

BLACKWATER, THE NEXT INSTALLMENT

This rather wandering piece by James Risen on Blackwater has several pieces of news. First, Panetta is trying to figure out whether BW was officially involved with the CIA in “operational” missions.

Leon E. Panetta, the C.I.A. director, recently initiated an internal review examining all Blackwater contracts **with the agency** to ensure that the company was performing no missions that were “operational in nature,” according to one government official. [my emphasis]

Note the scope, though: Panetta’s checking whether BW was contracting **with the CIA**. Not whether they were involved in operational missions. Compare that to Risen’s description of his sources.

Five former Blackwater employees and four current and former American intelligence officials interviewed for this article would speak only on condition of anonymity because Blackwater’s activities for the agency were secret and former employees feared repercussions from the company.

He describes the intel folks as generic intel—which could be CIA, but also could be DOD or something else. (Just as interesting, the BW guys plead fear of repercussions from the company; remember, several BW employees have alleged that Prince was taking out whistle blowers.)

And note how quickly Risen goes from discussing the way providing security became assistance on raids—to the inclusion of Delta Force and Navy Seals.

In addition, Blackwater was charged with providing personal security for C.I.A. officers wherever they traveled in the two countries. That meant that Blackwater personnel accompanied the officers even on offensive operations sometimes begun in conjunction with Delta Force or Navy Seals teams.

Which is what the subtext of this story seems to point to: first, the possibility that the operational aspects were contracted not through the CIA, but through DOD (which would make it easier to put it through on a supplemental, and therefore much easier to hide it from the Intelligence Committees); and also the likelihood that everyone in Baghdad knew about this, but the top brass in CIA did not.

But it is not clear whether top C.I.A. officials in Washington knew or approved of the involvement by Blackwater officials in raids or whether only lower-level officials in Baghdad were aware of what happened on the ground.

And then there's this. In Prince's VF piece, he was sweating the various legal cases against BW. Risen implies—but does not say—that the weapons smuggling case in NC points to the use of non-authorized weapons.

... a federal grand jury in North Carolina is investigating a wide range of allegations of illegal activity by Blackwater and its personnel, including gun running to Iraq.

Several former Blackwater personnel said that Blackwater guards involved in the C.I.A. raids used weapons, including sawed-off M-4 automatic weapons with silencers, that were not approved for use by private contractors.

Which I guess would make it easier to hide the

involvement of contractors.

Now, for BW's part, they deny everything. Mark Corallo (recycled from having helped Karl Rove work the press in the CIA Leak case) denies both primary allegations that BW employees told Risen they had been involved in: snatch and grab ops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and rendition flights (and Corallo is very disciplined in denying **both** a CIA contract and a JSOC one on raids, but not rendition flights).

Mark Corallo, a spokesman for Blackwater, said Thursday that it was never under contract to participate in clandestine raids with the C.I.A. or with Special Operations personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else.

[snip]

Intelligence officials deny that the agency has ever used Blackwater to fly high-value detainees in and out of secret C.I.A. prisons that were shut down earlier this year. Mr. Corallo, the Blackwater spokesman, said that company personnel were never involved in C.I.A. "rendition flights," which transferred terrorism suspects to other countries for interrogation.

I'm particularly fascinated by this last detail: BW didn't fly in and out of CIA prisons. But recall that in spring 2004, the government was trying to justify flying people captured in Iraq out of country to be tortured. Hassan Ghul, who has since disappeared in a Pakistan jail, is probably a key example of someone the government tried to fly out of Iraq, in blatant violation of the Geneva Convention.

So what if BW wasn't involved in **CIA** flights?

These are all fairly scattered details. But why Risen wrote them is my biggest question. Risen's got incredible sources, but he has especially close ties to CIA. Yet this story may be as much

sourced to disgruntled BW folks and JSOC folks
as CIA. So why is Risen, of all people, telling
this story?