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Scope of CIA Involvement In Weapons Deal Unclear

By SAM HEMINGWAY

Free Press Staff Writer

The remote compound on Vermont's border no longer shudders with the sound of another ballistics test. Munitions buyers from foreign lands no longer file past the security gate on their way to meetings with Space Research's band of crack engineers and scientists.

The legacy of Space Research Corp. — all that remains from the days the firm boasted of breakthroughs in rocket and munitions technology — is its now infamous arms-smuggling scheme that provided howitzer shells, gun barrels and weapons technology to South Africa but cost the firm its life.

Today the sprawling compound on Vermont's border with Canada at North Troy is the property of a freewheeling Arab investor mouthing many of the same ideas Space Research founder Gerald V. Bull, regarded by many as the Edward Teller of munitions, once extolled. Whether investor Saad Gabr can reignite Bull's dream remains to be seen. One thing is clear, however. No company will be allowed to operate the 1,200 acre compound quite like Space Research did.

Questions about the Space Research case, the largest known violation of the United Nations embargo against arms sales to apartheid-ruled South Africa, are many.

•How did the firm convince the Army to provide it upwards of 65,000 howitzer shell forgings without finding out where they were going?

•How were approvals to make those forgings for Space Research obtained so quickly — in only four days?

•Why did the State Department's Office of Munitions Control send Space Research a letter so easily construed as a waiver of all licensing requirements for export of the forgings?

•How could 16 individuals working for a firm so obviously involved in munitions travel back and forth from South Africa undetected by Customs officials?

•Finally, why did only two company officials — Bull and former president Col. Rodgers L. Gregory — get singled out for punishment when so many other parties within and without the federal government were involved.

A U.S. House subcommittee investigating the Space Research affair last week issued a report on its findings and attempts to answer many of those questions. In most instances, the answers suggest a perplexing chain of "mistaken actions" and fumbling by federal agencies, sometimes caused by apparent lax procedures, other times permitted as the result of a lack of any procedure to deal with possible improprieties altogether.

But the biggest question of all — How much of a role did the Central Intelligence Agency play in the arms smuggling scheme? — remains unresolved. Clearly, the findings in the 46-page report, based on federal grand jury documents and interviews with more than 50 people connected with the case, show the agency had knowl-

edge of the affair.

In its conclusion, the report contends, "At the very least, this episode suggests serious negligence on the part of the Agency (CIA). At the most, there is a possibility that elements of the CIA purposefully evaded U.S. policy."

The story of the CIA's involvement in the case — much of it documented in the past during a series of stories on the case published by the Burlington Free Press — is a complicated one indeed.

The origins of the Space Research deal can be traced to the battlefield in Angola in 1975. Forces supported and financed by the CIA were warring with Soviet-backed troops and the fight was not going well.

Encouraged by the CIA, South African troops had invaded Angola only to find themselves outmatched by superior, Soviet-made artillery pieces, most notably the 155mm howitzer.

In October 1975 the South Africans told the CIA's station chief in Pretoria they badly needed the 155mm artillery to shore up their invasion. The request was carried to Washington, but was rejected by the National Security Council's "working group" on Angola as a potential violation of U.S. law.

According to the House report, the denial did not deter the CIA from pursuing the matter of fulfilling the South African request.