket; when all the water drips out and the two wires touch, the rocket ignites. By that time the Taliban are back home eating dinner.

The plan for tonight is to sling out the destroyed Humvee on a Chinook helicopter and then move 10 kilometers on foot into the next valley. (Colonel Stammer has a policy of not leaving destroyed vehicles behind—in part out of respect for the men who may have been killed or wounded in them, in part so that the Taliban can't use them as propaganda trophies.)

The sling operation goes smoothly. The Apaches arrive soon after dark, clattering around us in the night, and then an A-10 comes in and lights up the mountainside with a burst from its gun. The Taliban are terrified of airpower, and the military finds that painting a mountainside with 4,000 rounds a minute has a way of discouraging enemy activity.

A few minutes later the Chinook comes in and settles awkwardly over the wrecked Humvee. The pilot descends so low that the belly of the Chinook taps the helmet of a Ranger who is on the hood trying to hook up the load slings. Mineral dust from the rotor wash hits the blades and produces two circles of fire that wobble oddly in the dark and then dissolve as the Chinook pulls and tilts and rushes on up the valley with its strange load.

The temperature is probably 20 degrees. We've been up since dawn. We're going to have to walk all night. The soldiers burrow into their sleeping bags for a couple of hours' rest and then claw their way back out around midnight to start their move.

It's a gruesome display of endurance that lasts until dawn. The men are carrying a full load—160 pounds or so, and even more for the mortar squad—and we have to cross over a mountain pass at nearly 10,000 feet. The air is so cold—10 degrees? 15 degrees?—that the water freezes in our CamelBaks.

The soldiers don't dare use the hip belts on their rucksacks in case they have to get rid of them quickly, which means they carry the entire 160 pounds on their shoulders.

Because we're going straight through Mullah Kabir's territory, two A-10s babysit us for most of the movement, and a Global Hawk peers down from 65,000 feet to make sure no one's waiting for us in the rocks up ahead. Global Hawks are flown remotely by pilots at Edwards Air Force Base, in California, and from 12 miles up they can tell if a man on the ground is holding an American weapon or an AK-47. If it's the latter, artillery units 20 or 30 miles away can—almost literally—drop a round into his lap.

By the time we stagger over the pass, I have the feeling that the men are almost hoping for contact just so they can lie down for a while. Despite the cold we're all in our shirtsleeves and sweating like horses, and whenever we stop—once because a man's legs cramp up—hypothermia seems to introduce itself around the group like some oversolicitous party guest.

We finally wobble into the village of Andar just as the eastern sky is starting to lighten. The scouts maintain a safe house in Andar, and in their courtyard we drop our gear and shake out our sleeping bags and zip ourselves in. One minute we're marching, the next minute we're asleep. I think the mortar team might have set up the mortar but I'm not even sure.

I wake up a few hours later to the voices of soldiers next to me. The sun is high and strong and starting to cook us in our bags. The soldiers don't know that I'm awake, and I just lie there for a while listening to them. They talk about music. They talk about women. They talk about their weapons. One guy asks a mortarman named McJunkin if it would be possible to hold a mortar sideways and fire it like a gun.

"No, it would tear you in half," McJunkin answers.

We happen to be sleeping a few hundred yards from the house of the main Taliban leader in the village, but of course he's up in the mountains; he won't be back until we're gone.

After that, this particular village won't see another American until the spring.

The locals call the Taliban Piranaye, or "ghosts," because of their ability to appear and disappear at will.

One day while I was in a bunker in Vietnam, a sniper round went over my head. The person who fired that weapon was not a terrorist, a rebel, an extremist, or a so-called insurgent. The Vietnamese individual who tried to kill me was a citizen of Vietnam, who did not want me in his country. This truth escapes millions.

**Mike Hastie
U.S. Army Medic
Vietnam 1970-71
December 13, 2004**

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DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK

Blackwater: "The Whores Of War"

“As We Expose Blackwater In This Case, It Will Also Expose The Inefficient And Corrupt System That Exists Over There”

[Thanks to J, who sent this in.]

