

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“Abuses in Private Security and Reconstruction Contracting in Iraq: Ensuring Accountability, Protecting Whistleblowers”

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Mother of Former Blackwater USA Employee

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First I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to testify. My name is Katy Helvenston-Wettengel. I'm the mother of Scott Helvenston who was literally slaughtered on March 31, 2004 in Fallujah while working for Blackwater security.

Scotty was one of four members of the Blackwater security team that was ambushed while driving empty trucks to pick up kitchen equipment from the 82nd Airborne.

The day Scotty died was his first day ever in Iraq. Scotty and the others that died with him were promised so many things...not one of those promises were kept. For example, it is undisputed that they did not have armored vehicles. They did not have heavy machine guns. They did not have a team of six. They did not have three people in each vehicle. They did not have a rear gunner that would have allowed them to see people approaching from the rear. They were not able to conduct a risk assessment of the mission. They did not have a chance to learn the routes before going on the mission. They were not even given a map. In fact, when Scotty asked for a map of the route, he was told: "It's a little too late for a map now."

Once the men signed on with Blackwater and were flown to the Middle East, Blackwater treated them as a fungible commodity. For example, when Scott said he was not well enough to leave the following morning on a mission, Scotty was physically and verbally attacked by a Blackwater program manager. Despite two other Blackwater operators offering to go in Scott's place, the Blackwater manager burst into Scott's room and told Scott that if he personally did not go on the mission the following day, he would be fired and left to find his own way home. It was under this threat of being fired and abandoned in a war zone that forced Scott to leave for Baghdad the following morning.

The treatment of the security operators was so bad that after working for Blackwater for just 11 days, Scott felt compelled to write an email to the owner and president of the company that began:

“It is with deep regret and remorse that I send you this e-mail. During my short tenure here with Blackwater I have witnessed and endured some extreme unprofessionalism.”

In this lengthy email, Scotty detailed all of the problems with the entire program and the treatment of the operators. There was no response from Blackwater management to this call for help. Instead, our men were dead four days later.

To this date, there is no accountability for the tens of thousands of contractors working in Iraq. To my knowledge the Iraqi law does not apply to these contractors, U.S. law does not apply, nor does military law apply. Consequently, these contractors continue to get away with murder. In Blackwater's case, time and time again they shoot first and ask questions later.

Following the horrific incident on March 31, 2004, I tried many times to get Blackwater to send me a copy of the incident report and a copy of the contract Scotty signed with Blackwater. Eventually, I was told that I would have to sue them to get that information.

So, in an effort to learn the cause, circumstances and reasons for the death of my son Scotty, as well as the brave men he served with, Wesley Batalona, Jerry Zovko and Michael Teague, the families filed a lawsuit against Blackwater in January of 2005. In the 2 1/2 years since that lawsuit was filed, Blackwater has consistently asserted that it could not be held accountable for its actions in any state or federal court. Despite numerous requests, Blackwater has never provided even one document, letter or e-mail that would explain what took place on the day of our loved ones' deaths.

The only document that we have ever seen that shows what actually went on prior to Scotty's death was produced by Congressman Waxman on February 7, 2007. That document is a March 30, 2004 e-mail from Blackwater's own Tom Powell in Baghdad to Blackwater's corporate office, sent the day before our loved one's deaths. Mr. Powell complained that his men "did not have the body armor, hard cars, weapons, and ammo that they needed." He stated that: "the guys are in the field with borrowed stuff and in harm's way," that the decision to go with Suburbans instead of hard cars was a "Bad Idea" and that Blackwater was engaged in a "smoke and mirrors show doing just enough to sustain the appearance of operational capability," while at the same time making representations that were false and "did not reflect the appalling truth on the ground."

Mr. Powell was correct that Blackwater's false promises were appalling and did place my son and others in harm's way leading to their death. We hope that in your search for truth and information, you will share this information with us and the public concerning the cause, circumstances, and reasons for our sons' deaths so that we will finally have answers and hopefully so that others will not suffer a fate similar to our loved ones at the hand of Blackwater.

We must have laws that apply to these contractors. Please, I implore you; do not allow them to continue to get away with murder. You have the power to hold these people accountable. I beg that you do.

