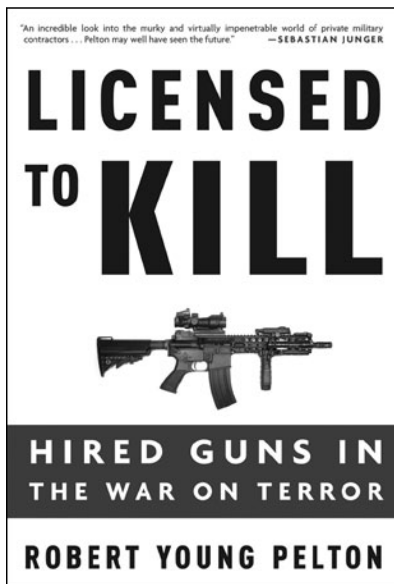

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE

Licensed to Kill: Hired Guns in the War on Terror,
by Robert Young Pelton

Reviewed by Peter J. Woolley

They are disunited, ambitious, and without discipline, unfaithful, valiant before friends, cowardly before enemies; they have neither the fear of God nor fidelity to men," said Niccoló Machiavelli about mercenaries. But that was then, and private security contractors are now. Judge for yourself.

With Robert Young Pelton, you can travel through Baghdad with a private security detail, stand on the remotest edge of Afghanistan with Pakistani border guards, or drop in at a convention of actual and wannabe mercenaries. Or witness a fatal ambush of American civilians in downtown Fallujah, and a mob rejoicing at their death. His is a journalistic story-quilt of char-

acters engaged as private security contractors and mercenaries in a variety of settings from Afghanistan to Equatorial Guinea, but most especially Iraq. Pelton serves up a nonfiction version of a Clive Cussler novel in which many of the characters are real-life approximations of Cussler's favorite protagonist, Dirk Pitt, and each chapter features a different adventure with a different Dirk lookalike.

The dust jacket describes Pelton himself as something of a Dirk Pitt: "a journalist, film-maker, and explorer." Author of several books and frequent contributor to *National Geographic Adventure* magazine, Pelton scoured his notes and interviews from several war zones to produce these strange tales of private armed forces. Perhaps it is exactly this journalistic flair that provokes his critics to grumble that Pelton has sensationalized his accounts and exaggerated the role and impact of private security contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq. It probably doesn't help that Pelton looks a bit like Geraldo Rivera.

Licensed to Kill is a page-turner, though not because it is well written. Pelton switches without warning from third- to first-person narrative, adorns chapters with quotations only tangentially related to the subject matter, relies on lengthy verbatim interviews, and is unselfconscious about overwrought descriptions of his adventures: "Somewhere on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a thunderous *whup*, *whup*, *whup* provides the soundtrack for a graceful, intertwining aerial ballet above my head." In fairness, the author admits his subjects "resemble the actors in a badly cast B movie about mercenaries." Then again, he points out that private security contractors (PSCs) are not truly mercenaries because they are for defensive purposes only. Mercenaries carry out the more aggressive tasks of seeking out enemy forces, and their businesses are PMCs, or private military companies.

The pages turn only because Pelton's stories are intrinsically interesting. Civilian contractors of all descriptions and roles have become essential in the last two decades in support of U.S. forces abroad, but security contractors only recently became an important dimension of the U.S. presence in Iraq because the post-Saddam government has thus far been unable to govern. Pelton's thriller is liable to mislead the excitable reader to unfairly equate all contractors with civilian security personnel. But PSCs are far different than the engineering firms or civilian airlines, computer consultants or road builders, food suppliers, truck drivers, or even jet-repair teams who perform strictly noncombat operations—mercenary logistics—for the U.S. military.

Citizens may be told how many combat troops are on the ground in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Iraq, but few really know how many other civilians there are supporting combat troops or engaging in rebuilding efforts—all in the service of the American taxpayer.

PSCs are different because their job is to provide force. They may work for the military, or for the CIA, or for civilian contractors who work for the Department of Defense, or for other corporations who need security to carry on their business operations in a truly hostile work environment. They may guard a CEO, or employees, a convoy, a pipeline, or the president of Afghanistan. PSCs are armed; the question is whether they are also dangerous. Thus, only on the surface is this a nonfiction, Cussler-esque action-adventure story. The real value of *Licensed to Kill* is in its implications for counterinsurgency strategy and for political accountability.