But today, Blackwater is facing a potentially devastating battle--this time not in Iraq but in court. The company has been slapped with a lawsuit that, if successful, will send shock waves through the world of private security firms, a world that has expanded significantly since Bush took office. Blackwater is being sued for the wrongful deaths of Stephen "Scott" Helvenston, Mike Teague, Jerko Zovko and Wesley Batalona by the families of the men slain in Falluja.

May 8, 2006 by JEREMY SCAHILL, The Nation

It is one of the most infamous incidents of the war in Iraq: On March 31, 2004, four private American security contractors get lost and end up driving through the center of Falluja, a hotbed of Sunni resistance to the US occupation. Shortly after entering the city, they get stuck in traffic, and their small convoy is ambushed.

Several armed men approach the two vehicles and open fire from behind, repeatedly shooting the men at point-blank range.

Within moments, their bodies are dragged from the vehicles and a crowd descends on them, tearing them to pieces. Eventually, their corpses are chopped and burned. The remains of two of the men are strung up on a bridge over the Euphrates River and left to dangle. The gruesome image is soon beamed across the globe.

In the Oval Office the killings were taken as "a challenge to America's resolve," according to the Los Angeles Times. President Bush issued a statement through his spokesperson. "We will not be intimidated," he said. "We will finish the job." Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt vowed, "We will be back in Falluja.... We will hunt down the criminals.... It's going to be deliberate. It will be precise, and it will be overwhelming." Within days of the ambush, US forces laid siege to Falluja, beginning what would be one of the most brutal and sustained US operations of the occupation.

For most people, the gruesome killings were the first they had ever heard of Blackwater USA, a small, North Carolina-based private security company. Since the Falluja incident, and also because of it, Blackwater has emerged as one of the most successful and profitable security contractors operating in Iraq.

The company and its secretive, mega-millionaire, right-wing Christian founder, Erik Prince, position Blackwater as a patriotic extension of the US military, and its employees are required to take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution.

After the killings, Blackwater released a statement saying the "heinous mistreatment of our friends exhibits the extraordinary conditions under which we voluntarily work to bring freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people.... Our tasks are dangerous and while we feel sadness for our fallen colleagues, we also feel pride and satisfaction that we are making a difference for the people of Iraq."

The company swiftly rose to international prominence: Journalists were flooding Blackwater with calls, and military types were clamoring to sign up for work.

"They're angry...they're saying, 'Let me go over,'" Blackwater spokesman Chris Bertelli told the Virginian-Pilot ten days after the killings, adding that applications to work for Blackwater had increased "considerably" in that time.

"It's natural to assume that the visibility of the dangers could drive up salaries for the folks who have to stand in the path of the bullets," he said.

A day after the killings, Prince enlisted the services of the Alexander Strategy Group, a now disgraced but once powerful Republican lobbying and PR firm. By the end of 2004 Blackwater's president, Gary Jackson, was bragging to the press of "staggering" 600 percent growth. "This is a billion-dollar industry," Jackson said in October 2004. "And Blackwater has only scratched the surface of it."

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More than 428 private contractors have been killed to date in Iraq, and US taxpayers are footing almost the entire compensation bill to their families. "This is a precedent-setting case," says Marc Miles, an attorney for the families. "Just like with tobacco litigation or gun litigation, once they lose that first case, they'd be fearful there would be other lawsuits to follow."

The families' two-year quest to hold those responsible accountable has taken them not to Falluja but to the sprawling Blackwater compound in North Carolina.

As they tell it, after demanding answers about how the men ended up dead in Falluja that day and being stonewalled at every turn, they decided to conduct their own investigation.

"Blackwater sent my son and the other three into Falluja knowing that there was a very good possibility this could happen," says Katy Helvenston, the mother of 38-

year-old Scott Helvenston, whose charred body was hung from the Falluja bridge. "Iraqis physically did it, and it doesn't get any more horrible than what they did to my son, does it? But I hold Blackwater responsible one thousand percent."

In late 2004 the case caught the attention of the high-powered California trial lawyer Daniel Callahan, fresh from a record-setting \$934 million jury decision in a corporate fraud case. On January 5, 2005, the families filed the lawsuit against Blackwater in Wake County, North Carolina. "What we have right now is something worse than the wild, wild west going on in Iraq," Callahan says. "Blackwater is able to operate over there in Iraq free from any oversight that would typically exist in a civilized society.

