



Civilian Warriors: The Inside Story of Blackwater and the Unsung Heroes of the War on Terror

By Erik Prince

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The founder of Blackwater offers the gripping true story of the world's most controversial military contractor.

In 1997, former Navy SEAL Erik Prince started a business that would recruit civilians for the riskiest security jobs in the world. As Blackwater's reputation grew, demand for its services escalated, and its men eventually completed nearly 100,000 missions for both the Bush and Obama administrations.

It was a huge success except for one problem: Blackwater was demonized around the world. Its employees were smeared as mercenaries, profiteers, or worse. And because of the secrecy requirements of its contracts with the Pentagon, the State Department, and the CIA, Prince was unable to correct false information. But now he's finally able to tell the full story about some of the biggest controversies of the War on Terror, in a memoir that reads like a thriller.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Prince’s book belongs on the shelf next to the memoirs of the other Iraq and Afghanistan war chieftains.... we need Prince’s story to help us understand the history of the post- 9/11 wars and the myriad roles contractors played in these conflicts.”

—*The Washington Post*

About the Author

Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL, is the founder and former CEO of Blackwater. Since selling the company in 2010, he has pursued a variety of new business ventures.

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Introduction

December 6, 2003

AT ELEVEN P.M., EIGHTEEN CARS, WATCHED OVERHEAD BY U.S. ARMY APACHE and Kiowa Warrior helicopters, as well as by a pair of Blackwater helicopters, known as Little Birds, stormed out of the Green Zone. They turned onto a pockmarked roadway, drove past scorched traffic barriers and burned-out remains of vehicles once used for suicide bombings, and sped toward Baghdad International Airport. A motorcade escorting a head of state and the U.S. secretary of defense doesn’t travel light. Especially not on the “Highway of Death.”

That multilane stretch of asphalt connects Iraq’s largest international airport with the coalition-occupied Green Zone. For years, insurgents had effectively owned the five or so miles, ambushing convoys, diplomats, and American troops roughly once a day. So dangerous was the road that the State Department would ultimately outlaw its personnel from using it at all. And even before that, no one took that road without a plan.

But sometimes Paul Bremer wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Shortly before eleven p.m., Bremer, the United States presidential envoy and administrator in Iraq, had finished a meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outside the Green Zone. To the surprise of his Blackwater security detail, Bremer insisted he would see the secretary off at the airport.

Frank Gallagher, the barrel-chested head of the detail charged with keeping Bremer alive, quickly recalibrated travel plans. “Needless to say, some of the radio traffic back to me expressed grave concern about doing the mission and questioned my sanity,” Gallagher later remembered. “But I could see the look in [Bremer’s] eyes that this was not open for debate.”

The trip out was uneventful, but Gallagher sensed the worst was yet to come. The show of force had certainly tipped off the insurgents that something unusual was going on at the airport. And Bremer’s Blackwater motorcade would have to travel back to the Green Zone without the Pentagon detail that had accompanied Rumsfeld.

Once Bremer had said his good-byes to the secretary, the Coalition Provisional Authority leader and his right-hand man, Brian McCormack, climbed into the back of an up-armored Chevy Suburban SUV. Gallagher gathered his Blackwater team. “I explained that getting back to the Green Zone was going to be an adventure, and made sure that everyone was aware of the dangers,” he said. “We promised to have a cup of mead in Valhalla later that evening.”

Contractor humor.

Around eleven twenty p.m., Bremer’s pared-down convoy pulled away from the airport. The nimble Blackwater helicopters darted out front, providing top cover and scanning the roadway for threats. Gallagher, in the front passenger seat, wrapped his fingers around his matte black M4 carbine and stared out into the darkness that enveloped the roadway. Bremer and McCormack chatted about meeting schedules for the next day.

Suddenly, a call from a Blackwater bird above: “Be alert—a vehicle ahead is *backing* down an on-ramp onto the road.” The driver of Bremer’s SUV pulled into the far left lane, closest to the highway median. The lead and follow armored cars maneuvered to flank Bremer on the right.

There was a jarring *crack* against the bulletproof window on Gallagher’s door—what he later learned had been an AK-47 round that had marked him for death. And then, with a horrible flash of light, an improvised explosive device (IED) rocked the armored Humvee behind Bremer’s SUV, destroying the Humvee’s axle with a deafening blast.

