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Missing Contractor: US Military Mechanics may Hold the Keys

Written by Susie Dow

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Missing Contractor: U.S. Military Mechanics May Hold the Keys

Both Kirk von Ackermann and Ryan Manelick worked for Ultra Services of Istanbul, Turkey.

October 9, 2003 -- Kirk von Ackermann left a meeting at FOB Pacesetter, a small and isolated base just north of Balad, Iraq. His vehicle was found later that day abandoned in the Jabal Hamrin mountains roughly 140 miles away.

December 14, 2003 -- Ryan Manelick was killed in a drive-by shooting just after leaving a meeting at Camp Anaconda, later renamed LSA Anaconda, just south of Balad. Shortly before his murder, Manelick had alleged fraud within his company, fraud that involved US Army officers.

That's the short version of the story. The longer version, as is often the case, is much more involved.



Kirk von Ackermann

Kirk von Ackermann may be one of the most important American heroes you've never heard of. His former work as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Air Force is so highly classified that no one outside of an elite counter terrorism task force knows the full scope of his mission. Kirk von Ackermann wrote predictive analysis on potential terrorist attacks in the U.S., which essentially foresaw the possible use of an aircraft as a bomb to strike the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House, and other buildings. He also predicted the USS Cole bombing, just weeks before it happened. The small task force of which he was an important participant defended the United States of America from the asymmetric threats of modern terrorism. Kirk von Ackermann -- in deed and fact -- saved lives. He should have testified at the 9-11 Commission hearings. He didn't. And neither did any of his colleagues. As to why, perhaps history will one day be kind enough to tell us.

All of this is to say, Kirk von Ackermann was no slouch when it came to security.

Rather than being honored for writing the manual on contemporary counter-terrorism, Kirk von Ackermann is remembered instead as the longest missing American civilian contractor in Iraq. He disappeared on October 9, 2003. Friends and family accept that he is dead - a Presumption of Death Certificate was issued and a memorial service was held in January 2007. He leaves behind a wife and three children. His remains have not been found. But perhaps equally as distressing, the memories of those who could help find his killers are rapidly fading.

Current Status

It wasn't until the murder of Ryan Manelick, that any meaningful investigation really began, a full two months after Kirk von Ackermann's disappearance. In August of 2006, the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) **informed** von Ackermann's family that they had determined von Ackermann was killed during a botched kidnapping attempt by hostiles in Iraq. On the surface, the kidnapping and subsequent murder of an American contractor working in Iraq appears to be a perfectly reasonable conclusion. But scratch below the

actual details surrounding the von Ackermann case and doubt immediately rises to the surface. To elaborate: In March of 2008, ePluribus Media was denied its FOIA request for access to the general information in von Ackerman's case files because "an active investigation is in progress with an undetermined completion date."

Going to Iraq

After serving in the U.S. Air Force, Kirk von Ackermann briefly explored going to work for a U.S. Senator. Eventually, he accepted work with Siebel Systems of San Mateo, California. In August of 2003, a former colleague from the same Silicon Valley company, Albert 'Charles' Phillips, offered von Ackermann employment with Ultra Services, a new company that was providing containerized housing units to the U.S. military in Iraq. Ultra Services was based out of Istanbul, Turkey where local suppliers assembled the units. Von Ackermann accepted the offer, eventually working out of the Istanbul office, and traveling back and forth between Iraq and Turkey two times.

Hitting the ground running, von Ackermann faced his first challenge: the design and development of an armored demountable guard unit that could be set up in less than one hour. The guard unit had enormous potential well-beyond Iraq and was attracting a lot of attention from investors, suppliers and manufacturers.



Kirk von Ackermann told his wife that he had found his calling assisting the U.S. military in rebuilding war torn areas. He loved the work and was ready to enter a new phase in life. As a result, the von Ackermanns made the decision to move their entire family to Turkey. But Kirk von Ackermann had one last trip to make into Iraq before he could return home to California and help pack up their household.

Transportation

Traveling back and forth between Turkey and Iraq, von Ackermann needed a good reliable vehicle. An avid car buff, von Ackerman knew that any decision to purchase a vehicle would need to be made carefully, knowing that the wrong choice could easily mark him as a target in Iraq's growing sectarian violence. At the time, the four most popular SUV models were the Mitsubishi Pajero, the Hyundai Galloper, the Toyota Land Cruiser, and the Nissan Patrol. Each SUV carried its own risk, identifying its driver with unspoken but acknowledged stereotypes. If the vehicle was too flashy, the driver was an immediate target for kidnapping and ransom. In 2003, most Iraqis tended to drive used sedans.

