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Jonathon Cote
talked of returning
to WNY.

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Detailed new book offers deep drama of Cote saga

Low rescue priority, details of death cited

By Dan Herbeck
News Staff Reporter

When Jonathon M. Cote and four private security co-workers were abducted in Iraq in 2006, the U. S. government did not make rescue efforts a “high priority,” according to an award-winning journalist who has written a book about the crime.

And when authorities finally recovered the bodies this April, they made the gruesome discovery that Cote had been beheaded, according to reporter Steve Fainaru.

“Before they were abducted, these men had talked openly about fears that they could be kidnapped, tortured and mutilated,” Fainaru said.

Cote and Joshua Munns, a close friend and co-worker who was also killed by the abductors, had even made a pact about what to do if they were ever captured, he said.

“Cote was to put a bullet in Josh’s head with his Glock and then turn the gun on himself,” Fainaru said.

That did not occur on Nov. 16, 2006, Fainaru said, because a band of terrorists who portrayed themselves as Iraqi policemen quickly disarmed Cote and his co-workers.

The author told The Buffalo News he is certain that the abductions and murders of Cote and his friends would have received much more publicity — and much more government attention — if the men had been active-duty soldiers.

“It says a lot about the way our country is conducting this war. It’s disingenuous,” Fainaru said. “These [private security] guys are critical to the war effort. But if they’re captured or killed, our government disavows them. Their numbers aren’t added to the casualty counts.”

Cote, 23 at the time of the kidnapping, was a former Amherst resident and a graduate of Williamsville North High School. He was an Army veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan before taking a private security job in the Middle East. Many of his family members, including his father, brother and grandparents, still live in Amherst.

Fainaru, a 46-year-old Washington Post reporter, won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting this year for a series of articles on private war contractors in Iraq. His book, “Big Boy Rules — America’s Mercenaries Fighting in Iraq,” is scheduled for release by Da Capo Press on Nov. 10.

Disturbing revelations

Fainaru knew and liked Cote. He spent hours talking with Cote and riding on security missions with him in Iraq just days before the abductions.

But the U. S. government “wasn’t as aggressive as it could have been” after the men were abducted while guarding a military supply convoy in southern Iraq, Fainaru said. He said he does not believe that the government made rescuing the men a high priority.

In his view, the U. S. government depends heavily on private security contractors in the Iraq War but exercises little control over them and gives little support to those who do the dangerous work.

His book contains a number of disturbing revelations about security contractors and about the crime, which is described by Fainaru as the biggest kidnapping of Americans in Iraq since the start of the war.

Among the revelations:

- Autopsy results showed that Cote was beheaded. Authorities do not know whether that occurred while he was still alive. It had been previously reported that the bodies of Cote and several of the men abducted with him had been mutilated.
- The private security force Cote was riding with on the day of the kidnappings was extremely understaffed, with just seven men guarding a convoy of trucks a mile and a half long on a dangerous Iraqi supply route.
- Some of the mercenaries in Iraq are dangerous and out of control, showing little regard for the safety of civilians. Fainaru writes about one soldier-for-hire who allegedly started his day by saying, "I want to kill somebody today."

In the book, three witnesses describe seeing that same mercenary fire shots through the windshield of an occupied Iraqi taxi "for amusement." It is not known whether the shots caused wounds or death.

In 2004, the U. S. occupation government in Iraq gave mercenaries immunity from Iraqi law.

"As the security industry grew, a shadowy and motley work force continued to pour into Iraq," Fainaru writes.

- Fainaru is convinced that the bodies of the abducted men would never have been found if Cote's stepmother, Nancy M. Cote, was not a prominent federal agent who headed the Buffalo office of the U. S. Drug Enforcement Administration. After more than a year of fruitless efforts by the FBI, a DEA agent in Iraq got the information that led to the recoveries.

The FBI investigation into the kidnappings and murders is continuing and is being run out of the Washington, D. C. office. Debra Weierman, an FBI spokeswoman, defended the agency's work in the case.

"Anytime when we have American citizens who are captured and in harm's way, we take those investigations very seriously," Weierman said. "It's still an active investigation. We have people actively working on it."

She said the location of the crime made it a difficult one for the FBI or any other police agency to solve. She declined to comment in specifics on the opinions expressed by Fainaru.

Days before he was abducted, Cote told Fainaru he had enough of the dangers he faced as a security contractor in Iraq, Fainaru said. After more than 50 missions guarding people or convoys of military cargo, Cote was making plans to return to Western New York.

He served in Iraq and Afghanistan with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division before taking the private security job at \$7,000 a month. Fainaru said Cote told him that the work he did with Crescent Security was more dangerous than what he had done in the Army.

Cotes are supportive

Although the book reveals some chilling and painful truths, members of Cote's family in Amherst strongly support Fainaru's work.

"It's a great book, and I want people to read it," said Francis L. Cote, the father. "I want people to know what happened to Jonathon and the men who disappeared with him. The book included a lot of information that was hidden from the public and hidden from us."

Fainaru deserves credit for risking his own life to write the inside story of how mercenaries are used by the government in the war effort, Cote said. "I agree with [Fainaru] that, especially in the first few months after the kidnappings, our government didn't do much to rescue these men," Francis Cote said. "I agree with him that, without [a DEA agent] that we call 'Joe from Basra,' the bodies would never have been found."

Cote added: "I want people to know that these terrorists have used their religion and their cause for the wrong reason — to torture and kill people. I believe they did it just to show they could do something like this to Americans."

Fainaru describes Crescent Security as a company that was "not even remotely safe" for its workers. He said the company made crucial mistakes on the day of the abductions, including understaffing the convoy and failing to register it with the Logistics & Movement Coordination Center in Baghdad.

"I think greed, negligence and complacency all contributed to Jonathon's death," Fainaru said. "Cote or any one of those guys could have said, 'No, this is insane. We're not going.' But they had made that run so many times, they were lulled into a false sense of security."

Officials of Crescent Security, based in Kuwait, could not be reached to comment.

Fainaru says Jonathon Cote emerges as the star of his book. He describes Cote as a caring, energetic, charismatic young man who made a horrible mistake in deciding to work in private security in a war zone.

"[The Cotes] are decent, honest, open people, and Francis is one of the strongest persons I've ever met," Fainaru said. "One of the hardest things about writing this book was watching such good people go through such a horrible ordeal."

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