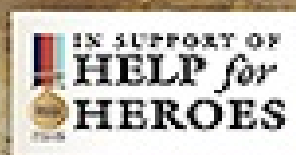


BAGHDAD OPERATORS

EX SPECIAL FORCES IN IRAQ



JAMES GLASSE
WITH ANDREW RAWSON



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James Glasse
with
Andrew Rawson



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Preface

The world changed on 9/11 2001, when four planes were hi-jacked in the skies over the United States and flown into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Then came the war in Afghanistan, a war which is still going on in 2013. In March 2003, ten years before this book was published, the invasion of Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom began. It did not take long to topple Saddam Hussein's regime and President George W. Bush was soon announcing 'Mission Accomplished'. But the mission was far from accomplished...

While battles were still being fought around Baghdad a team of five British ex-Special Forces began work escorting a client around Iraq's electricity grid, as part of the reconstruction plan for the country. What was a 'one-off' job turned into a business as the construction work snowballed and the need to protect the contractors increased. Before long the five man team had over 200 employees, many of them ex-Special Forces from around the world, working for them.

Follow the highs and lows of working in the security industry as the security teams came to terms with the chaos on Baghdad's streets, where dickers, snipers, carbombs, and IEDs were constant hazards. Discover how the men used their military skills to survive and how they constantly changed their operating procedures to try and keep one step ahead of the bad guys. And find out what happened when it went badly wrong.

The company expanded from the Basra oilfields into the Baghdad area, where life in the Green Zone evolved in complete contrast to that of the civilians living in the Red Zone. As work mushroomed, so did the dangers. But without their security teams, contractors could not function and the Coalition Provisional Authority could not fulfil its promises. Eventually the work expanded into the desolate country of Kurdistan, a fiercely independent area where everyone was viewed with suspicion.

The battles fought across Iraq were well documented by news teams and the casualties are remembered with honour. However, few know the details about the private wars fought to rebuild and protect Iraq's infrastructure while the fallen and the injured are only remembered by their families and their mates.

While some called them mercenaries, they called themselves 'Operators'.

Army Days

I WENT TO SCHOOL in Yorkshire in the 1970s but I turned away from studies when it was time to leave. I was mixing with the wrong crowd and believed it was unfashionable to study; all I wanted to do was join the army. So, it was off to join the Paras and the harsh environment that brought, but I thrived on the discipline and knew I could become somebody in the army. It was during that time that I first came across the Special Forces when one of their guys walked through our lines, said “alright lads” and headed towards the enemy looking to fight his own war. We were amazed because we needed so much backup and all our mates to fight our war. The image of him walking alone in enemy territory never left me.

Having done all my courses and with no conflicts on the horizon, I applied for Special Forces and after a long wait was accepted onto Selection. Weeks of gruelling exercises followed in the Welsh hills, the Borneo jungle and the Scottish mountains. The selection process whittled the numbers down from over 250 to a handful but I made it and a personal greeting from the colonel welcomed us into the Regiment. But that was only the start.

Over the next ten years I had many adventures all around the world but little did I know that the skills we were acquiring were also preparing me for a career after I left the services. Time spent on the streets of Northern Ireland trained us how to move covertly in potentially hostile urban environments. It also taught us the many ways of intelligence gathering when facing paramilitaries and the importance of understanding information. Then there was two years looking after a communication expert across a variety of terrains, ranging from the arctic to the arid and from mountains to deserts. Little did I know the skills acquired working with a close protection team would serve me well years later.

Because in the 1990s the global security industry was tiny compared to the multi-billion dollar industry it is today. No one back then knew how the world was about to change in the aftermath of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. So when I retired in the spring of 2001, I was left wondering what I would do next: global terrorism had not been heard of. It was soon to change, but first I had to carry out one last operation.

One Last Operation

WHEN YOU LEAVE THE REGIMENT it does not leave you. The military exploits of the Special Forces are often in the public domain, either through the media, books or documentaries. People come to think of you as some sort of super hero, either jumping out of planes or jumping into embassies. But a lot of operations are non-military in nature and while it is in the national interest to carry them out, it is not in the national interest for them to be scrutinized by the media. After all we do not want the bad guys knowing what we get up to, do we?

Today the focus of national security is terrorist groups, such as those affiliated to al-Qaeda, and stopping them carrying out attacks. During my service a lot of our work was in Northern Ireland and what happened there will never be forgotten by some. Problems would develop if you spoke freely about your past adventures to the wrong people on civvy street. And, believe it or not, someone could pay you a visit and remind you to keep your mouth shut.

After leaving the army in April 2001 I was free to do what I wanted, and the first thing I wanted to do was move overseas. My wife and I had always been attracted to living abroad and now we had the money and the children were old enough, we decided to make the move. We decided to relocate to a favourite destination of many holiday makers and ex-pats alike: Mallorca, one of Spain's Mediterranean islands.

We looked forward to the warm climate, the laid back lifestyle and had good recommendations for local schools. While my family settled into the life, I could continue in the security business and hop on a flight to London any time; after all it was only two hours away.

Like everyone, I had built up a collection of papers relating to my work throughout my career. Some of them were training records and certificates while others related to jobs I had been involved in. While we were not officially supposed to keep anything relating to operations, I had kept copies of documents and photographs in case any court cases were brought about later. Investigations about incidents in the Troubles are still going on in Northern Ireland and you never knew when you might be called as a witness. In short I was covering my backside.

I had also acquired a haul of souvenirs and mementoes of jobs I had been on; again again official procedures. Some might say they were the spoils of war or trophies. The random mixture of items included clothing, gadgets, a few bits of military hardware and general bits and pieces. While I should have disposed of some of the items, I had never got round to it.

I had always stored my collection in two rented steel containers, the sort you see on ships, and they were kept in a local hire company compound where I could get to them anytime. Having made the decision to leave for Mallorca, I had to move the items as well; a pretty straight forward task you might think. I contacted a courier to move everything to Mallorca and he reckoned it would take two large vans. I also arranged for a mate of mine to take the military contraband off my hands and I would lose them in an army stores. The rest of the stuff could be disposed of. With everything in place, I headed to the Mediterranean while a friend supervised the move. So, as I sat back on the plane, I was confident that my stuff was on the road.

