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FOCUS: CONTRACTORS IN IRAQ

Private army of contractors carries a heavy load in Iraq

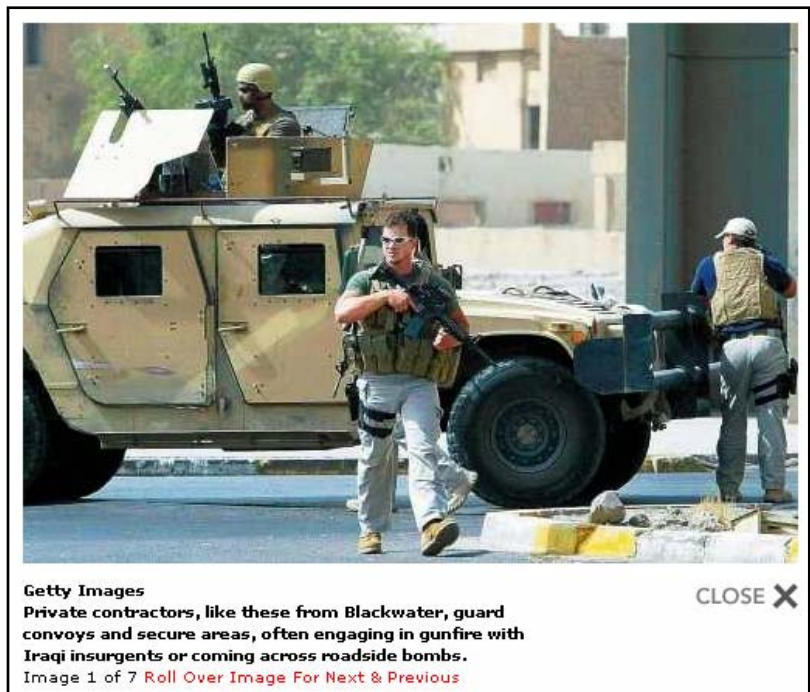
Security firms put people like Jonathon Cote in harm's way, but the public is less aware of the dangers they face

By Dan Herbeck NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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A stealth private army works alongside America's troops in Iraq, guarding supply convoys, feeding the uniformed soldiers and rebuilding a shattered country.

And of the estimated 180,000 private contractors who have served in that stealth army, more than 1,100 are dead.

That fact has not gotten much attention during a war that has lasted more than five years and claimed the lives of more than 4,000 U.S. troops. But it's a personal issue to the family of Jonathon Cote, the former Amherst resident who has been missing since he was abducted in Iraq more than 16 months ago.



And it's a political issue in Washington, where one security firm stands accused of turning its guns on Iraqi civilians and all such firms are viewed by some as out-of-control hired guns.

"For five years, their behavior and lack of supervision and accountability have often eroded our credibility, endangered U.S. and Iraqi lives and undermined our mission," Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N. Y., said in a recent speech.

Nevertheless, advocates who push the interests of that stealth army say the U.S. government could not conduct its war in Iraq without those contractors.

“It’s incredible important work. . . . These men put their lives on the line every day,” said Douglas Brooks, president of the International Peace Operations Association, which represents the security contractors.

According to a trade group of private military contractors, the U.S.-paid civilians working in the war effort now outnumber military personnel in Iraq.

Most of them are Iraqi citizens, but about 20 percent are Americans, said Brooks, who noted: “It can be extremely high-risk work.”

Cote was one of a relatively small number of workers who performed the most dangerous task of all, guarding truck convoys and individuals as they travel across the desert, Brooks said.

Those private security workers can make big money — in return for braving a landscape rife with snipers, kidnappers and improvised explosive devices.



Cote, an Army veteran, was working as a private security contractor for a company based in Kuwait, near the Iraqi border, when he was abducted with four co-workers on Nov. 16, 2006. Within the past week, the federal government has identified the bodies of five men, including four of those who were kidnapped with Cote.

Cote’s family said he enjoyed the money he was making — \$7,000 a month — but also genuinely believed in the war effort and felt he was helping to bring freedom to Iraq’s people.

In Brooks’ view, the private contractors don’t get nearly enough credit for the jobs they do and the extreme dangers they face while working in Iraq.

Peter W. Singer, a national security expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, agreed.

Singer has done extensive research on the subject, and has concluded that, to a large degree, the Bush administration has outsourced some of the most dangerous duties of the Iraq War.



