

The CIA's torture taxi

The trail of a secret spy plane leads to a mysterious outfit in Reno with ties to a prominent Nevada politico.

By A.C. Thompson and Trevor Paglen

THIS IS A story about an airplane, a Boeing 737 passenger jet.

This is also a story about torture, the war on terrorism, and the Central Intelligence Agency's practice of quietly snatching suspected terrorists and transporting them to dungeons in far-off lands, where, allegedly, they're detained indefinitely – without charges in any court of law in any country – drugged, beaten, threatened, and interrogated. –These two narrative threads, as you've probably guessed by now, are interwoven. A growing body of evidence suggests the plane you're about to read about is used by CIA agents to shuttle prisoners to clandestine jails around the world. And new clues, revealed here for the first time, link this airliner to a small office in Reno, Nev. – and to one of the biggest figures in Nevada politics.

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The Boeing passenger jet in question, which trundled off the assembly line in Washington state in late 2001, looks unremarkable from the outside. Its paint scheme is low profile: The top half is painted white, the bottom is painted gray, and red and blue striping runs along the midsection of the vehicle and up the tail fin. There is no corporate logo of any sort on the aircraft. Stamped on the fuselage near the rear of the plane is a key clue to its shadowy life, a tracking code known as a "tail number," essentially the Federal Aviation Administration's version of a license plate.

FAA records show plane number N313P was initially purchased by a Massachusetts company called Premier Executive Transport Services Inc., a tiny firm that owned one other plane.

As soon as Premier acquired the Boeing, the company began making intriguing modifications to what is normally a short-range aircraft – mainly the sorts of things you'd do if you wanted to fly epic distances without stopping for gas. The changes are documented in a thick sheaf of FAA paperwork obtained by the *Bay Guardian*.

First, Premier tweaked the wings, installing "winglets," little vertical fins designed to help planes take off from short runways and under tough weather conditions and to boost fuel efficiency, and thus, range. Next, Premier put in an auxiliary fuel tank system, adding seven extra fuel cells, again increasing the vehicle's range. Then, in 2002, the plane was sent off to a hangar in Dallas, where technicians added a sophisticated data and antenna system, a 24-inch flat-panel TV, and a new "executive interior."

Around this time, a Bay Area guy, a brainy character with a background in science and a penchant for speaking in baffling aerospace jargon, became one of the first people to notice that something strange was going on with plane number N313P. We met this gentleman, whom we'll call Ray, on a blustery night in early December in a dimly lit burger joint in the East Bay suburbs. Ray's a hardcore planespotter, one of those somewhat eccentric hobbyists who spend their free time tracking the flights of aircraft by sifting through FAA data, airplane radio transmissions, and the Web postings and snapshots of other planespotters.

There are dozens of planespotter Web sites – Airliners.net, Landings.com, and Flightaware.com are among the most popular – loaded with photos of aircraft and arcane facts about modern aviation. Some sites are focused on commercial planes, while others are dedicated to ferreting out details about military vehicles and classified experimental craft. Planespotters tend to be inveterate data-fetishists, men obsessed with the accumulation of facts – and over the past year, some of those facts have migrated from their insular online universe to the mainstream media, causing migraines for the CIA and the Bush administration.

Ray, who uses some, shall we say, *interesting* methods to get some of his information, has asked us not to use his real name for this story. He greeted us with a half joke. "There's no story here! Condoleezza Rice says we don't torture people," he said, laughing and pointing to a story on the front page of *USA Today*.

Back in 2002, Ray and fellow planespotters started noticing some odd flights: civilian planes traveling to places like Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Libya, and Uzbekistan – the kind of thing Ambrose Bierce meant when he famously declared that "war is God's way of teaching Americans geography." Planespotters slowly developed an index of the tail numbers of these aircraft, but as Ray and his pals started searching for more information about the jets, they stumbled into a spider web of front companies, cover stories, half-truths, and obvious lies.

Ray *could* verify one thing, however. For some reason, plane N313P had blanket permission to land at any US Army base anywhere in the world, a fact that sparked his curiosity, since very few private companies are allowed that level of access to military facilities. Army records indicate the service has issued only 24 such permits in the past two years. Planespotter listservs bubbled with speculation that the plane was a spookmobile, a vehicle owned by a phony front company and used by the CIA to carry out agency missions.