I had only been a few days in Mallorca when the courier rang me on the Saturday morning and told me he had bad news; one of their vans had been stolen. I immediately assumed they had stolen the one carrying my motorbike. But no such luck, the stolen van had been the one loaded with my paperwork and mementoes. Twenty years of documents relating to my life had gone in a flash. Although the courier offered his condolences and asked if I could fly over to sort out the details, I was

in shock. After putting the phone down I sat down and tried to remember what had gone missing. There were literally hundreds of highly sensitive papers. And then the situation went from bad to worse.

Two hours later I received a call from a senior officer in my local police force back in England. He also had bad news. While the stolen van had been found on waste ground only a few miles from the compound, it was completely empty and there was no sign of the boxes; not a single piece of paper. Now I knew they were too heavy for one person to carry far and they would have had to have a getaway car. And yet a quick look in any of the boxes would have proved there was nothing of monetary value inside.

While my head span with the information, the police officer was far more interested in the full container. During the investigation the courier driver had reported seeing rifles inside the container from which the cargo had come; which was news to me. The officer was really on my case about the unauthorized firearms and demanded that I opened the container straight away and hand them over. While I tried to explain that I was in Spain, he countered that he would obtain a warrant as soon as the Magistrates Court opened on Monday morning and break it open. He also advised me to move fast unless I wanted to face a serious charge.

A quick call to the courier confirmed the details of the robbery but they did not add up. To begin with, the thieves had climbed into a secure courier compound when they could have taken any vehicle they wanted off the street. They then decided on the vehicle loaded with my stuff even though it was in the middle of dozens of similar vans of all shapes and sizes. After hot-wiring the vehicle, they did not check out to see if there was anything valuable in the back. They then drove out of the secure compound without being stopped by security. It did not help when the courier company told me the driver who had loaded the van and who had spoken to the police did not work for the company anymore. He had only been a short-term driver and they could not find his contract details. Now if that sounds strange to you, it did to me too. And then the penny dropped; I was a victim of our own system.

I did not sleep much that night because I kept going over what was missing in my head. I needed advice and fast. Systems had been put in place for such circumstances, and anyone who had retired from the Special Forces could call a handler 24/7 if they encountered a difficult situation in civilian street. Normally a call would be put in if someone started asking unusual questions or if we felt we were under surveillance. However, my situation was an unusual one. I explained the robbery to my handler and asked him to look into the consequences. He replied quickly, telling me that he believed it was an opportunist thief who had dumped the material; well at least that was the official line. While I thought differently, there was no way of proving it.

Something was very wrong and while I suspected what had happened, I did not have time to ponder over it, I needed to head off the police. After all what if the courier driver had been right? If the 'thieves' had the balls to spirit away a van, they would have the balls to plant unauthorized firearms in my container. If they had then I had a big problem. It was the classic diversionary tactic dating back to Sun Tzu's 2,500 year old 'Art of War'; confuse your enemy at the same time as you attack.

With no time to lose, I contacted an old mate of mine in the North of England who was still serving in the military and explained the problem. The long and short of it was I wanted him to empty the container before I met the police on Monday morning. We did not discuss how he would do it; I just told him where to find it.

Early on the Sunday morning he called with good news; the job was done; I was in the clear. So how had he done it? Well he needed to find a way into the compound without raising suspicion. After emptying the container he needed to escape with everything, again without drawing attention. So it was time for a lot of lateral thinking and a bit of stealth.

He started by contacting a mate who worked for a company which supplied the construction industry with accommodation. On the Saturday evening a lorry carrying five porta-loos pulled up outside the container yard; only there was a man inside each loo. My mate blagged his way past security, telling him he was there to change the site toilets and apologized for the late hour which had resulted from a breakdown. The security guard felt sorry for him and let the wagon inside. My mate quickly located the container, picked the lock and the guys emerged to empty the contents into the porta-loos. After locking the container the five guys hid on the floor of the cab as the driver drove back to the gate. He explained that he had the wrong address and drove off leaving the security guard to watch his television, unaware that he had just been scammed. Job sorted.

My mate also confirmed that there were no high velocity weapons inside, just a couple of old air rifles. They had been planted and I guess to the untrained eye they looked like rifles in the back of a dark container. Either way they provided the police with an excuse to break open the container and cause me a whole load of grief.

I was happy that one mystery had been cleared up and caught the early flight to England, driving at top speed from the airport to the container site. All well and good you might think but when I reached the container yard on that wet Monday morning, there was mayhem. The police officer was there but so were another dozen and they had brought an armed response unit with them. It was like a scene from a highly charged cop movie; only it was about to turn into a scene from the Keystone Cops. As a crowbar was produced, I made it clear I had the key, but they took no notice; they had a point to make. I held my breath as the padlock was snapped off and the doors were pulled open. I then stifled a laugh as everyone peered inside and realized what I had known all along... there was nothing inside.

Of course all eyes turned on me and it was suggested that I had removed the contents. I countered with my plane ticket and hire car receipt. They proved I had stepped off the plane only a couple of hours earlier, leaving only enough time to drive straight to the compound. After all, the container was inside a secure compound watched by a vigilant security guard...

Of course I knew my legitimate belongings were already on their way to Mallorca in another van. I also knew my next stop was to pick up the dodgy ordnance so I could deliver them to my mate. But there was still no trace of my missing boxes.

To this day, ten years later, not a single piece of paper has been found. Although the police told me to claim on my insurance there was nothing of financial value, just sentimental value and – of course – operationally sensitive material.

My whole life in the services had disappeared in that van. Everything from my service beret and belt to photographs and certificates, from training notes to my law degree papers. Apart from a handful of copies of photographs, I had nothing but memories.

A couple of years later I was discussing my work in Iraq with my handler when he posed a question; off the record... He asked me to think if I would have been able to leave for Spain with the boxes? I did not have to think about the question for long; of course not. And it was impossible to cherry pick sensitive papers from the boxes; it would have made me even more suspicious about the robbery than I already was.

