

Local & Region

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Analysts: Navy bribery trial to expose pervasive problem

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Dozens of U.S. Navy officials have admitted to being bought off by the gregarious, rotund Malaysian defense contractor known as “Fat Leonard” who plied them with prostitutes, Cuban cigars and free stays at the Philippines’ Shangri-La hotel, among other things.

Now as the last five of 34 defendants stand trial in federal court in San Diego, what’s more shocking is how little the case has changed the Navy’s way of doing business, according to former military officers and government watchdog advocates.

“You would expect that one of the largest corruption scandals in the history of the United States Navy would provoke pretty dramatic changes to prevent something like this from happening again in the future. But sadly, that’s not really the case,” said Dan Grazier, a former Marine who now works as a military analyst at the Project on Government Oversight in Washington.

The case has centered around Leonard Glenn Francis who admitted in 2015 to offering \$500,000 in bribes to Navy officers. In exchange, the officers passed him classified information and even went so far as redirecting military vessels to ports that were lucrative for his Singapore-based ship servicing company, Glenn Defense Marine Asia, or GDMA.

Twenty-nine people, mostly Navy officials, have pleaded guilty to helping Francis including providing classified ship schedules in exchange for extravagant outings in South Asia with prostitutes and meals with tabs totaling more than \$20,000.

“While scores of Navy officials were partying with Leonard Francis, a massive breach of national security was in full swing,” U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman



Assistant U.S. Attorneys Mark Pletcher, left, and Robert Huie, talk outside the federal courthouse, about the guilty plea of Leonard Francis, known in military circles as Fat Leonard, on bribery charges involving U.S. Navy officials in 2015 in San Diego. AP PHOTO/LENNY IGNELZI

said recently.

Prosecutors say Francis and his company overcharged the U.S. military by more than \$35 million for its services between 2004 and 2013, which included providing food and water to the ships at Pacific ports in Asia.

Francis, who is scheduled to be sentenced in July, has been cooperating with the U.S. Department of Justice since his arrest in 2013 in San Diego.

Five officers — Rear Adm. Bruce Loveless, Capt. David Newland, James Dolan and David Lausman, and Cmdr. Mario Herrera — have maintained their innocence and have gone to trial.

It’s unclear whether Francis, who is in poor health and has been under house arrest, will testify at the trial, which is expected to last months. Defense lawyers have been trying to prevent him from taking the stand after he gave his version of events in a podcast last year.

Navy officials vowed to clean up their contracting processes in response to the scandal and implemented more oversight. Sailors received more ethics training. Supply officers have less

independence. Goods and services now must be priced at current market rates as determined by the Navy’s Fleet Logistics Centers.

But that’s not enough for Grazier, who said the military needs to move away from contracting out so much of its work. As bases have closed worldwide, the Navy has increasingly turned to contractors to do what it once did in-house.

“I think unless the Navy really changes the way it does business, future Fat Leonards are just going to be more cautious, but it’s not going to change their practices,” Grazier said.

Grazier fears the case’s biggest impact has been on young people like his son who is an enlisted sailor.

“They think they’re signing up for something really noble, and then they see all these people that they’re supposed to look up to be having in such an unethical and often times illegal fashion,” Grazier said. “That’s hugely crushing for these young idealists. I think that’s one of the biggest tragedies of all this.”

Craig Hooper, a defense contractor, said the Navy needs to increase its audit-

ing teams and also adapt its rules so they fit the cultural norms of where it operates.

In Asia, for instance, it’s common to go out for drinks or dinner to form business relationships yet many junior officers are expected to pay out of their own pockets, though many can’t afford it. Hooper said the Navy should be footing those bills rather than creating situations that lend themselves to corruption.

Bryan Clark, a fellow at the Hudson Institute, said the Navy’s brass has also long turned a blind eye to contractors who might be unscrupulous but who could get things done. When he was a sailor in the Pacific more than 20 years ago, it was known then Francis was “sleazy,” but he was also well-connected in the region, he said.

He hopes the case will teach officers that those things can no longer be ignored, though he said it’s unfortunate that many high-ranking officers who were investigated got off with early retirements while lower-ranking officers were charged.

California bar investigating Trump lawyer for ethic breaches

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — The State Bar of California says it is investigating well-known conservative attorney John Eastman for possible ethics violations after the one-time candidate for state attorney general argued former U.S. President Donald Trump could stay in office despite losing the 2020 election.

Eastman, the former dean of Chapman University law school in Southern California, was one of Trump’s lawyers during the election. He wrote a memo that argued former Vice President Mike Pence could keep Trump in power by overturning the results of the election during a joint session of Congress convened to count electoral votes. Critics have likened that to instructions for staging a coup.

Pence refused to do that. But on the day of the vote count, Eastman spoke at a rally of Trump supporters in Washington. Shortly after that, Trump supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol.

Trump eventually left office. Since then, a committee of U.S. lawmakers investigating the attack has subpoenaed Eastman, along with nine other former White House aides.

Tuesday, the State Bar of California confirmed it has been investigating Eastman since September for potentially breaking the law and state ethics rules “in relation to the November 2020 presidential election.” Such investigations are usually kept secret, but the State Bar’s rules say it can publicly confirm them “when warranted for protection of the public.”

In a news release, the bar said “details of the investigation must remain confidential” to comply with state law and “give

the investigation the greatest chance of success.”

George Cardona, the State Bar’s chief trial counsel, investigates and prosecutes attorney disciplinary matters before the State Bar Court, which can recommend attorneys be either suspended or, in some cases, lose their licenses to practice law. The California Supreme Court ultimately decides what to do.