As we expose Blackwater in this case, it will also expose the inefficient and corrupt system that exists over there."

Scott Helvenston was a walking ad for the military. He came from a proud family of Republicans; his great-great-uncle, Elihu Root, was once US Secretary of War and the 1912 Nobel Peace Prize-winner. Scott was tall, tan and chiseled and, by all accounts, a model soldier and athlete. At 17 he made history by becoming the youngest person ever to complete the rigorous Navy SEAL program. He spent twelve years in the SEALs, four of them as an instructor, and then tried his luck with Hollywood. He trained Demi Moore for her film G.I. Jane and did a few stunts on reality television. In one, Man vs. Beast, he was the only contestant to defeat the beast, outmaneuvering a chimpanzee in an obstacle course. Once the cover boy on a Navy calendar, he also had several workout videos.

If it had been up to Katy Helvenston, her son wouldn't have been in Iraq at all. "We had argued about him going over there," she recalls. "I believe that we should have gone into Afghanistan, but I never believed we should have gone into Iraq, and Scott bought the whole story about Saddam Hussein being involved with Al Qaeda and all that. He believed in what he was doing."

He also had a financial motivation. In early 2004 Helvenston was between jobs and was eking out a living with the stunts on reality TV, the movie consulting and the fitness videos. "It was good money, but it was never enough," his mother remembers. He was divorced but continued to support his ex-wife and two children.

His mother says he took the job with Blackwater because the company offered short-term, two-month contracts, and Scott viewed it as an opportunity to turn his life around. "He said, 'I'm gonna go over there, make some money, maybe make a difference. I'll only be away from my kids for a couple of months.' That's why he chose Blackwater," she recalls.

Helvenston arrived for training at Blackwater's North Carolina campus around March 1, 2004. The man heading the training was Justin McQuown, nicknamed Shrek, after the green ogre movie cartoon character. According to the suit, McQuown lacked the credentials of Helvenston and other ex-SEALs. "During training, McQuown would often improperly instruct the class or provide erroneous information, tactics or techniques," the suit alleges. "On occasion, Helvenston would attempt to politely assist McQuown by offering his expertise on the correct manner of the particular training exercise.

The fact that (McQuown)...was being exposed infuriated him." Scott's mother believes, based on Scott's e-mails and conversations with contractors who served with her son, that McQuown feared that Scott might replace him at the company.

After the training session, Helvenston got on a plane to Kuwait, where he touched down on March 18. It seemed like an ideal situation for him, as two of his friends from his days on the reality TV show Combat Missions were helping to run the Blackwater operations: John and Kathy Potter.

When Helvenston set off for the Middle East, his family thought he was going to be working on Blackwater's high-profile job of guarding the head of the US occupation, Paul Bremer. At \$21 million, it represented the company's biggest contract in Iraq.

As it turned out, Helvenston was slated to carry out a far less glamorous task. John Potter had recently teamed Blackwater up with a Kuwaiti business called Regency Hotel and Hospital Company, and together the firms won a security contract with Eurest Support Services (ESS), guarding convoys transporting kitchen equipment to the US military. Blackwater and Regency had essentially wrestled the ESS contract from another security firm, Control Risk Group, and were eager to win more lucrative contracts from ESS in its other division servicing construction projects in Iraq. Unbeknownst to Helvenston, this goal would drive a series of events that would ultimately lead to his death.

According to former Blackwater officials, Blackwater, Regency and ESS were engaged in a classic war-profiteering scheme. Blackwater was paying its men \$600 a day but billing Regency \$815, according to the Raleigh News and Observer.

"In addition," the paper reports, "Blackwater billed Regency separately for all its overhead and costs in Iraq." Regency would then bill ESS an unknown amount for these services. Kathy Potter told the News and Observer that Regency would "quote ESS a price, say \$1,500 per man per day, and then tell Blackwater that it had quoted ESS \$1,200." ESS then contracted with Halliburton subsidiary KBR, which in turn billed the government an unknown amount of money for the same security services, according to the paper. KBR/Halliburton refuses to discuss the matter and will not confirm any relationship with ESS.

All this was shady enough--but the real danger for Helvenston and the others lay in Blackwater's decision to cut corners to make even more money.

