

Danger Room
What's Next in National Security

CIA's 'Black' Helicopters Land in Court

By Sharon Weinberger [✉](#) August 17, 2009 | 8:56 am | Categories: [Af/Pak](#), [Miscellaneous](#), [Russia](#), [Spies](#), [Secrecy and Surveillance](#)



More

than seven years ago a group of Americans traveled to Siberia to buy a pair of Russian Mi-17 helicopters for the CIA's post-9/11 clandestine operations in Afghanistan. As with many "black" programs, the contract had elements of craziness: Contracting officials paid the multimillion-dollar contract on a credit card at a local El Paso bar and then used the credit card rebate to redecorate their office; the team traveled under the guise of being private contractors; and the charter crew transporting the group abandoned the team in Russia in the middle of the night.

Ultimately, a five-year investigation into the mission led to the conviction of the Army official in charge and the contractor who bought the helicopters on charges of corruption. The two men, currently in federal prison, are appealing their convictions.

At first glance, it's a simple case: A few days after returning from Russia, the contractor paid off the second mortgage of the Army official in charge of the mission. Prosecutors argued that the contractor, Maverick Aviation, was unprepared for the mission, and the Army official helped cover up the problems in exchange for a payoff. The defendants at trial were barred from mentioning the CIA, Afghanistan or even 9/11.

In an article for *The New York Post*, this author looks at what really happened in Siberia based on over two dozen interviews with people involved in the mission and trial. It's a story, that in some respects, is very different than the portrait painted by the government at trial.

One interesting comparison not mentioned in the article is worth noting in light of recent purchases of Russian helicopters: In 2001, Maverick Aviation was paid \$5 million for two freshly overhauled Mi-17s and spare parts, as well as travel and logistics for team of Army/CIA personnel, and got the helicopters out of Russia in under 30 days. In 2008, ARINC, a major U.S. defense contractor, was paid \$322 million dollars to buy 22 Russian helicopters under a U.S. foreign military sales contract.

Guess how many helicopters ARINC has delivered to Iraq after 18 months? Zero.

Check out the full story at the *New York Post*.

[Photo: U.S. Air Force. The photograph, taken in March 2002, shows a CIA helicopter in Afghanistan. The tail number is traceable back to Maverick Aviation.]

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