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Soldier of Misfortune

Fighting a Parallel War in Iraq, Private Contractors Are Officially Invisible -- Even in Death

By *Steve Fainaru*

Adapted from "Big Boy Rules: America's Mercenaries Fighting in Iraq" (Da Capo Press, 2008)

As US Airways Flight 1860 eased into Gate 4 at Buffalo Niagara International Airport, the pilot's voice came over the intercom: "Can I please have your attention? We are carrying with us tonight the remains of a fallen American in Iraq. Please remain seated for the movement of the remains and for the American escorts to deplane."

The cabin fell silent. No one moved as the two men seated in the first row rose to gather their belongings. They were the white-gloved master sergeant who had accompanied Jonathon Coté's body from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware and the American drug enforcement agent who, after a 16-month search, had recovered the headless corpse in southern Iraq.

The two men were led down to the tarmac, and the master sergeant climbed up into the belly of the plane. He draped an American flag over the silver casket and made sure that Coté's body was placed feet-first on the conveyor belt.

There was a light drizzle, the temperature at 40 degrees. A bitter wind blew off Lake Erie, snapping a half-dozen flags held by members of the Patriot Guard Riders of New York, a biker group that supports the families of fallen Americans. Police flashers and a Buffalo TV crew's equipment threw light and shadows over the plane. From the ground you could see the passengers, still frozen in their seats in the lighted cabin, and the baggage handlers, waiting off to the side in fluorescent orange vests and knitted caps.



Mourners gather in May for the funeral of Jonathon Coté, a private security contractor killed in Iraq but not counted among official U.S. casualties. Employing contractors, his father says, "hides the true costs of war." (Dennis C. Enser - The Buffalo News)

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I stood with Jon's family beneath the wing, buffeted by the freezing wind. Five men and one woman from New York's 107th Air National Guard lifted the casket from the belt and slowly marched it across the tarmac to an idling hearse.

Anyone watching might have thought they were witnessing the somber homecoming of an American hero killed in Iraq. That was technically true: Jonathon Coté had fought in the U.S. Army. He was killed in Iraq.

But it was far more complicated than that.

The Money and the Life

I covered the war in Iraq from the fall of 2004 through 2007, and the story that, to me, captured its essence turned out to be about a mercenary.

This was a war with its own original sin: the Bush administration's failure to provide enough troops. To make up the shortfall, the government chose to outsource responsibility for deciding who can kill and die for the United States to for-profit companies that employed tens of thousands of soldiers-for-hire: mercenaries, or private security contractors, as they were known. The mercenaries developed their own language and subculture, and they fought their own secret battles under their own rules -- "Big Boy Rules," as they called their playbook, with more than a hint of condescension, to distinguish it from the constraints of the military's formal code. They weren't counted by our government, alive or dead.

It was, in many respects, a parallel war, one that ultimately came to define the darkest aspects of the entire Iraq conflict. Under the shadow of officially sanctioned impunity, the mercenaries killed Iraqis, and Iraqis killed them. Only after employees of Blackwater Worldwide -- one of hundreds of private security firms in Iraq -- massacred 17 people at a Baghdad traffic circle in September 2007 did the magnitude of this private war become apparent. By then, going on five years into the conflict, the U.S. war effort could not have been maintained without mercenaries.



During Jonathan Cote's funeral, his mother, Lori Ann Silveri, accepts the flag that had been draped over his casket. (Dennis C. Enser - The Buffalo News)

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It was war without planning. War without ideology. War as a paycheck. War as escape.

I first met Coté in November 2006, when he invited me to ride along with him from Tallil Air Base near Nasiriyah back to the Kuwait City headquarters of his company, Crescent Security Group. To hold down costs, Crescent navigated Iraq's dangerous roads in silver and black Chevy Avalanches -- pickup trucks with scavenged steel plates wedged into the doors for armor and belt-fed PK machine guns mounted in back. Two months earlier, Coté told me, a roadside bomb had blown one of the flimsy trucks 150 yards off Iraq's main supply route, killing two Iraqi employees who were inside.

It was midafternoon, the heat radiating off the desert as Coté wheeled his Avalanche toward the front gate of the air base. We reached a frontage road and were suddenly unable to move. A convoy of big rigs stood in our way. To the left was a chain-link fence that ran the length of the road. To the right was a steep dirt shoulder that sloped down into a vast field of mud.

"Hang on," Coté told me with a sly grin. "You got your seatbelt on?"