As a teenager Kirk von Ackermann and a friend each spent their free time restoring a pair of vintage Mustangs - one red, the other black. Kirk von Ackermann even installed a nitro-boost in his Mustang. Years later, even though he was trained as a Russian linguist, he more often found himself assigned to vehicle maintenance in the U.S. Army. According to his wife, Megan, Kirk von Ackermann usually maintained the family's vehicles himself.

Traveling between Iraq and Turkey, von Ackermann needed a durable vehicle with a good maintenance record. Based on what he knew about reliability, he chose a used Nissan Patrol SUV. The Patrol, while financially out of reach for most Iraqis, is still considered popular by non-governmental organizations and is well-known for 40-year track record of hard work for the United Nations. At the time von Ackermann paid for his vehicle, the sellers told him one of the tires had a problem. Von Ackermann told the sellers the tire wasn't an issue. And it wasn't. Kirk von Ackermann was perfectly capable of changing a tire -- even in the middle of Iraq.

The events of October 9, 2003

Kirk von Ackermann attended a meeting with Çuneyt Demirici, an employee of one of Ultra Services Turkish suppliers at FOB Pacesetter. After the meeting, Demirici said good bye to

Kirk von Ackermann, got in his car and headed south to return to his home in Baghdad. Demirci's meeting would prove to be the last publicly known sighting of Kirk von Ackermann before he disappeared.

What Actions did von Ackermann Take to Repair his Tire?

Because of his experience repairing vehicles in the US Army, Kirk von Ackermann knew the language that would get him access into the Motor Pool to take a good look at his vehicle. While FOB Pacesetter was still a primitive air strip with little of the creature comforts increasingly common on other area bases, the base was sure to have a wheeled vehicle mechanic, a lift, and an air compressor with an impact wrench--ideal for quickly removing the lug nuts. If von Ackermann ran late repairing the tire on his car, he could stay on base, just as he had stayed at another base the night before when it had gotten too late in the afternoon to risk being on the road at nightfall.

Having served two full terms in both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force, von Ackermann knew the number one priority of the military mechanics was to keep their vehicles rolling. And von Ackermann definitely wasn't going to do anything that would jeopardize their mission. He'd find a quiet corner, set up over to the side, keep out of every one's way, and just get down to business. If he was lucky, he'd make some new friends along the way. Outgoing and friendly, Kirk von Ackermann loved to chat with and meet people.

But FOB Pacesetter had just one small battalion and only a few hundred artillerymen. Kirk von Ackermann stood a much better chance of getting his vehicle attended to at Camp Anaconda, less than 25 miles away, south of Balad on the other side of the Tigris River, where his company, Ultra Services, was overseeing a large project.

Camp Anaconda is 15 square miles, supports two runways, with 22,000 troops and contractors on premises and was the central distribution point for all supplies, parts and repairs for ALL vehicles in Iraq. In 2003, Anaconda processed vehicles in and out country as well as maintained a Motor Pool with 19 mechanics responsible for over 1,000 vehicles a week. Anaconda was the busiest air base operated by the Pentagon in the world. Camp Anaconda was the perfect choice for taking a good look at the vehicle von Ackermann had owned for less than 24 hours.



[View Larger Map](#) Jabal Hamrin ('Reddish Mountain')

A small ridge of mountains known as the Jabal Hamrin runs between Tikrit and Kirkuk, from Baiji in the north tapering off in to Iran in the South. The road from Tikrit and Kirkuk is approximately 65 miles long of which a 7 mile stretch passes through the Jabal Hamrin, a rolling, rocky and isolated area that Kirk von Ackermann had previously identified as the most dangerous section of road between Tikrit and Kirkuk. It was here, 140 miles and several hours away from the meeting at FOB Pacesetter, that Kirk von Ackermann's car was discovered abandoned.

Kirk von Ackermann carried a satellite phone. A call was placed to Safa Shukir, an Iraqi employee 40 miles away in Kirkuk. A voice Safa assumed was von Ackermann's told him that he was stranded, to come get him and bring a jack because the one in the Nissan Patrol didn't work. Within 5 minutes of von Ackermann's satellite service recording that outgoing call on his phone, a passing military patrol reported an abandoned vehicle by the side of the road. Oddly, just several miles down the road, the U.S. military maintained a checkpoint. And yet, von Ackermann chose to stay where he was, stranded by the side of the road, an easy target hidden by outcroppings.

