

North Carolina based Blackwater is the most famous of the operational firms, but by no means the first. The historical precedent for contemporary times is drawn from the dark continent and was formed shortly after the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

Executives Outcomes was the name of a South African based company which specialized in private, full scale military operations. All of the soldiers were former members of the South African Special Forces which included the much feared Thirty Two Battalion. Thirty two Battalion was either tremendously combat capable or regarded with the utmost loathing. It all depended on which end the rifle was aimed at you.

After several successes in Angola, the firm's capabilities became better known worldwide. Executive Outcomes, by their very name, were the first to utilize fuzzy wording to disguise their true role and were the earliest to successfully manipulate the media to their own ends.

The country that was destined to play the role of Petri dish for future armed contractor operations was the corrupt, war-wracked nation of Sierra Leone. The government was engaged in a prolonged struggle with a rebel faction dubbing itself the "Revolutionary United Front." The year before, in 1994, Sierra Leone had finished dead last in the United Nations Human Development Report. The President was a twenty six year old Army Captain by the name of Valentine Strasser. This juvenile leader had assumed power when the previous occupant of the Presidential palace had fled with a significant percentage of the treasury.

The standing Army deployed to save the populace from the insurgency would have been farcical had it not been for their bestial conduct. Training was nil, children as young as their early teens were impressed to fight, and the daily rations contained substantial servings of both narcotics and liquor. During military deployments to defend against the invading rebel factions,

the government forces spent more time pillaging the local villages than they actually did fighting.

If possible, the rebels were even worse. The insurgent faction was led by a charismatic but inept monster by the name of Foday Sankoh whose primary tactic consisted of terrorizing all those who opposed him. His followers banded together under the flag of the “Revolutionary United Front” or RUF but lacked any serious political platform save for that of overturning the sitting government. The RUF degenerated into propagating violence for its own sake and was nothing more than armed criminals saddled with a depraved set of morals. Like the government, the RUF press ganged children into its ranks, forcing them to gun down both innocent and enemy with equal abandon. Villages were pacified by the linear expedient of decapitating the village elders and impaling their heads on stakes posted at the village entrance. The RUF trademark was amputated limbs hacked off by machetes. One can neither pull a trigger nor vote if one does not have a hand.

The greatest losers were the general populace, trapped between predating RUF elements and government troops only slightly less debased. By early 1995 the country had collapsed into complete anarchy and life was brutal, cheap and short.

The Strasser Administration had pleaded for military assistance from any quarter but had been rebuffed on all fronts to include the US, the UK, and the UN.

Faced with a “nothing to lose” situation, Strasser signed a contract with a British company to come in and train his Army. The advisors, primarily Nepalese Gurkhas with Caucasian leaders, arrived and attempted to prop up the collapsed regular forces. Shortly thereafter the RUF managed to ambush the mixed bag of military advisors, inflicting heavy casualties in the process. The Revolutionary United Front celebrated the victory by

dismembering and eating the body of the leader of the fallen trainers. This grisly event concluded the first attempt to import private military companies.

Freetown, the capital of the beleaguered nation, was in chaos as embassies evacuated all foreign nationals. The RUF advanced to the suburbs as the reign of terror continued to envelop the doomed metropolis.

Historical legend has it that Valentine Strasser was idly flipping through a copy of “Soldier of Fortune” magazine when the President happened upon a classified ad placed by the South African Executive Outcomes. Contact was made and a deal was quickly brokered. The private military force would provide 160 men for twenty one months for a total price tag of thirty five million dollars. The government of Sierra Leone lacked the necessary start up capital so Executive Outcomes (EO) was funded in part by a shadowy firm which would be compensated in the form of diamonds after EO troops had liberated the areas which contained the mining concessions.

Within days the logistics were arranged and the EO troops deployed to Sierra Leone along with helicopter gunships. Taking full advantage of the tactical capabilities of the helicopters EO rapidly mounted an unconventional offensive against the ill trained boy soldiers of the RUF. For the first time in living memory, the rebels were confronted by a professional fighting force. Night ambushes, raids, snipers, and point blank assaults tore gaping holes in the rebel ranks. The RUF, lacking even the most rudimentary of military skills, were slaughtered en masse. The helicopter gun ships rained death from above and provided EO troops with a high degree of mobility. These aviation assets became force multipliers of the first order, especially in light of the difficulties involved when traversing jungle terrain on foot. In the space of a fortnight

the RUF absorbed an estimated several hundred dead, lost thousands in desertions, and was thrown back over 80 miles into the interior of the jungle.

