



# ERIK PRINCE

Founder and Former CEO of Blackwater, Inc.

# CIVILIAN WARRIORS

The Inside Story of  
**BLACKWATER**

and the Unsung Heroes  
of the War on Terror

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**ERIK PRINCE**  
with Davin Coburn

Afterword by Max Boot

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Version\_1

To all the Blackwater team, especially the forty-one men who gave their all and those who were wounded and still inspire us today with their perseverance.

I'm extremely proud of what we accomplished together.

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## **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

Prior to the publication of *Civilian Warriors*, Erik Prince submitted the manuscript to the Central Intelligence Agency for review, honoring the confidentiality agreement he had signed when hired by the agency. The CIA review resulted in numerous redactions, and Mr. Prince accordingly deleted all material considered classified from the text, including his accounts of several widely publicized events.

While Mr. Prince's memoir stands alone despite the cuts, we have asked Max Boot, one of America's leading military historians, to write an outsider's account of the experiences Mr. Prince is unable to recount himself. This afterword is based on information drawn from public sources, and Mr. Prince has had no input or involvement in its writing.

# INTRODUCTION

December 6, 2003

[At eleven p.m., eighteen cars](#), watched overhead by U.S. Army Apache and Kiowa Warrior helicopters, as well as by a pair of Blackwater helicopters, known as Little Birds, stormed out of the Green Zone. They turned onto a pockmarked roadway, drove past scorched traffic barriers and burned-out remains of vehicles once used for suicide bombings, and sped toward Baghdad International Airport. A motorcade escorting a head of state and the U.S. secretary of defense doesn't travel light. [Especially not on the "Highway of Death."](#)

That multilane stretch of asphalt connects Iraq's largest international airport with the coalition-occupied Green Zone. For years, [insurgents had effectively owned](#) the five or so miles, ambushing convoys, diplomats, and American troops roughly once a day. So dangerous was the road that the [State Department would ultimately outlaw its personnel](#) from using it at all. And even before that, no one took that road without a plan.

But sometimes Paul Bremer wouldn't take no for an answer.

[Shortly before eleven p.m.](#), Bremer, the United States presidential envoy and administrator in Iraq, had finished a meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outside the Green Zone. To the surprise of his Blackwater security detail, Bremer insisted he would see the secretary off at the airport.

Frank [Gallagher](#), the barrel-chested head of the detail charged with keeping Bremer alive, quickly recalibrated travel plans. "[Needless to say, some of the radlesio traffic](#) back to me expressed grave concern about doing

the mission and questioned my sanity,” Gallagher later remembered. “But I could see the look in [Bremer’s] eyes that this was not open for debate.”

The trip out was uneventful, but Gallagher sensed the worst was yet to come. The show of force had certainly tipped off the insurgents that something unusual was going on at the airport. And Bremer’s Blackwater motorcade would have to travel back to the Green Zone without the Pentagon detail that had accompanied Rumsfeld.

Once Bremer had said his good-byes to the secretary, [the Coalition Provisional Authority leader and his right-hand man](#), Brian McCormack, climbed into the back of an up-armored Chevy Suburban SUV. Gallagher gathered his Blackwater team. “I explained that getting back to the Green Zone was going to be an adventure, and made sure that everyone was aware of the dangers, he said. “[We promised to have a cup of mead](#) in Valhalla later that evening.”

Contractor humor.

Around eleven twenty p.m., Bremer’s pared-down convoy pulled away from the airport. The nimble Blackwater helicopters darted out front, providing top cover and scanning the roadway for threats. Gallagher, in the front passenger seat, wrapped his fingers around his matte black M4 carbine and stared out into the darkness that enveloped the roadway. Bremer and McCormack chatted about meeting schedules for the next day.

Suddenly, [a call from a Blackwater bird](#) above: “Be alert—a vehicle ahead is *backing* down an on-ramp onto the road.” The driver of Bremer’s SUV pulled into the far left lane, closest to the highway median. [The lead and follow armored cars](#) maneuvered to flank Bremer on the right.

There was a jarring *crack* against the bulletproof window on Gallagher’s door—what [he later learned had been an AK-47 round](#) that had marked him for death. And then, with a horrible flash of light, [an improvised explosive device \(IED\) rocked](#) the armored Humvee behind Bremer’s SUV, destroying the Humvee’s axle with a deafening blast.

Bremer’s driver swerved and battled to keep all four tires of the SUV on the ground. From the darkness, insurgents opened fire with AK-47s, rattling

machine-gun fire off the right side of the car. There was nowhere to hide; flames and headlights provided just enough light to grasp what was unfolding. “[We’d been ambushed](#), a highly organized, skillfully executed assassination attempt,” Bremer later wrote. “I swung around and looked back. The Suburban’s armored-glass rear window had been blown out by the IED. And now AK rounds were whipping through the open rectangle.”

