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Miami Mercenaries: International Security Business Is Booming in South Florida

By **Michael E. Miller** Thursday, Aug 1 2013

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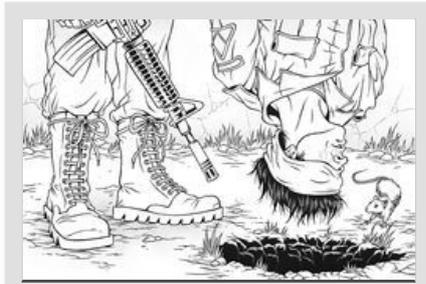


The cops lay motionless and silent on the sand — two ink stains on an already bruise-black night. Through night-vision goggles, they surveilled the concrete skeleton of a building in the distance. Covered in graffiti, it rose like a crumbling tombstone against the desolate Mexican desert. Behind broken windows flitted the menacing outlines of men with assault rifles.

The pair of policemen failed to notice the shadows gathering around them. In an instant, they were surrounded. One cop bolted into the darkness, scrambling through the scrubland toward safety. The other wasn't as lucky. The men with balaclavas and AR-15s tied him up, blindfolded him, and dragged him inside.

They held the terrified cop upside down over a pit full of rats and feces. Then they began pouring water over his face and demanding answers. "What are the names and addresses of your commanding officers?" one of the captors yelled as the cop fought the liquid filling his lungs. "Tell us the names!"

A month later, footage of the torture session



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exploded on Mexican television. But unlike countless previous films, which showed drug cartels murdering their rivals on camera, this video sparked international outrage because the torturers weren't narcos. They were fellow cops.

"They Are Teaching Police... to Torture!" screamed the headline of one national newspaper as human rights organizations lined up to protest. It didn't matter that the footage was from a training course for which all the police officers had volunteered. Politicians called for criminal charges. The chief of police for the city of León was sacked.

But the brunt of the backlash fell on the white man giving orders onscreen. With the country already gripped by anti-gringo sentiment after George W. Bush handed over \$1.5 billion to fight a bloody drug war, Mexicans were outraged that the mysterious man barking orders worked for a private American security firm called Risks Inc. Stranger still, the company was headquartered in Miami.

In hindsight, the Dade connection shouldn't have been so surprising. In the decade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Miami has quietly sprouted more private security companies than anywhere else in the nation. As America waged wars overseas, a cottage industry of guns for hire sprouted in South Florida, which is now headquarters for nearly twice as many security companies as Washington, D.C., by one measure. Camouflaged by parties and palm trees and close to troubled hot spots in the Caribbean and Latin America, Miami is a boomtown for mercenaries.

New Times spent two months inside this strange and secretive world and discovered that Risks Inc., which is run by an ex-soldier who was once thrown in jail for desertion, is actually the most transparent of the area's stockpile of security companies. Miami is also home to a former CIA spook whose legion of mercenaries in the Middle East has made him a multimillionaire. And then there's the celebrity-wooing Afghan insider accused of funneling a fortune of American tax dollars to the Taliban.

When National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the government's warrantless wiretapping, he also exposed the immense power that private companies wield over American and international affairs. They run our jails, read our emails, and increasingly fight our wars. Unbeknownst to most Miamians, their city is a central hub in this lucrative but loosely regulated industry.

"The state's monopoly on the use of mass, organized violence is slowly being frittered away by reliance on the private sector," says investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill, author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. "They are not motivated by patriotism [but] by profit. So what's to stop any of these companies from simply flipping and going to the highest bidder?"

"What's the easiest way to clear a building?" a man asks in a British whine. A dandyish lock of hair flops down his forehead. An untucked black dress shirt betrays a hint of a potbelly. He could be mistaken for a soccer dad if it weren't for the gun in his hand.

"Blow it up, burn it down, clear it out, yeah?" he tells his audience. "A lot of that SWAT stuff doesn't work... Is it going to work in Colombia? No, because people shoot back."

Meet Andrew "Orlando" Wilson: former British soldier, Miami-based mercenary, and the mystery man barking orders in the infamous Mexican torture video.



