

Keenie Meenie

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The British Mercenaries Who
Got Away with War Crimes

Phil Miller

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Prologue

Piramanthanaru, Northern Sri Lanka, 2 October 1985

The early morning mist cloaks the village in a false sense of tranquillity. Some hear the helicopters coming. Others slumber too deeply to realise the danger that is hurtling towards them. The air force base is only 20 miles away, so the thump of rotor blades is familiar. Today the noise is louder, a constant crescendo that never stops until the mist is shattered by olive green fuselages probing the villagers' peaceful way of life and altering it permanently.

Scores of soldiers stream out of six helicopters and disappear inside concrete irrigation channels that run like veins through the fields. One helicopter lands next to the house of a young woman, Thurairasa Saradha Devi, and her 21-year-old brother, Ponnuthurai Pakiyanathan. Terrified, Devi runs inside and hides – but soldiers soon surround her home. 'The army ordered us to come out and kneel,' she would later recount to a Tamil human rights group.¹ 'There was another child with us who also knelt on the floor.'

Amid the terror, with life and death flashing before her eyes, one memory stood out. Among the helicopter pilots who landed in her village, 'one of them was a tall white man who was watching everything carefully. Many other people in my village saw him that day.' Devi struggled to make sense of this oddity. 'Villagers later referred to him as Mossadu. I didn't know what it meant then. Later I learnt that Mossadu are overseas white men.' Although Israeli security experts were working in Sri Lanka at that time, the pilot she saw was almost certainly not from Mossad. He was a mercenary from a British company, Keenie Meenie

Services or KMS Limited, which had begun flying Sri Lankan Air Force helicopters several months before this incident.

As the white pilot watched over her village, Devi's life began to fall apart. 'Soldiers captured my brother and tied his hands. They took him by the side of the helicopter, made him hold a rifle, and took video footage and a photo. Afterwards they brought my brother to the house and asked me if he was an LTTE man.' The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was a guerrilla movement fighting to free the island's Tamil minority from the ethnic Sinhalese majority. Devi denied her brother was in the LTTE. 'We are farmers – we are poor people doing farm work here only,' she frantically told the soldiers, to no avail. 'We were hit by guns and boots. They said that my brother was LTTE and that they had a photo of him with a gun. If we did not agree with them, they would kill us and all the children. With that they burnt our house down.' More than 75 houses were ablaze. 'There was smoke everywhere,' she said. 'We were all shouting and begging for mercy. They took my brother with them. I followed them, crying, and asked the army several times to release him. One soldier kicked me with his boots and I fell on the floor. After some time I opened my eyes. I could not see my brother.'

Other women managed to flee the village before the army surrounded them. One villager ran from lane to lane shouting out warnings. Uma Maheswaran Kamalambihai, 45, took her six children and ran into the nearby forest. Her youngest child was only six months old. They stayed in the forest all day, drinking dirty water from small ponds. But many did not hear or heed the warnings. A survivor later followed the soldiers' boot marks, which stood out from the villagers' modest sandals. The footprints led him to seven corpses.

Devi, the lady who saw the white pilot, fled the village with her children. On their return the next morning, she said: 'We saw so many dead bodies and could not find my brother.' It took them six days to find his body – the smell of her brother's decaying corpse alerted them to its presence. 'There were several stab

Prologue

marks and his hands were tied behind his back. They had stabbed and pushed him from the helicopter. All his bones were broken.' In total, 16 people lay dead, and 30 more were injured. Their wounds included life-changing trauma that left them paralysed or deaf. The soldiers even mugged a farmer, taking his watch and 2,000 rupees before chasing him away. The farmer was so poor that he went back to the army to ask for his possessions. Then the soldiers killed him.

Mothers saw their sons lying dead in pools of blood. Wives watched their husbands beaten by the army – one woman said the bludgeoning was so severe that blood poured out of his ears. Some men were tied upside down to a tree branch and interrogated while water was poured down their noses. The village shopkeeper was blindfolded, taken away and executed. Among the almost exclusively Tamil casualties was a 26-year-old Sinhalese civil servant, Vansanatha Kopyathilaka Kamini. Yet the local army commander would later claim that his troops had only killed Tamil rebels.

