

CIA admits training at Mena

2-week 'exercise' never divulged

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Democrat-Gazette Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — In a report certain to rev up an already-active rumor mill, the CIA acknowledged Friday that it has conducted operations at Arkansas' Mena Airport.

The small airport in Polk County at the far western edge of the state has long been the subject of speculation that it was a center of money laundering, drug smuggling and gunrunning — and that government officials knew about it.

Former State Trooper L.D. Brown has said that while he was under review for possible employment with the CIA in 1984, he took two airplane rides from Mena to Honduras. There, Brown said, M-16 rifles were distributed to members of the Nicaraguan Contras — anti-communist guerrillas the Reagan administration was supporting — in exchange for cocaine.

In a declassified summary of a report commissioned by House Banking Committee Chairman Jim Leach, R-Iowa, the CIA inspector general's office insisted it has come up with no evidence that the agency was involved in "money laundering, narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling or other illegal activities at or around Mena."

But the report, which involved a review of about 40,000 pages of materials and interviews with more than 40 people, acknowledged that the CIA did run "a joint training operation with another federal agency at Mena Intermountain Airport."

The report described it only as a "two week exercise" and said that the agency's involvement had been classified and never publicly disclosed.

One source familiar with various Mena investigations remarked that at the very least the inspector general's report tends to lend credence to the suspicion that the airport was used as a center for clandestine operations to supply the Contras.

The inspector general's office also acknowledged that the CIA

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used Mena for "routine aviation-related services" on equipment the agency owned. The report said that the companies and employees who did the work did not know their client was the CIA.

A spokesman for the agency said he could not elaborate on the report's revelations.

The report confirms that Brown was a candidate for CIA employment in 1984. It said the agency decided that December not to hire him.

CIA personnel also had "limited contact" with Adler Berri-man "Barry" Seal, a drug-trafficker and federal informant who Brown said took him along on the rides to Honduras.

According to the inspector general's report, the contact came during a federal Drug Enforcement Administration sting operation in which Seal flew the airplane.

The report said the CIA provided "technical support" in the form of cameras mounted into Seal's plane.

That much association to Clinton in 1984 was not true
Agents discussed with Seal where to place the cameras and how to operate them, but that was the extent of the CIA's contact with the drug runner, later shot dead in Baton Rouge, La., the inspector general's office concluded.

The report added there is "no evidence" that the CIA knew Seal's "true identity" at the time of the operation.

A source close to the CIA's internal investigation said the agency did not even know his name when its personnel were dealing with him on the drug sting.

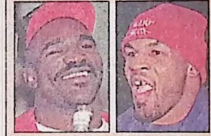
Although the report is clearly meant to quell rumors of a conspiracy among members of the Reagan administration and then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton to cover up a Mena-based guns-for-drugs operation, it seems likely to add more fuel to the fire.

Leach, who requested the CIA's report, refused to comment on it.

But in a statement, the congressman said his committee is continuing its own investigation of what happened at the Arkansas airport. Leach hopes to issue a report by the end of the year.



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