The notion certainly wasn't implausible. The spy agency has a well-documented history of creating bogus aviation firms to cover its tracks, most notably Air America, a Vietnam-era company that later became the subject of a Hollywood film.

Eventually Ray got another juicy clue: Using FAA data, he caught the plane making a trip from the States to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Given the intense secrecy surrounding the controversial base, where the US is holding thousands of men pulled off the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ray couldn't imagine the military opening up its Gitmo landing strip to a civilian plane owned by an insignificant little company. "That's when I realized that these things were the real deal," he said.

He became convinced it was being used for "extraordinary rendition," the process of dragging purported terrorists to countries where regard for human rights is low and the use of torture in eliciting testimony is common.

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At this point, there's little doubt the plane served as Langley's torture taxi. The *Washington Post*, *60 Minutes*, and numerous German media outlets have all tied Boeing number N313P to the agency, and all traces of its putative owner, Premier, have vanished. The company's boss appears to be a completely fictional character.

It was the Boeing's alleged role in the kidnapping of a German citizen, a 42-year-old man of Lebanese descent named Khaled El-Masri, that put Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the defensive during her recent visit to Germany.

"We know the CIA is using a fleet of some 26 planes," said Steven Watt, a human rights expert with the American Civil Liberties Union who is working on El-Masri's behalf. The agency's network of front companies, Watt argued, is "complicit in unlawful acts of torture and detainment."

El-Masri's tale, laid out in a lawsuit filed in federal court Dec. 6 by the ACLU, reads like a post-9/11 spy novel. A really fucking scary spy novel.

According to the suit, El-Masri was forcibly abducted on New Year's Eve 2003, while on vacation in Macedonia. His captors – a rotating crew of armed Macedonians, apparently law enforcement agents of some sort – held him in a hotel room for 23 days, he claims. Eventually, El-Masri says, seven or eight men clad in black, their faces covered by black ski masks, entered the room. They hooded him, chained his wrists and ankles, wrapped him in a diaper, and threw him on a plane, where, he alleges, he was injected with some sort of sedative drug. ACLU investigators later identified the aircraft as plane N313P.

The Boeing purportedly ferried him, semiconscious, from Macedonia to Kabul, Afghanistan, making a stop in Baghdad on the way. In Kabul, the suit claims, "Mr. El-Masri was removed from the plane and shoved into the back of a waiting vehicle. The car drove for about ten minutes. Mr. El-Masri was then dragged from the vehicle, pushed into a building, thrown to the floor, and kicked and beaten on the head and the small of his back. He was left in a small, dirty, concrete cell. When he adjusted his eyes to the light, he saw that the walls were covered in crude Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi writing. The cell did not contain a bed."

The ACLU believes the jail was a secret CIA detention center, a former brick factory outside Kabul called the "Salt Pit." For five months, El-Masri says, he was locked in a solitary cell in the Salt Pit and interrogated by Arabic-speaking inquisitors who asked him repeatedly if he was involved with the Sept. 11 hijackers, if he'd journeyed to Jalalabad on a false passport, if he hung out with Islamic extremists living in Germany.

Problem was, El-Masri didn't have any terrorist connections. He was the wrong guy, a conclusion the agency apparently reached in late May 2004, when, El-Masri says, he was thrown on another plane and dumped in Albania.

The ACLU's Watt said "the allegations are substantiated by flight records" placing plane N313P in Macedonia, Iraq, and Afghanistan during the times at issue. As of mid-2004, FAA records show, the plane had spent more than 1,300 hours in the skies, enough time to make 100 flights between the US and Kabul.

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The story doesn't stop with Premier. When journalists started connecting the dots in 2004, Premier sold the Boeing to a Reno firm called Keeler and Tate Management Group LLC. The transaction is recorded in FAA documents we obtained.

Though Keeler and Tate is named in the ACLU's suit – along with Premier, another aviation outfit, and former CIA chief George Tenet – nobody's really checked out the company yet, so we decided to take a little trip up I-80 to northern Nevada to see what we could uncover. Things got shady fast.