U.S. officials recently confirmed the death of Bert Nussbaumer, captured in Iraq with Jonathon Cote.

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“There has been much discussion of how the U.S. recently passed the 4,000 death mark,” Singer told The Buffalo News. “The fact is, we already passed that long ago, if you count contractors. More than 1,000 contractors have been killed and more than 13,000 hurt [in the war], according to Department of Labor statistics. And yet, they aren’t counted in official tolls, and largely not known by the media and the public.”

According to Brooks, many of the people who are hired to work private security jobs in Iraq are military veterans who look at the opportunity as Cote did.

“The risks are high and the money is not as good as some people think it is,” Brooks said of the security contractors. “At the top

end, the State Department pays some of these people \$650 a day to protect diplomats. But for most doing this work, the going rate is \$300 or \$350 a day.”

The most horrific example of what can go wrong for private security contractors occurred in Iraq’s Fallujah province in March 2004. Four of the private workers were killed in a rebel ambush. In a shocking public display, their bodies were burned and hung from a bridge.

Before that incident, America’s extensive use of a private military force had been “largely hidden behind the headlines,” Singer said.



U.S. officials recently confirmed the death of Joshua Munns, captured in Iraq with Jonathon Cote.

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More recently, though, there have been allegations of grave wrongdoing by some of the contractors. Since last September, authorities have been investigating claims that hired guards from the Blackwater Worldwide security firm acted illegally when they shot and killed 17 Iraqis during a confrontation in Baghdad’s Nisoor Square.

Iraqi officials said the shootings were unprovoked. Blackwater officials said their guards — working on a security detail for the State Department — had been fired upon by insurgents.

The Blackwater incident has fueled an ongoing debate in Washington about whether the Pentagon has contracted out too much work that the military should be doing itself — and left these contractors unsupervised.



U.S. officials recently confirmed the death of John Roy Young, captured in Iraq with Jonathon Cote.

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Both Clinton and her rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, have been highly critical of the proliferation of private security contractors in Iraq.

Clinton has proposed banning the use of armed security contractors, and Obama, while stopping short of that idea, has introduced legislation requiring the Pentagon to deliver detailed information to Congress on how security contractors are being used.

“I don’t believe they should be able to run amok and put our own troops in danger and get paid three or four times or 10 times what our soldiers are getting paid,” Obama said in a speech in Pennsylvania earlier this month.

The candidates’ concerns echo that of Human Rights Now, which said in a report earlier this year that the contractors operate in a dangerous “culture of impunity.” The report suggested that contractors should be subject to prosecution under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, just like soldiers.

Advocates of the armed contractors stressed, however, that these security guards by no means operate as the men in uniform do.

Soldiers work under the protection of tanks, helicopters and their fellow soldiers, and soldiers can aggressively attack someone who is a potential threat to their safety, Brooks said.

“The private security contractors work under regulations that prevent them from being the aggressor. They can only take aggressive action to protect themselves or the people they’re guarding,” Brooks said. “If they come under attack, they can call for help from the military, but that help doesn’t always arrive right away.”

According to Michael Skora, an Army veteran who worked closely with Cote in both the Army and Crescent Security, he and Cote faced sniper attacks and “dozens” of encounters with improvised



U.S. officials recently confirmed the death of Paul Reuben, captured in Iraq with Jonathon Cote.

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explosive devices that blew up near convoys that the two former soldiers were escorting, Skora said.

“It was as bad or worse than anything we saw in the Army,” Skora said.

Paul Chapman, a spokesman for Crescent Security, told The News by e-mail that Cote served 51 missions during the time he worked for the company.

“Jon was professional in appearance and conduct,” Chapman said of Cote. “[He] provided convoy escort work to companies involved in the reconstruction of Iraq.”

By October 2006, according to Skora, Cote felt he had seen enough action as a private security contractor, and he was making plans to quit the job and head back to America.

“That’s one of our great frustrations,” said Francis L. Cote of Amherst, Cote’s father. “Jon was planning to come home around Thanksgiving. But about a week before he was going to come home, he was kidnapped.”

Four of the men who worked closely with Cote in Iraq — Joshua Munns, Paul Reuben, John Roy Young and Bert Nussbaumer — are among the dead.

Friends and family members of Cote, 25, pray that his name is not added to the casualty list.

“We’ve been told that the military is aware of another body, and we’re praying that it isn’t Jon,” Francis Cote said. “We’re still hoping and praying for a miracle.”

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