“A number of individuals and entities have brought to the State Bar’s attention press reports, court filings, and other public documents detailing Mr. Eastman’s conduct,” Cardona said. “We want to thank those who took the time to bring to our attention this information, which serves as the starting point for our investigation.”

The State Bar said Eastman knows about the investigation. But attempts to reach him on Tuesday were unsuccessful. There was no answer at a phone number listed for his law office in Anaheim and no way to leave a message.

Eastman has been a member of the California Bar since 1997, according to the Bar’s website. He was a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and a founding director of the Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence, a law firm affiliated with the Claremont Institute. He ran for California attorney general in 2010, finishing second in the Republican primary.

Eastman retired as dean of the Chapman University law school last year after more than 160 faculty members signed a letter calling for the university to take action against him.

CALIFORNIA BRIEFS

RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA

Firefighters battle blaze in Southern California forest

Firefighters on the ground and in the air battled a smoky wildfire Wednesday in Southern California’s Cleveland National Forest.

The fire was reported around 11:20 a.m. in the Holy Jim Trail area and by 2 p.m. had consumed about 400 acres (162 hectares) of brush along steep slopes.

Air tankers and helicopters dropped water and retardant on the blaze, dubbed the Jim Fire, national forest officials said.

No structures were threatened. The fire sent up a huge plume of smoke visible across Orange County.

It erupted on the last day of a winter heat wave, with temperatures in the 80s (about 29 Celsius) and very dry humidity levels. Rain and cooler temperatures were expected on Thursday.

The fire’s cause was under investigation.

LOS ANGELES

Adoptive parents arrested in killing of 2 California boys

The adoptive parents of two small California boys who were reported missing in 2020 have been charged with killing the children, although their bodies have not been found, authorities said Wednesday.

Trezell West and Jacqueline West were arrested Tuesday night on murder and other charges in an indictment returned by a grand jury, Kern County District Attorney Cynthia Zimmer told a news conference in Bakersfield.

Orrin West, 4, and his brother Orson, 3, were reported missing from their family’s backyard in the desert town of California City on Dec. 21, 2020. A huge search by law enforcement agencies and community members failed to find them.

“This morning, I’m saddened to announce that the investigation has revealed that Orrin and Orson West are deceased,” Zimmer said. “The investigation has also revealed that they died three months before their adoptive parents reported them missing.”

The district attorney said she was not permitted to reveal any facts of the case until the trial.

The grand jury heard testimony from 50 witnesses

over three months.

Zimmer said that a combination of direct and circumstantial evidence was presented, and the grand jury was convinced that the boys were dead.

“I would like to emphasize that the fact that law enforcement has not found their bodies does not preclude a murder prosecution,” Zimmer said. “As a matter of fact, there have been many, hundreds, of what we call no-body homicides prosecuted across the United States successfully.”

Both parents were being held without bail on two counts of second-degree murder, two counts of willful cruelty to a child and a count of false report of an emergency.

Arraignment was scheduled for Thursday in Kern County Superior Court. Zimmer said it won’t be known who the couple’s attorneys will be until the court appearance.

The family has four other children, two of them also adopted, and all are in protective custody, Zimmer said.

Zimmer said that a week after the boys were reported missing “crucial information came to light” that brought in the involvement of police in Bakersfield, about 60 miles (97 kilometers) west of California City.

The district attorney did not reveal anything about that information. But it is known that the family lived in Bakersfield before moving to California City in September 2020.

Asked if Orrin and Orson had actually ever been in California City, Zimmer said “that’s something we’re going to answer during the trial.”

Police and FBI agents searched a field in Bakersfield in March 2021, but the results of that effort were not revealed.

“We now realize that the search for the boys began after the real tragedy had already occurred. ... This is not a resolution in this case and there will not be a resolution completely in this case until these boys are brought home,” Bakersfield Police Chief Greg Terry said.

FRESNO

7 Fresno County inmates rushed to hospital overnight

Seven inmates from the Fresno County Jail were rushed to the hospital overnight after being exposed

to an unknown substance, authorities said.

Several ambulances were called to the jail around 10:30 p.m. on Tuesday after staff members noticed the inmates seemed ill, Tony Botti, spokesperson for the Fresno County Sheriff’s Office, told the Fresno Bee Wednesday.

A hazardous materials cleanup crew was sent to the jail. Authorities have not said what kind of substance the inmates were exposed to. Botti said the investigation is ongoing.

All the inmates are now doing OK and are expected to recover, he said.

SALINAS

Man pleads not guilty to killing California police officer

The man accused of fatally shooting a central California police officer during a traffic stop last weekend has pleaded not guilty to murder.

Gustavo Matias Morales was arraigned Tuesday on a murder charge with a special circumstance for killing a police officer, the Monterey County District Attorney’s Office said.

Salinas Police Officer Jorge David Alvarado was killed during a shootout that erupted after he pulled over a car late Friday.

“Morales suddenly pulled over in his vehicle, immediately exited, and fired a barrage of rounds at Officer Alvarado while quickly advancing on Officer Alvarado’s patrol car,” the DA’s office said in a statement.

Alvarado returned fire from the driver’s seat of his patrol car, the statement said.

Morales was arrested when he showed up at Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital with a gunshot wound to his left hand.

Alvarado’s death was the first of a police officer in the line of duty in nearly 80 years in Salinas, a city in a farming region about 100 miles (160 kilometers) south of San Francisco, Mayor Kimbley Craig said.

He was a five-year veteran of the police department who previously served in the U.S. Army and was deployed to Afghanistan, officials said.

Morales is scheduled to return to court on March 22, KION-TV reported.

—The Associated Press