He gunned the Avalanche down the shoulder. The truck slammed into the muck, pitching us into the dashboard, then reared up, engine roaring, tires spinning. Coté downshifted and the truck lunged forward, bucking us through the mud. As we reached the front of the convoy, Coté yanked the truck back onto the asphalt road. Then he laughed and laughed.

Coté said he sometimes felt as if he were watching himself play himself at war. He was 23 and looked like a Tommy Hilfiger model, with short brown hair, a handsome face faintly scarred with acne, and the slim build of a college cornerback. He posted beefcake photos on his Facebook page that showed only his cut abdomen, or his bare chiseled arms wrapped around an AK-47 assault rifle. "I'm the kind of kid who has to have fun no matter what I'm doing," he told me.

One of the fun things he liked to do was drive around Baghdad and blast Led Zeppelin and the Notorious B.I.G. through the open window while rocking back and forth in his seat, fingers splayed. Coté was also something of a health nut. On the front seat of his "gun-truck," he carried canned peaches and assorted nuts, along with his locked-and-loaded AK and a dog-eared copy of "Beyond Brawn: The Insider's Encyclopedia on How to Build Muscle and Might."

Coté made \$7,000 a month protecting supply convoys in Iraq, but it wasn't just money that had brought him back. He had been in the 82nd Airborne Division, completing combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. After the Army, he enrolled at the University of Florida as an accounting major. It should have been utopia for him: beautiful women, fraternity parties, the kind of perpetual sunshine he never saw in Buffalo, his home town.

But he found that Iraq still raged inside his head -- the intensity of it, the sense of purpose that it had given him and that couldn't be replaced, anywhere. He tried to replicate the experience with binge drinking and multiple women and escalating risk. One night, half-drunk, he put his Ford F-150 on cruise control, climbed out the driver's side window and swung himself into the bed of the truck. He stood

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looking out over the cab like Leonardo DiCaprio on the bow of the Titanic, the wind buffeting his face, as the truck hurtled into the darkness at 70 miles per hour, steered by the panicked fraternity brother who'd slid into the driver's seat. Eventually, Coté climbed back in through the passenger-side window.

"I don't belong here," Coté told a college friend one day.

And before anyone knew it, he was gone.

"Basically, I was looking for a feeling I didn't have, and this job provided that," he told me as he steered the Avalanche down Main Supply Route Tampa, outside Nasiriyah. Coté drove in a T-shirt, with the window down. I wore a flak jacket. The sky was crammed with stars, and you could feel the warm night and smell the desert. Coté had his MP3 player on shuffle, and hip-hop and rap songs droned softly in the background. Coté tapped the steering wheel and bobbed his head as he drove.

He was telling me that he looked at his life like a book. "If the book is only 23 pages," he said, referring to his age, "I want them to be 23 really interesting pages."

It was his variation on an expression I'd heard over and over in Iraq: Come for the money, stay for the life.

For the mercenaries, the private security contractors that were a way of summing up the million different reasons they were there. And why they kept coming back, including the reasons they couldn't articulate and probably wouldn't admit to if they could. There was the obvious: the camaraderie and the addictive thrill -- Iraq as a reality, not as an abstraction. But it was mostly personal. Whatever your story was, that's why you were there; it didn't much matter whether the story was true, or whether you told it to anyone but yourself, or whether it changed over time, every day even.

I had my own story, and maybe that's why I thought I understood why men like Coté kept coming back. At home in California, my father was dying of lung cancer, and my brother -- also a journalist -- was appealing an 18-month prison sentence for refusing to reveal the source who'd leaked Barry Bonds's grand jury testimony in the BALCO steroids scandal. My son, Will, had just turned 8. And yet I, too, kept coming back. When people asked me why, I could only respond, "I just feel like I need to."

A Plan for the Spring

Journalism, as a profession, demands a balance of intimacy and distance. But I guess the balance shifted for me, and suddenly, after spending hours and hours with Coté, I found myself giving him advice.

I didn't really think much about it. Jon was 21 years younger than me; we shared the same birthday: Feb. 11. Like everyone else, I was mesmerized by him; he was like a force of nature. One of his friends said, "His heart was made from pieces of this world."

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Coté had his whole life ahead of him. Crescent, as a going concern, was not even remotely safe; anyone could see that. In addition to the vulnerable pickup trucks, the company had left a trail of lawlessness throughout Iraq. Employees reported making fake military IDs to get unscreened Iraqis onto U.S. military bases. Crescent rolled through Iraqi towns, guns blazing, and smuggled weapons and liquor across the Iraq-Kuwait border. The company "medic" was a self-described alcoholic with no formal medical training who lacked such basic supplies as tourniquets. The "director of security" was a convicted domestic violence offender who was prohibited from carrying a firearm in the United States, but drove through Iraq with AK-47s and shoulder-fired antitank rockets. The company hired tow-truck operators and people who hadn't served in the military since the early 1970s and sent them out into the battlefield with guns.