The original contract between Blackwater/Regency and ESS, obtained by The Nation, recognized that "the current threat in the Iraqi theater of operations" would remain "consistent and dangerous," and called for a minimum of three men in each vehicle on security missions "with a minimum of two armored vehicles to support ESS movements."

But on March 12, 2004, Blackwater and Regency signed a subcontract, which specified security provisions identical to the original except for one word: "armored." Blackwater deleted it from the contract.

"When they took that word 'armored' out, Blackwater was able to save \$1.5 million in not buying armored vehicles, which they could then put in their pocket," says attorney Miles.

"These men were told that they'd be operating in armored vehicles. Had they been, I sincerely believe that they'd be alive today. They were killed by insurgents literally walking up and shooting them with small-arms fire. This was not a roadside bomb, it was not any other explosive device. It was merely small-arms fire, which could have been repelled by armored vehicles."

Before Helvenston, Teague, Zovko and Batalona were ever sent into Falluja, the omission of the word "armored" was brought to the attention of Blackwater management by John Potter, according to the families' lawyers.

They say Blackwater refused to redraft the contract.

Potter persisted, insisting that his men be provided with armored vehicles.

This would have resulted in Blackwater losing profits and would also have delayed the start of the ESS job. According to the suit, Blackwater was gung-ho to start in order to impress ESS and win further contracts. So on March 24 the company removed Potter as program manager, replacing him with McQuown, who, according to the families' lawyers, was far more willing than Potter to overlook security considerations in the interest of profits.

It was this corporate greed, combined with McQuown's animosity toward Scott Helvenston, which began at the training in North Carolina, that the families allege played a significant role in the deaths of Helvenston and the other three contractors.

Scott Helvenston and his team were to deploy to Iraq on March 29. But late on the evening of March 27, McQuown called Helvenston and told him that he needed to pack his things immediately, that he would be leaving at 5 am with a completely different team. According to the lawsuit, "It was virtually unheard of to take a single person, like Scott Helvenston, and place him on a different group with whom he had never trained or even met." Helvenston resisted the change. Several other contractors stepped forward, offering to go in his place. McQuown refused to allow it.

Later that night, according to Scott's mother, McQuown came up to Helvenston's hotel room. "He was told at that time that he was not going to be doing security for the ambassador, Paul Bremer, and he was going to escort a convoy of trucks to pick up kitchen equipment. And Scott says, 'You're nuts,' you know, he says, 'I'm not goin' in there to Falluja. You're out of your mind. That's not what I was hired to do.' And at that point McQuown apparently told him that if he didn't do it, he would be fired immediately. He would have to reimburse any monies that had been paid to him, and he was on his own to get home. Well, that left Scott no choice. So the next morning they were off."

The night before he left, Helvenston sent an e-mail to the "Owner, President and Upper Management" of Blackwater, subject: "extreme unprofessionalism."

In this e-mail, obtained by The Nation, he complained that the behavior of McQuown (referred to as "Justin Shrek" in the e-mail) was "very manipulative, duplicitive [sic], immature and unprofessional." He describes how his original team leader tried to appeal to Shrek not to reassign him, but, Helvenston wrote, "I think (the team leader) felt that there was a hidden agenda. 'Lets see if we can screw with Scott.'" Those were some of the last words Helvenston would ever write.

Callahan says that if Blackwater and McQuown had done in the United States what they are alleged to have done in Iraq, "There would be criminal charges against them."

What happened between McQuown and Helvenston was no mere personality conflict. "Corporations are fictional entities--they only act through their personnel," explains Miles. "You need to show intent. You need to put a face on these acts. With regard to the wrongful death of these four men, that face is Justin McQuown of Blackwater."

On March 30, 2004, Helvenston, Teague, Zovko and Batalona left Baghdad on the ESS security mission. The suit alleges that there were six guards available that day, but McQuown intervened and ordered only the four to be sent. The other two were kept behind at Blackwater's Baghdad facility to perform clerical duties. A Blackwater official later boasted, the suit says, that they saved two lives by not sending all six men.