But any time I brought the question up, the official line was still that the robbery had been carried out by an opportunist thief who had got it wrong. At one point the police even suggested that a couple of drunkards had stolen the van on the way home from the pub. Although I later asked if I could at least get some photographs and my degree qualifications back, I was still met with a wall of silence.

So there you had it and in hindsight it was exactly how I would have carried out a similar job. Think about this. Rather than me leaving for Spain with boxes of mementoes, what if it had been a suspected terrorist leaving the country with boxes of notes and drawings relating to potential targets?

While you want to follow the suspect to find out where he was heading and who he was meeting, you could not let the paperwork out of the country.

Now consider what happened to me and my paperwork... And you can see how I was both victim and instigator of my last operation.

Back in The Mob

SO AFTER MANY YEARS in the army it was time to leave. After so long in the forces I wanted to forget about the army and go and do something completely different. I had always fancied the warm Mediterranean climate and my favourite place was the Spanish island of Mallorca. It also allowed me time to think about what I wanted to do next. And I was doing just that when, like everyone else, I was glued to the television on 11 September when terrorists struck in the United States. They flew two hijacked planes into the World Trade Centre in New York, while a third hit the Pentagon in Washington D.C. A fourth plane, probably destined for the State Capitol building in D.C., crashed in Pennsylvania after passengers fought with the hijackers. Over 3,000 people died in the attacks and the world changed that day; my life was also about to change.

I was still on the Army reserve list and I soon received a call from my headquarters. There were plans afoot to send troops to Taliban controlled Afghanistan where it was believed that al-Qaeda had bases. I was given a simple choice. Did I want to volunteer immediately or did I want to wait until a call was issued with a compulsory call up. It was also suggested that there could be future opportunities in Afghanistan, and those who volunteered would have first call on what was referred to as a bit of icing on the cake.

I was not told what these opportunities would be and it did not matter, I was a Special Forces soldier and I volunteered straight away. I was packing my bag, the moment the call ended. I was looking forward to getting back with the lads once again and off I went, not knowing where I was heading or when I might return.

As I flew back to England and reported to headquarters, events around the world were changing rapidly. Within a week of the attacks, the United States President, George W. Bush Jr., had announced that Osama Bin Laden had been behind them and that he was hiding out in Afghanistan. I was immersed in training and briefings while the calls for the Taliban to hand over Bin Laden and his lieutenants were rejected. Bush's ultimatum on 20 September 2001 to close down terrorist camps in the Afghan mountains was also ignored. The Taliban's offer to try Bin Laden in an Islamic Court on 7 October was in turn rejected and an intensive United States and British bombing campaign began immediately.

I was already on my way into hostile territory with my detachment when it began. So what were we going to be doing? While we were too old for strenuous active service in the mountains of Afghanistan, we had something the younger guys did not; combat experience.

Ten years had passed since the Regiment had been involved in a major conflict, in Iraq back in 1991. Many operations had been in the country's Western Desert where teams had slipped behind enemy lines and set up observation posts overlooking the Iraqi Army's main supply routes, or MSR's. Convoy movements were reported and important targets were located so that airstrikes could be called in. The Regiment was doing what it did best, using stealth to pave the way for the battle ahead by creating mayhem and confusion behind the Iraqi lines. I was personally involved in dealing with air crashes and the rescue of pilots, the recovery of black boxes and the destruction or booby trapping of plane debris.

By December there were reports that al-Qaeda were holding out in the mountainous region known as Tora Bora, or Black Cave, near the Pakistan border; Bin Laden was also reported to be hiding there. Our guys were joining the combined Allied assault on the caves, using stealth to locate the caves used by al-Qaeda and then called in air strikes. It was a difficult task and while the younger guys had the

training and the fitness, they did not have experience of full scale combat. So we older guys passed on our experience of working in inhospitable areas, advising our younger comrades about the problems they might face.

The battle did not last long. Al-Qaeda had not had the time nor resources to build extensive fortifications in Tora Bora. By mid December the area was clear and while many of the caves were demolished or blocked, garrisons were overrun in others. The only problem was, Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership were missing.

Once the Taliban had been toppled, the military side of Afghan operations was scaled down and reservists like myself were due to be released from duties. After three months in Afghanistan, my army service was once again coming to an end. However, as I prepared to demobilize, the question was put to me if I was interested in staying in Kabul to do something a little different.

The United Nations Security Council established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on 20 December to coordinate the activities of all the military forces in Afghanistan. Over 40 countries had troops in the country with over half of them from the United States. The ISAF had to restore order across the country so that a Presidency and a government could be installed. Security trained personnel were needed to protect the president's staff and government officials and I was asked if I wanted to stay on and train Afghan soldiers to do the work.

The world of personal protection and security was only a small industry before 9/11. Many ex-Special Forces guys worked in Third World countries, protecting important people and assets while training the local military and militias to do the work. While a lot of my comrades had worked in the business, I had never planned to do so.

I was told that I would be employed by the United States Department of Defense rather than the British military. I also learnt I would be working with a small group of like minded guys and the work was not too taxing or dangerous. What could go wrong? There was good money on offer, money which would supplement my army pension. It was a short-term private contract and I would soon be back home in Mallorca. I did not have to think about the offer for long; it was time for me to enter the world of private security.

Virtually overnight I converted from a military capacity into a private capacity and I hardly noticed the difference. I was getting orders from a new organization and while the money was much better, the work was easier and safer. I joined a team of around sixty advisors, the majority of them from the U.S. Special Forces, in the Afghanistan capital Kabul and we quickly immersed ourselves in our new work.

Steps were being taken to install a new administration and we had the task of training 600 bodyguards to protect senior officials. We started by pooling our skills to organize a training programme covering both security and private protection work. I got to know my American counterparts well and during the course of conversations it became clear that something was afoot in Iraq. Everyone knew about the weapons inspectors searching for the weapons of mass destruction across Iraq but the operations were highly secret. There were also rumours that units from the Joint Special Operations Command were preparing the way for conventional warfare.