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Five years after the fiasco in León, Wilson is still teaching people how to fight. Oftentimes it's cops or federal agents looking to sharpen their skills. Today, however, his students are doctors from Jackson Memorial Hospital learning the basics of self-defense. Standing inside a Doral warehouse that has been converted into a firing range, they clutch imitation Glock BB guns uncertainly, like children with expensive new toys. Suddenly, Wilson spots a gun muzzle wandering.

"Keep that gun pointed at me, not over there," he tells a jittery pediatrician. "I'm used to having them aimed at me."

He's not joking. Since he first strapped on a gun as a skinny young soldier, Wilson has spent his life seeking out — and skirting — danger. His trajectory from the British armed forces to hired gun is par for the course among private security contractors in Miami.

Even more revealing, however, is Wilson's no-nonsense attitude. South Florida's more than 1,000 private security companies range in size and international influence. But they all tend to be run by men like Wilson, who are brutally realistic about life's dangers and the dollars it takes to avoid them. It's no coincidence that his company is called Risks Inc.

"Most people live in a bubble," he says. "But life can be fucking dangerous, yeah?"

Wilson grew up in an English fishing village in the soggy southwestern county of Cornwall (he refuses to say which one). His father was a fisherman, but Wilson preferred hunting rabbits and pigeons with his air rifle. By the time he was 17, he had decided to trade fishing boats for a battalion.

"I was used to being cold, tired, wet, and pissed off," he says. "I thought I might as well be cold, tired, wet, and pissed off in the Army, where I could at least have a gun."

He volunteered in 1989 for the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment, which was deployed to Omagh, Northern Ireland. The teenager found himself on the front lines of an armed conflict between British soldiers and the Irish Republican Army. "The under-the-car booby trap was one of their favorite weapons," Wilson says of the IRA. "If it didn't kill you, it'd take your legs off."

Living in Omagh, where three-fourths of the locals were Catholics who bitterly resented the British soldiers, Wilson gained a reputation as a hard man.

"He was known as 'Mad Willy' back then," says friend and former soldier Matt Trott. "Once [the veteran soldiers] tried to give Andy some grief. He just sat on the edge of his bed sharpening his knives and staring at them. That freaked them out."

Wilson was an excellent — if strange — soldier, Trott says. He was a good shot, he never grumbled, and he got the job done. Bizarrely, though, it was an act of desertion that elevated Wilson's badass reputation to legendary level. "He went AWOL to the French Foreign Legion," Trott explains. "He thought [the British Army] was too tame."

When the Foreign Legion discovered that Wilson was in the British Army, however, they sent him back. He spent 28 days in military jail for the stunt.

Soon afterward, Wilson and Trott were sent to a British military base in Dhekelia, Cyprus, which seemed like a Mediterranean vacation. The soldiers would spend a week or two at a time patrolling the mountains and then descend upon the island's discotheques and Swedish tourists. Trott and Wilson once spent a weekend in a Cypriot jail after a bar fight ended in a car wreck.

When the battalion headed back to England, Wilson met an American woman at a bar and later married her. He quit the military but still had the itch for action.

It was the spring of 1994, and South Africa was preparing for its first elections since the fall

of apartheid. "Everybody said the place was going to blow. So I got a plane and went there," Wilson remembers. "Somebody handed me a rusty .357 [pistol] that would have fallen apart if I had shot it." The work was underpaid and overly dangerous but didn't last long. When Nelson Mandela's African National Congress party won power four months later, Wilson's visa was denied.

Back in England, he made a living protecting members of the Saudi and Qatari royal families. But he eventually tired of London. His wife's parents lived in Miami, and in late 2001 — with Ground Zero still smoldering — the couple moved across the Atlantic.

The marriage wouldn't last. But one thing would: Wilson would stay in South Florida. After all, it was a mercenary's wet dream.

On April 1, 2004, Americans awoke to strange and disturbing news. Footage emerged of an Iraqi mob literally tearing four Americans limb from limb. The burnt and blackened bodies were then hung from a bridge over the Euphrates as a young man held up a sign that said in English: "Fallujah is the graveyard of the Americans!"

The four dead Americans were neither U.S. military men nor civilians, but something in between. They were mercenaries paid to fight in Iraq by a mysterious private security company called Blackwater USA. The incident would spark a months-long U.S. assault on the city that claimed 122 American lives and killed more than 1,400 Iraqis.