The surviving villagers were so poor that they struggled to find coffins for proper funerals. One mother was displaced by the war and cut off from her family. She spent the next two decades not knowing the fate of her son, who was killed in the attack. Among the carnage though, there were some remarkable survival stories. Soldiers tied up 18 villagers and locked them in a room, intending to shoot them later. An eight-year-old boy, who had not been bound, untied all 18 people, allowing them to escape. A local government official, Mr Sinnathamby, also did a valiant job recording the tragedy. He collected details of those killed and injured as well as the properties damaged. The authorities confiscated his notes and interrogated him for three days, and yet he refused to stop speaking out about the massacre. 'These people created Piramanthanaru through their own hard work', he said. 'The army came and destroyed it all.'

Secret British government cables, finally declassified three decades later, support Devi's claim that a white pilot took part

in the atrocity. One diplomat said that a mercenary company, KMS, 'appear to be becoming more and more closely involved in the conflict and we believe that it is only a matter of time before they assume some form of combat role however limited it might be'. He noted: 'Members of KMS are frequently seen both at hotel bars in Colombo and at private functions. The identities of many of them (and of the role of the team as a whole) are well known to the British community here.'² As 1985 drew to a close, the head of Britain's Foreign Office was informed by his staff that 'We believe only KMS pilots are currently capable of flying armed helicopter assault operations in Sri Lanka.'³ In time this mercenary air force would deliver decisive blows against the Tamil militants and civilians alike, at immense cost to their liberation struggle and incalculable profit to KMS. The bloodbath at Piramathanaru that day was not an anomaly, but was set to become part of a gruesome pattern.

Introduction

Return of the Privateers

Profiting from war is one of the most controversial aspects of UK foreign policy. The debate normally centres on why British bombs are being sold to a belligerent ally and how the deal was secured. The recent furore around Saudi Arabia's murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the ensuing pressure to stop Britain selling more than £4 billion worth of weapons for the war in Yemen is a case in point. However, the arms industry will always defend its business on the grounds that its staff never pull the trigger, and that any subsequent casualties are therefore not its responsibility. Or as the chairman of Britain's largest arms dealer, BAE Systems, modestly told shareholders in 2019: '[We] provide defence equipment that ultimately encourages peace.'¹

Tenuous as that logic may sound, amid this heated debate on the arms trade it is often forgotten that there is another British industry altogether, which has absolutely no qualms about being directly involved in war. Mercenaries will deliver the bullet directly to their client's target of choice, and the UK has one of the world's largest networks of private armies. There are over a dozen firms clustered near the special forces base in Hereford – corporate warriors who are ready to operate anywhere on earth provided there is profit to be made. As such, British mercenaries can be embroiled in conflicts without much more accountability than their firm filing an annual report at Companies House, where they are often only required to list the region of the planet in which their 'security consultants' operated that year: Africa, Asia or Latin America.

It has not always been this way. The British government did once have a monopoly on violence, as most states aspire to, but this control over bodies of armed men was deliberately relinquished in order to exert power through more subtle and ultimately effective channels. As Britain entered the 1970s, she had lost almost all of her once vast empire, from India to Malaysia, Egypt and Kenya. Former colonies whose riches had paved the streets of London, fed the northern mills with cotton and quenched Britain's thirst with their tea leaves, now governed themselves. As close to home as Belfast, parts of the United Kingdom were in insurrectionary mood and yearning to break away. Even the miners had climbed out of the bowels of the earth with their faces caked in soot and dared to go on strike. For many British people of a certain class, who were born and raised in the colonies, and spent decades in the military or civil service, the decline of empire was deeply disorientating. They had won two world wars, only to spend the next quarter century watching the world decolonise before their eyes.