We continued our work in Kabul while the United States and Great Britain called for action against Iraq and we concentrated on our training while the United Nations Security Council and other NATO countries refused to support action and anti-war groups protested. However, we took note of the rumours about troops moving into Saudi Arabia and the reconnaissance missions along the Iraq border; they all pointed to an impending invasion.

As the world waited to see if diplomacy would prevent a war, talk in our group began to revolve around our own futures. Our work was coming to an end in Kabul but we had all learned a lot about the business of private security. Surely if there was an invasion, it would be over soon like Operation

Desert Storm in 1991. On that occasion the criticism had been that the U.S. military had withdrawn too soon and allowed Saddam Hussein to reassert his power.

Our employers suggested that once Iraq had been conquered there could be a mass of work rebuilding the country's infrastructure and oilfields. Engineers and technicians working for foreign contractors, particularly United States companies, would need personal protection in such a hostile environment. Oil fields, power stations and government buildings would also need protecting. While it sounded plausible, I thought the military would do it.

The U.S. military launched Operation Iraqi Liberation (later named Iraqi Freedom) on 20 March, crossing the Kuwaiti border and advancing rapidly northwest. The British also launched Operation Tulec, and their objectives included the city of Basra, the surrounding oilfields and the port of Umm Qasr. As I watched the air strikes and rocket attacks on the television, I wondered what my mates were up to as I remembered my time in Iraq.

Most Iraqi units fled the Allied onslaught and the only major battle took place around Nasiriyah where Route 1 crossed the Euphrates River and the Saddam Canal, halfway to Baghdad. On 9 April the leading elements of the United States forces entered the capital and symbolically marked the end of Saddam Hussein's reign by tearing down his huge statue in Firdos Square. Troops also occupied the palaces and ministries on the west bank of the River Tigris.

Although the conventional war was over, civil order quickly broke down and the capital was subjected to widespread looting while the U.S. military's stretched lines of communications came under attack. The war officially came to an end on 15 April when U.S. Marines captured Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town 100 miles northwest of Baghdad. Two weeks later President Bush famously declared that it was "Mission Accomplished" to soldiers and sailors on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*. Little did he or the servicemen gathered on the flight deck know that there was still a lot of work to be done. Meanwhile, I was wondering when was it time to go home.

Once the U.S. military had completed the objectives set them, it was time to install an interim government to replace Saddam's regime. The Coalition Forces established the Coalition Provisional Authority (C.P.A.) on 21 April as a division of the United States Department of Defence. In Baghdad its offices were installed in Saddam Hussein's palaces, in the area which would become known as the Green Zone. The governor and his group of the administrators then set about restoring life to normal in Iraq.

The C.P.A.'s first order ordered the de-Ba'athification of Iraqi society, removing all supporters of Hussein's regime from positions of power. The second order disbanded the Iraqi Armed Forces. In hindsight the two orders were the start of Iraq's problems. In its first month in power the C.P.A. had put tens of thousands of young men out of work and left them with no alternative means of income, at least no legitimate means. But while they had no money, they did know where hundreds of arm dumps had been set up ahead of the Allied invasion.

While the C.P.A. set to work restoring order in Iraq, I was only concerned with my own future. My work was coming to an end in Afghanistan and although there was talk of security work up for grabs in Iraq, none was coming my way. Many of the Americans I was working with were being offered new contracts but so far the Brits I had worked with had not been offered any.

By the time my contract was up, we had a fully trained group of security personnel. My time was over in Kabul and I packed up and headed back to England where I could demobilize for a second time. Once again I joined my family in Mallorca and for the next two weeks we slipped back into the gentle Mediterranean way of life. And then the telephone rang. Apparently my work in Kabul had been appreciated and my name had been noted for future reference. The C.P.A. was inviting companies into Iraq so they could bid for infrastructure contracts. I was asked if I was interested in getting together a small close protection team which could escort a senior businessman around Iraq. Yet again it was

tabled as a short-term contract with good pay. I had not had time to organize any other work so I agreed and prepared to say goodbye once more to my family. Only this time I was going to be working as a private contractor. I was about to become an operator.

A One-off Job

POST WAR IRAQ was suffering from years of neglect, financial cutbacks and embargoes on foreign goods. Over half a million tonnes of high explosive had been dropped on the country by the Allied Air Forces, leaving the country's infrastructure in a terrible state. Everything we take for granted in the Western World needed attending to; roads, bridges, buildings, power plants, water plants and sewerage plants to name but a few. Iraq was going to become one massive building site and companies from around the world, but particularly from the United States, were eager to have a share of the work.

One area the C.P.A. was keen to restore to normality was the Basra area in the southeast corner of Iraq. This area had been captured by the British after heavy fighting and the local population had welcomed the end of the Hussein regime and the dreaded Ba'ath party. The people in the area were Shi'ites, opponents of the Sunnis who supported Saddam Hussein, and they had risen against his regime during the 1991 invasion. He responded violently when the Allied forces withdrew, ordering executions and the destruction of many buildings. A second uprising in 1999 resulted in more mass reprisals.

The port of Umm Qasr, where the Euphrates and the Tigris met to become the Shatt Al-Arab, the River and flowed into the Persian Gulf, was now Iraq's gateway to the world. Huge amounts of humanitarian aid were being delivered to the port and then taken by road to the cities across the country. While thousands of barrels of oil a day could be delivered to the port from the oilfields around Basra, electricity was needed to extract the oil. But the war had left the electricity situation across the oilfields in a sorry state and plenty of work had to be carried out before they would be producing again.

A United States company had been invited to tender for work in the Basra oilfields and a senior executive of the company had to assess the current installations around the oilfields before heading for Baghdad to negotiate the contracts with the C.P.A. The protection team I had been asked to put together would look after him while he travelled around the country.

I called up four mates I had known for years, all British guys with long careers in the Regular Army and the Special Forces and they agreed to join the team. We had all reached around the same rank and had similar experience but the main thing was that we could all trust each other. The chance of a bit of excitement with a wedge of money at the end appealed to us all. We would be back with our families in a couple of weeks and able to clear a few bills.