The next phase was to over run the diamond concessions to ensure payment. Executive Outcomes required only a few days to accomplish this task.

Heavy fighting was to continue for the next month as EO utilized every ploy imaginable to lure the RUF into conventional firefights. Every time the RUF tried to stand their ground they were invariably chopped to pieces. The South Africans, both black and white, adapted to the gloomy jungles of Sierra Leone as well as they did to the scrub of Angola. Moving swiftly they tracked down and engaged the RUF in areas the guerillas had previously considered safe havens. The insurgents, deprived of secure staging areas, wilted like drought stricken corn. Within a matter of months the tables had been turned. The rebels had developed an atavistic dread of the silent South Africans who stalked them with ruthless abandon.

Executive Outcomes continued to punish the RUF for the remainder of 1995, driving them to the very fringes of the country and rendering them incapable of sustained combat.

Sierra Leone again began to prosper as the military contractors brought stability to the country. Valentine Strasser was removed in a bloodless coup and a General by the name of Julius Bio was inserted as an interim president. EO condoned the coup but did not proactively participate in it. International critics of EO assumed the worst and issued provocative statements in the world media that a mercenary gang had taken over an entire country for personal exploitation.

To the amazement of all full credit must be given to Executive Outcomes for only a few months later, in Feb of 1996, a legitimate, multi-party civilian election took place and Ahmed Kabbah assumed the mantle of President.

Kabbah's first priority was to attempt to find an end to the civil war and peace negotiations commenced with the remaining RUF who still lingered in the south east portion of the country. The guerillas, facing a vastly reduced share of the national pie, pulled out of the negotiations that October.

Executive Outcomes was again unleashed. Utilizing multiple intelligence sources the company identified the exact location of RUF headquarters and wiped them out in a surprise attack. Facing extermination, Foday Sankoh interpreted the writing on the wall correctly and signed the peace accords on behalf of the Revolutionary United Front a couple of weeks later. EO had unilaterally brought political stability to the country. Sierra Leone was able to celebrate Christmas of 1996 as a nation at peace.

There is no question that the private military contractors restored peace to a war- wracked nation. For the villagers who were trapped between the mercies of the RUF and the Government forces the black and white troops of EO are considered saints. Many are alive today due to the effective actions of the private military company.

The final tally sheet was impressive. EO lost less than 2 dozen troops dead, wounded, or sick. The Revolutionary United Front losses will never be accurately collated but are estimated in the thousands. The country had morphed from a tin pot dictatorship to a budding multi party democracy during the time EO was responsible for security. Thousands in Freetown had been spared a grisly end and over a million displaced persons were able to return to their homes. Those are heady statistics for a Private Military Company of just over one hundred and sixty men.

The operation even made it to Hollywood. The 2006 Academy Award Winning Movie entitled “Blood Diamonds” was loosely based on the actions of Executive Outcomes during the previous decade.

What was the final price tag to restore democracy? The government of Sierra Leone paid the equivalent of what it costs the American taxpayer to purchase eight M1 Abrams Tanks, about thirty five million dollars.

The case for the utilization of private military firms becomes even more pronounced in light of subsequent events.

During the civil war the US, UK, and United Nations had all declined to provide any form of financial or military assistance. In what can only be interpreted as a morally ambiguous move, once peace had returned to Sierra Leone the international community applied pressure on the Kabbah administration to expel the “mercenary” units.

Executive Outcomes justifiable rebuttal was that it was hypocritical to condemn the organization when it was in fact the only Western style entity that had been willing to take on the job in the first place. Now having succeeded, it was being run out due to the international political uproar over the employment of contracted military forces to prop up a now functioning democracy. Furthermore, the intelligence wing of EO predicted an internal coup led by the Sierra Leone military within 100 days if the South Africans withdrew. Lastly, the RUF, though severely mauled, were not completely finished as a fighting force and the company feared their resurgence based upon the continuing incompetence of the standing national Army.