“[Tuna! Tuna! Tuna!](#)” shouted the voice from the radio in Bremer’s SUV. It was Blackwater’s shift leader, limping along in the battered armored vehicle, calling out the code for the SUVs to drive through the ambush: *Leave the Humvees*, he was saying; *get Bremer out of there now*.

Contractors in the two helicopters above unloaded enough ammunition to repel the attack, while Blackwater’s drivers ignored the burns on their feet from the heat of the blast and stomped on the gas through the fog of smoke on the roadway. [One of the trailing Suburbans pulled](#) immediately alongside Bremer’s car, shielding it while speeding down the Highway of Death so close together that the cars’ sideview mirrors touched. “[I asked for a casualty report](#) and learned that two of our four vehicles were damaged, but limping along,” Gallagher said.

<p>nousaid.[The stench of explosives lingered](#) in the ambassador’s vehicle as they made it to the Green Zone. And soon, the Humvees and helicopters made it back as well.

Miraculously, no one was injured.

• • •

**S**ince I first enrolled in the Naval Academy after high school, my life’s mission has been to serve God, serve my family, and serve the United States with honor and integrity. I did it first as a midshipman, then as a SEAL, then —when personal tragedy called me home from the service— as a contractor providing solutions for some of the thorniest problems on earth. The business of war has never been pretty, but I did my job legally, and I did it completely. Too well, perhaps, growing Blackwater until it became

something resembling its own branch of the military and other government agencies.

During my dozen years as company CEO, we filled contracts for the State Department, the Department of Defense, the CIA, elite law enforcement agencies around the world, and many others. We did everything from protecting heads of state to delivering the mail. Blackwater expanded from a simple training center in the North Carolina swampland to encompass dozens of business divisions ranging from surveillance blimp development and construction to intelligence services to K9 operations. [We became the ultimate tool](#) in the war on terror, pushing a thousand contractors into Iraq and hundreds more into Afghanistan under the Republican Bush administration, then continuing a connection to Democratic president Barack Obama that was closer than he has ever wanted to admit. My company's history is a proud tale of performance excellence and driven entrepreneurialism.

The public relations battle at home, however, was very different from a firefight on the front lines. Those conflicts my men and I were trained for. Stateside, though, thanks to endless waves of frivolous lawsuits, congressional hearings, and inaccurate press reports, [Blackwater was slagged as the face](#) of military evil. [Gun-toting bullies for hire](#). We were branded mercenaries and murderers, and were made the whipping boy for the public's fury over the Bush administration's policies in the Middle East. After failing in their multiyear effort to win hearts and minds in Iraq, the bureaucrats decided a company that had repeatedly answered this government's pleas for help was suddenly more valuable as a scapegoat. I was strung up so the politicians could feign indignation and pretend my men hadn't done exactly what they had paid us handsomely to do.

There is much the government doesn't want told about the work we did: the truth about our State Department-sanctioned operational tactics in Iraq, for instance, including our rules of engagement; or Blackwater's crucial involvement with President Obama's ever expanding terrorist-hunting tactics in Pakistan and beyond; or even the depth of government reliance on

contractors today and the outsourcing of its war machine. Government agencies don't want that spotlight being shone on our work, nor to applaud the greatest advantage Blackwater offered them: increased capability. They want increased deniability.

For years my company's work was misconstrued and misrepresented. At the time, our government contracts explicitly barred Blackwater from responding to the public broadsides. We were never allowed to explain things such as how we secured the contracts we did, or what really happened during a bloody Baghdad shoot-out in September 2007, or the way shifting political tectonic plates crushed my company as an act of partisan theatrics. Or how the one job I loved more than any other was ripped away from my aed away me thanks to gross acts of professional negligence at the CIA.

So now I'm done keeping quiet. What's been said before is only half the story—and I won't sit idly by while the bureaucrats go after me so that everyone else can just go back to business as usual. The true history of Blackwater is exhilarating, rewarding, exasperating, and tragic. It's the story of men taking bullets to protect the men who take all the credit, a tale of patriots whose names became known only when lawyers and politicians needed to blame somebody for something.

Our critics have spoken. Now it's my turn.

## CHAPTER 1

# MY FATHER'S SON

1969–1996

The sound of a boat exploding is exactly what you'd think it would be.

I was thirteen the first time I heard it, way up in Ontario's North Channel, where my family was vacationing aboard our forty-three-foot Viking powerboat. My dad had driven my mother, Elsa, one of my three older sisters, and a buddy and me up through Lake Michigan and past the Upper Peninsula. Towed behind us was an aging thirteen-foot Boston Whaler my dad had bought through a newspaper ad, and which I'd subsequently poured my heart into.