Our outline plan was to establish an operating base in Kuwait City, so we had a place to sleep and organize ourselves. We could then collect the client, take him across the border into Iraq and drive around the oilfields and Umm Qasr port. The area was under the control of the British military and there was a good chance we might bump into a few old mates. There was also a good chance we could pull a few strings along the way to ease our journey.

So all five of us flew into Kuwait City and rented two cars from one of the desks in the airport, the same as you would when you go on holiday. We hired two Mitsubishi Pajeros, normal 4x4 vehicles that any family would drive around Kuwait City in. We paid up front in cash, much to the hire company's delight; cash is king in the Middle East and paying with U.S. dollars helps you avoid awkward questions. We did not mention we were crossing the border into Iraq; at best it would have bumped the insurance premium considerably; at worst they would have refused to hire us the cars.

We planned to be as covert as possible when we drove around, so we did not attract attention to ourselves. There was a large military presence in the Basra area and reports indicated that while the

locals were suffering from the lack of food and water, they were not directing their frustrations against the new regime; they still blamed their problems on Saddam Hussein's regime.

Next stop was a drive to our hotel to meet our client. From a Brit's point of view he was a typical American, if there is such a thing, being larger than life in more ways than one. We got on well and the initial meeting was businesslike but light hearted, ideal for what we had to get through over the next two weeks. He gave us the itinerary of what he had to accomplish, where he had to visit and how long he expected to spend at each site. We were allowed a couple of days to plan the journey and after booking ourselves into the hotel, we settled down to study our new assignment.

Each team member was allocated a list of tasks and everyone reported back at the end of each day to talk over progress. New problems were discussed, broken down into new tasks and then delegated. Planning is everything when you undertake a job like this and while you cannot cover every eventuality, the team's experience and knowledge help you to anticipate many problems. Emergency procedures also had to be agreed, so we were ready to deal with the unexpected.

Two of the guys studied our routes into Iraq and around the Basra area, making relevant notes of landmarks, useful places and areas to avoid; they were also getting the maps inside their heads so that the chances of getting lost were reduced to a minimum.

Two of the guys were tasked with sorting out the logistics for the trip. We had to consider food, water, first aid and medicines for ourselves. The cars also needed fuel, spare tyres and our team mechanic collected tools and parts so he could carry out road side maintenance. Arrangements also had to be made for weapons and ammunition and while the military would not allow us to take arms across the Kuwait border, there was no way we were going to travel around Iraq unarmed. Although the country was relatively safe, we would still be vulnerable to car-jacking and armed robbers looking for cash. For now all we could take were pistols which we had to conceal.

We also had to arrange clearance with the British military authorities in the Basra area and the United States counterparts in Baghdad. We could not just drive around freely because we were entering a war zone where military operations were still going on. Our client's company had obtained a visa and other papers from the United States Department of Defence allowing us to enter Iraq on business. People in the C.P.A. were pushing for the work to start and the paperwork had been rushed through so that our client could meet his deadlines. The main thing was the visa would allow us across the border while other papers would get us through military checkpoints.

We did not get involved in what our client's company was going to do in Iraq, but the ultimate objective was to restore electricity across the country. Government buildings, hospitals, schools, industry and commerce needed a regular electricity supply for machinery, lighting and computers. Families needed it to cook their food and light their houses; air conditioning was a big thing in the hot summer months. Many things we take for granted need electricity; everything from refrigerators for food storage, water pumps for clean water, pumps to remove sewerage, street lighting and even traffic lights. Without it the country was going nowhere and the people were going to get frustrated. Our client had a full schedule of refineries, generators and power stations to visit and he had to assess if they could be repaired or if they needed to be replaced.

Before leaving Kuwait, we had to brief our client what to expect when we were on the road. Although he told us where we had to be, when we had to be there and for how long; how we got there and what we did on route was up to us. The deal was he always followed our instructions without question. If we told him to get down in the car, he had to do so; if he was pushed to the ground or dragged behind cover, he had to do so. Security can involve manhandling without warning and our client had to agree to it before we set off. We were his guardians, watching all angles for threats. We had to assess each threat and then immediately act on it.

There was no time for arguments; the questions and answers would be dealt with later when

was safe to do so. It is the same in any close protection or Special Forces role. The client decides the itinerary and we decide the safest way to carry it out. We needed a mutual respect for each other's job and a trust in each other's professionalism for it to work. Without that the contract was off, whatever money was on offer.

In the years to come hundreds of Private Security Details, or PSDs, would be working across Iraq for over twenty different companies, including Blackwater, ArmorGroup, Edinburgh Risk and Sabre to name a few. However, in the spring of 2003, as President Bush declared Mission Accomplished and the war was over, there were hardly any security teams in the country. The multi-million dollar business of security was all in the future and we were just one of a handful of teams who had been asked to enter the country. What we were about to embark on was new to us and the client.

With everything in place, we picked up the client and drove the 100 kilometres north up the coastal road. Stopping just short of the border, we filled up with petrol, not knowing where the next fuel point would be and gave the cars a final look over. "Have you got a Leatherman", I enquired as I knelt behind the car. "Yeah sure, here you go", said my mate, handing me the multi-head tool. Our client watched as I unscrewed the number plates and threw them in the boot. "What are you doing that for?" he asked. "We do not want anyone to know this car comes from Kuwait, there would be too many awkward questions" I replied. I could see the client's eyes widening as I spoke; the enormity of the adventure we were about to embark on had just hit him. He did not say anything else and we were soon on our way.

Kuwaiti plates singled our cars out to anyone who was interested, be it the military, armed robbers or disgruntled locals. We did not want to draw attention from anyone, and our experience told us that no plates were better than foreign plates. We were preparing to enter a war zone and no one knew what to expect; particularly our client.