The four men were, in fact, working under contracts guaranteeing that they would travel with a six-person team. But their personal contracts also warned of death and/or injury caused by everything from "civil uprising" and "terrorist activity" to "poisoning" and "flying debris." In filing its motion to dismiss the lawsuit, Blackwater quoted from its standard contract, insisting that those who sign it "fully appreciate the dangers and voluntarily assume these risks as well as any other risks in any way (whether directly or indirectly) connected to the Engagement."

Reading this, it would seem that Blackwater has a reasonable defense.

Not so, say the families of the four men and their lawyers. They do not deny that the men were aware of the risks they were taking, but they charge that Blackwater knowingly refused to provide guaranteed safeguards, among them: They would have armored vehicles; there would be three men in each vehicle--a driver, a navigator and a rear gunner; and the rear gunner would be armed with a heavy automatic weapon, such as a "SAW Mach 46," which can fire up to 850 rounds per minute, allowing the gunner to fight off any attacks from the rear.

"None of that was true," says attorney Callahan. Instead, each vehicle had only two men and far less powerful "Mach 4" guns, which they had not even had a chance to test out. "Without the big gun, without the third man, without the armored vehicle, they were sitting ducks," says Callahan.

The men got lost on the evening of March 30 and eventually found a Marine base near Falluja where they slept for a few hours. "Scotty had tried to call me in the middle of the night," Katy Helvenston remembers. "I had my bedroom phone ringer turned off--I didn't get the call, so he left me a message. It mostly was, 'Mom, please don't worry, I'm OK. I'm gonna be home soon and I'm gonna see ya. We're gonna go have fun. I'm gonna

take care of you.' You know, just stuff like that, which obviously wasn't true. By the time I got the message he'd already been killed."

Shortly after Helvenston left that message, the men left the base and set out for their destination. Without a detailed map, they took the most direct route, through the center of Falluja.

According to Callahan, there was a safer alternative route that went around the city, which the men were unaware of because of Blackwater's failure to conduct a "risk assessment" before the trip, as mandated by the contract.

The suit alleges that the four men should have had a chance to gather intelligence and familiarize themselves with the dangerous routes they would be traveling. This was not done, according to Miles, "so as to pad Blackwater's bottom line" and to impress ESS with Blackwater's efficiency in order to win more contracts. The suit also alleges that McQuown "intentionally refused to allow the Blackwater security contractors to conduct" ride-alongs with the teams they were replacing from Control Risk Group.

(In fact, the suit contends that Blackwater "fabricated critical documents" and "created" a pre-trip risk assessment "after this deadly ambush occurred.")

The men entered Falluja with Helvenston and Teague in one vehicle and Zovko and Batalona in the other. "Since the team was driving without a rear-gunner and did not have armored vehicles, the insurgents were able to literally walk up behind the vehicles and shoot all four men with small arms at close range," the suit alleges.

"Their bodies were pulled into the streets, burned and their charred remains were beaten and dismembered."

The men, it goes on, "would be alive today" had Blackwater not forced them--under threat of being fired--to go unprepared on that mission. "The fact that these four Americans found themselves located in the high-risk, war-torn City of Fallujah without armored vehicles, automatic weapons, and fewer than the minimum number of team members was no accident," the suit alleges. "Instead, this team was sent out without the required equipment and personnel by those in charge at Blackwater."

After the killings, Katy Helvenston joined the families of Mike Teague, Jerko Zovko and Wesley Batalona in grieving and in seeking details about the incident. Blackwater founder Erik Prince personally delivered money to some of the families for funeral expenses, and the company moved to get the men's wives and children benefits under the government's Defense Base Act, which in some cases insures those on contract supporting US military operations abroad.

But then things started to get strange.

Blackwater held a memorial service for the men at its compound. The families were gathered in a conference room, where they thought they would be told how the men had died. The Zovko family asked Blackwater to see the "After Action Report" detailing the incident. "We were actually told," recalls Zovko's mother,

Danica, "that if we wanted to see the paperwork of how my son and his co-workers were killed that we'd have to sue them."

Thus began the legal battle between Blackwater and the dead men's families.

In one of its few statements on the suit, Blackwater spokesperson Chris Bertelli said, "Blackwater hopes that the honor and dignity of our fallen comrades are not diminished by the use of the legal process." Katy Helvenston calls that "total BS in my opinion," and says that the families decided to sue only after being stonewalled, misled and lied to by the company.

