



The High-Risk Contracting Business

The notorious killings of four Blackwater security contractors in Fallujah in March 2004 and the news coverage about their lives offered a glimpse into the world of the people attracted to this work. Their deaths also triggered growing concerns about the regulation and accountability of private security contracting firms.

On March 31, 2004, four men working for Blackwater USA as security guards -- Scott Helvenston, Wesley Batalona, Jerry Zovko and Michael Teague -- were ambushed by insurgents in Fallujah. They were killed, their bodies burned and mutilated, and two were strung up on a bridge over the Euphrates. The insurgents made their own video of the attack and the images were broadcast around the world. Overnight, the presence of private contractors in Iraq was highlighted and the dangers and questions surrounding their work in a combat zone took center stage. The Marines in charge of the area didn't know the Blackwater team would be traveling that day into the dangerous city of Fallujah, but four days later they were ordered to invade the city and find the killers; this was not the original plan they had had for quelling the insurgency in the area.

The Blackwater mission was to provide security for trucks belonging to a food caterer, ESS. The empty trucks were being sent to pick up kitchen equipment from the 82nd Airborne. But the Blackwater men were uneasy. One team member, former Army Ranger Wes

Scott Helvenston



By all accounts, Scott Helvenston, who joined Blackwater in March 2004, was well prepared for security work. He had been a Navy SEAL instructor and was a world class athlete. But he was in debt and Blackwater's pay -- about \$600 a day -- was a chief reason for signing on for a two-month contract. He told a friend he expected to be guarding Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition

Provisional Authority. But he never met Bremer. Blackwater had a new contract with a catering company, ESS, and they were scrambling to find new guards.

- [A final e-mail](#) -- Written on the eve of his departure for the mission, it's addressed to Blackwater officials. He complains about last-minute changes in pulling the team together and some problems with a team member. But he declares his resolve to stick with the mission.
- A Blackwater colleague [pays tribute](#) -- In a letter written to Helvenston's family after his death, she writes about the kind of man he was and his attitude toward his job in Iraq.
- [Read Helvenston's full story](#) -- "Scotty Bod Grows Up" -- as reported in the Raleigh *News & Observer's* special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required for this series.)

Jerry Zovko



A 6'3" former Army Ranger, he was born in Cleveland, joined the military in 1991 and had a reputation for being independent, with a knack for getting what he wanted. A Croatian-American, he got himself assigned to Bosnia in 1995 to help keep the peace. In

Batalona, complained to a friend that the team had never worked together before. And contractually, Blackwater was to supply two SUVs with three guards per vehicle. Instead, the men set out that morning with just two men per car, each short a rear gunner.

After the killings, concerns mounted about the regulation and accountability of private security companies. In a case that is being closely watched by contractors, the families of the men filed wrongful death lawsuits against Blackwater in January 2005. The suits charge Blackwater "knowingly and intentionally" sent the men out "without the needed and promised protections" such as equipment, personnel and maps ([read the lawsuit](#), PDF file).

But in a privatized war, it's hard to determine who can be held responsible; disentangling the chain of contracts behind the mission is difficult and has so far obscured any final accountability. Blackwater denies responsibility for the contractors' deaths and says it doesn't know who directed the March 31st mission. Blackwater was contracted through a Kuwaiti company, Regency, to a Cypriot company, ESS, the food caterer. ESS has refused to tell FRONTLINE exactly whom they were working for.

RELATED LINKS

+ [American Contractors In Iraq](#)

A site that collects a range of material that conveys the personal side of the private contractors' world. View the "[tribute videos](#)" that were produced by their family and friends.

+ [KBRjobs.com](#)

This Web site of the largest private contractor in

1997, after being thwarted in joining the Green Berets, he left the army and went to work as a security contractor for DynCorp in Qatar and Dubai, where he learned Arabic. In the summer of 2003, he signed on with Vinnell to help train the new Iraqi army, telling his family it was important work because the Iraqis needed the chance to take charge of their own country. Three months later, he joined Blackwater Security Consulting.

- ["He always had a smile and a good sense of humor"](#) A letter written to Zovko's family from an old Army buddy relating what he was like and why he had signed on for contractor work.
- [His contractor ID letter](#) The authorization letter that allowed him to travel as a private contractor working for Vinnell.
- [A letter of condolence](#) Sent to Zovko's family from L. Paul Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.
- [Read Zovko's full story](#) -- "A Private, Driven Man" -- as reported in the *Raleigh News & Observer's* special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required.)

Wesley Batalona



A native of Hawaii, Batalona was career Army and a former Ranger sergeant with a reputation for being tough. Like the others, his motive for signing on for security work in Iraq was mixed: a yearning for some adventure, a bit of self-challenge, and the money. He wanted to help out his father who was facing foreclosure on his house. Batalona joined the Army in 1974 and took part in the

1989 invasion of Panama, the first Gulf War and the 1993 humanitarian mission to Somalia. After 20 years he retired and ended up taking a hotel night security work. But he yearned to do more and didn't hesitate when he learned through contacts with other former soldiers about security work in Iraq.

- Read [Batalona's full story](#) -- "Army Molds a Future" -- as reported in the *Raleigh News & Observer's* special series on the Fallujah killings, "The Bridge." (Note: Free registration required.)

Iraq, Halliburton's subsidiary KBR, lists the many jobs available.

+ [Iraq Coalition Casualties: Contractors](#)

A site offering a partial list of contractors' deaths shows 244 killed to date. It lists names, nationalities, circumstance surrounding the death, contractor's occupation and the employer.

+ [Danger Zone Jobs](#)

How many international high-risk jobs are available? This site offers an idea, displaying high-paying jobs in Iraq and other countries, and in various fields including security, operations, intelligence, linguists, engineering, construction, mechanical and transportation.

+ ["I'm From the Private Sector and I'm Here to Help"](#)

A June 2005 radio story from NPR's "This American Life" series describes what it's like being a civilian contractor working in a war zone.

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