Just before six a.m. one morning during that vacation, my friend and I jumped from the Viking into that Whaler and motored out to a nearby fishing spot. We'd barely cast our first lines when suddenly an orange flash on the horizon jerked my head, followed by a baritone thunderclap that rattled across the water. White smoke billowed from the blown-open motor yacht; in the distance I saw debris raining down and the shards of a mast pinwheeling out of the sky.

I could hear screaming. There were no cell phones at the time, and no radio in my boat to call for help. We cranked the forty-horsepower outboard motor my father and I had recently mounted in the Whaler, crouched low inside that robin's egg blue hull, and zoomed toward the chaos.

With the water spray whipping against my face, I thought about one of the first boating lessons my father had taught me: *Always ventilate!* Gas engines on board require particular attention, he'd emphasized—it's different than with car engines. In automobiles, he'd said, the airflow under the vehicle blows away dangerous gas fumes. But there's little natural ventilation through a bilge compartment, and even during a routine refuel, heavy gas fumes can pool there. If you don't adequately ventilate those fumes, he said, you'll literally create a bomb just waiting for a spark. I remembered reading in *Popular Mechanics* a few years earlier that one cup of gasoline had the same explosive power as a dozen sticks of dynamite. And there in the North Channel I figured I was about to see what that actually looked like.

The Whaler cleared the half-mile distance to the accident in one minute flat. The damage to the motor yacht shocked me. The coach roof had been blown off, and there was a sickening hole by the bow. The deck was on fire.

Two people, a woman who appeared to be in her seventies and a middle-aged woman I assumed was her daughter, had been catapulted from the boat. Unbelievably, they were alive, though the burns they had suffered, and the sounds of their pain, were evident before we could even pull alongside them. They struggled to stay afloat.

Together, my friend and I hoisted each of them into the Whaler, laying the women across the wide wooden bench seats my father and I had spent so many hours sanding and revarnishing back in Michigan. To this day, I remember the smell of their burnt hair.

Luckily for the women, as I cranked the Whaler into a U-turn and gunned it for shore, locals brouack on land who'd also seen the explosion were calling for the emergency personnel. The paramedics arrived soon after we reached the shore, and we helped load the women into the ambulances on stretchers. I never did learn their names, or what became of them. In fact, the last thing I remember about that morning was puttering back out to the Viking, tying off the Whaler, and climbing back on board with my family. Hardly anyone else was even awake yet.



• • •

“**P**erseverance and determination,” my father used to say. “Perseverance and determination.” It’s a mantra that defined his life. I hope it defines mine.

As a child, my father accompanied his father, Peter, on his daily delivery route for Tulip City Produce Company around the scenic town of Holland, Michigan. My grandmother, Edith, was a seamstress. There, in the quiet town along the eastern edge of Lake Michigan, my father was taught to be industrious and to chip in with home improvement projects as soon as he could swing a hammer. When Peter died suddenly of a heart attack in 1943, my grandmother sought no government handouts, no charity from the church, not even money from family. Edgar, who had two sisters, was the man of the house now. He would provide for them. He was twelve.

My father’s first job, for a local painter, paid him a few cents an hour to scrape and sand houses. That summer, when the hot water heater at home broke, he measured all the piping connections for the new appliance, walked to the hardware store, and had galvanized pipe cut and threaded. Piece by piece he installed the new water heater, no plumber necessary. There was no money to afford one, anyway.

There were few stories of happy times from my father’s childhood. He never spoke of vacations to the beach, or family celebrations. He played high school football for only one season. He was studious because he was expected to be, and hardworking because he needed to be. At age thirteen, Dad took a job at the local Chrysler-Plymouth dealership that paid him forty cents an hour. He devoured everything there was to know about cars—how to take them apart, how to diagnose problems, how to sell them. Three years later, he was running the dealership whenever the owner was away.

Dad supported his family, and saved enough money to put himself through college. An engineering major at Michigan Technological University, he earned a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship and soon served two years as an Air Force photoreconnaissance officer at bases in South Carolina and Colorado. He returned to Holland after his service and

took a job as a die caster at the local Buss Machine Works, working his way up to chief engineer. He married a lovely young schoolteacher named Elsa Zweip, whom he'd met while waterskiing on summer break two years earlier. Soon my oldest sister, Elisabeth, was born. Then came Eileen and Emily. I was born in the summer of 1969.

