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David Isenberg

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Author, *Shadow Force: Private Security Contractors in Iraq*

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Mental Health and Private Military Contractors

Although it is infrequently mentioned, and it is often unfashionable to say, the truth about most private military and security contractors is that they are mostly regular folks trying to make a living doing often difficult jobs in frequently chaotic and dangerous conditions.

Yes, many of them are military veterans but they are certainly not mercenaries in any meaningful sense of the word. But often they do have one thing in common with regular military personnel, namely, they frequently get screwed over.

In that regard one should certainly read the article published today by ProPublica, written by T. Christian Miller. Miller is one of the few reporters in the country, and possibly the best, chronicling the many different ways in which private contractors are often treated like disposable trash, used for the job and then thrown away. For example, his past writings on flaws in the Defense Base Act, the federal law requiring companies to provide insurance for those working overseas in war zones, caused Congress to hold a June 18, 2009 hearing of the Domestic Policy Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on the subject.

His latest article, "*The Other Victims of Battlefield Stress; Defense Contractors' Mental Health Neglected*," details the little attention that has been paid to the mental health of tens of thousands of civilian contractors returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike the mental health of regular military personnel, an issue which has received considerable attention in the past few years, no agency tracks how many civilian workers have killed themselves after returning from the war zones.

Miller writes:

Survivors of civilian contractors whose death is related to their work in Iraq have the right to apply for compensation benefits that pay up to \$63,000 a year for life.

[The widow of Wade] Dill applied, asserting that her husband's PTSD [Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder] made him an exception to the rule against payments in suicide cases. Her claim was denied by AIG, KBR's insurance provider.

She protested, sending her claim into a dispute resolution system run by the Labor Department. Her case is still grinding its way through the system, which can take years to produce a final result.

Experts hired by the family and the insurance company differed on what led to Wade Dill's suicide.

This is hardly the first time AIG, a leading provider of insurance under the DBA, and a notable recipient of U.S. government bailout money, has been criticized for disputing benefits. It is also an example of irony, or perhaps chutzpah, that DBA insurance firms dispute these claims, as workers' compensation insurance is a hidden cost for U.S. taxpayers. The government reimburses contractors for the insurance premiums and also reimburses the insurance company for any combat-related claims.

There have been enough incidents over the past 6 years to note that the mental health of private military contractors is a significant issue. Even the most cursory online search would bring up the following incidents.

Danny Fitzsimons, who worked for the British private security firm Armor Group, and who shot dead two colleagues after a drinking session in Baghdad's Green Zone in August 2009, is said to be suffering from PTSD. He was reportedly diagnosed in January 2004 as suffering from PTSD, while still in the British army. Assessments by consultant psychiatrists in May 2008 and June 2009 reported that the symptoms had worsened. Despite this, he was hired in August 2009 by ArmorGroup and sent out to Iraq without undergoing a full medical assessment. Within 36 hours of his arrival, the incident took place in which two colleagues died and an Iraqi was injured.

On November 19, 2006 the San Francisco Chronicle ran an article that noted contractors are not eligible for the network of support that the Pentagon has designed to assist U.S. troops suffering from psychological trauma.

A July 4 2007 New York Times article detailed how thousands of contractors who worked in Iraq are returning home with the same kinds of combat-related mental health problems that afflict American military personnel.

Bear in mind that in terms of medical coverage, long before they fall under Veteran's Administration care or DoD-subsidized health insurance, every U.S. service member are entitled to taxpayer-subsidized health care insurance under the TRICARE Program, including mental health benefit options. They are also eligible for the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program, which offers portable, guaranteed renewable, federally sponsored coverage. Combat veterans receive free medical care under the Medical Benefits Package of the VA, including Mental Health Care (PTSD, substance abuse); and Suicide Prevention.

As private military contractors generally don't provide anything remotely like this perhaps that is one reason they can argue that they are more cost-effective, if not ethically-effective towards their own workers, than their public sector counterparts.