Of course, they had tried to ensure that the new rulers would be friendly to the old mother country, and play by Britain's rules. It was bearable to give away a country to a puppet ruler who would obediently do their bidding. India was partitioned, her western and eastern flanks carved off, weakening her long-term military potential. The transition to independence in Kenya and Malaya was painfully prolonged, until radical movements like the Mau Mau or Chin Peng's Maoists were crushed. In some cases, Kenyans were literally castrated with pliers.² Shocking as they were, these measures were not always enough to stop the former colonies from pursuing complete autonomy from the metropole. In Egypt, the revolutionary pan-Arabist Gamal Abdel Nasser wrenched power from a pliant king, and nationalised the Suez Canal, severing the jugular of the empire's sea lanes. Britannia no longer ruled the waves.

Leaders like Nasser made decolonisation an extremely bumpy ride for the old guard. The stiff upper lip trembled from the

earthquake, and constant aftershocks, of ending an empire. By the 1970s, some felt it was time to re-exert power and control before everything was lost. Instinctively, these arch-imperialists reached for a familiar technique, one that had worked so well for their ancestors. They appeared not to have forgotten how the empire began 400 years ago, with Queen Elizabeth I granting permission to enterprising merchants and aristocrats to seek riches around the world. From the privateer Francis Drake and his sorties in West Africa and the Caribbean, to the East India Company's voyages across the Indian Ocean, heavily armed private companies had played a key role in exerting English, and eventually British, power across continents. It was only when this corporate rule was threatened, as in Delhi in 1857 when the East India Company's local troops staged a major revolt, that the full force of the Crown had to step in to crush the uprising. Tens of thousands of European troops who once worked for the company were subsequently absorbed into the Crown's army, and Queen Victoria replaced the firm's directors as the ruler of India. Over a century later, with the world once more in flux and Queen Elizabeth II on the throne, perhaps the reverse was now possible, and necessary? Wherever the Crown retreated, was there now a role for British companies to step in to ensure stability in former colonies? To prevent a communist from taking over? Or a strategic harbour from falling into less reliable hands?

It was in this reactionary climate that Britain's private security industry, as we know it today, began to emerge. Tentatively at first, Special Air Service (SAS) veterans, blooded by Britain's colonial wars, banded together and embroiled themselves in a civil war somewhere foreign. At first they did not even bother to form a company. Men like Colonel Jim Johnson, a former SAS commander, used the basement of his Chelsea home to recruit mercenaries to fight Nasser's forces in Yemen during the 1960s.³ The setting was so intimate that the participants called it *Beni Johnson*, Arabic for family. That arrangement, which had the sporadic blessing of MI6 and the SAS, was a one-time operation,

and dissolved after they had inflicted enough damage on Nasser. It was not until the 1970s that mercenaries such as Johnson would formalise their activities into permanent companies, appoint directors and brand their firms with mysterious names – in Johnson’s case, Keenie Meenie Services (KMS) Ltd. Unlike their predecessors, such entities were capable of taking on a series of contracts around the world, and by the 1980s were part of a booming industry, fuelled by free market Thatcherism and relentless privatisation, and supercharged by Ronald Reagan’s aggressive anti-communism. These companies were now in their element, sabotaging left-wing regimes as readily as they propped up right-wing dictatorships. Some firms failed to win more than one contract and fizzled out in a few years. Others, those with connections in high places, managed to secure a series of deals that allowed the company to grow and establish itself, so that it was strong enough to weather a storm. If one of its contracts turned sour, the rest of the business could survive, even if it had to rebrand itself occasionally. Their survival meant that, by the time Thatcher left office in the 1990s, Britain had a well-established private security industry. In time, this climate would incubate firms such as G4S whose services, from immigration detention centres and Olympic guards at home, to war zones abroad like Iraq, have become integral to British governments for the last quarter century.