The Blackwater slaughter also exposed the unprecedented role private security companies had assumed for the U.S. military. Blackwater was far from alone. Thousands of corporations sprang up to seize their share of the trillions of dollars suddenly being spent on security. And a large swath of that shadowy work has been awarded to private security companies — or PSCs — right here in Miami. According to the Beacon Council, Miami-Dade County is home to nearly 500 such corporations. South Florida as a whole boasts 1,010 PSCs, compared with 646 in the entire D.C.-Arlington-Alexandria area.

Miami's mercenary streak can be partly chalked up to low taxes and lush living standards, not to mention the short flight to island tax havens. But the biggest reason behind the boom is South Florida's proximity to some of the most dangerous places on earth, such as Mexico, Central America, Colombia, and Venezuela. Miami is more than the capital of Latin America; it's the region's panic room, where the rich and powerful hide out and hire body guards.

Cracking Miami's private security market wasn't easy for Andrew Wilson. South Florida doesn't have as many Middle Eastern monarchs in need of a private security detail, and the ex-soldier didn't speak a lick of Spanish. But he did know a helluva lot about guns.

Wilson began teaching small groups how to use a handgun, charging \$75 a session. Slowly but surely, he built up a loyal following. But his clients weren't just locals. Some were Latin American soldiers and security experts themselves, like Gerry, a Mexican martial arts instructor who took Wilson's courses during visits to Miami (Gerry asked *New Times* to withhold his surname out of concerns for his family's safety). When Gerry later began training police officers in León's Special Tactical Group (GET in Spanish), he suggested bringing in Wilson to teach them how to combat rising drug violence.

That's how Wilson ended up in Mexico on the most controversial mission of his career. He quickly decided harsh tactics would be needed on the squad of cocky cops. "We broke them in three days," Wilson says. "We did that by pushing them and pushing them and screaming at them."

And shooting at them. Videos Wilson posted on his website show the León officers storming the abandoned building in the desert and blasting targets with real bullets as fellow cops stand just inches away.

"We could never teach this stuff in the U.S.," Wilson says. <http://www.framisewint.com/2013-08-01/news/miami-mercenaries-security-companies/full/>

pride. "I'm very big on stress training and pushing people as much as possible. We're not going there and hurting them just for the sake of hurting them."

But hurt them he did. The most serious exercises involved teaching the Mexican cops how to operate more like an army while executing operations to take out the cartels that controlled the surrounding state of Guanajuato.

Wilson divided the cops into two teams. One would play the part of the narcos. The other would surveil and then ambush the compound where the narcos hid.

When Wilson caught the oblivious scouts by surprise, he ordered the team to drag their fellow cop to a foul-smelling black pit infested with rats. They lowered their captive headfirst into the darkness and waterboarded him. The man went into shock, but a medic was on hand to help. "When I was in the military, all that would be part of basic training," Wilson says. "It's not that extreme in my book, but it looks extreme."

Wilson and Gerry earned about \$16,000 for three weeks of whipping the León officers into shape, but not everyone appreciated the lesson. Three weeks later, videos of the waterboarding session broke on the local news.

"Some of the guys that were pissed off at us, that had a hard time, leaked the videos to get back at us," Wilson says.

It worked. Within 24 hours, the torture tapes had spread like wildfire from one news station to the next. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were outraged.

The scandal could not have happened at a more sensitive time for U.S.-Mexico relations. The countries' presidents, Bush and Felipe Calderón, had just signed a deal sending \$1.5 billion south of the border to combat drug cartels. The Mexican media's message was clear: The gringos are teaching our already corrupt cops how to torture like at Abu Ghraib.

Risks Inc. was suddenly infamous. "Company That Led Training in Torture Techniques for Mexican Police Is Risks Incorporated of Miami, Florida," wrote *Narco News*. Like Blackwater, which had been thrown out of Iraq in 2007 after massacring innocent civilians, Wilson's small security company suddenly became a symbol for the excesses of all international security companies worldwide.

"It had to do with Mexican politics more than anything else," Wilson says. "The same weekend we were accused of this BS, 11 people were beheaded in Culiacán. Why wasn't that reported? Because we made an easy target."

