

## *Book Review*

# **In Kill Zone: Surviving as a private military contractor in Iraq**

*Neil Reynolds*

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Jeppestown, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers

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Have you ever turned down a job offer that pays US\$25 000 (ZAR201 500)<sup>562</sup> per month? Neil Reynolds has! Have you ever been offered work that not only pays US\$9 000 (ZAR72 540)<sup>563</sup> per month, but also guarantees you the opportunity to work and travel abroad? This is what Neil Reynolds was offering entry-level employees should they decide to come and work with him. The only catch, you had to be working as a personal security detail (PSD) to an anonymous very important person (VIP), also known as ‘the client’, in one of the world’s most dangerous places, Iraq after the 2003 American-led coalition invasion of the country. If you have ever considered such a career choice or are simply curious what such employment might entail, then this book by Neil Reynolds is a must have for you.

In July 2003, Mauritz le Roux, a founder member of Safenet Security Services (SSS) was looking to expand his business. The coalition invasion of Iraq provided just such an opportunity. Despite not having any personal or private experience within the PSD environment – Mauritz had served as an engineer officer in the South African Defence Force (SADF) before resigning to join Executive Outcomes for their Angolan contract in 1993 – Mauritz felt that Iraq offered an opportunity he just could not ignore. Teaming up with John Walbridge – a graduate of the Citadel and the US 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group before transitioning to work in Africa for the CIA, Walbridge now owned Overseas Security & Strategic Information (OSSI) Inc., which he had founded in 2000, the two men decided to form OSSI-Safenet and chance their hand in Iraq.

As a first step, OSSI-Safenet needed to recruit a team that could go to Iraq and set up a base of operations and hopefully catch some clients in the not too distant future as well. The first to be appointed was Neil Reynolds, a veteran of the Bush War who had cut his teeth working in the Reconnaissance Wing of 31 (Bushman) Battalion at Omega, and who had shortly before decided to not renew his contract in terms of in-house security for International Trading and Mining, an Angolan diamond mining company. Reynolds was asked to become OSSI-Safenet’s Iraq country manager. To assist Reynolds, OSSI-Safenet also recruited Rieme de Jager and Snoeks Nieuwoudt, two ex-senior non-commissioned officers of the South African Reconnaissance Regiments and Eddie Visser, a well-experienced paramedic.

What follows is Reynold's rip-roaring tale of high adventure within Iraq. Leaving South Africa, the team – including Mauritz – passes through Turkey into Kurdistan (the northern part of Iraq) heading for the town of Sulaymaniyah. Here they meet up with another South African, Casper Oosthuizen, a former member of the Police Special Task Force, who assists them by introducing the team to the Kurdistan Black Market for Weapons. Anything and everything from rocket launchers to machineguns to hand grenades are on open display and for sale. Their purchases made the team then move down to the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

In 2003, Iraq is a divided city. On the one hand, there are those who live and work in the Green Zone – the heavily fortified and strictly controlled area around Saddam Hussein's old palace, which now accommodates the US Embassy – and, on the other, those who survive in the Red Zone, i.e. the rest of the city where nobody is in control. Not having any US credentials, the team sets up in the Red Zone and gets to learn the city and find some clients.

Through tenacity, hard work, common sense and a small bit of luck, OSSI-Safenet is able to carve a niche market for itself in the cut-throat PSD scene within Baghdad. While the majority of PSD companies (such as the now infamous Blackwater International) follow a hard approach – transporting their clients in armoured vehicles, with their members openly armed and overtly aggressive – Reynolds, drawing from his Bush War experience with 31 Battalion, opts for a soft approach. Travelling in unarmoured pickups and minibuses disguised as taxis, with the members (and clients) all dressed in local attire as cover, Reynolds and the team become the principal agent and masters of this indirect approach.

While successful in avoiding most hostile contact with the Sunni insurgents, including their improvised explosive devices (IEDs), because the insurgents think they are locals, they are not without danger and do get involved in firefights from time to time when their cover is blown. The book ends as it began with the terrible tale of the Baghdad Four. Four employees of SSS, Andre Durant (38), Johann Enslin (48), Hardus Greeff (43) and Callie Scheepers (48), were kidnapped in 2006 while on a mission and later murdered when they were stopped at what they believed was an authentic police checkpoint but which in reality was a fake checkpoint set up by the insurgents in cahoots with corrupt local police officials.

A year later, the OSSI-Safenet alliance disintegrated due to the intense rivalry between Le Roux and Walbridge, with Reynolds eventually going to work for Walbridge's OSSI as its country manager in Iraq, later transferring to Afghanistan, Haiti and Libya before retiring in 2013 and returning home to South Africa.

This is an often humorous, fast-paced, well-written book that provides its readers with a rare glimpse behind the curtains into the little known and often secretive world of PSD, in the years following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>562</sup> Based on the US dollar to South African exchange rate of ZAR8.06 to US\$1.00 as on 1 June 2003. The US dollar to South African rand spot exchange rates for 2003 from the Bank of England: <https://www.poundsterlinglive.com/bank-of-england-spot/historical-spot-exchange-rates/usd/USD-to-ZAR-2003>.

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