

Colonel pleads not guilty in SOCom scam

The retired Army officer faces charges of bribery and fraud related to defense contracts for the MacDill-based command.

By PAUL DE LA GARZA

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TAMPA - Before he retired last year, Army Col. Tom Spellissy played a key role in the war on terror, helping to arm special operations forces.

As chief of special programs at Special Operations Command, he briefed the SOCom commander, Army Gen. Bryan "Doug" Brown, throughout the year.

On Wednesday afternoon, Spellissy, 48, was in leg irons, standing before a federal judge to answer bribery and fraud charges.

Prosecutors say the 48-year-old Spellissy became a consultant and paid thousands of dollars in bribes to help his clients land defense contracts with SOCom.

He allegedly paid the money to 49-year-old William Burke, a private contractor at SOCom who pleaded guilty to bribery last month and agreed to cooperate with investigators.

Spellissy, of Clearwater, pleaded not guilty Wednesday and vowed to fight the charges.

"We're in for the long haul," he said after the hearing.

Magistrate Judge Elizabeth Jenkins set bail at \$25,000 and ordered Spellissy to surrender his passport.

She also placed travel restrictions on him.

At SOCom, based at MacDill Air Force Base, spokesman Col. Samuel Taylor said the bribery investigation is not over.

"There are others that are being looked at," he said.

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SOCom, which oversees the nation's elite commandos, is leading the war on terrorism.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, its budget has gone from \$3.8-billion to \$6.6-billion, while staff levels have increased by 6,000 to 51,441.

Unlike other military commands, SOCom is charged by law to develop and buy the equipment used to arm special operations forces.

That's where Burke and Spellissy came in.

Both men had been at SOCom since 1999.

Burke's job was to test and evaluate equipment and rank which private defense contractors deserved federal contracts. Spellissy worked in the same area.

After a 25-year military career, Spellissy retired last December with an honorable discharge.

But, according to a nine-page indictment unveiled Tuesday, he had formed a consulting company, Strategic Defense International Inc., months earlier on April 23, 2004.

His client list included "various companies" seeking to do business with SOCom, whose procurement budget in fiscal 2005 totaled \$1.8-billion.

Burke, of Odessa, formed his own company, Carlisle Bradford Enterprises, in September 2004.

By then, prosecutors say, the ruse was in full swing.

Beginning in early 2004 until July 26, 2005, Spellissy used his company "to make illegal payments" to Burke, the indictment said.

Burke, in turn, used his company to accept the illegal payments.

"It was further part of the conspiracy that defendant Thomas F. Spellissy would and did notify William E. Burke as to which companies he represented," the indictment said.

"It was further part of the conspiracy that William E. Burke would and did provide preferential treatment to specific contractors represented by defendant Thomas F. Spellissy."

The indictment did not name the companies Spellissy represented, nor did it say whether they were aware of the alleged bribery.

The indictment said Burke gave preferential treatment to "certain projects" affiliated with Spellissy.

According to SOCom, Burke "worked on what can best be described as soldier systems, which includes things like lightweight communications systems, ammunition, small arms, etc."

The indictment cites several e-mails Burke and Spellissy sent one another, but does not discuss content.

The indictment also documents wire transfers - both from domestic banks and international banks - from Spellissy to Burke.

The earlier indictment against Burke said Burke received several thousand dollars and was promised substantial money "down the road."

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One writer once likened Spellissy to basketball legend Pistol Pete Maravich.

It was during Spellissy's high school days at Clearwater Catholic. A forward, Spellissy made the Suncoast first team sponsored by the *St. Petersburg Times* in March of 1975.

A newspaper story compared him to Maravich.

"Black hair flying, two fingers high in the air and a running style reminiscent of Pistol Pete Maravich, Clearwater Catholic's Tom Spellissy is the very picture of confidence on court," the story said.

Spellissy graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1979.

He commanded battalions in Fort Sill, Okla., and Germany, according to a biography Spellissy gave to a defense industry conference in 1999.

He served as a military analyst at MacDill-based Central Command.

Throughout his career, he received glowing evaluations, said Spellissy's attorney, Pat Doherty.

"He is an extraordinary person and a patriot," Doherty said.

On Wednesday, as Spellissy made his first court appearance, he sat next to two other defendants: a man charged in a prostitution ring and a woman accused of drug charges.

Doherty acknowledged Spellissy had business dealings with Burke but said they were all legal.

Doherty thinks Spellissy got caught up in the bribery investigation as a result of the "parked funds" investigation at SOCom.

In that case, investigators looked into allegations that SOCom hid \$20-million from Congress in the budget three years ago.

Doherty said Spellissy refused to hide money in any of the programs that he controlled.

SOCom has denied that the parked funds investigation led to the bribery case.

In a previous interview with the *Times*, Spellissy said he could shed light on the investigation. He characterized Burke as honorable and a patriot.

Outside the courtroom Wednesday, Doherty declined to discuss the defense strategy.

But he questioned Gen. Brown's motives in ordering the bribery investigation.

"I think there are some unusual things happening here," Doherty said.

Separately, military investigators and the FBI are looking into allegations contained in an anonymous letter charging corruption in defense contracts at SOCom. The letter accuses Brown of illegally influencing contracts.

SOCom, which has initiated the various investigations, has said the letter is meant to distract investigators from the bribery investigation.

On Wednesday, Taylor, the SOCom spokesman, went a step farther.

He said the letter writer could be Burke or Spellissy.

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