Though Pelton sounds the alarm against the growing number and potency of private security contractors, he does present a fair picture of their appeal. PSCs, like other kinds of civilian contractors, offer many efficiencies and advantages over in-house operations of the U.S. military. They train their own employees—who are often highly experienced to begin with. They manage them, transport, feed, protect, pay, and discipline them (sometimes), and—when the contract is over—they send them home. The services rendered by PSCs are expensive, and PSC employees typically earn a great deal more money than U.S. army enlistees or officers (often $700 a day), but neither the U.S. government nor other corporate employers are on the hook for pensions, medical care, benefits, or fatalities.

Pelton might have added that one need not be put off merely by the fact that PSCs apply force on behalf of the U.S. government for pay. The Continental Congress hired guns to fight the war of secession from Britain, and Congress and soldiers often haggled over both price and payment schedule. Likewise, the American navy got its start from privateers, sea captains authorized

to attack and capture enemy shipping and keep the loot. The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the right to issue licenses to kill, giving our representatives not only the power to declare war but to "grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water."

Still, in more than half a century of big government and a big military establishment, Americans came to expect that their government had a monopoly on the force it applied in its own foreign policy objectives. Suspicions about conspiratorial cowboys in the army, the CIA, the FBI, the NSA, or the White House basement were entertaining exactly because they suggested that the nation's military force was not a monolithic tool under absolute control, operated with internal checks, and subject to public approval. So it's surprising when Pelton points to a Pentagon estimate from late 2003 that there were 25,000 private security personnel employed by 60 different companies in Iraq.

For many years, advocates of contract logistics have maintained that such contract workers are flexible, competent, and responsive to their clients' needs. Perhaps contracting for security functions in addition to logistical ones was the obvious next step. And Pelton points to his academic counterpart Peter Singer, author of *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (2003), to emphasize that PSCs offer an important political efficiency: because these security guards are not the U.S. military, their actions can be condemned at any time, and a clear distinction made between U.S. policy and whatever damage has been done by the privateers.

And there lies the rub: PSCs are not in a direct chain of command. Presumably, they are in the end accountable only insofar as they would like to maintain their contract and to win other, even larger ones in the future. Pelton's stories are clearly meant to suggest that their employees are not necessarily held accountable for their behavior and may literally get away with murder.

Critics have also pointed out that, at least since NATO made a long-term commitment to ground troops in Bosnia, civilian contractors allow the American public to be buffaloed into thinking its force presence is much smaller than it actually is. Citizens may be told how many combat troops are on the ground in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Iraq, but few really know how many other civilians there are supporting combat troops or engaging in rebuilding efforts (or protecting those engaged in rebuilding)—all in the service of the American taxpayer. Even for a relatively small-scale operation like that in Bosnia, estimates of the number of civilian contractors vary widely. In a 2003 report to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, the General Accounting Office merely accepted the Army's estimate that the ratio of civilian logistics contractors to U.S. troops in Bosnia was about 2 to 1. But in the much larger and confused Iraqi theater, the number of civilian contractors is highly fluid; estimates vary widely, from 50,000 to over 100,000. Several U.S. government departments, as well as some allied governments and many private corporations, have hired PSCs. All this gives the U.S. government more latitude than it might otherwise have in regard to military intervention or long commitments. And perhaps this is not what the American public wants.

Pelton revisits the question of accountability almost as a refrain to each chapter. But students of politico-military strategy should also ask to what extent these PSCs and their civilian employees—armed to the teeth—can ever synchronize with a counterinsurgency strategy. Despite claims that they work well with, and always defer to, the "Big Army"—or, as one soldier told me, that they "stay in their own lane"—PSCs often wall themselves off from the local population, may be unaccountable to local police or courts (if there are any), and are perceived as taking jobs away from the local workforce. Thus a key question needs to be asked: do PSCs make tactical contributions in a thousand discrete situations, but on the whole detract from the effort to pacify a population? Unfortunately such an inquiry is not likely to get the attention it needs; as Jeffery Record, currently of the Air War College has repeatedly charged, the army tends to think of counterinsurgency as a military-tactical matter, and not as a political agenda.

Pelton's stories also make one wonder how much the Pentagon's current predilection for private security presages a rebirth of mercenary forces around the world. Those owner-operators of PSCs interviewed by Pelton are ambitious; they claim they can handle the outsource for as much application of force as the U.S. government or corporate giants or even the United Nations will give them. In an era of globalization, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and there is no reason to think that the mercenary forces—PSCs or PMCs—will not, as other businesses do, expand their markets, their services, and their employee base. One day they may say, echoing William Makepeace Thackeray's central protagonist in *Barry Lyndon* (1844): "What cared I for their quarrels, or whether the eagle under which I marched had one head or two?" •