

# Fanatics aimed to kill and kidnap

CHARLES MIRANDA

SIX terror groups and a militia army was out to kill or capture Australians from "AusAID House" and specifically their armed security contractors, according to a classified military intelligence report released publicly for the first time.

After the fall of Baghdad to Coalition Forces in April 2003, the federal Government deployed officials from various agencies including AusAID, Treasury, DFAT and Defence to help in reconstruction efforts.

But the city came under siege from an insurgency with daily attacks, and Australia had become a primary target.

The Commonwealth was forced to contract an armed security squad - Control Risk - to protect Australians.

But one year after they arrived, the ADF Joint Task Force 633 military intelligence threat assessment found the whole operation "compromised".

"The threat of AIF (Anti-Iraqi Force) and terrorist targeting, specifically direct attacks on AusAID House and kidnapping of personnel residing there is assessed as HIGH," the classified intel note reads.

The ADF, however, removed just two Defence personnel from the threatened Aussie compound to the safety of the more fortified US Embassy, and wished the CRG security force well to protect the other civilian AusAID and other officials, all of whom fell out of their remit.

The intel brief noted that two CRG contractors working for the British government had "disappeared" believed kidnapped and "Australian citizens, be they military or civilian are at threat".

# AUSTRALIA'S



A former Australian soldier, contracted to protect Australians during the Iraq war and the following bloody insurgency.

The 'private soldiers', above and below, risked their lives for Australians doing aid work.

## MEDAL DENIED TO

EXCLUSIVE

CHARLES MIRANDA

THEY were the direct target of terror groups, dodging daily mortar attacks on the frontlines in Iraq.

But almost two decades on from the conflict, the private civilian troops who put their lives on the line for Australia are yet to be recognised.

A never before-seen trove of archived documents branded "not in the public's interest" lays bare a fight for war medals for the contracted security force which could embroil Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Such is the scope of the apparent mishandling by the PM's department in honouring the force of 35 men that former foreign minister Alexander Downer has been forced to step in.

His appeal to honour them

includes a private letter to Foreign Minister Marise Payne confirming the civilian force was a "critical enabler" for Australia at that time.

In the letter, he appeals to her to support a medal clasp, "consistent with the government's commitment to honour our veterans and their families".

The men protected Australians working to help Iraq amid turmoil and bloodshed. "That AusAID delivered the government's humanitarian program amidst the Iraq war without loss of life, serious injury or incident is remarkable and not at least in part to these people's efforts," Mr Downer wrote last year.

A similar appeal was made by the then foreign minister Bob Carr eight years ago but was apparently overruled by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. A huge volume of documents secured under Freedom of Information, and unredacted for the first time on an up-held appeal by the information Commissioner, details the full extent of Australia's diplomatic and conflict aid operations after the 2003 Iraq invasion and the eight-year insurgency that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and, critically, wrangling over the awarding of medals.

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# PRIVATE WAR

## Protection force diary reveals bloody mayhem

May 30, 2004 • 42 attacks in Baghdad today. 2 contractors shot in neck both of them in soft skinned vehicles at BIAP. 11 x 82mm mortar rounds fired in area behind palace.

June 12, 2004 • Did a job to Spot 8. B got dicked on way to Spot 21, believe it is no longer safe. Kroll got ambushed today, came up behind car and machined gunned rear of car hard until integrity gave way. 2 x Wounded in Action. 1 critical bullet wound to head. UVIED threat now extremely high. Over 30 attacks today, very dangerous town & times.

June 15, 2004 • 30 attacks today in Baghdad. Looking grim for handover. We are going to fortify our current loc. "Delta Hotel" in anticipation.

June 19, 2004 • 58 attacks today. We will start building parapets and wiring tomorrow. 2 x CRG cars destroyed near Kirkuk Whiskey 1 and Whiskey 2. 1 x WIA - was IED and RPG.

September 3, 2004 • FBI came last night and "bagged" one of our guards and grabbed another former one at home. Apparently phone taps and hot tip they were planning to kidnap an American/foreigners ie our Australian clients.