"Blackwater seems to understand money. That's the only thing they understand," she says. "They have no values, they have no morals. They're whores. They're the whores of war."

Since its filing in January 2005, the case has moved slowly through the legal system. For its part, Blackwater is represented by multiple law firms. Its lead counsel is Greenberg Traurig, the influential DC law firm that once employed lobbyist Jack Abramoff. The lawyers for the families charge that Blackwater has continued its practice of stonewalling. While some of that may be legitimate defense tactics, the lawyers argue that the company has actively prevented court-ordered depositions from taking place, including taking steps to prevent a key witness from testifying: John Potter, the man who blew the whistle on Blackwater's removal of the word "armored" from the contract and was subsequently removed.

Attorney Marc Miles says that shortly after the suit was filed, he asked the court in North Carolina for an "expedited order" to depose John Potter. The deposition was set for January 28, 2005, and Miles was to fly to Alaska, where the Potters were living. But three days before the deposition, Miles says, "Blackwater hired Potter up, flew him to Washington where it's my understanding he met with Blackwater representatives and their lawyers. (Blackwater) then flew him to Jordan for ultimate deployment in the Middle East," Miles says.

"Obviously they concealed a material witness by hiring him and sending him out of the country." Callahan says Blackwater took advantage of the Potters' financial straits to hinder the case against the company. "Potter didn't have any other gainful employment, because many of these men who are ex-military, their skills don't transfer easily into the civilian sector," he says, adding that after Potter was removed for blowing the whistle on the armor issue, the company abandoned him "until they needed him to avoid this subpoena and this deposition and they said, 'We need you and we need you now.' And zoom, off he goes."

Blackwater subsequently attempted to have Potter's deposition order dissolved, but a federal court said no.

Blackwater has not offered a rebuttal to the specific allegations made by the families, except to deny in general that they are valid. It has fought to have the case dismissed on grounds that because Blackwater is servicing US armed forces it cannot be sued for workers' deaths or injuries and that all liability lies with the government.

In its motion to dismiss the case in federal court, Blackwater argues that the families of the four men killed in Falluja are entitled only to government insurance payments. That's why the company moved swiftly to apply for benefits for the families under the Defense Base Act. Many firms specializing in contractor law advertise the DBA as the best way for corporations servicing the war to avoid being sued. In fact, Blackwater's then-general counsel, Steve Capace, gave a workshop last May on the subject to an "International Super-Conference" for contractors. In the presentation, called "Managing Contracting Risks in Battlefield Conditions," Capace laid out a legal strategy for deflecting the kind of lawsuit Blackwater now faces.

That's why this case is being watched so closely by other firms operating in Iraq. "What Blackwater is trying to do is to sweep all of their wrongful conduct into the Defense Base Act," says Miles. "What they're trying to do is to say, 'Look--we can do anything we want and not be held accountable. We can send our men out to die so that we can pad our bottom line, and if anybody comes back at us, we have insurance.' It's essentially insurance to kill."

Given the uncounted tens of thousands of Iraqis who have died since the invasion and the slaughter in Falluja that followed the Blackwater incident, some might say this lawsuit is just warmongers bickering--no honor among thieves. Indeed, the real scandal here isn't that these men were sent into Falluja with only a four-person detail when there should have been six or that they didn't have a powerful enough machine gun to kill their attackers. It's that the United States has opened Iraq's door to mercenaries who roam the country with impunity.

"Over a thousand people died because of what happened to Scotty that day," says Katy Helvenston. "There's a lot of innocent people that have died." While this suit doesn't mention the retaliatory US attack on Falluja that followed the Blackwater killings, the case is significant because it could blow the lid off a system that allows corporations to face zero liability while reaping huge profits in Iraq and other war zones. "Scotty's not going to die in vain," says his mother. "I'm driven and I'm not going to quit. They will be accountable."

Still, Blackwater has friends in high places.