Further up the road the British troops at the checkpoint made us stop and show our visa and papers. After a quick look over, we were through and on our way. Although I had been into Iraq, many years before, this time I was going in as part of a PSD. There was no organized back up and no fire support on the end of a radio call if we ran into trouble. There would be no emergency extraction by helicopter either if any of us were injured. All we had with us were concealed pistols in case we ran into trouble. However, we were never going to be far away from British troops and Basra was the safest area in Iraq.

We had followed the coast road through Kuwait heading for the Umm Qasr border crossing. It took us out of our way, but the border crossing at Safwan, on the main road between Kuwait City and Basra, was only open to military personnel at this time. We headed for the military base in the port where the personnel were trying to make sense of the huge shipments arriving in the port. Although the area was under control of the British military, the Americans had a small contingent of technicians based at Umm Qasr organizing shipments of grain made by the world food programme. At the time it was the only way to get anything into or out of Iraq in large quantities. The Basra area had been cut off from Baghdad due to the war and the people needed food badly. The main problem was keeping the peace while the food and other essentials were unloaded and transferred to waiting lorries.

Nobody took any notice of us as we looked up some old friends who were working in the port area. I had already called ahead to arrange our visit but there were a few surprised faces when we pulled into their camp in our two hire cars. I suppose it might have looked as if we were off on a fishing trip somewhere, only we were carrying pistols rather than fishing rods and there was spare ammunition in the boot rather than bait.

We were as pleased to see them as they were to see us and the usual slagging about receding hairlines, ageing physiques and dress sense was supplemented by banter about the differences in our respective roles. They joked about the soft overpaid life of a security team ahead of us while v

laughed at their jealousy. Our client viewed this very British sort of teasing and ribbing with suspicion but we assured him that they really were happy to see us. Our serving friends did not look down on us for doing this sort of work. After all it was only a short term job and they might have done the same if they had left the service.

As we settled down for the evening, it was time to get information about what was happening in the area. We were not looking for specific operational information but we did want to know what to expect. Questions and answers about the locals, the environment, military camps and logistical problems criss-crossed between us well into the night. A few other faces from the past dropped by when they heard we were around and it was good to see them; we wanted as many of our old contacts to know that we were in the country. We never knew when we might want to call on them for a favour.

We stayed with our friends in Umm Qasr for a couple of days, checking out our routes and gathering intelligence. While we had most things we needed, we still needed semi-automatic rifles, 'longs' as opposed to our concealed 'shorts'. Although pistols could get us out of a minor scrape, they were not much use in a country flooded with weapons. It did not take long to get a few contacts and a couple of Iraqi guys soon approached us with details of illegal arms dealers in the area. When the army was disbanded, villains and traders had secreted away arms dumps all over the country, hiding them away for a rainy day – not that it ever rained in Iraq. While food and clean water was hard to come by, there was a surplus of cheap guns, grenades and ammunition on the black market.

One of our contacts provided the name of a guy who was prepared to meet us at a discreet location and I arranged a meeting to see what he had on offer. I also took our guns specialist, an armourer, along to check the guns out for serviceability.

We met the guy in a secluded area where we could check out the guns in peace because our dealing was not exactly legal. After the usual pleasantries and posturing, he opened the boot of his car to reveal about fifty AK47s, the standard long arm of the Iraqi Army. The dealer talked away about how good his wares were, but it was obvious at first glance that some were in a sorry state. As I started haggling over the price, our armourer set to work dividing them into three piles which could be described as the good, the bad and the ugly. Those that worked, those that could be broken into spare parts and those destined for the scrap heap.

The AK47, with its distinctive banana shaped magazine, has been around for years, and for several good reasons. It is cheap to produce, simple to operate and easy to maintain. It has no gears, parts, hardly ever jams and never breaks down. Our Special Forces arms training had often included the AK47, and its imitators, and I was happy to take the good ones and a few of the bad ones for spares. The price reflected the availability; \$25 for a good one and \$5 for a bad one; no questions asked. A stock of ammunition was included in the final price, along with the promise of more when we needed it. We were in business for only a few hundred dollars.

Our client's first port of call was in the centre of Baghdad, where the U.S. Military and the C.P.A. had established their headquarters on the west bank of the River Tigris. They had taken over the government buildings surrounding Saddam Hussein's Presidential Palace. The area was known as the Green Zone, the safe area, as opposed to the rest of the city which was known as the Red Zone, the dangerous area. We did not need to know anything about our client's reasons for visiting Baghdad, we just knew where he had to be and when. However, it was clear that he needed to meet the relevant executives in the C.P.A., to press the flesh, and learn about the scope of the contract before visiting the oilfields.

Those meetings involved a 1,000 kilometre round trip through southern Iraq, across what had been a war zone only weeks before. It did not take any time at all to decide the route; there was only one. The expressway, Route 1 or Route Tampa, was the U.S. military's Main Supply Route between Basra and Baghdad. It headed west through the Basra oilfields and then swung northwest past the

cities of An Nasiriyah, Ad Diwaniyah and Al Hillah before heading to the capital. Although the first 150 kilometres was a straight forward asphalt motorway, Saddam had refused to tarmac the next 200 kilometres stretch to An Nasiriyah, limiting the amount of vehicle movements north. He had taken this decision after the Shi'ite uprising following the first Gulf War. Then it was back on tarmac for the long road to Baghdad.

So off we set, all loaded up for the big adventure. It would only take a day to get to Baghdad and we were well loaded with food, water, ammunition, spare tyres and as much fuel as we could carry. We had been told where the military camps were where we could try to get topped up. We also had plenty of cash tucked away in case we had to buy ourselves out of trouble along the way.

As we set off, it felt a little strange to be out on our own. We had all operated in Special Forces units for many years and were used to operating as a small group in hostile situations. However, a lot of the forward planning and backup are sorted out for you in the military. If anything goes wrong you could call on your company headquarters and they would arrange to get you out of trouble. Not this time. We had to assess the threats, devise the drills to deal with them and make the contingency plan to escape from them.

As we drove north there was no doubt we were in a war ravaged country. War debris was scattered everywhere along Route Tampa; abandoned tanks, burnt out vehicles and unrecognizable lumps of metal. Wrecked buildings were a constant reminder that the Coalition Forces had used some heavy munitions to knock out Iraqi Army positions. It was a stark reminder of the power of modern weaponry, particularly as we only had our second hand AK47s and pistols for protection.

