

Plea is likely in bribery at SOCom

A contractor is expected to plead guilty to accepting money for his recommendations on equipping forces at MacDill.

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TAMPA - A defense contractor at Special Operations Command is scheduled to plead guilty today to taking bribes from companies seeking to equip the nation's secret military commandos.

William E. Burke, 49, of Odessa, who works for a Virginia private engineering firm, will plead guilty to one count of bribery, according to a federal plea agreement.

Burke was in charge of determining which weapons and military equipment would be tested and used by Special Operations Forces. His recommendations reached the Office of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon.

Since Sept. 11, SOCom, which is based at MacDill Air Force Base, has played a growing role in the war on terror. Its budget has nearly doubled to \$6.6-billion, and staff levels have increased by 6,000 to 51,441.

The guilty plea comes at a difficult time for SOCom, as Congress questions the legitimacy of a criminal investigation into allegations that the command hid \$20-million at the direction of the Pentagon.

While the federal bribery charge carries a maximum penalty of \$250,000 and 15 years in prison, federal prosecutors have agreed to seek weaker penalties as a part of a plea agreement.

In return, Burke has agreed to implicate others involved in the kickback scheme, said Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Indian Shores, chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

Young said he was briefed on the agreement Thursday afternoon.

Col. Samuel Taylor, a SOCom spokesman, said he was not familiar with the case and could not comment.

Federal prosecutor Robert O'Neill also declined to comment, as did Burke and his attorney.

Burke worked for Sentel Corp., a multimillion-dollar company that employs about 300 people nationwide, with employees like Burke on special assignments.

Burke had been working at SOCom in Tampa since 1999.

His job was to test and evaluate equipment and rank which private defense contractors deserved federal contracts.

"Defendant was hired to provide analysis, acquisition and sustainment of special operations forces . . . unique equipment and material," according to the plea deal.

At some point, a yet unnamed individual worked out a kickback scheme with Burke.

In September 2004, Burke formed a company based out of his house called Carlisle Bradford Enterprises,

which received at least \$12,000 from the unnamed individual over time.

Burke's company has no relation to the Carlyle Group, a billion-dollar private investment firm that invests in defense and national security companies, and once employed former President George Bush as a consultant.

Burke used his company, which he closed a week before being charged with bribery, to legitimize the kickback scheme by providing "market research" to the unnamed person, according to federal records.

"The payments were, in part, for (Burke's) assistance, and in part, for the agreement to assist the other individual by providing preferential treatment to specific contractors who were represented by this other individual," the plea agreement says.

In the billion-dollar world of defense weapons systems, Burke's suggestions carried a lot of weight.

If a proposal was not placed on the SOCom "nomination list" to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, it could not receive congressional funding, the plea deal said.

"In addition," the agreement said, "if the item was placed on the back of the SOCom submission to OSD, its chances of approval were diminished."

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