It's a well-connected, Republican-controlled business that has made its fortune because of the Bush Administration. Company founder Erik Prince and his family have poured serious money into Republican causes and campaign coffers over the past twenty years. An analysis of Prince's contributions prepared for The Nation by the Center for Responsive Politics reveals that since 1989, Prince and his wife have given some \$275,550 to Republican campaigns. Prince has never given a penny to a Democrat. While it is not unheard of for a successful business to cast its lot entirely with one party, it has clearly paid off. Shortly after George W. Bush was re-elected in November 2004, Gary Jackson sent out a mass celebratory e-mail declaring, "Bush Wins, Four More Years!! Hooyah!!"

The White House, for its part, has turned the issue of accountability of Blackwater and other private security companies into a joke, literally. This April at a forum at Johns Hopkins, Bush was asked by a student about bringing "private military contractors under a system of law," to which Bush replied, laughing, that he was going to ask Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, "I was going to--I pick up the phone and

say, Mr. Secretary, I've got an interesting question [laughter]. This is what delegation--I don't mean to be dodging the question, although it's kind of convenient in this case, but never--[laughter] I really will--I'm going to call the Secretary and say you brought up a very valid question, and what are we doing about it? That's how I work."

Do you have a friend or relative in the service? Forward this E-MAIL along, or send us the address if you wish and we'll send it regularly. Whether in Iraq or stuck on a base in the USA, this is extra important for your service friend, too often cut off from access to encouraging news of growing resistance to the war, at home and inside the armed services. Send requests to address up top.

Thieving VA Head Principi's Private Corporation Got Government Contracts While He Headed VA: The Rat Got Rich From Sweetheart Contracts As His Corporation Denied Veterans Benefits; Now New VA Contracts Go To Ex-Chief's Company Diamond Bar; Fees Could Exceed \$1 Billion

John Hennon, who broadcasts a veterans show in Illinois, said he was convinced that QTC "was contracted to deny as many claims as it could." He blamed Principi. He said it was "not a surprise" that the former secretary had an interest in QTC.

April 23, 2006 By Walter F. Roche Jr., L.A. Times Staff Writer [Excerpts]

WASHINGTON: A Diamond Bar company headed by former Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony J. Principi could get fees exceeding \$1 billion from the VA, much of it on contracts approved and amended while he ran the agency, records show.

Principi was president of the medical services company QTC Management Inc. before he joined President Bush's Cabinet in 2001. He ran the VA for four years, then returned to the firm as chairman of the board.

While he was VA secretary, Principi's past and future corporate home collected about \$246 million in fees, according to VA records. Congressional Budget Office projections show the contracts could be worth as much as \$1.2 billion through 2008.

Whether, or to what extent, Principi stands to benefit from QTC's success was not determined.

He said he held nonvested stock options in QTC, but did not say how many shares.

Principi's firm administers medical exams to veterans seeking disability assistance. It also examines soldiers before they are discharged. The results of the exams play a substantial role in VA disability benefit decisions.

According to its website, QTC owns and operates 31 medical evaluation facilities and has produced "more than 2.5 million" medical exams and reports.

Principi, deputy VA secretary and acting secretary under President George H.W. Bush, also served as Republican chief counsel and staff director of the Senate Armed Services Committee a decade ago.

In 1996, he was named chairman of a congressional task force on veterans issues. His panel recommended having a standardized, comprehensive physical exam for outgoing military personnel. That recommendation led to exams conducted by QTC.

The firm began its relationship with the VA in 1998, conducting disability exams under a pilot program. Principi joined the company in 1999.

QTC's initial performance drew some criticism. As mandated by Congress, its work was reviewed by a private consulting firm, which said QTC's fees were much higher than expected.

A QTC hearing exam, for instance, averaged \$495.55 compared with \$89.80 for an in-house VA exam. Even with an adjustment for possible hidden VA costs, the difference exceeded 400%. For a general medical exam, QTC's average fee was \$393.52 compared with the VA's \$225.58, the consultants found.

They recommended further cost-comparison studies, but such an analysis was not done.

In the program's third year, Principi was nominated to be VA secretary.

He told the Senate panel considering his confirmation that he had "terminated all relationships with QTC and waived any and all future rights or benefits that could flow from (his) relationship with that organization." Still, Principi's 2001 financial disclosure listed a \$250,000 bonus he said he received from QTC before his confirmation Jan. 23.