Although we were on edge the whole way, unsure what to expect, the Iraqis were pleased to see Westerners in those early days. The people, particularly in the Shi'ite south, were overjoyed by Saddam's disappearance and they looked on the Americans and British as their liberators from his cruel regime. Everyone expected prosperity under the new promised democracy and we saw real joy on people's faces as we drove by. It was only natural that they were looking forward to the day when their country would be built up again and money and trade would replace poverty and fear.

After five hours on the road, we cruised into the busy outskirts of Baghdad, becoming tangled in the mad rush of city traffic. Cars, vans, buses and lorries were everywhere, mingling with military vehicles loaded with grim looking soldiers armed to the teeth. So there we were, five white males sitting in two hired 4x4 vehicles with no number plates in the middle of it all. The situation was just crazy. But we just stuck to our route and tried not to draw attention to ourselves. We were centerhooks the whole time but most drivers were just intent on getting to their destination as fast as possible and they took little notice of us. A few registered their surprise and eyeballed us to get a reaction but we just watched our surroundings and each other.

I had been to Baghdad over ten years before on a covert reconnaissance mission before Operation Desert Storm and while the main buildings looked familiar, reminders of the recent invasion were everywhere. Burnt out office blocks and destroyed buildings reminded us that the Iraqi people had suffered over the past couple of months and they were struggling to get their lives back to normal.

It was around midday when we crossed the River Tigris and encountered the checkpoint on the edge of the new Green Zone. When the U.S. military had made their mad dash into the centre of Baghdad back in April, they had entered the heavily fortified zone surrounding Saddam's Presidential Palace. After brief, but heavy fighting, in which most of the occupants fled, the invasion force established itself in the area, taking over a range of palaces, government, military and residential buildings. The C.P.A. arrived soon afterwards and took over many buildings for offices while its staff moved into the nearby villas.

Over the months that followed an area of ten kilometres would be cordoned off by concrete blast walls and razor wire, turning the Green Zone into a city inside a city. However, when we arrived it was

still a military controlled zone with new offices slotted between the garrisons. Our client had to meet representatives of the C.P.A., the Department of Defense and Iraqi officials and we had the job of ferrying him between meetings.

One of the main concerns in Iraq at that time was how to restore electricity to the country because the C.P.A. could not fulfil many of its promises without a regular supply. Iraq had a capacity of 10,000MW, one of the largest electricity generation capacities in the region, before the First Gulf War. However, international sanctions and obsolete technology reduced the capacity of the network to a third. Power stations became inefficient due to a shortage of spare parts and poor maintenance resulting in regular power cuts. Saddam responded by making his technicians reorganize the network to suit his political needs. They made sure that Baghdad and the towns in the Sunni Triangle, north and west of the city had first call on the limited supply. It meant his supporters always had electricity while the rest of the country was often plunged into darkness.

The network was badly damaged during the Second Gulf War because airstrikes and rocket attacks targeted the Iraq military infrastructure. Many military targets, including radar, telecommunications and signalling posts had been placed inside bunkers in built up areas, Saddam was using the residents as a human shield so the Allies hit generators and sub-substations, cutting the power to military installations. It also deprived the population of power. Intact generators and sub-substations were at the mercy of looters looking to sell valuable metals.

The C.P.A. placed the restoration of electricity services on the top of their agenda and the Commission of Electricity had been established to tackle the challenging problem. It was given complete operational authority and the promise of unlimited financial resources to get Iraq's electric grid back on line. The Commission was a relatively autonomous institution and it coordinated the activities of eleven different companies responsible for assessing, repairing and replacing the network's infrastructure. It had the complex task of bringing together all the elements required to restore and maintain an adequate electricity supply; generation, distribution, construction, manufacturing and the all encompassing computing and information technology.

Work had already started on bringing power stations and sub-stations back on line but the supply was limited by what was still working. Running repairs had been carried out on the main installations and transmission lines by military engineers and Iraqi technicians but outside help was needed if the C.P.A. targets were going to be met. Our client worked for one of the U.S. companies invited to tender for the huge amount of work on offer and he was in Baghdad to discuss contract details with the relevant officials.

Although we were technically inside a military zone, we shadowed our client wherever he went. We had all worked with close protection teams during our military service but this time it was clear we were not welcome in many areas. It was an understandable reaction but we found it strange. When we had worked in a military capacity we had been welcomed everywhere and were often included in briefings. However, we were frequently reminded of our mercenary status when doors were closed on us over the next few days. We often felt like armed chauffeurs, driving our client to and fro from office block to military headquarters. We would just escort him into the building, show our passes and then be asked to wait outside until the meeting finished. There was a lot of classified information to discuss and no doubt a lot of money on the table; and it had nothing to do with us.

We had been issued with IDs which identified us as private security contractors and they kept us out of all sensitive places. We could only get through the front door of Ministry buildings and not sensitive areas in Department of Defense buildings where we could obtain food or fuel.

We also had our British military IDs and in the future they would come in useful in British held areas. Even though we had left the service, we used them to obtain equipment or stores or even get intelligence information. They were always useful for getting food or a bed for the night. But when

they worked around Basra, they did not cut any ice in the U.S. military held areas. As far as the average American soldier was concerned, we were just a group of mercenaries looking after one man. We were not soldiers anymore in their eyes, just five self-employed guys who had taken on a job to earn a lot of money in a short space of time. I guess if the roles had been reversed; I would have thought the same.

Meanwhile, our client was welcomed wherever he went. He worked for a well known international company which had a reputation for carrying out similar contracts in dangerous parts of the world. We, however, were viewed with suspicion. The Americans (whether working in a military or a civilian role) were curious as to why we were up in Baghdad and it often took a lot of talking to explain our role. The main question was why were British guys escorting a senior representative of an American company looking to work on behalf of the United States government.