John Walbridge Jr. might be Miami's most secretive man. The Vietnam veteran turned CIA spook spent years covering his tracks, first in the rainforests of Southeast Asia and then in agency operations across the Third World.

Today, however, as he slides into a seat at a quiet café in Buena Vista, he can't help but betray hints of the millions he's earned during his postgovernment career in private security. There's his silver BMW sedan, for starters, and the golden Citadel ring on his right hand. And then there is his elephant skin briefcase.

"If you look at the animal kingdom, you can learn a lot about security," says the sexagenarian with tanned skin, a boyishly handsome face, and a toothy smile. "The lion is not interested in looking good. He just wants to eat."

His company, Overseas Security and Strategic Information Inc. (OSSSI), has made more than \$100 million escorting dignitaries around Iraq and Afghanistan with assault rifles. Yet, like a lion lying low in the grass, Walbridge has remained largely out of sight.

Walbridge was destined by birth to be a soldier. His father, John Walbridge Sr., was in the U.S. Army. From 1957 to 1958, long before the Gulf of Tonkin and while Junior was still in

elementary school, Walbridge Sr. was already in Vietnam as an adviser to South Vietnam's anti-communist government. It was a battle that his son would join nearly 20 years later.

He grew up on bases in Germany, Hawaii, and New Jersey. It was there, on a stranger's farm, that he landed his first job: tossing chicken shit onto corn fields. "It was my choice to shovel shit," he says. "That's how much I wanted to succeed."

It was no surprise, then, when Walbridge earned his way into South Carolina's elite military college, the Citadel. By the time he graduated in 1969, the Vietnam War was at its peak. Walbridge stepped into the real shit a year later as a member of the Army's 5th Special Forces Group.

Walbridge is hesitant to talk about what, exactly, he did in Vietnam. But his group of Green Berets was under the command of the legendary Sgt. Maj. William "Billy" Waugh.

"They went across the border and killed every son of a bitch they could kill," Waugh says of his men. "That was their job: to kill and capture, to maim and destroy."

Whatever Walbridge did, it was dangerous as hell. "If you were going up there, you were either going to die or get shot all to hell," says Waugh, whose 83 years haven't cost him his Texas twang. "Everyone in the outfit was wounded once, twice, three times."

But there was a reason to stick with the unit. "When they came up with a good POW snatch or something like that, we'd fly them over to Bangkok and get them laid for a couple of days," Waugh says. "We put them to work, but we treated them square."

Much of the 5th Special Forces activities were funded by the CIA, and after the war, both Walbridge and Waugh went to work for the Agency. Walbridge isn't eager to discuss his career as a spy. But when he retired in 1995, the head of the House Intelligence Committee read a statement in his honor. Walbridge had "accept[ed] the challenging task of recruiting and handling human intelligence sources... in Africa, Europe, and Latin America," announced U.S. Rep. Larry Combest. "Americans like Mr. Walbridge are... our first line of defense."

Walbridge had visited Miami frequently during his last assignment for the CIA, and he decided to settle here with his wife and two sons after retiring. But he didn't wait long to wade back into the dangerous world he had just left, this time as an independent contractor. Drawing upon his Rolodex of spies, he prepared threat assessments for companies preparing to expand overseas. Then, in 2000, he founded OSSI.

It was a well-timed gamble. Less than a year later, 9/11 ushered in a new age of war and war profiteering. OSSI was perfectly positioned. Between 2003 and 2010, Walbridge was awarded more than \$100 million worth of contracts in Iraq alone, plus countless millions more in Afghanistan, Libya, Haiti, and elsewhere.

In Iraq, OSSI quickly swelled to more than 1,000 employees, including 275 foreigners. Most of these expatriates were former cops or soldiers from South Africa who had spent the decade since the fall of apartheid fighting throughout Africa for top dollar. Their job in Iraq was to protect dignitaries, construction workers, and cargo.

The real danger was not a gun battle with insurgents, Walbridge says, but the roadside bombs that could be remotely detonated by Al-Qaeda spotters. Other companies like Blackwater rumbled around Baghdad in heavily armored Humvees and Jeeps, with M16-toting guards hanging out the windows and music blaring. "They tried to use intimidation to protect themselves," Walbridge says. But years of operating in the shadows had taught him to take a subtler approach.

