



In April this year French soldiers negotiated with Somali pirates to release the Lemacon family from their captured yacht. In an operation by French commandos the family's father was killed, the rest of the family were freed.

of a recently launched operation. Later he will visit a production company that wants to turn his six novels into movies.

The final scenes of *Mercenary* take place in the London hotel, Dukes, where we now meet. "I came here years ago when I was bodyguard to Rupert Murdoch," says Falconer. "It's a real rabbit warren, isn't it?"

In *Mercenary*, Falconer's regular hero, Stratton, is parachuted into guerrilla-controlled jungles of South America to help a group of freedom fighters. "I was sent to the Basque country [in Spain] to turn 60 policemen into an antiterrorism unit, on my own. I had three months to do it. And in that three months I had quite an interesting adventure. And that's what *Mercenary* came from really: it was born from that basic concept."

His first book was his autobiography, *First Into Action*, which he wrote more than 10 years ago. In it, he describes life within the Special Boat Service: how dangerous it is, how self-motivated and intrepid the members are, and how often things go totally wrong. It exposed some of the SAS/SBS rivalries, and described the many tragedies he witnessed – friends and comrades lost in action, or even in training.

falconer spent the first 10 years of his life in an orphanage in north London, before he was adopted by a family from Battersea, south London. He joined the Royal Marines at the age of 17. By 19 he'd been selected as one of only nine men (out of 150) for Special Boat Service training. It was an exceptional achievement. He served most of his career with the SBS, deployed to the 1982 Falklands War, and was a leading contributor in modern maritime counter-terrorism techniques. He also served in Northern Ireland in 14 Intelligence Company, a controversial undercover operations unit, accused of colluding with Protestant paramilitary groups.

On leaving the Royal Marines he "hit the circuit", as he puts it. Among his various jobs was bodyguarding Murdoch (which he hated) and working with a former SAS colleague in the African bush, hunting

poachers. A couple of years later, on his way to Central America, Falconer stopped over in Los Angeles.

"While I was there I was asked to set up an office; I got approached by a couple of guys who said they were screenwriters. They encouraged me to write something," he says. Although he later discovered "they were a couple of losers", Falconer bought a book on how to write a film and put down his first screenplay. "I wrote it on a computer, and gave it to a mate who was an actor for a laugh. Unbeknown to me, he gave it to an agent, that agent sent it to Warner Brothers, and Warner Brothers offered US\$55,000 [Dh202,000] for it. And so, er, I got the bug."

He was to stay in LA for many years. He wrote a dozen movies as well as for a television show (the "cops on bikes" series *Pacific Blue*) which ran for five years. "I had a great life, living in Malibu, earning good money. Then towards the end of it I wrote my life story, *First Into Action*. Then I got into producing, which I was useless at. Just before 9/11, I'd written two big screenplays – one was a plane crash, one was about a building coming down after a CIA explosion – and I went bankrupt." He pauses and then

bursts into extended, incredulous laughter. "Literally, I had US\$1.50 [Dh5.5] in my pocket to go into a supermarket and get some lunch, then to figure out what I could do next. I wasn't despondent. I had a lot of skills, things I could do. I'm one of these relentless people who will keep going until there's nothing left."

He came back to Britain just before the invasion of Afghanistan and rejoined the PMC circuit. Such security work would eventually take him deep into the heart of the conflict in Iraq, where he carried out undercover surveillance and helped negotiate the release of a kidnapped American reporter, Jill Carroll. However, Falconer says that his worst experience was trying to avoid other, brash (often American) military contractors, not just Iraqi insurgents.

"I used to dread coming across those guys with the armoured vehicles. I was living in the Red Zone [in Baghdad], grew a beard like one of the locals and drove around in a battered old taxi. Every time they appeared I thought they were going to shoot me – because they'd think I was an Iraqi – or get us caught in an ambush."

