

BALANCE OF LIFE

NZ CONTRACTORS IN IRAQ

More than 300 New Zealanders walk a daily tightrope on the mean streets of Iraq. As guns for hire, they weigh up the risk to life against the attraction of lucrative contracts, and soldier on.

WORDS KIWIMAC

Hundreds more are said to be interested. Salaries appear attractive. US\$600 per day sounds pretty good – good enough to have enticed several blokes from my Waikato home town, Te Awamutu, to work in Iraq as Private Military Contractors (PMCs). One, Andre Chatfield, who earned his spurs in the New Zealand police's Special Tactics Group even guarded Iraq's interim president.

But if the money sounds too good to be true, sometimes it is. In July this year, Darryl de Thierry lost his life in an IED attack while last year, two other Waikato men, Steve Gilchrist and Teina Ngamata, both employed by ArmorGroup, were killed in two separate incidents. In 2004, New Plymouth engineer John Tyrrell was shot dead in Kirkuk.

Ngamata and de Thierry had served together in 1RNZIR before both men decided to ply their trade in the private sector with ArmorGroup.

Fellow former Waikato soldier, Mike, currently operating in Iraq, is just one of an estimated 35,000 PMCs working the circuit for about 80 different companies.

While some PMCs drive into Iraq from neighbouring Jordan or from Kuwait in the south, Mike says most enter the bad-lands via Baghdad International Airport.

"Aboard a Royal Jordanian flight from Amman, the first time in, I thought the pilot was a frustrated fighter jock as he threw the plane into tight corkscrews to avoid ground fire," he says.

"Landing, you then take the ringroad towards the exit. You're in a green, or safe weapon state, but once past the waving Gurkhas on the gate, you're in the Red Zone, loaded for beer."

The eight-minute ride along 'Route Irish' is described as the biggest adrenaline rush on the planet with as many as 15 attacks a

day along the main access to the safe haven of the Green Zone.

Contractors working in Iraq are generally tight lipped. The last one to grant *The Times* an interview was sacked, despite gaining approval to speak to the media in 2005 – so, we thank Mike for his insights.

Mike has worked in Iraq for about three years and said things had gotten seriously dodgy of late, and some PMCs questioned if the money was still worth it.

"It's getting pretty tight. I managed to secure a job in the Green Zone last year but, before you can do that, you've got to earn your patch working the convoys for about two years.

"While the money is OK, it isn't that flash to be honest. Sure it's good compared to an eight-to-five, Monday to Friday office job. But it's not Monday to Friday, it's 24/7 and

actually works out about US\$25 an hour when you consider insurance and other costs," he says.

But despite the risks, more and more Kiwis [and Australians] appear eager to take the plunge. Many former or serving soldiers, police and even the odd civvie are putting their hand up for a shot at a job with a real difference.

It's easier said than done, though. Many become frustrated trying to get that first foot in the door.

But one New Zealander who has trained both PMCs and crack counter-terrorist teams from 30 different countries says perseverance is the key for Kiwis wanting to enter the industry.

Alan Brosnan, a former New Zealand SAS soldier is one of a rare breed, having already established himself in the private security sector before the war in Iraq started. He even wrote a best-selling book with fellow ex SAS soldier and fellow security contractor Duke Henry – *Soldiering On* – about the pair's days with the Special Air Service and subsequent security operations.

Originating from Dunedin, Alan left the NZ SAS in the late '80s.

In 1991 he established his own company in Mississippi USA – the Tactical Explosive Entry School (TEES) – to train law-enforcement and military special-operations teams from around the world, tasked to operate in high risk environments.

"One of the biggest pitfalls for Kiwis

wanting to enter the private security industry is that they are applying for jobs with mostly US and UK companies and competing, not only against applicants from those countries, but Australians and South Africans as well.

"They lack the initial contacts. They need buddies on the inside," he says.

But those who persevere and prove themselves have adapted well.

"One thing they do have in their favour though, is that Kiwis have a good reputation. They mix well with different cultures and races, where some guys from other countries don't.