Reached by phone earlier today Miller said that since there is no system in place that works at all, mental health treatment of PMC workers has to be looked at on a company by

company basis.

Miller noted that a few companies have gone above and beyond in dealing with the issue. He points to DynCorp, which in 2006 created its own care program through its own health insurance plan to better monitor employees for PTSD. The program has psychologists examine returning contractors immediately after they arrive in the United States and six months later. It also has psychologists available via a 24-hour hotline, provides help filing insurance claims and has created an alumni association for its contractors.

Also last month DynCorp announce the establishment of an Employee Assistance Program , to assist employees in the event of serious or mortal injury.

Another is the CivPol Alumni Association, which promotes the accomplishments of American police officers serving in post-conflict environments throughout the world. It has a blog devoted to the issue of psychological support among contractors.

And Xe Services (formerly known as Blackwater) also, according to Miller, has a fairly developed program.

Miller also said that today private military contractors "fulfill a scapegoat function", not unlike that of Vietnam veterans, for those who are unhappy with U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

While these companies are to be commended for being proactive on the issue most companies are not of their size. Whether there are other more systemic, industry wide efforts to deal with ensuring contractors mental health is unknown.

One might hope that industry trade associations, which proclaim their role in helping set standards for the industry might be of help. But Miller says such groups represent "their member's interests, which are corporate, and don't necessarily coincide with that of the individual contractor." He also noted such associations will "never take the place of a good regulatory body."

Consider IPOA, a major trade association for private military contractors. Section 6.2 of its Code of Conduct states:

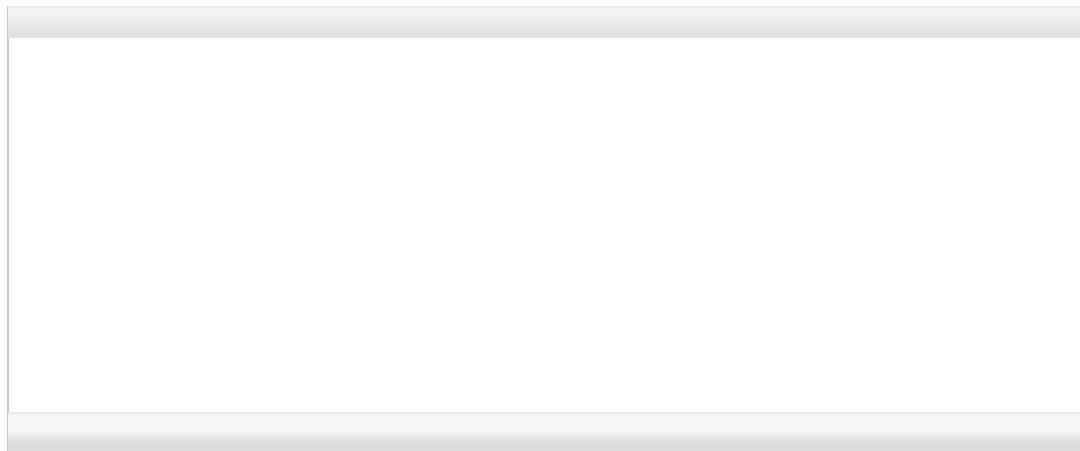
Signatories shall ensure that their personnel are medically fit and are appropriately screened for the physical and mental requirements for their duties according to the terms of their contract.

Armor Group, which employed Danny Fitzgerald, is an IPOA member company. Yet it obviously failed to ensure he met the mental requirements for the job. In fairness, DynCorp, is also an IPOA member.

Miller did say that he thinks groups like IPOA would like to see a much more robust Defense Base Act, as it would relieve them and their member companies of the cost of doing things not currently required under the law.

He also noted there is a "monetary, non-altruistic reason" for companies to provide mental health benefits, in that it will help in the recruiting of workers.

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