The next year, he was photographed with QTC officials at a business forum in Orange County. Principi was the featured speaker, and QTC's founder and then-principal owner, Steeve Kay, was a sponsor.

Right after becoming head of the VA, Principi appointed a task force on the backlog of veterans' claims. In its report to Principi, the panel lauded QTC's performance and recommended that the medical exam program continue or expand.

Principi said he had nothing to do with that review or the recommendation. The head of that panel later was appointed a top deputy to Principi.

The favorable Principi task force report was cited as justification for language inserted in the 2003 VA budget authorizing continuation and expansion of the program. That extension and expansion had been requested by Principi's agency.

The task force urged that the expansion and continuation be done on a competitive basis; the VA awarded a new contract to QTC after giving rival contractors 30 days to submit proposals. No other bids were submitted. Some competitors said they learned of the new contract only after it was awarded.

Sahniah Lambert, a physician with MSLA, a competing firm based in Pasadena, said she contacted the VA about bidding, but no one returned her calls.

During Principi's leadership of the VA, his agency also awarded QTC performance bonuses, as provided for in the contract.

The firm emerged in 2003 as the sole private contractor selected to perform the comprehensive joint discharge physical exams recommended by the Principi task force.

The VA has since made multiple amendments to two successive QTC contracts, increasing the number of approved sites for the exams and thereby adding to the contract's value. As the number of sites multiplied, so did QTC's revenue — from \$8 million in fees in 1998 to \$69.1 million in 2005.

Veterans groups and radio talk shows recently have seized on Principi's ties to QTC and accused him of conflicts of interest.

John Hennon, who broadcasts a veterans show in Illinois, said he was convinced that QTC "was contracted to deny as many claims as it could." He blamed Principi. He said it was "not a surprise" that the former secretary had an interest in QTC.

QTC has additional critics.

North Carolina attorney Hugh Cox, who frequently represents veterans, accuses the company of working with the VA to deny disability claims.

"Significant numbers of QTC medical examiners issue addendums to previous medical reports creating an appearance that VA officials communicate off-the-record with the QTC examiners to alter the veteran's chance of receiving benefits," Cox wrote in an e-mail response to questions.

Cox said Principi's involvement with the firm before and after he was VA secretary was "of special concern" while taxpayers continued to pay "increasing and unchecked amounts to QTC."

One of Cox's clients, Vietnam veteran Jimmy S. Pollock, was told to appear for a physical exam scheduled two days before he received the notice. "They put me down as a no-show," he said.

According to VA data, QTC has been paid \$6.2 million since May 2003 for no-show exams.

Seattle psychiatrist Philip B. Plattner, who has worked at veterans health facilities for 23 years, was one of the first to question QTC's expanded role. He launched a letter-writing campaign warning that veterans could be the victims of inadequate evaluations.

In a letter to several members of Congress, Plattner said the switch to QTC exams had the appearances of a "good old boys plan to privatize VA services, which will cost our country and our veterans dearly."

Plattner said the VA was paying double what it should. He cited data from a May 2005 VA inspector general's report that showed the average cost of a QTC exam was \$590.

The value of QTC's federal contracts became apparent late last year, when the firm was sold to Spectrum, a Massachusetts-based venture capital firm, for a reported \$270 million.

A partner who spearheaded the Spectrum purchase was Steven Price, a colleague of Principi's in the George W. Bush administration who served as a deputy Defense secretary. Price was named to the QTC board immediately after the purchase, but has since stepped down.

Principi acknowledged discussing with Price his return to QTC before the sale. "Spectrum approached me about joining the company if they were successful in purchasing QTC," Principi wrote.

Spectrum and QTC refused to disclose whether QTC's VA contract was pledged as security for the \$150-million-plus loan used to finance the purchase.

An investment firm's report on the sale noted QTC's "very close relationship" with the VA and said QTC "has integrated its process and systems with the VA and has even co-located several offices at VA facilities."

[Sending this despicable piece of shit to prison for life would be letting him off too easy. How about a one way trip to Ramadi? Stake him out with a nice suit of body armor made out of his stock options. Bye bye asshole.]

What do you think? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Send to thomasfbarton@earthlink.net. Name, I.D., address withheld unless publication requested. Replies confidential.

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