In 1965, Buss was sold. During that transition, Dad gathered two coworkers, remortgaged the house, and borrowed \$10,000 from his mother. He was convinced that nearby manufacturers would soon need to perform their own in-house die casting. He had clever ideas about how to answer that call—for which he can thank my mother, and the opera. Dad found their date nights at Opera Grand Rapids so interminably boring, he spent the whole time pondering novel designs for die-casting machines. Amid a forest of competitors, with his finances overextended thanks to a growing family at home and his aging mother's nest egg at risk, [he struck out to create Prince Manufacturing](#).

A staff of six labored around the clock to construct the six-hundred-ton die-casting machines. A few months after its founding, Prince filled Prince d its first order for Honeywell International, which needed a pair of the machines to manufacture military ordnance. Soon, Honeywell returned for three more. Then fifteen. Then General Motors started buying them, manufacturing each of its new engine blocks with Prince machines. Everyone at the company saw the hard work paying off. "If my employees are part of the game, if they desire to know what the game plan is, they will be part of its success," my father said. "People win games because they have the group working together."

The size of the machines grew as the orders did: In January 1969 GM demanded a sixteen-hundred-ton die caster to manufacture aluminum transmission cases. Sixteen-hour workdays became eighteen-hour workdays. For my father, filling even the most outlandish order was about more than business. It was about even more than *losing* the business. It was pride. "If you have high expectations for your own life, you have to put those same

expectations into your work,” he said. And seven months later, Prince Manufacturing had the die caster in place and operational at GM’s factory.

Soon he was diversifying, and Prince Manufacturing was growing into Prince Corporation. Dad’s company was no longer just manufacturing machines to make machines, but creating products of its own. In 1972, he invented a lighted mirror sun visor for Cadillac—an accent so ubiquitous today, it’s hard to imagine a time when cars didn’t have them. Prince then began designing interior consoles for cars—then dashboard cup holders, movable armrests, a digital compass/thermometer, programmable garage door openers. My father could envision whole new industries to create. [David Swietlik](#), then Chrysler’s procurement manager for large cars, once told *Forbes* magazine, “Prince comes in saying, ‘You don’t know you want this yet.’”

The Big Three automakers loved that my father backed his research and development with his own funds; if prototypes failed, he took on all the losses. The approach made him relentless and tactical; every mistake the company made was documented and chronicled in a notebook he stored in his office desk. He called those mistakes “humbling gifts.” It worked: [Seven years after its founding](#), Prince Corporation was Holland’s largest employer.

Not that success came without a price. In 1972, a heart attack almost killed my father. He was forty-two. For three weeks, he lay in bed at Holland Hospital reflecting upon how hard he’d been driving himself—and everyone around him. He thought about his own father dying at the age of thirty-six. He thought about how his temper had been getting the better of him. I remember when my mom and I found him at home before rushing him to the hospital. It was the first time I’d ever seen him lying down in the middle of the day. “[It was then, while he lay](#) in a hospital bed reflecting on what all his labor had won for him, that he committed himself anew to his faith in Jesus Christ,” family friend Gary L. Bauer would later say. “Ed turned his future and the future of his business over to God.” As a result, Dad soon focused less on work and became a much larger part of my life.

• • •

It was important for my father to show me my grandparents' European heritage. The old country. The Dutch-German roots were not subtle: I grew up in [a town named Holland](#), settled in 1847 by Dutch immigrants fleeing religious persecution in their homeland. We were surrounded by tulip festivals and traditional architecture from the Netherlands—even an imported ancient windmill from the old country. There were wooden shoes everywhere. The Dutch Reformed Church was a cornerstone of our town, and my mother a devoted member.

I was fascinated by my family's history, and world history in general—particularly its association with the military. The first group of soldiers I ever assembled was made of solid lead—two inches high, standing in neat rows on my bedroom windowsill. There were hundreds of them, painted to match their real-life British, French, and Continental Army counterparts. I created them from molds I got on trips abroad and forty pounds of lead Dad and I melted down in a cast-iron plumber's pot. I was only seven, but I'd heard amazing stories about the military from my father, and his uncles, who'd also served.

A sense of duty to family was also important. Mom was strict but gentle, especially with me. Dad was six feet tall, with an average build and giant hands that had grown thick through endless hours at the milling machine. He traveled often for business, and I saw myself becoming the man of the house, as my father had been. Family was intertwined with business, and I got a feel for the business when Dad designated my mom, my sisters, and me as major shareholders of the ever expanding Prince Corporation. He led family meetings so everyone could be involved with company decisions. On Saturdays, he'd walk me through the various plants and offices at the company, teaching me about manufacturing and pointing out inefficiencies in production. The whole place smelled like hydraulic fluid. He never let me miss shaking even one person's hand, from machinist to executive, to acknowledge their contributions. Even when I was just seven.