

# Enid News & Eagle

## Vance Simulator Instructors Caught in Unresolved DoD Decision on In-sourcing

By Jeff Mullin, Senior Writer

August 20, 2010

ENID — Replacing the civilian contractors who teach young pilots to fly in simulators at Vance Air Force Base with government employees was supposed to save the taxpayers money.

That turned out not to be true, according to the Air Force's own numbers.

Now Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has called a halt to the practice that has become known as in-sourcing. But the Air Force has not halted the process at Vance or other undergraduate pilot training bases.

That leaves Vance's sim instructors in a state of limbo, a state with which they have become all too familiar.

"This has been a tough year," said Ken Sumpter, president of the Vance Instructor Association.

The process began in December when it was decided simulator instructors would go from contractors to civil servants. This happened under the auspices of Resource Management Decision 802, announced by Gates in early 2009, that called for hiring 34,000 new civil service workers in place of contractors over the next five years.

The simulator instructors at Vance and other UPT bases like Laughlin AFB, Texas, and Columbus AFB, Miss., were told they would have to re-apply for their jobs and there was no guarantee they would be re-hired. This left instructors with 15 years of sim experience and thousands of hours of military flight time without jobs.

"Everybody was on pins and needles as to whether they would be re-hired," Sumpter said. "And, now, as we know, there are people who are not going to be re-hired."

Of the 85 people employed under the Lear Siegler Services Inc. simulator contract (which includes administrative personnel as well as instructors), roughly 10 percent have not been re-hired, including the Lear Siegler site manager Jack "Pappy" Beam, an Air Force veteran with combat experience in Vietnam.

Two people, one a supervisor at Vance, have taken other jobs at Laughlin AFB. The supervisor took a large pay cut.

"Some of my guys can't get hired here," Beam said, "but they can get hired at Laughlin or Columbus for the same job. Does that make any sense to you?"

Sumpter said he thinks as a contractor they can do a better job of providing the services at a cheaper rate than the GS (government service), "because GS workers have certain constraints on them."

That could impact the training mission at Vance, where instructors currently conduct between 120 and 150 simulator missions per day as well as 10 to 15 hours of classroom instruction per day.

“As GS we’re not going to be as flexible, we’re not going to be able to provide the service that really needs to be provided,” Sumpter said.

Vance’s sim instructors’ schedules are flexible. Their workday might begin at 5 a.m. and it might not end until about 10 p.m. Not so under the civil service system, which requires advance notice of schedule changes and does not allow for overtime. In addition the hiring process takes longer. The hiring process at Vance, begun in December, still is not completed.

The government originally estimated converting contract simulator instructor jobs to civil service would save \$480,000 over the next five years. But the Air Force now says the conversion actually will wind up costing taxpayers \$27.5 million.

“The Air Force put these numbers together, not us,” Beam said.

That doesn’t seem to jibe with the fact moving from working for a contractor to working for the government will result in an average pay cut of \$18,000 for the simulator instructors.

“We don’t have a retirement out of this program, we have a 401K,” Beam said. “GS has an annuity and a 401K.”

“So the taxpayer starts paying for our retirement,” Sumpter said.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who has joined Enid state Sen. Patrick Anderson, U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe and Rep. Frank Lucas in speaking out against the in-sourcing plan, estimates each government employee costs \$113,000 a year.

Losing experienced instructors will hurt Vance’s pilot training pipeline. Losing the tax revenue as a result of well-paid people leaving Enid or taking large pay cuts will hurt the local economy.

“We’re good for the community,” Sumpter said. “We provide a higher income level in the community than we will if we go GS, doing the same job. It’s probably a \$1.5 million to \$2 million impact per year to the community if we go GS.”

The simulator program at Vance has been run by contractors since 1991, the past 15 years under Lear Siegler. In that 15-year span there have been no written complaints from the Air Force.

“Matter of fact they’re very happy with what we’ve done,” Sumpter said.

Lear Siegler normally requires a 30-day notice if a contract is to be renewed. The company has waived that requirement in this case. The current contract is supposed to end Sept. 30, with the civil service instructors taking over Oct. 1.

As they wait for word from the Air Force, Vance’s sim instructors have a ray of hope. This week one of their number e-mailed Gen. Norton Schwartz, Air Force chief of staff, asking about the instructors’ status.

“Rest assured we will pursue a course of action consistent with both the guidance from the Department of Defense and the Air Force’s best interest,” the reply read, in part.

“The door is still open, I think,” Beam said.