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## Politics


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### Trucks made to drive without cargo in dangerous areas of Iraq

 BY SETH BORENSTEIN  
 Knight Ridder Newspapers

**WASHINGTON** - (KRT) - Empty flatbed trucks crisscrossed Iraq more than 100 times as their drivers and the soldiers who guarded them dodged bullets, bricks and homemade bombs.

Twelve current and former truckers who regularly made the 300-mile re-supply run from Camp Cedar in southern Iraq to Camp Anaconda near Baghdad told Knight Ridder that they risked their lives driving empty trucks while their employer, a subsidiary of Halliburton Inc., billed the government for hauling what they derisively called "sailboat fuel."

Defense Department records show that Kellogg Brown and Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, has been paid \$327 million for "theater transportation" of war materiel and supplies for U.S. forces in Iraq and is earmarked to be paid \$230 million more. The convoys are a lifeline for U.S. troops in Iraq hauling tires for Humvees, Army boots, filing cabinets, tools, engine parts and even an unmanned Predator reconnaissance plane.

KBR's contract with the Defense Department allows the company to pass on the cost of the transportation and add 1 percent to 3 percent for profit, but neither KBR nor the U.S. Army Field Support Command in Rock Island, Ill., which oversees the contract, was able to provide cost estimates for the empty trucks. Trucking experts estimate that each round trip costs taxpayers thousands of dollars.

Seven of the 12 truckers who talked to Knight Ridder asked that they not be identified by name. Six of the 12 were fired by KBR for allegedly running Iraqi drivers off the road when they attempted to break into the convoy. The drivers disputed that accusation.

In addition to interviewing the drivers, Knight Ridder reviewed KBR records of the empty trips, dozens of photographs of empty flatbeds and a videotape that showed 15 empty trucks in one convoy.

The 12 drivers, all interviewed separately over the course of more than a month, told similar stories about their trips through hostile territory.

"Thor," a driver who quit KBR and got his nickname for using a hammer to fight off a knife-wielding Iraqi who tried to climb into the cab of his truck, said his doctor recently told him he might lose the use of his right eye after a December attack. Iraqis shattered his windshield with machine gunfire and bullets whizzed by his ear. Glass got in his eye, and he broke two bones in his shoulder, he said.

His truck was empty at the time.

"I thought, 'What good is this?'" he recalled.

Shane "Nitro" Ratliff of Ruby, S.C., who quit working for KBR in February, recalled a harrowing trip in December.

As he was hauling an empty truck to Baghdad International Airport, Iraqis threw spikes under his tires and a brick, a cement-like clot of sand and gasoline through his windshield, scattering shards of glass all over him and into his eyes.

"We didn't have no weapons; I had two rocks and a can of ravioli to fight with," Ratliff said.

Ratliff caught up with his fleeing convoy in his damaged truck and made it to the airport safely. He figured he'd pick up a load there, but he was told to return with another empty trailer.

Iraqi insurgents have killed two civilian drivers.

Kellogg Brown and Root, the Army and the truckers gave different reasons for why empty trucks were driven through areas that the drivers nicknamed "rockville" and "slaughterhouse" for the dangers they presented.

Some of the truckers charged that KBR is billing the Pentagon for unnecessary work. KBR described the practice as normal, given the large number of trucks it has delivering goods throughout Iraq. Army officials said longer convoys may provide better security.

The Army's contract with KBR calls for daily truck runs, but doesn't dictate how many trucks must be in a convoy or whether they must be full, said Linda Theis, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Army Field Support Command in Rock Island, Ill. The area military commander or KBR officials might choose to run empty trucks as a security measure, she said.

KBR denied there was any problem with the truck runs. "KBR is proud of the work we do for the military in Iraq. It is difficult and dangerous work and requires a lot from our employees," said Cathy Gist, a KBR spokeswoman. KBR truckers say they can earn about \$80,000 a year, which is tax-free if they remain in Iraq for a year.

The empty trailer runs in Iraq peaked in January, February and March of this year but have dwindled as violence has escalated and forced contractors to reduce the number of trucks in each convoy and how far they travel, the drivers said.

Earlier this year, as many as a third of all the flatbed trucks in a 30-truck convoy were empty, they said. Much of the time, drivers would drop off one empty trailer and pick up another empty one for the return trip.

"There was one time we ran 28 trucks, one trailer had one pallet (a trailer can hold as many as 26 four-foot square pallets) and the rest of them were empty," said David Wilson, who was the convoy commander on more than 100 runs. Four other drivers who were with Wilson confirmed his account.

James Warren of Rutherfordton, N.C., one of the fired KBR drivers, said he drove empty trucks through Iraq more than a dozen times. Besides the risks to the truckers, the six National Guard or Army escorts who provided security were also in danger, he said.

The KBR driver who shot the videotape of the 15 empty trailers on the road in January described it this way: "This is just a sample of the empty trailers we're hauling called `sustainer.' And there's more behind me. There's another one right there. ... This is fraud and abuse right here."

KBR documents viewed by Knight Ridder showed that one February run included 11 "MT" (trucker lingo for empty) trailers, 11 containers (which could be full or empty) and six with pallets on them. On another February day, three of 15 trucks were empty.

KBR officials said empty runs resulted from the lack of cargo at one depot. The company ran all the trucks so they'd be available to pick up cargo for the return trip. "This is the same as typical commercial trucking operations work in the U.S.," said Gist.

Drivers discounted that explanation.

"Sometimes we would go with empty trailers; we would go both ways," said one driver who goes by the nickname Swerve and declined to be named for fear of retribution. "We'd turn around and go back with empty trailers."

An independent expert on trucking economics put the cost of a 300-mile one-way run at a minimum of \$1,050. Researcher Mark Berwick at the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University used a computer model, the fuel costs that Halliburton charged the Army and the truckers' salaries to come up with that figure.

Wilson and Michael Stroud, of the Seattle area, another former KBR trucking convoy commander, said the actual costs were probably far higher.

"It was supposed to be critical supplies that the troops had to have to operate," said Wilson, who returned to his home in southwest Florida after being fired by KBR. "It was one thing to risk your life to haul things the military needed. It's another to haul empty trailers."

Peter Singer, a scholar at the Brookings Institution and the author of "Corporate Warrior," a book on privatization of the military, said the use of empty trucks illustrates how the government's contracting system is broken.

The government gives out large cost-plus contracts in which "essentially it rewards firms when they add to costs rather than rewarding them for cost savings," Singer said.

Despite a massive increase in contracts for the war and occupation of Iraq, the Army hasn't increased the number of officials who oversee those contractors. Only 180 Army officials monitor defense contracts and only a little more than a handful of them are in Iraq, Singer said.

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(Mark Washburn of The Charlotte Observer and Mark Rogers of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram contributed.)

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