



PRIVATE FIRMS FILL NEED FOR EMBASSY SECURITY

Marine Corps stretched too thin to meet demand; contractors handle 90%

Gretel C. Kovach • September 16, 2012

The American public has taken comfort for more than six decades in the image of the Marine security guard standing sentry at its foreign embassies. The Corps still stations troops at diplomatic posts worldwide, but the attack on the consulate in Benghazi, Libya, last week underscored significant changes in the makeup of the U.S. diplomatic security force.

Although the United States sent 50 Marines from an antiterrorism security unit to Libya, no Marines were guarding the compound when the ambassador and three other consulate workers were killed by a heavily armed mob of protesters and Islamist militants, U.S. government officials said.

As the deaths of two former Navy SEALs from San Diego County who were working at the consulate underscored, these days State Department personnel and facilities overseas are usually guarded by private security contractors.

Over the past two decades, demand for security services has outstripped what active-duty Marines could provide. First during the 1990s post-Gulf War era of military downsizing. Then after 2001, when the “global war on terror” and a proliferation of terrorist threats accelerated the trend toward private security contracting by the U.S. government.

“There has been a move away from using active-duty troops for diplomatic security for some time. The legend has it that Marine guards always guarded the embassies. I don’t think the legend was ever completely true, but it is less true now and it has been declining for a long time,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and a former Navy lieutenant.

“Partly because the Marines, especially in the last 11 years, have been busy fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Marines began guarding U.S. diplomatic posts abroad in 1949. Since then, their iconic status as protectors of U.S. diplomatic interests abroad has been reinforced by dramatic events such as the evacuation of embassy staff during the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the Beirut bombings of 1983.

Today more than 1,300 remain assigned to the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group at Quantico, Va., its regional commands and guard duty at embassies and consulates worldwide.

But approximately 90 percent of U.S. diplomatic security personnel are private contractors, said Deborah Avant, a scholar with a doctorate from the University of California San Diego who oversees The Private Security Monitor, an independent research project on government contracting.

The two former SEALs from San Diego County killed in Benghazi turned to private security and intelligence work as second careers. Tyrone Woods, 41, had served more than 20 years as a SEAL, making him eligible for a full military pension. Glen Doherty, 42, served almost a decade before he got out in 2005.

Special operations forces, with their hard-to-acquire security clearances and elite training, have been a natural conduit into the private security pipeline. The operators are attracted to compensation that is often triple or quadruple their military pay, though commanders tried to retain their best personnel during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars by offering retention bonuses of as much as \$150,000.

In recent years, the special operations force has grappled with burnout as demands for its services grew — one reason operators have gravitated toward civilian careers. For instance, many on active duty spend more time deployed than at home.

U.S. Special Operations Command vowed this spring, based on results of its Preservation of the Force and Families Task Force, to give personnel more time with their families between stateside training and overseas deployments. But the operational tempo for the 66,000-strong force — which includes Navy SEALs, Marine special operators, Army Rangers, Green Berets and aviators, and Air Force pararescuemen and combat controllers operating in some 78 countries — shows little sign of relenting.

Despite fat paychecks luring some out of active duty, a surprisingly high number of operators choose to remain in uniform for the camaraderie, the long-term health

and pension benefits, and the personal satisfaction of direct service to country, said retired Rear Adm. George Worthington of Chula Vista, former head of Naval Special Warfare Command.

“Some guys have had seven, eight deployments. That’s a problem for the families. Not having their father there,” said Worthington, whose son is a Navy SEAL. But the work for private firms is often no less grueling, he noted: “When a guy burns out you still have to go (overseas), for the paycheck. But when he’s in the service he can say, ‘I need some down time.’ He can be an instructor. In the civilian world, you don’t have an opportunity to take shore duty for two or three years.”

For those who leave active military service, their motivations are more complicated than money, said an acquaintance of Doherty’s who asked to remain anonymous out of respect for the privacy of special operations forces. Yes, “it’s easier to make a little bit more money with a private military contractor than it is in the armed forces. So for a lot of your SpecOps groups, that’s the reason why they get out,” he said.

But many former special operators continue to work for the government in dangerous locations as private contractors because they see it as an extension of their careers as public servants, he added.

“Nobody ever takes the uniform off. Even when you get out. That mindset, it just makes you who you are. When it comes to what Glen and Ty were doing, they were doing the same crap they were doing when they were on active duty. They just didn’t happen to have a rank on their arm.”

For the U.S. government, private security contractors employed for diplomatic security abroad are an indispensable and adaptable addition to the bottom line. “As security needs grew ... rather than opt to increase the size of that force, the State Department has relied on contractors,” hoping for cost savings and increased flexibility to react more quickly to security needs, Avant said.

Whether the use of private security contractors actually saves money over the long run, when weighing higher fees for civilian services versus retirement benefits for active-duty personnel and the hidden costs of training military veterans before they leave active duty, remains fiercely debated.

Many international observers calling for more regulation of government contractors are also concerned that private security personnel operate outside the law and public scrutiny, when governments use them to deal with thorny political realities. For instance, although the U.S. withdrew its combat troops from Iraq last

year, the State Department employs a private force of several thousand to protect its massive embassy in Baghdad.

Members of Congress likewise complain that they have no clear idea how many contractors are on the payroll, because of confusing accounting or outright obfuscation for political or intelligence reasons.

Many Americans became aware of this growing army of private security personnel in 2004, when the charred bodies of four Blackwater security contractors were hung from a bridge in Fallujah, Iraq. Among those killed was Scott Helvenston, a former Navy SEAL and fitness instructor who had lived in Oceanside. The company that morphed into the world's largest private military purveyor was founded by Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL who moved to the United Arab Emirates after a firestorm of bad publicity over accusations of strong-arm tactics by his security forces.

In San Diego County, Blackwater Worldwide had sought to open a site in Potrero in 2007, but changed course after residents protested. The next year, it launched a site later called the U.S. Training Center, an indoor facility in Otay Mesa to train sailors on marksmanship and handling emergencies at sea. The company, which has undergone subsequent name changes, was later sold to a consortium of investors.