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State Outsources Secret War

by JASON VEST

Best known as a place where the Air Force shoots satellites into orbit, the Eastern Space and Missile Center--just south of the Kennedy Space Center in Florida's Brevard County--would appear to focus solely on the wild blue yonder and beyond. Indeed, the 45th Space Wing's web page is pretty clear about the mission of Patrick Air Force Base and the adjacent Cape Canaveral Air Force Station: to enhance "national strength through assured access to space for Department of Defense, civil, and commercial users."

But according to a closely held government document, in the corner of the base that's occupied by the defense contractor Raytheon there's an operation that has absolutely nothing to do with the 45th's role as "premier gateway into space." In fact, the 10,000-square-foot fenced-in yard isn't used by Raytheon at all. Nor is the 62,000 square feet of office, storage and hangar space located at 1038 South Patrick Drive. Officially, it's the province of the State Department, which maintains a dedicated high-speed data line linking its Foggy Bottom headquarters in Washington with Buildings 984-986.

What the State Department is doing here has little to do with the genteel art of diplomacy but everything to do with combat. For all intents and purposes, South Patrick Drive is the gateway to the US government's private war in the South American Andes.

Building 985 at Patrick Air Force Base is occupied by at least two State Department officers and a handful of administrators from DynCorp, a giant contractor which does most of its \$1.4 billion in business with the US government--particularly in the realms of defense and intelligence. Since 1991, the company has effectively--and quietly--served as the State Department's private air force in the Andes, providing pilots and mechanics for US-owned aircraft. Both DynCorp and the State Department have been reticent about just what DynCorp does. A handful of media reports and public statements have shown that the company's pilots are flying fumigation and search-and-rescue missions, primarily in Colombia.

There's also been passing mention of DynCorp operating in Peru and Bolivia. But when reporters, activists and even members of Congress have asked for more details on what DynCorp does for the Aviation Division of State's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau, they've received nothing. Sometimes State simply doesn't respond. "We're hitting a stone wall here," sighs Nadeam Elshami, an aide to Representative Jan Schakowsky, who recently introduced a bill banning the use of private military companies like DynCorp in the Andes. "We've asked State for information, and we haven't received any yet."

Other times State says it can't say anything because to do so would compromise information proprietary to DynCorp that's protected by the "trade secrets exemption" in the Freedom of Information Act. If DynCorp ever responds to queries, it says it won't divulge any details because the State Department won't let it. "We haven't gotten any answers from them, either," says Elshami, "though they did contact us after Veronica Bowers's plane was shot down over Peru last month and told us they weren't involved. I think they made sure everyone knew that, but about what they're actually doing, no."

The Nation has obtained a copy of State's contract with DynCorp--a contract that requires all employees to have a "secret"-level clearance and "not communicate to any person any information known to them by reason of their performance of services." Additionally, it instructs DynCorp to "not refer to this award in any public or private advertising" or in the news media.

Looking through it, it's not hard to see why. The contract reveals DynCorp's Andean aerial counternarcotics operations to be far more expansive and far-flung than previously reported. From its "Main Operating Base" at Patrick AFB, DynCorp oversees an aerial fleet of forty-six helicopters and twenty-three fixed-wing aircraft which can operate from twenty-three locations spread out over Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. In some cases, DynCorp's operations are not limited to fumigation and search-and-rescue but, according to the contract, include maintenance and pilot training, aircraft ferrying, materiel transport, reconnaissance and flying local troops in to destroy drug labs and coca or poppy fields.

According to Federation of American Scientists secrecy specialist Steven Aftergood, the State-DynCorp contract is a prime example of how the executive branch is unilaterally projecting power and implementing policy without leaving a trace. "The kind of routine oversight that official military activities would be subjected to are evaded by contractors as a matter of course," he says. "This highlights how the whole phenomenon of privatizing military functions has enabled the government to evade oversight to a shocking degree."

Politically, the contract's specifics only reinforce concerns voiced by Representative Schakowsky and others that US taxpayers have been funding a secret war that has the potential to slowly but surely draw the United States further into a poorly understood counterinsurgency conflict. "What most people either forget or don't know," says Sanho Tree, director of the drug policy project at the Institute for Policy Studies, "is that conflict in Colombia is a civil war, and is not about drugs. But instead of doing things like infrastructure and economic development to connect with people who have been abandoned by their government, the first contact scores of peasants have with their government--and the United States, thanks to Plan Colombia--is with armed soldiers and herbicide-spraying aircraft, which only underscores the rebels' case. If the American people don't know the full extent of what's being done in their name, how can they make informed decisions?"

Perhaps the most interesting part of the contract deals with Bolivia, a country where DynCorp's activities have gone virtually unacknowledged and undocumented. Operating out of a main base at Santa Cruz and forward operating locations (FOLs) in Puerto Suarez, Chimore and Trinidad--as well as at staging areas in San Matia, Riberalta, San Ignaci and Via Montes--DynCorp's contractors both train mechanics and do maintenance work themselves on twelve State Department UH-1H ("Huey")

helicopters, and another ten Hueys provided by the Pentagon.