"We attempted to be invisible: no Oakleys, no ear pieces, no displaying weapons and body armor under our clothes," he says. "We'd be driving a regular-looking car with a furry dashboard and the *Saturday Night Fever* disco ball hanging from the mirror." It worked. OSSI guards drove more than a million miles during operations and suffered only a few

of bomb attacks, none fatal.

But OSSI wasn't completely bulletproof. One Iraqi employee was killed by insurgents, Walbridge admits, and an American died in a traffic accident. Another employee lost his legs to a landmine, and a guard was shot five times only to miraculously live. In December 2006, four guards were kidnapped at a police checkpoint in central Baghdad. Walbridge says their contract with OSSI had ended a few months earlier and they were working for another company. He believes they were probably sold to Al-Qaeda, but their bodies have never been found.

Compared to companies like Blackwater, though, OSSI kept a low profile — and a low body count. But it's impossible to fully account for Walbridge's work because American military records for such contractors are almost nonexistent. *New Times'* requests for reports on these and other incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan were unsuccessful. "Obviously, if there's a contractor over there involved in a massive shooting, then there would be an investigation," says Army spokesman Matthew Bourke. "Otherwise, grades are basically pass or fail."

There are other signs that OSSI hasn't totally avoided trouble. The firm boasts about its partnerships with two companies — Safenet Security Services and White Eagle Security Services — which both have controversial records.

Safenet Security is run by a South African named Mauritz Le Roux. Le Roux made a name for himself as an anti-communist mercenary in Angola's civil war. He then hopped the border into Zaire, where he and a handful of other white South Africans tried to prop up the country's infamous dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, in exchange for diamonds and cash.

"As Le Roux... saw it, the key to unlocking Zaire's door and accessing its loot was to sell Mobutu on the need for close air support," Al J. Venter writes in *War Dog: Fighting Other People's Wars*. When the plot failed and Mobutu fled to Togo, Le Roux and crew still pocketed as much as \$5 million, according to Venter.

What's more, last November, Walbridge and Le Roux were accused by the *Guardian* newspaper of using shell companies in the British Virgin Islands to stash millions from mercenary operations. Asked about the sleight of hand, Le Roux said it was simply to foster "local partnerships" in foreign countries. Walbridge says he never invested money on the islands.

Regardless of where he keeps his cash, it's clear Walbridge has made a fortune off freelance soldiering. Miami-Dade property records show he owns five houses worth more than \$11 million within walking distance of one another in the exclusive gated Bay Point Estates community (including three homes next to one another on the waterfront).

OSSI's other partner, White Eagle Security Services, meanwhile, was one of eight companies banned from Afghanistan in October 2010. President Hamid Karzai accused the firms of running an "economic mafia" based on "corruption contracts." Florida records list Walbridge's two sons, John and Sean, as managers of White Eagle. Walbridge admits his sons have followed him into the business but says White Eagle was run by Afghans and the Florida records are "bogus."

Sitting in the café near his Bay Point Estates homes, Walbridge says OSSI today is more like a "mom-and-pop shop" than the mega mercenary firm it was five years ago. The war in Iraq is long over, and Afghanistan is too unpredictable even for him.

"I was in Vietnam close to the end in '74, when you just got the feeling that things were decaying," he says. "That's what it's like in Afghanistan now."

So he got out while he could. He doesn't have any regrets. He didn't start the wars; he just made money off them. "Philosophically, I would give it all back to change history," he says. "But if someone had to benefit, I'm glad it was us."

He raises a coffee mug in a mock toast, his Citadel ring clinking against the porcelain, and says, "Here's to George W. Bush!"

As Walbridge picks up his elephant skin briefcase, however, he admits he hasn't completely retired. "I'm in the twilight now," he says with a boyish grin. "But I still dabble."

The beats were thumping. The drinks were top-shelf. And the guests were oblivious.

It was one of last summer's biggest parties. In a lavender jacket and purple tie, DJ Irie flitted around the Star Island mansion while welcoming guests to his foundation's eighth annual fundraiser. Go-go girls wearing nipple pasties danced on stilts as sculpted celebrities such as Reggie Bush and Dennis Rodman tossed back Chambord vodka.