"Dude, you gotta get out of here," I told Coté. "You gotta go back to school."

We were in one of the Avalanches, on our way to see a backroom Kuwait City jeweler. Coté had hired him to make a butterfly-shaped ring for his mother's birthday. She loved butterflies, he said, because they were so free, just like the two of them. He planned to give his mom the ring when he went home.

"This company is a mess," I told Coté. "I know sometimes you don't feel it, but you have everything in the world going for you. You don't belong here."

Sometimes he would say it didn't really matter if something happened to him, because he didn't have a wife, or kids, or anyone he was responsible for. I don't think he ever totally believed that; it was one of those things you say to help you make sense of how you feel at the time. He didn't say it this time.

Instead, he said that he'd been thinking about returning home, and that now he'd decided to do it. He said he'd go back to school in the spring, this time with a different major and a plan.

"I think maybe I'd like to be a trainer, you know, like an athletic trainer for a college team," he said. "Something outdoors."

Coté told his family and friends he was coming home, and left a message on his cellphone in the United States. He asked his fraternity brothers in Gainesville to reserve a room for him for the spring semester. He called a friend, Shiva Hafezi, and asked if she could pick him up at the airport.

The night before I left Kuwait, I decided to shoot some video of Coté. He sat on his bed in his room, leaning against the wall in a black T-shirt with an orange alligator and the words "University of Florida Blood Donor."

Suddenly I noticed the shadows on the wall behind him.

"You know, I'm looking at the shadows on your back, and it looks like you have wings," I said.

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"No, it doesn't," he said.

"Yeah, it does, kind of," I said, laughing.

Coté turned his head to look, but of course then the shadows moved, so he didn't see them.

A Story on the Wires

My father died of cancer while I was on my way home from Iraq.

A few days later, my brother and I cleaned out his apartment in Petaluma, Calif. As I drove home, drained and numb, I turned on my cellphone. There were urgent messages asking me to call the office.

My editor got on the line and asked me the name of the security company I had been traveling with the week before.

"Crescent Security Group," I told him.

"That's what I thought," he said. "Listen, there's a story on the wires that Crescent was ambushed in southern Iraq. Five of their guys are missing."

He said the names hadn't been released.

I felt lightheaded, nauseated, the way you do when a plane suddenly loses altitude.

I raced home to call Coté in Kuwait City. I got a recording, first in Arabic, then in English: "The person you are trying to reach is unavailable or out of the coverage area."

Coté and the four others had been kidnapped on the same stretch of highway where, one week earlier, we had traveled together, and it was inconceivable that his life would be a 23-page book.

Suspended Lives

Four months after the kidnapping, the phone rang next to Francis and Nancy Coté's bed around 3:30 a.m. Nancy was closest to it, and the sound shook her awake, filling her with dread.

It was Franco Picco, the owner of Crescent Security Group, calling from Kuwait. Francis was sitting up now and Nancy handed him the phone. The sound of Picco's thick South African accent hit Francis in the gut. But Picco told him he was "expecting good news." He said he had sources who had seen Jon and the other four men alive. He said he couldn't be more specific. But he left the impression that their nightmare would soon be over.

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Days passed, then weeks, and then months. But the Cotés never heard from Picco again.

How do we meet our friends, the people we come to love?

I met Francis and Nancy Coté because their son had been kidnapped in Iraq and I was one of the last people to have seen him alive.

Francis, 50, was a stocky bear of a man, with a goatee and a thick sweep of graying hair. He had spent 20 years in the U.S. Marines, fought in the Persian Gulf War and retired as a chief warrant officer. Now he worked as a program manager for IBM. Nancy, his second wife and Jon's stepmother, had joined the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1980, just the 50th woman in history to do so; she had risen to become resident agent in charge of the DEA's Buffalo division.

After the kidnapping, I watched as they suffered with dignity and grace, humor and faith, their tragedy indistinguishable from those of other families with loved ones in peril in Iraq, and yet totally different because it involved a business.

Once Jon and the other four men went missing, Crescent Security suspended their pay, as if they had taken unauthorized vacations or several months of undocumented sick leave. For Coté, a college student, it didn't mean as much, but the others had dependents, including children.