The situation raised eyebrows in some quarters, especially as there were few American security companies working in Iraq at that stage. Virtually every Westerner in the city was in the U.S. military and driving around like they were in the military, in heavily armoured convoys. For us to be driving around covertly as a private armed security team in soft skinned vehicles was alien to them. PSIs would be seen everywhere in Baghdad over the next few years and they would become a way of life for us, but they were unheard of at this stage. The whole multi-million dollar private security industry had not been envisaged, but it soon would be and numerous contractors were starting to look for work on Iraq's infrastructure. Others were also looking to supply food and commodities, either to the military and the contractors or to the people of Iraq. If a company could secure one contract, establish a base and establish a good name, it was well placed to supply everyone arriving in the area. There was a lot of money to be made and it could be called the 'spoils of war'.

Looking back it is hard to see beyond the terrible events that seemed to occur with depressing regularity in and around Baghdad over the years to follow. It is hard to believe what the city was like back then. While there was a large military presence on the streets and many buildings bore the scars of war, the people had resumed their daily routines.

We often had time to kill while the client was safely holed up in a meeting and we took it in turns to explore outside the Green Zone. Dressed casually in cargo trousers and t-shirts with our pistols tucked out of sight, we mingled with the crowds, looking to see what we could pick up and get a feel for what was going on in the city. The pistols were only for personal protection against a mugger, there was no animosity shown against us, only curiosity.

We would have got into a lot of trouble with the authorities if we had walked around with rifles, so we hid them in our cars. We did not have a licence to carry arms, not that a licensing process had been introduced yet; Baghdad was still technically a warzone. Although the need for arms was never raised when we were hired for the contract, it was clear that we would need them. No one asked how we would get hold of them and it was easier if no one saw them.

After a little sightseeing, our favourite place to hang out was the local market where the hustle and bustle of trading was a constant source of amusement. The locals welcomed us, waving and calling to us as we hung around, drinking tea. Everyone believed that the Coalition forces had come to save them and as Westerners we were seen as liberators, even though we had liberated nobody.

Although Saddam was still alive and on the run, no one talked about him when we were drinking in the teashops, they were more interested in their futures and were hoping for better things for Iraq. As far as we could see most people were too busy looking out for their families to be worried about causing trouble. The worst threats seemed to come from opportunist thieves and car-jackers, and as we were armed and switched on to threats, we were the last group of people a gang of robbers were going to tackle.

Eventually our client finished his meetings and we drove back to Kuwait, delivering our client

back to his office. As we headed home we had time to reflect on what we had seen across Iraq. Although a lot of buildings were showing signs of war damage on the whole most things were functioning well. One thing that struck me was that Baghdad was not damaged as much as the press had portrayed; it appeared that they were focusing on the worst situations they could find and 'bigging them up' to enhance their stories. But for now we thought that our adventures in Iraq were over. The job had been a nice little earner but it was time to get back to my family and decide what to do next. I had always said that I would do occasional security jobs if they were offered, after all I had the right background and contacts; the money was also good.

Before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the security industry was a very closed shop and there were only a few dozen people who made it their full time job. Most of them knew each other and from time to time they would call up old comrades to help them out on bigger contracts. I expected at some time to be asked to join one of these guys somewhere around the world and after a couple of months' work and I could return home. I suppose you could call it semi-retirement but I prefer to call it a sabbatical. Whichever way you want to look at it, it did not last long.

We Are in Business

AFTER ONLY THREE WEEKS, I received a telephone call from the company our client worked for. They had been awarded a contract to work on restoring electricity in Iraq. To begin with the work would be around the Basra oilfields but there was potential for more work further north later on. While the company had the engineers they needed, they did not have the security personnel to escort them around the country. They also wanted us to provide advice on keeping work sites secure. In short we were being offered a security contract by one of the largest companies in the world, in what would soon be one of the most dangerous countries in the world.

It all sounded a little daunting to me and I started to explain how we were just a handful of guys who had only taken their man up to Baghdad for a bit of money. We were not an established company, we had no infrastructure, no financial backup or even the expertise to run the sort of operation they were looking for. The guy at the other end persisted, pointing out that this was not a military operation; this was a civilian operation working under rules laid down by the military.

Iraq was coming to terms with post war occupation and the huge problems it presented. While the U.S. military were controlling everything to the north, the British Army was busy in the south where we would be working. Our backgrounds would give us a unique insight into how things were done in the British sector and we could make use of our contacts in the area.

After hanging up the telephone, my head was in a bit of a spin as I came to terms with all the information. Twenty minutes ago I had been lazing about contemplating what to have for lunch. Now I was faced with asking the other four guys if they were interested in coming up with a business plan for a new security company.

They were all interested and after we had all had a bit of time to digest the idea, it was time to sit down and come up with a plan. The information was a little vague, so all we could do was come up with ball park figures for everything we could think of. We had all done a bit of moonlighting work, either intelligence gathering or close protection jobs, in the United Kingdom during our Special Forces days. But while we knew how to price small jobs up, this was completely different.

The figures soon started to tumble out for paying personnel, acquiring arms and ammunition, buying food and fuel and hiring vehicles and accommodation. That was the easy part. As we did not know what to expect in Iraq, we explained to the client that we needed a Forward Operating Base (F.O.B.) with a control centre, accommodation, vehicle parking and storage. We were assured that as we were working on the reconstruction of Iraq, the British military would provide us with a secure compound, complete with cabins and services, on their base.

We also had to arrange insurance. There was only one insurance company in London who covered this kind of work in hostile areas and it did not come cheap. As well as personal insurance for death and injuries, it also had professional indemnity, which covered mistakes made by the company.

We also had to consider how to deal with casualties and while we could find a company who would arrange for their evacuation from Kuwait, it would not operate in Iraq; it was still too dangerous. We would have to make local arrangements once we got to Iraq.

After a lot of deliberation we came up with a figure of around half a million pounds but we all knew it was a real 'back of a fag packet' calculation. The next question was where each of us would get the money from? But after a lengthy discussion, we all left the meeting believing we should give the business a go.

Over the days that followed the number of phone calls we all made to each other went through the

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