At the center of the maelstrom of models stood a squat, sallow man named Hamed Wardak. The 37-year-old was not one of the beautiful people, but the party was sponsored by Wardak's new sportswear company, "an eco-conscious and philanthropic firm committed to fashion and fun" called Ludus Athletics.

Wardak was desperate for good publicity. The last time his name was in the news, he was being accused of funneling millions to the Taliban. He had traveled to Miami to rebrand himself: "Philanthropist" sounded so much better than "mercenary."

The story of Hamed Wardak shows South Florida has become central to an international web of private security companies. When war profiteering in Afghanistan went awry, Wardak didn't return to D.C. Instead, he opened his company in quiet Cooper City while schmoozing celebrities on South Beach.

Wardak was born in the mid-'70s to a powerful Pashtun family in Afghanistan. But the Soviet invasion in 1979 forced the family to flee, first to Pakistan and later to the United States. Wardak's father, Abdul Rahim Wardak, remained in Afghanistan to fight with the U.S.-backed mujahideen. After the Soviet withdrawal, he became deputy defense minister until the Taliban takeover in 1996.

Hamed Wardak attended Georgetown University, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and interned at the American Enterprise Institute, where he connected with powerful conservative foreign-policy makers. By the time his father was appointed Hamid Karzai's defense minister in 2004, Wardak was in a position to profit.

Wardak founded NCL Holdings in 2007 near Washington. Two years later, after President Barack Obama announced his Afghanistan surge, the upstart company received an eye-opening \$360 million contract from the Department of Defense to truck Army supplies. "NCL, the firm run by the defense minister's well-connected son, had struck pure contracting gold," investigative journalist Aram Roston wrote in the *Nation* magazine.

Roston then revealed NCL didn't actually own any trucks. Instead, it subcontracted out the service and hired another company, Watan Risk Management, run by Karzai family relatives and former drug dealers, to provide security. Watan then funneled millions in protection money to local warlords including the Taliban — money that could be used to attack Americans, Roston reported. NCL wasn't keeping the peace so much as sowing the seeds of incessant war, he alleged.

But Wardak's family connections would also spell ruin for NCL. In an effort to distance himself from the widespread corruption within his cabinet, Karzai in 2011 forbade private security companies with government ties. NCL was forced out, but by then its two-year contract was up anyway.

A few months later, Wardak landed in Miami Beach. He quickly reinvented himself as a philanthropist. He gave \$100,000 to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. And he sponsored lavish parties — including DJ Irie's 2011 and 2012 Star Island soirees — to promote Ludus Athletics: "the finest organic, recycled, and otherwise eco-conscious

materials... for the most beautiful people on earth."

It wasn't the first time Wardak had thrown a smoke bomb to hide the real carnage he'd left behind in Afghanistan. In another article in the *Nation*, Roston reported Wardak had paid powerful lobbying firm Patton Boggs to push for an extended U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The firm had created a nonprofit called the Campaign for a U.S.-Afghanistan Partnership (CUSAP) to be the "face" of the campaign. All the while, Wardak was making tens of millions off the war. Within months, however, CUSAP all but disappeared.

Wardak refused to speak with *New Times* about NCL, CUSAP, or even Ludus Athletics. In the past, he has denied directly or indirectly paying the Taliban. *New Times* did reach Milt Bearden, a former CIA official who helped the mujahideen — including Abdul Wardak — fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bearden was on the board of both NCL Holdings and CUSAP until Roston's articles were published.

"Hamed has sort of gotten a bum wrap," Bearden says. "He's a bright kid — valedictorian, Rhodes Scholar, and all that. I thought the whole thing [about NCL funding the Taliban] was unfair. There is sort of a sense of nastiness toward any of the things going on in Afghanistan."

As for Wardak's overseas security work, Bearden says, "I think Hamed bailed out or sold out."

That's the same message delivered by Wardak's attorney, Frank Smith. "Hamed has no current active government contracts," he says. Even Ludus Athletics "is kind of mothballed right now."