Read the full diaries online daily at [www.comau.com.au](http://www.comau.com.au)

Smoke marks the aftermath of an insurgent bomb attack in Baghdad.

## CONTRACT SOLDIERS WHO SAVED LIVES IN IRAQ

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Between 2003 and 2005, at the insistence of the US government, Australia commercially contracted the force, mostly former Australian and New Zealand SAS, Commando and special operations officers from Queensland

Police and NSW Police, for security, logistics and "life support" duties. All were veterans of previous conflicts, and had either left the ADF or were taking extended leave before returning to full-time duties.

Documents show the men were given "Top Secret" level security clearance and approval for official "government passports". Coalition operations permits and were registered as "administrative and technical staff" of the Australian embassy in Baghdad.

A military intelligence report obtained under FOI confirmed they were a direct target for six terror groups and an Iraqi insurgent force armed with rocket launchers.

At the end of hostilities the government officials who the force were protecting were the Humanitarian Overseas Service Medal - Iraq clasp. But there was no medal for the protection force as they were employed by the Commonwealth through a commercial contract with Control Risk Group.

CRG is a British-based security outfit that works closely with the UK government and has a dozen offices globally, including in Sydney and Melbourne. In 2012, PMC proposed a detailed amendment to the HOSM Iraq clasp, concluding "we consider a case exists for extending eligibility" and noted the AusAID director general confirmed his agency's work would not have been possible without the critical efforts of the CRG detail.

The foreign minister of the day, Mr Carr, endorsed the proposal in writing in 2013 but there is no evidence his letter was ever included in the file for consideration. PMC declared the file be closed.

Some of the 35 men said their almost two-decade battle for recognition was heart-breaking.

"I've always thought it was an issue with civilians carrying guns, we look quite radical and... some looked at you like you were mercenaries," one said. "They (government) didn't know how to deal with you at that time, Australia was playing catch up in war and modern conflict that involves civilians."

"The Brits, Canadians and the Americans also the American sense of... but there is such a hesitancy in Australia; they don't want to recognise civilians overseas in these contemporary conflicts but it is such an unsung story in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere."

Another said: "It's just recognition that we only now are realising we were to get operational service medals become family heirlooms... held along generations."

Assistant Minister to Prime Minister and Cabinet Ben Morton and the PMC both advised as late as last month that the men still did not meet eligibility requirements since they were technically working from a for-profit contractor.

"It is understandable given recommendations provided by AusAID and foreign minister - you would be disappointed by this outcome," PMC first assistant secretary John Reid wrote late last month to one of the would-be recipients.

"We were legitimate, accredited, badged-up administrative and technical staff to the Australian embassy - all of these sorts of things that mysteriously gets left out of deliberations," one said.

Senator Payne's office was contacted for comment.

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2014 - Amendment held, citing "we would expect strong criticism from existing medal-holders", no evidence cited. Carr letter not sent to Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC). Issue declared closed.

January 2020 - Former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer writes to Foreign Minister Marise Payne saying he's "happy to attest that CRG was a critical enabler for government's aid program" in Iraq. Asks Payne to make appeal to PMC to make HOSM amendment.

March 2020 - Office of Australian Information Commissioner overrules PMC's "not in public interest" decision to not release files.

May 2020 - Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ben Morton MP maintains CRG members not eligible and declines to make amendment approval.

July 2021 - PMC writes to members of the squad to inform they remain ineligible for the HOSM for reasons cited a decade earlier.

## Untangling refusal of an honour

March 20, 2003 - Iraq invasion by US-led Coalition forces.

April 9, 2003 - Baghdad falls.

June 2003 - US recommends Australia engages private security/logistics contractors to assist government agencies working towards a Coalition Provisional Authority. Control Risk Group (CRG) contracted, deploys 35 men, all Australia and NZ former SAS, Commando and specialist Queensland and NSW Police.

December 2011 - Iraq War ends. Commonwealth awards Humanitarian Overseas Service Medal (HOSM) (Iraq clasp) Declaration 2004 to members of agencies.