This book is the story of one such pioneering mercenary company, KMS Ltd, whose name has long since faded from the limelight, but whose legacy, and some staff, live on.⁴ KMS has left an indelible scar on the 200,000 Tamil refugees scattered across London. I came to know the Tamil community in 2011 while studying politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in Russell Square. On campus, I was involved in campaigns to stop Tamils being deported to Sri Lanka, where they faced torture. It was amid this drama of placard making and detention centre protests that a Tamil friend told me a childhood story. One day in the 1980s, his uncle said a mysterious British company, KMS Ltd,

was helping the Sri Lankan government fight Tamil rebels. This recollection intrigued me. There was very little written about the company – some scattered references to its work in Nicaragua, Oman and Afghanistan, but often more rumour than fact.

After I graduated, I spent several years working as a researcher at Corporate Watch, focusing on the private security industry's role in the detention and deportation of asylum seekers. I spent hours each day mapping out the activities of companies like G4S, Serco and Mitie, but the name KMS stayed in my mind. Slowly, over the last seven years, I have pieced together everything I could find about KMS, especially its work in Sri Lanka but also elsewhere. Primarily, I have relied upon British government files which are, by law, made available to the public at the National Archives in Kew 30 years after they were written. Inside the bowels of this brutalist building in west London there are miles upon miles of once secret documents: telegrams cabled from British diplomats stationed around the world to their headquarters in London, minutes of cabinet meetings held by ministers of the day, and forensic reports written by soldiers analysing distant rebel movements. I combed through British Foreign Office files not only on Sri Lanka, but also from Latin America (Argentina, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Uruguay), the Middle East (Lebanon and Oman), Africa (Angola and Uganda), and Europe (Ireland and the Netherlands). Regimental journals at the National Army Museum in Chelsea proved to be another welcome source, especially for understanding what the mercenaries had previously done when they served in the British military. The Surrey History Centre in Woking, with its meticulous stash of council minutes, shed considerable light on the political life of one KMS founder, who simultaneously worked as a local councillor. US government archives, much of them available online, were a trove of information about the company's work in Nicaragua.

From this formidable array of paperwork, I was able to identify which British officials were involved with KMS, and trace several surviving diplomats who agreed to be interviewed, reuniting

them with reports they had written all those years ago. One former defence ministry official was willing to divulge much more detail than the carefully crafted telegrams had revealed, whereas others remained very guarded. Alongside this process, I travelled around Sri Lanka interviewing Tamil priests, lawyers, politicians and widows who had vivid recollections of the company's impact on their struggle for independence. Several colleagues who I worked with also spoke to Sri Lankan military veterans and recorded their fond memories of being trained by British mercenaries. Newspaper clippings at the British library, various film archives and the memoirs of former soldiers have complemented my research considerably.

One aspect of this enquiry was particularly difficult. There has been a considerable delay in the declassification of Foreign Office material about KMS, such is the secrecy and mystique surrounding the firm. The documents I found at Kew were often heavily redacted, with key sentences blacked out or entire pages removed. In dozens of cases the files were simply shredded – or earmarked for destruction until I demanded access to them. This censorship, some of it conducted by the former civil servants who had originally written the telegrams themselves, could only be challenged through freedom of information requests. Essentially, these are emails sent to government departments demanding a right of access to classified material. The law in this area is full of caveats, with anything vaguely related to the special forces or intelligence agencies exempt from disclosure, throwing up a smokescreen around the company's connections to powerful institutions such as the SAS and MI6. And in circumstances where departments do have to hand over documents, they can drag their feet considerably. A delay of six months is not uncommon, even for something as simple as a civil servant posting a document they have already agreed to disclose.

However, when my requests have been successful, thousands of pages of material have arrived in padded brown envelopes. Sometimes, the disclosure was farcical, containing newspaper

clippings or parliamentary speeches that have been in the public domain for decades. In other cases, the information Whitehall sought to keep secret was much more sinister, and contained evidence of British complicity in war crimes. Ultimately, the most sensitive material remains classified at the time of writing and is subject to appeals, which may only come to fruition after this book is published. So despite not being able to provide all the pieces of the puzzle, I trust this book contains more than enough to understand the nature of KMS, its complex relationship with the British government and its profound impact on the private security industry.