But is Wardak really out of the mercenary game? State records show Smith helped Wardak register a new company out of Cooper City called VLOX, LLC in June. According to transparency watchdog the Sunlight Foundation, VLOX is nothing more than Boggs' new name for NCL Holdings.

"This is what our boys did a year after we trained them," Andrew Wilson says, sitting in a tiny, windowless office he rents in Hollywood. Gun range targets are displayed like diplomas on the walls around him. A machete hangs above his computer.

Wilson presses play, and machine-gun fire rattles the laptop. The video is a compilation of Mexican news coverage of a 2009 shootout between officers and a particularly vicious drug cartel. Next, Wilson opens photos the cops sent him of the shootout's aftermath. They show bullet-shredded cars and narcos with their faces blown off.

"They killed 12 Zetas in a single day," Wilson says proudly. "That's got to be some kind of a record."

The carnage onscreen is a stark reminder of the impact local private security companies have on communities thousands of miles away. No matter how unknown they may be in Miami, firms such as Risk Inc. leave large, bloody boot prints around the world. Their bland office buildings often hide powerful paramilitary organizations and millions in profits.

Yet these companies are subjected to little scrutiny. In fact, South Florida's explosion of security firms echoes a broader and troubling trend of privatizing armed forces in America and beyond.

"Intelligence, military, and, increasingly, homeland security functions in the United States are largely in the hands of private companies," the journalist Scahill says. "Their infrastructures are being built up with U.S. taxpayer dollars. They are given access to sensitive documents, sensitive military operations, and potentially the private data of millions of American citizens. But they are, at the end of the day, for-profit companies."

The same is occurring around the globe. In fact, the private security industry has swelled to

more than \$100 billion worldwide. At the height of the American invasion of Iraq, the Department of Defense employed 100,000 private contractors — ten times as many as the Persian Gulf War a decade earlier.

There has been some pushback. In 2009, President Obama called for a reduction in government reliance on such companies, tightened regulations, and increased the number of federal auditors scrutinizing their contracts.

But critics say the reforms weren't nearly enough. "Private companies working in this capacity should be subjected to the Freedom of Information Act, where journalists and the American people have the right to see the full extent of what a corporation is doing on behalf of the American government," Scahill says.

"The explosion of the private security and the private intelligence industries is something that should be thoroughly investigated by Congress. And yet there is nary a peep from Capitol Hill."

That silence suits men such as Wilson, Wardak, and Walbridge just fine. Despite scathing media scandals involving their respective companies, all three remain players in Miami's booming private security industry.

Wilson, for example, views the Zetas massacre as vindication. "The GET guys were about to be disbanded when we came in and kicked their asses," he says. "Now everybody is looking back at it and saying, 'This shit works.' If they don't want to deal with it, the cartels are going to be everywhere."

But there is no black and white in the private security business. By Wilson's own admission, Risks Inc. itself nearly trained narcos by accident. "We had agreed to go down there and train another state's police force," he says. "We were just waiting on the plane tickets when — *bam* — the entire department was arrested for working for the drug cartels."

When a trip to Nigeria to train police recently fell through, Wilson ended up training vigilantes in the volatile north of the country. Who's to say those vigilantes won't do more harm than good with their newly acquired skills?

As the heads of massive mercenary companies, Walbridge and Wardak have made millions, much of it from American taxpayers. Yet they are able to easily hide their pasts — and their personal fortunes — from the public. As a result, Walbridge can continue to run "boutique" ops in Brazil even as riots shake the country to its core. And Wardak can keep inventing celebrity causes to mask his past.

That all three men are still in business boils down to one simple fact: People are willing to pay them.

Sitting at his desk, Wilson receives a phone call from a contact in Mexico. Two people have supposedly been kidnapped. "If the family doesn't come up with \$20,000 in two hours, they are going to start doing things to them," the contact says.

Wilson isn't interested.

"What are we going to do, hire a team with guns to go into Mexico? How would we do that? And how would we get paid?" he asks. "Such is life. That shit happens all the time. The family is thinking about their loved ones, but I'm thinking about business."

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Joseph F. Carney III

Had a FB friend who recently defriended then tried to refriend me, he just moved to miami, and i find was part of this world...fuck them, the numbers will wipe them from the earth if they ever try anything...



Mark L. Houghton
Ugly.....

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