Bremer’s driver swerved and battled to keep all four tires of the SUV on the ground. From the darkness, insurgents opened fire with AK-47s, rattling machine-gun fire off the right side of the car. There was nowhere to hide; flames and headlights provided just enough light to grasp what was unfolding. “We’d been ambushed, a highly organized, skillfully executed assassination attempt,” Bremer later wrote. “I swung around and looked back. The Suburban’s armored-glass rear window had been blown out by the IED. And now AK rounds were whipping through the open rectangle.”

“*Tuna! Tuna! Tuna!*” shouted the voice from the radio in Bremer’s SUV. It was Blackwater’s shift leader, limping along in the battered armored vehicle, calling out the code for the SUVs to drive through the ambush: *Leave the Humvees*, he was saying; *get Bremer out of there now*.

Contractors in the two helicopters above unloaded enough ammunition to repel the attack, while Blackwater’s drivers ignored the burns on their feet from the heat of the blast and stomped on the gas through the fog of smoke on the roadway. One of the trailing Suburbans pulled immediately alongside Bremer’s car, shielding it while speeding down the Highway of Death so close together that the cars’ sideview mirrors touched. “I asked for a casualty report and learned that two of our four vehicles were damaged, but limping along,” Gallagher said.

The stench of explosives lingered in the ambassador’s vehicle as they made it to the Green Zone. And soon, the Humvees and helicopters made it back as well.

Miraculously, no one was injured.

Since I first enrolled in the Naval Academy after high school, my life’s mission has been to serve God, serve my family, and serve the United States with honor and integrity. I did it first as a midshipman, then as a SEAL, then—when personal tragedy called me home from the service—as a contractor providing solutions for some of the thorniest problems on earth. The business of war has never been pretty, but I did my job legally, and I did it completely. Too well, perhaps, growing Blackwater until it became something resembling its own branch of the military and other government agencies.

During my dozen years as company CEO, we filled contracts for the State Department, the Department of Defense, the CIA, elite law enforcement agencies around the world, and many others. We did everything from protecting heads of state to delivering the mail. Blackwater expanded from a simple training center in the North Carolina swampland to encompass dozens of business divisions ranging from surveillance blimp development and construction to intelligence services to K9 operations. We became the ultimate tool in the war on terror, pushing a thousand contractors into Iraq and hundreds more into Afghanistan under the Republican Bush administration, then continuing a connection to Democratic president Barack Obama that was closer than he has ever wanted to admit. My company's history is a proud tale of performance excellence and driven entrepreneurialism.

The public relations battle at home, however, was very different from a firefight on the front lines. Those conflicts my men and I were trained for. Stateside, though, thanks to endless waves of frivolous lawsuits, congressional hearings, and inaccurate press reports, Blackwater was slagged as the face of military evil. Gun-toting bullies for hire. We were branded mercenaries and murderers, and were made the whipping boy for the public's fury over the Bush administration's policies in the Middle East. After failing in their multiyear effort to win hearts and minds in Iraq, the bureaucrats decided a company that had repeatedly answered this government's pleas for help was suddenly more valuable as a scapegoat. I was strung up so the politicians could feign indignation and pretend my men hadn't done exactly what they had paid us handsomely to do.

There is much the government doesn't want told about the work we did: the truth about our State Department-sanctioned operational tactics in Iraq, for instance, including our rules of engagement; or Blackwater's crucial involvement with President Obama's ever expanding terrorist-hunting tactics in Pakistan and beyond; or even the depth of government reliance on contractors today and the outsourcing of its war machine. Government agencies don't want that spotlight being shone on our work, nor to applaud the greatest advantage Blackwater offered them: increased capability. They want increased deniability.

For years my company's work was misconstrued and misrepresented. At the time, our government contracts explicitly barred Blackwater from responding to the public broadsides. We were never allowed to explain things such as how we secured the contracts we did, or what really happened during a bloody Baghdad shoot-out in September 2007, or the way shifting political tectonic plates crushed my company as an act of partisan theatrics. Or how the one job I loved more than any other was ripped away from me thanks to gross acts of professional negligence at the CIA.

So now I'm done keeping quiet. What's been said before is only half the story—and I won't sit idly by while the bureaucrats go after me so that everyone else can just go back to business as usual. The true history of Blackwater is exhilarating, rewarding, exasperating, and tragic. It's the story of men taking bullets to protect the men who take all the credit, a tale of patriots whose names became known only when lawyers and politicians needed to blame somebody for something.

Our critics have spoken. Now it's my turn. Reprinted from *CIVILIAN WARRIORS: The Inside Story of Blackwater and the Unsung Heroes of the War on Terror* by Erik Prince with permission of Portfolio, a member of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, A Penguin Random House Company. Copyright (c) BW Productions, LLC, 2013.

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