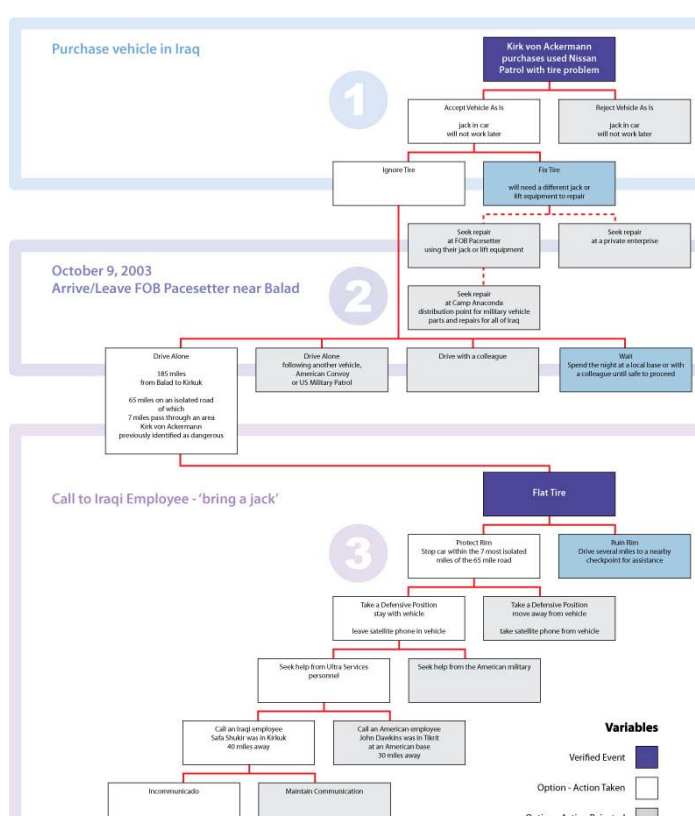
Perhaps ironically, or perhaps tellingly: Years before, Megan von Ackermann had to drive through 'a slightly scary area of town' -- her husband had advised her to be prepared to ruin the rim on her car should she get a flat tire, drive slowly, and keep going until she was somewhere safe rather than stop the car. So why did Kirk von Ackermann ignore his own advice and stop his car rather than keep going? In addition, Kirk von Ackermann was licensed to carry a side arm, which he is reported to have had with him that day. But there

was no evidence of any kind of struggle where his car was found. No shell casings. No sign of fire fight. In fact, his laptop computer, \$40,000 in cash in a case on the back seat, and his satellite phone remained undisturbed inside his vehicle. His colleague Ryan Manelick would later remark, "It was as if he had been abducted by aliens." (ref)

It certainly seemed like Kirk von Ackermann made a lot of poor choices the day he disappeared -- that is, if you believe that Kirk von Ackermann was abducted from the location where his Nissan Patrol was found. And to believe that Kirk von Ackermann was abducted in the hills of the Jabal Hamrin requires ignoring his years of defensive training and service in both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force as well as years maintaining his own vehicles and his time in vehicle maintenance while in the U.S. Army. Embarking on a 185 mile journey through hostile areas in Iraq with a bad tire was completely out of character with who Kirk von Ackermann was.

Decisions and Actions

Indeed, the accompanying chart reconstructs the decisions Kirk von Ackermann made on the day he disappeared. Megan von Ackermann identified three points at which she felt her husband would have acted differently, marked in blue. The chart is broken into three stages, each stage an opportunity to change the course of events.



Stage 1 - decision to repair or ignore tire
Stage 2 - decision to proceed alone to Kirkuk
Stage 3 - decision not to defend himself

(click graphic to enlarge)

Given Kirk von Ackermann's background, each of his decisions make little sense with one possible exception: if von Ackermann was abducted before he had the opportunity to repair his tire, then absolutely **none** of the decisions in Stage 2 and Stage 3 previously assigned to von Ackermann were actually made by him.

Someone else didn't repair the tire. Someone else drove his car and abandoned it in the Jabal Hamrin mountains. Someone else used his satellite phone to call an Iraqi employee who spoke little English. Someone else

walked away without a struggle.

