

The Washington Post

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The Private Armies of Iraq



COURTESY OF ISIRELI NAUCUKIDI

This Pulitzer Prize-winning series of reports by Steve Fainaru sheds light on private security contractors, the hired guns who fight a parallel and largely hidden war in Iraq.

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Full coverage of the private armies of Iraq along with video reports, graphics and transcripts of online discussions can be found online at: washingtonpost.com/world

This digital newsbook was produced for *The Washington Post* at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute in Columbia, Missouri. www.rjionline.org

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COURTESY OF ISIRELI NAUCUKIDI

Colleagues said Jacob Washbourne, a Triple Canopy team leader, fired at vehicles on Baghdad's airport road. The firm conducted the only known probe of the shootings and said it could not determine the circumstances behind them.

A Chaotic Day On Baghdad's Airport Road

By STEVE FAINARU

Published: April 15, 2007

On the afternoon of July 8, 2006, four private security guards rolled out of Baghdad's Green Zone in an armored SUV. The team leader, Jacob C. Washbourne, rode in the

front passenger seat. He seemed in a good mood. His vacation started the next day.

"I want to kill somebody today," Washbourne said, according to the three other men in the vehicle, who later recalled it as an offhand remark. Before the day was over, how-

ever, the guards had been involved in three shooting incidents. In one, Washbourne allegedly fired into the windshield of a taxi for amusement, according to interviews and statements from the three other guards.

Washbourne, a 29-year-old former Marine, denied the allegations. "They're all unfounded, unbased, and they simply did not happen," he said during an interview near his home in Broken Arrow, Okla.

The full story of what happened on Baghdad's airport road that day may never be known. But a Washington Post investigation of the incidents provides a rare look inside the world of private security contractors, the hired guns who fight a parallel and largely hidden war in Iraq. The contractors face the same dangers as the military, but many come to the war for big money, and they operate outside most of the laws that govern American forces.

The U.S. military has brought charges against dozens of soldiers and Marines in Iraq, including 64 servicemen linked to murders. Not a single case has been brought against a security contractor, and

confusion is widespread among contractors and the military over what laws, if any, apply to their conduct. The Pentagon estimates that at least 20,000 security contractors work in Iraq, the size of an additional division.

Private contractors were granted immunity from the Iraqi legal process in 2004 by L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the U.S. occupation government. More recently, the military and Congress have moved to establish guidelines for prosecuting contractors under U.S. law or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, but so far the issue remains unresolved.

The only known inquiry into the July 8 incidents was conducted by Triple Canopy, a 3½-year-old company founded by retired Special Forces officers and based in Herdon. Triple Canopy employed the four guards. After the one-week probe, the company concluded that three questionable shooting incidents had occurred that day and fired Washbourne and two other employees, Shane B. Schmidt and Charles L. Sheppard III.

Trouble on the Airport Road

On July 8, a convoy from the private security company Triple Canopy was dispatched to the Baghdad airport to pick up a civilian client. During that run, the guards in one of three armored SUVs were involved in two separate incidents in which shots were fired at a pickup truck and a taxi on the airport road. Triple Canopy investigated the incidents and fired three guards. The incidents illustrate the confusion among private contractors about what laws, if any, apply to them.

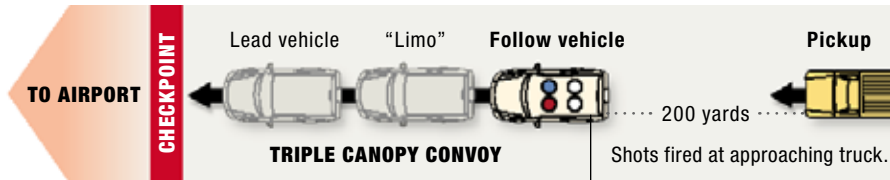


MAP BY MARY KATE CANNISTRA — THE WASHINGTON POST

Details of the two incidents remain disputed:

1 FIRST INCIDENT: Shots are fired at white pickup truck; no information is available about whether anyone was hurt in the truck.

2 SECOND INCIDENT: See next page [▶▶](#)



CONFLICTING STATEMENTS FROM EMPLOYEES IN FOLLOW VEHICLE

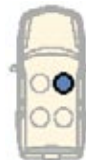
NOTE: Drawings are not to scale



○ Naucukidi*: In a report, submitted immediately after the incidents, he said he and Schmidt tried to warn the driver of the pickup truck to stop, but it kept moving toward them. Schmidt then fired his M-4 three times at the truck.



● Schmidt*: Submitted reports two days after the incident, saying it was Washbourne who shot at the truck.



● Washbourne: Says that he cannot recall the incident and that he shot at a larger truck in an incident earlier that day.

*Naucukidi and Schmidt disagree on who sat behind driver.

SOURCE: Staff reports

GRAPHIC BY DITA SMITH AND TODD LINDEMAN — THE WASHINGTON POST

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