



## Details of Mission for CIA 'Black' Helicopters Revealed

In a tale that sounds like something out of a  spy movie, the New York Post has revealed intricate details about a secret mission to Russia to purchase "black" Mi-17 helicopters, a mission that landed a defense contractor and an army official in federal prison.

What would appear on the surface to be an open-and-shut case of corruption is actually far more complex upon closer examination. After dozens of interviews with people involved in the operation and gleaning new information from court documents and the jailed men's appeals, journalist Sharon Weinberger revealed a "story, that in some respects, is very different than the portrait painted by the government at trial," according to an article on Wired.com. Entitled "CIA's 'Black' Helicopters Land in Court.," the article was written by the author of the *New York Post* story.

Back in the winter of 2001, a group of Americans traveled on a private plane to a remote region in Siberia on tourist visas. But they weren't regular private citizens or tourists — the team was a mix of Central Intelligence Agency personnel traveling under false identities, Army personnel masquerading as private contractors, specialists in the modification of Russian aircraft for the U.S. military, and the man in charge of Maverick Aviation, Inc., the company that obtained the contract for acquisition of the helicopters.

There are certainly many oddities in the story recounted by the *Post*. The nearly \$5 million bill was paid using a credit card at a bar in El Paso. The group sent on the mission was detained upon arrival in Russia because the tourist visas had not arrived yet. And when the team was released and went to pick up the helicopters, it was informed that the choppers could not be released.

During their wait, they were instructed to pose as tourists, so they traveled around the area checking out the sights in what at times was close to negative 30-degree weather. In another strange development, the crew of the chartered plane that took them there grew tired of waiting and snuck off in the middle of the night, abandoning the team in Siberia, by bribing airport officials.

"I had the sense that I might end up in a Russian jail," said the team's Russian translator, Kimberly Boone, while testifying in court. "It was a nightmare." But eventually, the helicopters were cleared for release and loaded onto a cargo plane for a long trip to Afghanistan. Everything seemed to be going fine. The CIA considered the mission a success. A man whose company had also sought the contract later told law enforcement that he was surprised people considered those problems a big deal, explaining that purchasing helicopters in Russia is tough.

But other weird occurrences happened when the head of the Army team, Jeffrey Stayton, and the contractor, William Childree, finally made it back to America. A few days after getting home, the contractor paid off the army official's mortgage, worth over \$60,000.

That was the focus of a five-year investigation that finally sent the two men to prison, though they still insist it was a "loan between two friends of 30 years, and had nothing to do with the contract," as the *Post* story entitled "The CIA, Siberia and the \$5M Bar Bill" related it.

"Stayton, in his capacity as an ATEC official, took actions that favored Maverick's selection as the



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 20, 2009

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eventual contract recipient and misled government officials about Maverick's performance under the contract," the government claimed in a press release issued by the Department of Justice announcing the sentencing of the two men. But it is worth noting that Maverick Aviation offered the lowest bid, and the helicopters were delivered as promised. Compare that to another government contract highlighted in Wired's story: ARINC, a larger defense contractor, was paid \$322 million for 22 Russian helicopters for Iraq last year. So far, none have been delivered. Another oddity is that the judge in the trial barred any mention of classified information, including the CIA's involvement in the mission.

Stayton was eventually sentenced to 63 months in prison and three years of supervised release for fraud and obstruction of justice, while Childree received a sentence of 27 months and three years supervised release. Both men were cleared of bribery but were still slapped with a \$61,071.75 fine.

They are appealing their convictions and arguing that if the jury had known all the facts in the case, they would have realized the odd portions of the tale were not indicative of poor performance requiring a coverup, which is what the government claims.

The CIA would not comment on the story.



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