July 2012 - Formal HOSM (Iraq) Amendment proposed, sent to Governor-General extending eligibility specifically to commercial contractor CRG. Cites critical CRG work in Iraq with AusAID and unrelated precedent set post 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami awarding HOSM to commercial contractors. AusAID supports amendment.

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## Arrest after seven-hour hotel 'siege'

BEN PIKE

An unemployed Balmuccia corporate worker accused of barricading himself and his family inside a city hotel suite for seven hours before assaulting police has been granted bail.

Ravi Ranjan Singh, 45, allegedly kept himself, his wife and daughter inside a room at Metro Apartments on Sussex from 10am on Friday despite being asked to leave by staff.

Specialist police negotiators were called to the scene and at about 4.55pm officers from Operation ODIN gained access to the unit and arrested Singh.

He was taken to Day Street Police Station where he allegedly assaulted a constable by twisting his thumb.

He has pleaded not guilty to two counts of resisting or hindering a police officer in the execution of duty, assaulting a police officer in

execution of duty, and remaining on enclosed land.

During a bail hearing at Parramatta Local Court on Saturday, Singh told the court, "Looking at my background I do not have any police records."

The police prosecutor, who told the court police "do not necessarily oppose bail," said Singh refused to provide a fingerprint sample.

He was granted bail on a \$1000 security.

## Orc-ward NZ exit for Amazon

TELEOZDUNA

New Zealand has been sacked as the location of Lord Of The Rings by Amazon, in a major blow to the South Pacific's self-styled Middle Earth.

Officials in Wellington had hoped multiple seasons of the upcoming LOTR TV show would give the local film industry a long-term boost similar to Kiwi director Peter Jackson's epic Tolkien movies.

With an eye on post-pandemic travel, they were also banking on footage of New Zealand's rugged beauty again sparking a tourism boom among fantasy fans.

But with shooting on season one recently completed and set to premiere in September 2022, Amazon announced production of the next season would move to Britain.

"We want to thank the people and the government of New Zealand... for providing The Lord of the Rings series with an incredible place to begin this epic journey," Amazon Studios vice-president Vernon Sanders said.

New Zealand's Economic Development Minister Stuart Nash, who had offered Amazon generous incentives to stay, said: "We have no regrets about giving this production our best shot with government support... However, we are disappointed for the local screen industry."

## Facebook secret

FACEBOOK has begun rolling out encryption for voice or video calls made through its Messenger texting app, ratcheting up privacy for users.

The move comes as the sanctity of data on smartphones becomes an increasingly sensitive topic.

The number of audio or video calls made on Messenger has surged since 2016 to more than 150 million daily, prompting Facebook to add the option of scrambling exchanges from one end to the other to prevent snooping from third parties.

## Big Pineapple runs Olympic rings in mascot race



The Big Pineapple.

JEREMY PIERCE

IT'S a little rough around the edges, but a Queensland landmark has emerged as a cool contender for the mascot of Brisbane's Olympic Games.

Decked in Aussie green and gold, Sunny the Pineapple would be decidedly less weird than many of the Olympic mascots over the years and could be the prickliest customer to steal the lime-

light since Clyde the Thistle took centre stage at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2014.

In a personal pitch, Sunny started down the other early option to emerge - the (Bis-) "I reckon I can run the Olympic rings around a bin chicken any day of the week," he said in an open letter launching his Brisbane 2032 bid.

The Sunshine Coast is scheduled to host Olympic and Paralympic outdoor events such as cycling, mountain biking, athletics, and sailing, as well as football and basketball.

Olympic legend and Sunshine Coast local Clint Robinson said Sunny would be an ideal brand ambassador for the next Australian Olympics.

"The summery climate, the sweet taste, the green and gold colours - I think it's perfect for Queensland's

Games," he said. "And so many Aussies would have good memories of visiting the Big Pineapple when they were kids, so I think there'd be a lot of affection for it."

Olympic mascots have been spectacularly hit-and-miss over the years, ranging from the quintessentially Aussie critter Oly. Syd. Millie and Lizzie in Sydney to the bizarre one-eyed steel-roed Wenlock at London 2012.