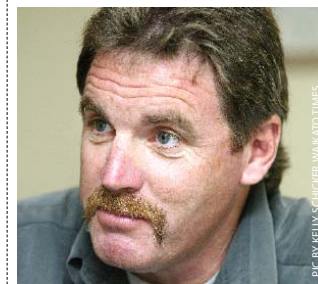
"And they don't expect a lot. Most are just happy to be there, contributing to the global war on terror," he says.

One particular Kiwi trait that is popular with employers is that despite an industry made up predominantly of type-A personalities, the New Zealanders have an ability to become the 'grey men'.

"They don't go about puffing their chests out and that can be a real advantage."

With a far larger homeland special operations community, American companies have so many former soldiers to choose from that they see little point recruiting from elsewhere, finding it simpler to recruit their own countrymen.

"Once they've been trained up by the government and had their skills honed by deployments in Iraq or Afghanistan, they are suddenly very employable," Alan says.



Alan Brosnan

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Baghdad's mean streets



PIC BY BRIAN HARTIGAN



Darryl de Thierry



PIC BY BRIAN HARTIGAN

“ THE GUYS IN IRAQ ARE NOT MERCENARIES, LIKE THE ILL-FATED EQUATORIAL GUINEA OPERATION, THEY ARE HIRED TO PROTECT INFRASTRUCTURE AND PEOPLE INVOLVED IN RECONSTRUCTION, NOT TO CARRY OUT OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS ”

But the veteran operator has no plans to return to the circuit himself.

Having travelled and worked extensively as a trainer and operator, including Iraq and three tours in Afghanistan since 2002, Alan is happy to hang up his gun.

In 2005 he sold TEES to Olive Group and now works for them as a training director.

“I’m not interested in working as a contractor, I’m happy to work as an executive and develop the business,” he says.

Here, he is ideally placed, working with government agencies and contractors, teaching and adapting to new techniques to fit in with established ones.

“I sold TEES to Olive because they had a sound reputation and we are currently developing our facility into the premier training centre in the US.”

Private security companies operating in Iraq and Afghanistan have been accused of being a private, uncontrolled army. But their presence is actually regulated, resulting from the US Army’s Logistics Civil Augmentation Programme (LOGCAP), introduced in 1985.

This allowed the US Army to downsize after the Cold War and civilian companies to tender for contracts to supply a broad spectrum of logistical and technical support. Under the agreement, however, the US military is obligated to provide security to civilian contractors or, if unable to do so because of troop shortages, contractors are free to hire private security firms to protect them.

Since the invasion of Iraq, and given the sheer scale of that engagement, there has been a sharp rise in the

number of companies needing and offering protective services. Among those offering such protection are the giant American companies Blackwater, Triple Canopy and DynaCorp, while British companies, where most Kiwis find employment, include Aegis, HART, CRG and Olive Group.

Alan Brosnan says that, far from just guns for hire, these companies offer broad-spectrum security solutions and a protective layer for those who are working to rebuild shattered nations.

“Here at Olive Group, for instance, we offer vulnerability appraisals, intelligence gathering, analysis and assessments, training and operational support.

“The guys in Iraq are not mercenaries, like the ill-fated Equatorial Guinea operation, they are hired to protect infrastructure and people involved in reconstruction, not to carry out offensive operations.

“If they get contacted, their job is to bug out, to protect the principal,” he says.

Iraq or Afghanistan are not the only places these contractors can be sent when military forces are stretched. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Olive Group provided staff to help secure disaster-relief efforts.

“We deployed 200 personnel, who were mobilised within days, assisting FEMA as security contractors. They’re contracted on that mission for at least one year.

“Since then we’ve also had people sent to assist in Texas where they were hired, equipped and deployed within hours.”

With so much of the US Defense budget being soaked up in Iraq and Afghanistan, Alan says it was only logical that specialist training be contracted out to companies like his.

“It’s easier and cheaper to hire private companies to run training than to create and maintain a specialist facility with limited focus within the military.

“The US is full of subject-matter experts in the area of counter-terrorism, so why not use them – and free up the military for other tasks.

“That’s why they come to companies like us.”



PIC BY BRIAN HARTIGAN