

Book review

Blood money: Stories of an ex-Recce's missions as a private military contractor in Iraq

Johan Raath

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Iraq was invaded by the United States (US)-led coalition in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. The United States accused Hussein of hiding weapons of mass destruction. The invasion phase of the war lasted for a little over a month, and Hussein's regime was removed from power. Coalition Forces (CF) however failed to maintain control, law and order in the country. The result was a bloody insurgency war fought mostly in urban areas. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq started in 2007, and was completed in 2011. Although the Iraq War technically came to an end, the country was ravaged by an ongoing civil war. The war created new opportunities for private military contractors (PMCs) to assist in providing various specialised security tasks since CF and the newly established Iraqi government were unable to meet the high demand.

Johan Raath was one of many ex-soldiers to seek employment opportunities in that war-torn country. *Blood money* is a memoir about his experiences living and providing security services in Iraq. According to Raath, "the book is not intended as an analysis of private security companies, but was conceptualised rather as a personal journey to illustrate the daily lives of PMCs working in Iraq".⁷⁵³

Raath served in the South African Special Forces for about seven years (1986–1992). He obtained a specialised skill set as a member of the 1-Reconnaissance Regiment ('1 Recce'). Ex-Reccees and other special forces units, such as 32 Battalion, Koevoet and the Special Task Force of the South African Police Service were in high demand in Iraq due to their specialised training and operational experience in the South African Border War. Raath left the South African Defence Force in 1992 and pursued a career in providing high-threat security, such as VIP protection and specialised training. The war in Iraq created job opportunities, and he started working there in 2004. His journey as a PMC in Iraq lasted until late 2017.

Blood money caters for the popular market and military enthusiasts. Very little is known about the role that PMCs play in warzones. The best-known South African book that deals with the topic of mercenaries and PMCs is probably Eben Barlow's *Executive outcomes*.⁷⁵⁴ Raath tries to break the stigma around PMCs often stereotyped as mercenaries, something about which he is very opinionated. According to Raath, the book is the first eyewitness account written by a South African about what it was like to work as a military contractor in Iraq. Raath tells his story from a grass-roots

perspective.⁷⁵⁵

The book consists of 17 chapters, and is in chronological order. It is easy to read and succeeds in keeping the audience's attention. The author uses an informal writing style to tell stories about experiences and events. For example, Raath writes,

In Bagdad you might have power for two-thirds of the day, but in Basra it would never last for more than 12 hours, and sometimes only four. Without a decent generator, you are screwed. On the roads you have to dodge potholes and the many unfinished construction projects dot the city like discarded carcasses on a battlefield. The smell of sewage reminded me of parts of Bagdad.⁷⁵⁶

Raath provides some historical research, but the book is by no means academic in nature. He used sources such as media reports, Wikipedia and Encarta Dictionary to do research and to double-check information. A list of endnotes provides the reader with additional information at the back of the book. The author voices his personal opinion about various subjects and events (see for instance pages xvii and 144). The story includes the personal experiences of his colleagues and friends. Raath calls them by their nicknames, such as 'Grobbies', 'Diff', 'Jakes' and 'JoJo'. He adds these personal experiences to make the book more exciting. The audience gets a good understanding of the dangers associated with the job. The author discusses different topics, such as everyday life in Iraq, environmental conditions, being a foreigner in Iraq, cultural differences, acts of terror, tribalism, personal injury and health, to name but a few.

The reader looking for a story filled with action does not have to look much further. The book presents many stories of ambushes, contact with attackers, incoming mortar attacks, high-speed car chases, suicide bombing attacks, improvised explosive devices, drive-by shootings, hot extractions, emergency evacuations, the experience of facing landmines, acts of terrorism, killing squads, kidnappings, illegal arrests and much more. Although the work done by PMCs can be seen as low-intensity security most of the time, it is still very dangerous. According to Raath, around 500 PMCs were killed during the war and another 1 000 private contractors, such as drivers, aviation personnel and construction workers lost their lives. Nearly 40 South Africans were killed in Iraq. A roll of honour at the back of the book provides their details.

The reader gets a clear picture of what life in Iraq is like for foreigners and civilians caught in the middle of war. Heat, sandstorms, flies, smells, dirty water, food and poor personal living spaces are some of the environmental and personal conditions that are explained. The cultural and language differences are also brought to light.

Raath writes very little about his personal life and experiences as a *reccé*. He focuses on the years spent as a PMC. He is, however, open about some personal experiences, such as injuries that he sustained while on the job. He explains his struggles with taking perhaps too much medicine to be able to complete tasks, as well as the long and difficult road to physical recovery. The job pays well, but comes at a high price in terms of physical and mental health.

Blood money succeeds in its primary goal: to tell the exciting personal story of being a PMC in Iraq.

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ENDNOTES

⁷⁵⁰ Black *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁷⁵¹ Freedman *op. cit.*

⁷⁵² JM Roberts & OA Westad. *The Penguin history of the world*. 2012. London: Penguin Books.

⁷⁵³ J Raath. *Blood money: Stories of an ex-Recce's missions as a private military contractor in Iraq*. Johannesburg: Delta, 2018, x.

⁷⁵⁴ E Barlow. *Executive outcomes: Against all odds*. Alberton: Galago, 2007.

⁷⁵⁵ In 2018, Neil Reynolds published *In kill zone: Surviving as a private military contractor in Iraq*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2018, which is also a memoir of a South African private military contractor who worked in Iraq.

⁷⁵⁶ Raath *op. cit.*, p. 208.