The families of the Crescent hostages felt powerless, desperate, their lives suspended. The State Department had assigned a representative from the Office of American Citizens Services and Crisis Management to keep them informed. Her name was Jenny J. Foo, and she called each family once a week from her office in Washington.

But there wasn't much to report. Foo was cheerful and compassionate, and she called every week without fail. But the families soon realized that she was a functionary, her primary role to placate them, and their frustration grew. The FBI, not the State Department, was running the investigation out of Baghdad's Green Zone, and that, too, was confounding. The kidnapping was the largest involving Americans since the start of the war, and yet the probe was centered 350 miles from the crime scene, nowhere near the region where it was thought the hostages were being held. Agents would spend 90 days in Iraq and then hand off the case.

Nancy Coté was outraged by the apparent lack of urgency surrounding her stepson's case. Using her contacts inside the DEA, she prodded the government to quietly change its tactics. Nearly a year after the kidnapping, the DEA put its own man on the case. Unlike the FBI, the agent, who had no previous experience with kidnappings, embedded himself in southern Iraq.

He would stay there so long he became known as Joe from Basra.

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A Macabre Delivery

A few months into the job, Joe from Basra traveled up to Baghdad to update the FBI and other U.S. government officials on the case. While he was there, he received a call on his cellphone. A contact told him that a courier was on his way to the Basra airfield to deliver proof of the missing Crescent hostages.

It was Feb. 11, 2008 -- Jon Coté's 25th birthday. Joe called Basra to inform a Special Forces team that the courier was on his way.

The man arrived at the airport gate carrying a small plastic bag. He was escorted into the highly fortified compound, where a Special Forces team leader, wearing plastic gloves, opened the bag carefully and felt a chill run through him.

Inside the bag were five severed fingers, each in its own Ziploc bag. The courier told him that they belonged to the missing Crescent hostages. The fingers were caked with dirt and badly decomposed -- more fingertips by now than fingers. Later, an analysis in the United States determined that one of them belonged to Jon Coté.

Francis and Nancy initially felt that the macabre discovery was proof that Jon was alive. "If it was a corpse, wouldn't you just take the whole finger?" Nancy told me. "I really do think it came off a live body."

But weeks passed, and soon the bodies themselves were handed over. On April 24, after the remains of the other Crescent hostages had been recovered, four cars pulled up in front of the Cotés' red-brick house in suburban Buffalo. It was a bright spring day. The agents walked through the kitchen and sat down at a patio table on the deck outside with Francis, Nancy and Jon's older brother Chris.

A female agent with long red hair looked directly at Francis. She told him that tests had been completed on the last body and it had been determined that it was "your son, Jonathon Coté."

Unresolved Ambiguity

The official American death toll in Iraq that day was 4,047. The number did not change when Jon's body was identified.

Five years into the Iraq war, the private security contractors weren't counted, alive or dead, even though hundreds and perhaps thousands had perished.

It creates a lot of ambiguity when you hire people to fight your war.

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I never really resolved the ambiguity. For me, the story of Jon Coté became symbolic of the war, with all its ennobling heroism and moral emptiness. It became inextricably intertwined with my father's death and my own vague reasons for abandoning my family to return to Iraq, as well as the tragic decisions, large and small, that we all make, as individuals and as a country.

I liked Coté the moment I met him. But it was an ugly business he had gotten himself into, perhaps the ugliest business there is. The U.S. government had fostered it, a manifestation of our failures in Iraq, a method for shifting responsibility and hiding the human toll.

As Iraq came apart, not soon to be pieced back together, the private security contractors helped confine the war to the margins of our consciousness -- tens of thousands of shadow soldiers, their roles and identities as murky as the war itself. You didn't have to draft them, or count them, or run them by Congress.

You didn't even have to know they were there.

On May 2, 800 people crammed the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Williamsville, N.Y., for Coté's funeral. The crowd included more than a dozen members of his platoon from the 82nd Airborne, several fraternity brothers from the University of Florida and friends and relatives from around the country. But not a single representative of Crescent Security Group.

Francis rose, pressed his left hand to his son's casket and walked heavily to the podium.

In the middle of his long eulogy, his voice echoing through the church, he took a moment to describe the strange and unfamiliar world in which Jon had been killed.

The employment of private contractors "hides the true costs of war," Francis said. "Their dead aren't added to official body counts. Their duties -- and profits -- are hidden by closemouthed executives who won't give details to Congress as their coffers and roles swell."

"Although Jon was not in the armed forces at the time he was killed, he was again serving our country in this war," Francis said.

Fainaru is a foreign correspondent for The Washington Post. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting in 2007 about the role of private security forces in the Iraq war.