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## C.I.A. Expanding Terror Battle Under Guise of Charter Flights



Pavel Horejsi for The New York Times

A Casa 235 about to take off from Ruzyně Airport in Prague on a flight to Afghanistan operated by the C.I.A.-connected Aero Contractors.

By **SCOTT SHANE, STEPHEN GREY** and **MARGOT WILLIAMS**  
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*This article was reported by Scott Shane, Stephen Grey and Margot Williams and written by Mr. Shane.*

SMITHFIELD, N.C. - The airplanes of Aero Contractors Ltd. take off from Johnston County Airport here, then disappear over the scrub pines and fields of tobacco and sweet potatoes. Nothing about the sleepy Southern setting hints of foreign intrigue. Nothing gives away the fact that Aero's pilots are the discreet bus drivers of the battle against terrorism, routinely sent on secret missions to Baghdad, Cairo, Tashkent and Kabul.

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When the Central Intelligence Agency wants to grab a suspected member of Al Qaeda overseas and deliver him to interrogators in another country, an Aero Contractors plane often does the job. If agency experts need to fly overseas in a hurry after the capture of a prized prisoner, a plane will depart Johnston County and stop at Dulles Airport outside Washington to pick up the C.I.A. team on the way.

Aero Contractors' planes dropped C.I.A. paramilitary officers into Afghanistan in 2001; carried an American team to Karachi, Pakistan, right after the United States Consulate there was bombed in 2002; and flew from Libya to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, the day before an American-held prisoner said he was questioned by Libyan intelligence agents last year, according to flight data and

other records.

While posing as a private charter outfit - "aircraft rental with pilot" is the listing in Dun and Bradstreet - Aero Contractors is in fact a major domestic hub of the Central Intelligence Agency's secret air service. The company was founded in 1979 by a legendary C.I.A. officer and chief pilot for Air America, the agency's Vietnam-era air company, and it appears to be controlled by the agency, according to former employees.

Behind a surprisingly thin cover of rural hideaways, front companies and shell corporations that share officers who appear to exist only on paper, the C.I.A. has rapidly expanded its air operations since 2001 as it has pursued and questioned terrorism suspects around the world.

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An analysis of thousands of flight records, aircraft registrations and corporate documents, as well as interviews with former C.I.A. officers and pilots, show that the agency owns at least 26 planes, 10 of them purchased since 2001. The agency has concealed its ownership behind a web of seven shell corporations that appear to have no employees and no function apart from owning the aircraft.

The planes, regularly supplemented by private charters, are operated by real companies controlled by or tied to the agency, including Aero Contractors and two Florida companies, Pegasus Technologies and Tepper Aviation.

The civilian planes can go places American military craft would not be welcome. They sometimes allow the agency to circumvent reporting requirements most countries impose on flights operated by other governments. But the cover can fail, as when two Austrian fighter jets were scrambled on Jan. 21, 2003, to intercept a C.I.A. Hercules transport plane, equipped with military communications, on its way from Germany to Azerbaijan.

"When the C.I.A. is given a task, it's usually because national policy makers don't want 'U.S. government' written all over it," said Jim Glerum, a retired C.I.A. officer who spent 18 years with the agency's Air America but says he has no knowledge of current operations. "If you're flying an executive jet into somewhere where there are plenty of executive jets, you can look like any other company."

Some of the C.I.A. planes have been used for carrying out renditions, the legal term for the agency's practice of seizing terrorism suspects in one foreign country and delivering them to be detained in another, including countries that routinely engage in torture. The resulting controversy has breached the secrecy of the agency's flights in the last two years, as plane-spotting hobbyists, activists and journalists in a dozen countries have tracked the mysterious planes' movements.

### Inquiries From Abroad

The authorities in Italy and Sweden have opened investigations into the C.I.A.'s alleged role in the seizure of suspects in those countries who were then flown to Egypt for interrogation. According to Dr. Georg Nolte, a law professor at the University of Munich, under international law, nations are obligated to investigate any substantiated human rights violations committed on their territory or using their airspace.

*Ford Fessenden contributed reporting for this article.*

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