Nonetheless, Kabbah caved in to a combination of internal and international pressure and the last Executive Outcome soldier flew home in January of 1997.

Almost as soon as the last plane carrying EO troops lifted off the runway the situation began to deteriorate.

The much touted and highly anticipated UN peacekeeping force failed to materialize when nobody was willing to foot the forty seven million dollar tab. The same Western democracies so adamant in their demands for EO to go home were less than forthcoming when it came to providing for UN replacements after the South Africans departed.

The best that could be arranged was for a Nigerian monitoring force to be deployed.

Five days before the expiration of EO's 100 day prediction, the coup occurred. The resurgent RUF had been secretly plotting with a number of Army Officers with the result that Kabbah's democratically elected administration was toppled in May of 1997. The Revolutionary United Front paired up with the rogue Army units and all descended upon Freetown. The Nigerian troops withdrew behind their fortified perimeters and did little to alleviate the medieval horrors that were descending upon the capitol city. In the most ironic twist of fate, many UN and Western nationals scrambled for refuge in the diamond mining concessions which were protected by a Western firm with connections to Executive Outcomes.

The years that followed were ones of prolonged terror for the civil population. It would require five years and a major deployment of British conventional and Special Forces before the RUF was finally eliminated. United Nations involvement was also required before the country was stable enough to hold elections again in 2002.

The following quotations from Human Right's Watch provide tragic insight into the anarchy that befell Freetown after Executive Outcomes returned to South Africa.

“The battle for Freetown and ensuing three week rebel occupation of the capital was characterized by the systematic and widespread perpetration of all classes of atrocities against the civilian population, and marked the most intensive and concentrated period of human rights violations in Sierra Leone's eight-year civil war. Government and ECOMOG forces also carried out serious abuses, including over 180 summary executions of rebels and their suspected collaborators.”

The tactics of the RUF are further documented in the following quote, also by Human Right's Watch.

“The January offensive brought to the capital the same atrocities witnessed in Sierra Leone's rural provinces over the last eight years, as the RUF murdered at least two thousand civilians. Victims were usually chosen at random, though there was some targeting of particular groups, such as Nigerian nationals, unarmed police officers, journalists, and church workers. The horrific practice of mutilation and, in particular amputation of hands, arms, lips, legs and other parts of the body was widespread until the signing of the Lome peace accord. In January, the rebels cut off the limbs of some one hundred civilians, including twenty-six double arm amputations. An unknown number died before being able to receive medical attention. The rebel attacks around Masiaka and Port Loko produced at least another forty-four victims of mutilation, including seven double arm amputations. In a village near Masiaka, fifty-seven civilians were burned alive in late April.”

RUF spared neither women nor girls in the mayhem following the collapse of the Kabbah government. Human Right's Watch notes that,

“The RUF perpetrated systematic, organized, and widespread sexual violence against girls and women. The rebels planned and launched operations in which they rounded up girls and women, brought them to rebel command centers, and then subjected them to individual and gang rape. Young girls under seventeen and particularly those deemed to be virgins were specifically targeted. While some were later released or managed to escape, at this writing hundreds continued to be held in sexual slavery after being "married" to rebel combatants. Well over one hundred of the girls became pregnant. Numerous girl children under the age of twelve died as a result of rape.”

In light of the appalling crimes committed against the civil population of Sierra Leone, a very strong case can be made in favor of continued employment of private military companies such as EO based solely on humanitarian grounds. The reality is that the defenseless citizens of the country paid an exorbitant price in blood to support the moral repugnance of the international community in the deployment of mercenaries. A not dissimilar situation exists today in the Sudan. The West has been dragging their feet in an attempt to solve the problem without the infusion of uniformed military forces. How many Sudanese have perished is open to speculation but there is little doubt that a professional private military force would make as short a work of the Janjaweed militia as Executive Outcomes did to the RUF. The outlay of hundreds of millions of dollars, the infusion of UN and UK troops, and the lives of thousands could have been spared for a fraction of the cost had the country been supported properly once the South African company had stabilized the security situation in 1996. Through fear of involvement, the Western democracies have partially legitimized operational firms such as EO when the only bottom line for the host nation is one of success or failure. Less than a decade later this oversight would come home to roost in the fiasco that is Iraq.