It was while working as a PMC that he

explains, "the IRA were still around and I'd done quite a bit in Northern Ireland ... I didn't want anyone knocking on my door. Now I've got a daughter and there are nutters out there. I'm not a 'don't see my face' type because terrorists are waiting behind every corner to stab me in the back. No. It's the nutters."

Since Duncan Falconer embarked on his writing and private military careers, a dramatic front has opened: a battle raging on the high seas. A huge increase in activity by Somali pirates led to attacks on ships more than doubling during the first six months of this year, with 78 vessels boarded worldwide, 75 fired upon and 31 hijacked with some 561 crew taken hostage, 19 injured, seven kidnapped, six killed and eight missing.

Once a ship has been hijacked, shipowners hire professionals – specialist negotiators or private security firms – to help transfer the ransoms. "They are mostly ex-SAS and

ensuring that the shipping companies are not putting themselves in any dubious positions."

"People have started to realise piracy and hostage-taking is good money-making," stresses Falconer, who now undertakes the kind of work Middleton refers to. "You've got the Malaccan Straits, the Yellow Sea, you've got the Delta, off South America – it's great business."

"In Somalia, you know what the threat is: they sees ya, they chases ya, they shoots at ya and they climbs on board. That's their technique. How do you mitigate that? Well, we've got intelligence sources from many recent incidents in the area; after that, it's training the crew, preparation and reaction. Preparation is all the things you do before leaving port – training the crew, putting bars on windows, locks on the strongroom, mesh up to stop people climbing and so on." But, he says, non-lethal force can only accomplish so much.

"At the end of the day, if you have 40 guys with RPGs and machine guns, they're going to take your boat. And so your other option is lethal. This is where you have four or five men, with AK47s, and shoot anyone that comes near."

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returned to writing. By this time his autobiography had been out about a year. The publisher called him and suggested he try his hand at fiction: "I thought he was crazy but he said I'll pay you – not very much – and it wasn't, but the first book did so well, he trebled the money for the second book, which was very nice of him."

"I go out to a place like Baghdad and the client gets on with his work and there's nothing else to do. And I hate having nothing to do," he says. Yet for one so used to taking risk, Falconer has never had much confidence in his writing. "I didn't take it seriously. And then we sat down and had a heart to heart: they [the publisher] wanted a top 10 from me. That's the magic barrier. The changes it makes are amazing. I'd been at Number 11, 12 and suddenly the deals have gone up for my next one, my movie, just because you hit the top 10. Tesco's [supermarket chain] have been running out, they're sold out. It's very nice."

Curiously, Falconer is happy to have his picture taken, but works under a pseudonym. Duncan Falconer is a pen name. His real-life activities, he says, preclude the use of his real name.

"When I wrote that first book," he



Falconer helped negotiate the release of the journalist Jill Carroll, who was held hostage in Iraq.

British or Australian. A lot are also South African," says Roger Middleton, a Horn of Africa specialist at the Chatham House institute in London. "The professional negotiators, acting on behalf of the ship owners, get about US\$100,000 [Dh370,000] for their services and the lawyers receive a fee of about US\$300,000 [Dh1.1 million] for

Falconer's solution has been to help launch FSI Maritime, part of a British-run security firm called FSI Worldwide, based in Dubai. Working with elements of the Yemeni coastguard as well as providing former Gurkha and SBS soldiers to work on ships, it is the ultimate armed deterrent to the pirates.

"We're trying to show the shipping companies that we have solutions which are pretty damn good. If the insurance companies and shipping companies only trusted us, we could practically guarantee passage because you have professional soldiers on board. We have a deal with the Yemeni Navy to provide a 40-foot navy patrol boat armed to the teeth. Trust me, no pirate's going to come within a mile of that thing."

Falconer goes on to the ships with his men. "I'll do risk assessments on most of the new vessels, and I'll go out on some of the missions. The odds are nothing much will happen; it's boring. You're unlucky if you get kidnapped, really unlucky."

Mercenary by Duncan Falconer (Dh85, Sphere) is available from Magrudy's. Nick Ryan (www.nickryan.net) is the author of *Homeland: Into A World Of Hate*