Used to transport troops to coca laboratories--as well as to fly reconnaissance missions--some Hueys belong to the Red Devil Task Force (RDTF), a little-known special unit of the Bolivian Air Force funded by the US government. According to the contract, DynCorp is "responsible for the military support, aircraft maintenance quality control and standardization of flight training for the RDTF," the latter including "some individual flight training" by DynCorp pilots. According to a recently retired DynCorp contractor, the company's pilots work with Red Devil pilots "day in and day out, hand in hand, on everything from keeping the log book to refueling, and are still actively training those pilots."

"I think this confirms the general sense that we have too little information about the kind of counternarcotics contract operations being carried out in the Andean region," says Gina Amatangelo, international narcotics fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America. Amatangelo says she'd be particularly interested to know if any DynCorp personnel working with the RDTF have flown for the government's Umopar mobile eradication unit, which has a documented history of human rights abuses.

In Colombia, DynCorp is required to support Bell 212 helicopter operations "seven days a week, twelve hours a day, in day, night, and NVG [night vision goggles] conditions." Operations include "search and rescue, host nation training, interdiction, command and control, and reconnaissance missions," specifically at two FOLs.

And there is no shortage of FOLs: In addition to the main base at El Dorado International Airport, DynCorp's personnel can apparently be found flitting between eight forward locations at La Remonta, Neiva, Apaiy Meta, Puerto Asis, San Jos?Tulua, Valledupar and Larandia. (According to the contract, there's also a maintenance base in Guaymaral, a training base under construction in Mariquita and three more forward bases planned for Florencia, Tres Aquines and Turbo.) The main mission continues to be "aerial opium poppy and coca reconnaissance and eradication" with fixed-wing T-65s and OV-10D Broncos--planes flown by both DynCorp pilots and their trainees, and maintained by DynCorp mechanics.

In Peru, as in Colombia and Bolivia, the State Department has instructed DynCorp to "collect, process, and disseminate aerial eradication flight path and spray data from 'Pathlink' [and/or] 'SATLOC'"--two high-tech recording and mapping systems--"to facilitate planning and analysis of aerial eradication and reconnaissance operations on deployment." This is particularly interesting since last month, after the Bowers shutdown, DynCorp spokeswoman Charlene Wheelless told reporters via e-mail that she wanted to "assure you that DynCorp does not provide surveillance services" in its areas of operation, especially Peru. When contacted by *The Nation*, another DynCorp spokeswoman, Janet Wineriter, clarified the statement, saying "We were speaking strictly about tracking aircraft." (When asked to comment on other aspects of the contract, Wineriter said that "I've never even seen the contract myself," but added that she was sure if it had been obtained from the State Department under the Freedom of Information Act, "You would certainly get it redacted.")

But in Peru, DynCorp does much, much more. In addition to having a presence at a large US government compound in Pucallpa, as a recent *Washington Post* reporter noted, DynCorp also

operates at forward locations including Tingo Maria, Santa Lucia, Mazamari and Tarapoto. For herbicide spraying, DynCorp has to be able to have four T-65s or four OV-10s simultaneously airborne, and has to both maintain the aircraft, train mechanics and train pilots both individually and as a unit.

According to a recently retired DynCorp veteran, while the company's people are "of the highest caliber--Delta guys, SEAL team guys, career military pilots and mechanics," most of the knowledge and experience they have isn't being passed on in training, insuring that the DynCorp contractors constantly operate in a very hands-on capacity. "It's probably one of the hardest things to put up with, because there's no perfect area or classroom to train people when they come in, and a lot of times they're in and then they move out, so you start over with new people, and then they move out," he says. "You always have the mission to adhere to first, and the mission is maintaining and flying those aircraft to spray and kill crops."

The veteran also says that DynCorp personnel have been tasked with rescuing army personnel whose missions may not be counternarcotics related. Not, he says, that the contractors mind. "Most people stay until they're ready to go, because they really like what they're doing. The contract is constantly changing to fulfill new requirements, so there will always be work." He pauses. "I haven't been down there in awhile, but in the time I worked for 'em, we went from having 120 people to 450 people."

For University of Wisconsin professor Alfred McCoy, the contract harks back to the days of his book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, originally published in 1972. "One of these days we may actually get all the records describing everything the CIA did in Laos, but we'll never get the records of the Continental Air Service, their contractor who worked there," he says. "The fact that this company is so large and is doing so much down there raises real questions of accountability. What's the relationship between the nominal drug war and the realities of counterinsurgency? If it's just the drug war, it raises questions about whether or not this is the best way to handle it, whether it's cost effective, what the consequences are. But the operations described here can very easily spill into involvement in counterinsurgency. And the worst-case scenario would be that we could become embroiled in a de facto counterinsurgency situation, because this is a privately held corporation for which there's no particular restraint."