On a cold, gray December day, we paid a visit to the Nevada secretary of state's office, a little stone building in Carson City, a small town nestled between snow-flecked Sierra peaks. The office, which oversees all businesses incorporated in the state, has several documents related to Keeler and Tate on file – and all of them look screwy.

According to the state records, Keeler and Tate is owned by a guy named Tyler Edward Tate, whose signature appears on three different official documents. The signatures vary markedly from document to document. Obviously we're not handwriting experts, but we got the distinct impression they weren't made by the same person.

In fact, there doesn't appear to be a Tyler Edward Tate anywhere near Reno, because he's not in the white pages and the name didn't pop up in an extensive review of online databases.

The only live person we could find on the Keeler and Tate paperwork was Steven F. Petersen, an attorney who acts as its "registered agent." A registered agent is someone who handles any subpoenas or lawsuits served on a business.

Petersen runs his practice from a suite at 245 East Liberty St. in Reno; it's the same address listed on Keeler and Tate's official letterhead and is the only address listed on any document related to the company. We headed there next.

We got a surprise when we arrived at the building, a five-story brown-glass office cube in downtown Reno, a few blocks from the neon-lit casino strip. Petersen shares his suite with a guy with deep Washington, DC, connections, a man named Peter Laxalt.

Petersen and Peter Laxalt have a clear business relationship. The sign on the office door says Laxalt is "of counsel" to Petersen's law firm, meaning he works with Petersen.

The building directory says the suite is also home to the Reno branch of the Paul Laxalt Group, a major Capitol Hill lobbying firm.

A little background is in order: Peter and Paul Laxalt are brothers. A hawkish Republican, Paul Laxalt is one of the bigger names in Nevada politics, having served as governor, from 1967 to 1971, and later as a US senator, from 1974 to 1987. He was a close confidant of Ronald Reagan (heading his election campaigns on three occasions), a strong supporter of the MX nuclear missile program, and a liaison between the Senate and the White House during the Iran-Contra scandal. An Army veteran, he was also, according to the *New York Times*, a good friend of late CIA director William Casey.

After leaving Congress, Paul Laxalt pulled a classic politico move, promptly forming a lobby shop, dubbing it the Paul Laxalt Group, and hiring his brother Peter.

We dropped by the office three times and confirmed that both Petersen and Peter Laxalt use the space, but we couldn't get past the receptionists, who, for some reason, didn't seem too freaked-out when we started talking about the CIA, torture, and mysterious aviation companies. Stymied, we placed a call to the DC headquarters of the Paul Laxalt Group, where we reached an employee named Tom Loranger, who told us, "We don't have an office in Reno.... I don't think Peter is working for us any more."

Later, we called the office at 245 East Liberty one last time. The receptionist said we had indeed reached the Paul Laxalt Group, but, unfortunately, Peter Laxalt wasn't available. She took a message; he never called back.

At the ACLU, Watt admitted he's still piecing together the Keeler and Tate puzzle, but he feels certain the firm is simply Langley's latest ruse. "If I were a resident of Reno and I knew a local company had a role in human rights abuses, I wouldn't be overly happy about it," he said, adding that by his tally, at least 150 people have been the victims of extraordinary renditions.

One thing is clear. FAA flight logs reveal the plane, which now bears a new number, is still flying, taking off regularly from a North Carolina airfield that the *New York Times* has linked to the CIA.

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We spent the night at the El Dorado, a garish hotel-casino that happens to have cheap rooms and wireless Internet access. Now, generally speaking, we're not big on gambling, but we were in Reno, and in Reno gambling is practically a civic responsibility, so we decided to examine the odds.

Perhaps this is all just strange coincidence – what appears to be a CIA shell company operating out of the office of Peter Laxalt, brother to a big-time Washington powerbroker who counted as his friend a notorious spymaster and former head of the agency. Maybe Keeler and Tate is a thoroughly legit outfit.

But we seriously doubt it. When you walk into a situation this spooky, there's only one way to place your bet. **E-mail A.C. Thompson at acthompson@hushmail.com and Trevor Paglen at tpaglen@berkeley.edu.**

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