Kirk von Ackermann, who was licensed to carry a weapon, was quite possibly never there to defend himself.

My own opinion is somebody killed Kirk von Ackermann before he got a chance to fix his tire and that he was abducted and killed near Balad which is where his colleague, Ryan Manelick, was killed two months later, shortly after leaving a meeting at Camp Anaconda.

Camp Anaconda. We've now come full circle in search of the mechanic von Ackermann sought out to repair his vehicle.

In the Hands of the Mechanics

U.S. forces rely on a wide range of mechanics, both military and civilian, with diverse skills to maintain a truly staggering amount of equipment from cranes and fork lifts to airplanes,

helicopters, tanks, HMMVVs, and ships. Yes, ships. Even the U.S. Army maintained patrols with MK-2 boats on the nearby Tigris River. So in addition to the Motor Pool, Kirk von Ackermann may have approached any number of the mechanics at FOB Pacesetter and/or Camp Anaconda for help. From FOB Pacesetter, Von Ackermann may have asked for a contact name at Camp Anaconda, made plans by phone or radio with someone at vehicle maintenance, and then just never showed up.

While Kirk von Ackermann could have driven the 25 miles alone to Anaconda, it's also possible he may have asked truck drivers for help to transport his Nissan Patrol SUV. The vehicle could have been towed, carried on a flat bed or heavy equipment trailer, stored in the back of an empty container truck or stake bed, or joined a convoy. The vehicle may have gotten a lift by air transport.

Is it possible that the mechanics of Camp Anaconda could solve the mystery of the longest missing American civilian in Iraq?

If you or anyone you know was a mechanic at Camp Anaconda or FOB Pacesetter in October 2003 and you think you remember Kirk von Ackermann, please contact the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division immediately. Please keep yourself safe. Ryan Manelick was gunned down and Kirk von Ackermann disappeared.

HQ, U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command

Report a Crime to CID

6010 6th Street
Fort Belvoir, VA 22060-5506
(703) 806-0416
email CID at

crimetips@conus.army.mil The **Mind of Susie Dow** is a fictional account of what the author believes happened to Kirk von Ackermann on October 9, 2003 written by Susie Dow, *The Missing Man*, April 6, 2008

Additional Reading

Missing in Iraq (see March - August 2006) by Megan von Ackermann

Bay Area civilian vanishes in Iraq by Colin Freeman, San Francisco Chronicle, November 11, 2003

Suspicion surrounds missing Bay Area man by Colin Freeman, San Francisco Chronicle, February 13, 2005

One Missing, One Dead: An Iraq Contractor in the Fog of War by Susie Dow with Steven Reich, ePluribus Media, May 15, 2006

Death of a Contractor: Greed and Murder in Iraq's Lawless Desert by Dan Halpern, Rolling Stone, March 8, 2007, Issue 1021 pp 70-74, 76-69 (print version includes photos)

Photo Credits

Kirk von Ackermann - photo source [Megan von Ackermann](#)

Demountable Guard Unit - web archive from the former ultra-services.com website registered to John Dawkins

Map of Balad, Iraq region - from [Google Maps](#)

Decision Chart - by Susie Dow

Missing Poster - by Susie Dow, Kirk von Ackermann photo source [Half Moon Bay Review](#), Nissan Patrol SUV photo source [Expedition Portal Team](#)

MISSING

SEEKING INFORMATION OF CIVILIAN KIRK VON ACKERMANN LAST SEEN AT FOB PACESSETTER NEAR BALAD, IRAQ ON OCTOBER 9, 2003. DRIVING A NISSAN PATROL SUV. HE MAY HAVE SOUGHT ASSISTANCE AT CAMP ANACONDA TO REPAIR A TIRE.



EXAMPLE ONLY - NISSAN PATROL SUV

RACE: WHITE
SEX: MALE
DOB: July 29, 1966
AGE: 37
HAIR: BROWN
EYES: BROWN
SCARS: SHOULDER SURGERY

OTHER: SERVED IN THE USAF & US ARMY
WORKED VEHICLE MAINTENANCE
SPEAKS ENGLISH, RUSSIAN, GERMAN
MARRIED, FATHER, 3 CHILDREN, WORKING
FOR ULTRA SERVICES OF ISTANBUL,
TURKEY, LICENSED TO CARRY A FIRE ARM



photo credit Half Moon Bay Review


KIRK VON ACKERMANN

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