



# The Clayton News Star

## Rick Mercier - Zooming in on the 'torture taxis'

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For the first time, activists last week spotted – and photographed – one of the “torture taxi” planes at Johnston County Airport.

The plane, a turboprop with FAA registration number N168D, just happened to be near the headquarters of Aero Contractors, an air charter service that has been linked to the CIA’s practice of snatching people off the streets and sending them to countries where they can be tortured. Sometimes the kidnapped subjects are interrogated by Americans at U.S.-run secret prisons. Sometimes they are turned over to foreign agents for interrogation.

The European human-rights group Statewatch has identified N168D as a plane involved in the CIA’s kidnappings, which are euphemistically known as “extraordinary renditions.”

Amnesty International Canada also has made inquiries with the Canadian government about the plane, which has landed on several occasions in recent years in St. John’s, Newfoundland, on its way to faraway places such as Turkey, Jordan, Hungary, Azerbaijan and Iraq.

The plane isn’t owned by Aero Contractors but by a company out of Lexington (in Davidson County in the Triad) called Devon Holding and Leasing.

This is where things get a little murky. Devon Holding and Leasing doesn’t really exist. It has no physical offices and no phone listing. A couple of years ago, when a reporter for the Toronto Star was looking into rendition flights that stopped in St. John’s, he found that town officials in Lexington had never heard of the company; neither had the local Chamber of Commerce.

It is almost certain that the firm is one of the shell companies created by the CIA to conceal its ownership of the torture taxi planes. A New York Times investigation in 2005 found that the CIA owned at least 26 planes, 10 of them acquired since 2001. “The agency has concealed its ownership behind a web of seven shell corporations that appear to have no employees and no function apart from owning the aircraft,” the Times said.

As for Aero Contractors, the Times has described it as “a major domestic hub of the Central Intelligence Agency’s secret air

service.” That shouldn’t really come as a surprise. After all, as the Times notes, the company was created in 1979 by legendary CIA officer Jim Rhyne, who served as chief pilot for Air America, the agency’s Vietnam War-era air service.

Today, Aero Contractors apparently has become deeply involved in the CIA’s rendition program. And that means the company’s employees may be implicated in human-rights abuses.

Consider the case of Khaled El-Masri. He’s a German citizen who was snatched during a holiday in Macedonia and detained for five months in that country and in Afghanistan. He says he was beaten, drugged and sexually abused during his ordeal. He says that Americans were among his interrogators and were behind his abduction and detention.

El-Masri’s captors eventually realized he wasn’t the terrorism suspect they were looking for, and they dropped him off in Albania.

The German government has indicted 13 people in connection with El-Masri’s abduction. Three of them are pilots for Aero Contractors who are believed to live in the Clayton and Cleveland areas. The men face charges of kidnapping and causing serious bodily harm to El-Masri.

The pilots have been charged under their aliases – James Richard Fairing, Eric Matthew Fain and Kirk James Bird – but journalists and Internet sleuths think they have uncovered their real names. The investigative journalism Web site Sourcewatch.org posited Bird’s actual identity just last week.

I’m not going to use what are thought to be the men’s real names because, so far, they have been indicted only under their fake names. Also, their exact relationship with the CIA is unclear – and as we all now know, outing CIA agents can get you in trouble.

But you can go to Sourcewatch.org and see who the Web site says the pilots really are. On the site’s home-page, look for the “Search” box on the left-hand side. Type in “el-masri” and look under “Page text matches.” That’s where you’ll find links to pages about the pilots.

The pages detail the evidence pointing to the men’s real identities, so you can judge for yourself whether the Web site’s conclusions about the pilots are reliable.

So check it out, and also spend some time thinking about whether you really want our county to be known as home of the torture taxis.

If you decide the answer to that is no, consider getting involved in the movement to get Aero Contractors kicked out of Johnston County by contacting NC Stop Torture Now (visit [ncstoptorture.org](http://ncstoptorture.org))

now.net).

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