



They'll train Saudis. From left: James D. Holland, Thomas P. Furey, William G. Welby and George Gastard in front of Alhambra headquarters of Vinnell Corporation

—AP Photo

The executive mercenaries

By Peter Arnett
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Several hundred former U.S. special forces soldiers and other Vietnam war veterans are being recruited by a private American contractor to train Saudi Arabian troops to protect oil fields.

One of the recruits calls himself an "executive mercenary."

The \$77 million Pentagon contract, awarded to the Vinnell Corporation of Los Angeles in January, is the first ever to a private American company to train a foreign army.

The contract calls for a 1,000-man Vinnell Corporation contingent to train four battalions of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, the 26,000-man internal se-

curity force commanded by King Faisal's half-brother Prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz.

These troops are primarily responsible for guarding the country's rich oil fields and petroleum export facilities. They also provide the key body-guard units for the Saudi Arabian royal family.

They supplement the rapidly modernizing 36,000-man Saudi Arabian regular army.

The U.S. government will provide the military hardware under a \$335 million contract signed with Saudi Arabia in 1974 that includes Vinnell's fee. Saudi Arabia will pay the U.S. government, which will in turn pay Vinnell.

Vinnell Corporation executives and American military men so far recruited are sensitive about

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suggestions that they are organizing a mercenary expedition.

"Maybe this contract has come about because the political climate of the day might be against the U.S. military sending such a big team," said Vinnell's general manager for special projects. Bob Montgomery. "But we are not creating a mercenary force. This is a one-time thing do do a specific job."

A former U.S. army officer said: "We are not mercenaries because we are not pulling the triggers, we train people to pull triggers."

Another officer laughed and said: "Maybe that makes us executive mercenaries."

The Vinnell contract is part of a vast program under way in Saudi Arabia to spend billions of dollars of oil profits to strengthen the armed forces.

Partly because the Saudis are relying on a U.S. Defense Department study of their military requirements, they are buying American-made Northrop F5E jet fighters, Bell helicopters, Cadillac Gage armored personnel carriers.

Other private American firms already in Saudi Arabia on military and related projects are Lockheed Aircraft and Raytheon. AVCO is training and modernizing the coast guard, the 163 military advisers listed at U.S. Military Advisory headquarters are tied in with the regular Saudi army.

In the last 40 years Vinnell has had engineering and construction projects in 50 foreign countries. In South Vietnam it did \$200 million worth of business in 15 years. Vinnell also built Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles and is completing the third stage of the Grand Coulee hydroelectric program.

"We are not a spook outfit," said the president, John F. Hamill, at Vinnell's modest headquarters in Alhambra, a Los Angeles suburb. "We worked hard for this contract, sinking five years of effort in winning the confidence of the Persian Gulf countries."

Long before it was awarded the contract Jan. 8, the company began preparations, recruiting Col. William G. Walby as training director last May, three days after he retired as commander of the 4th Advanced Individual Training Brigade and Training Command at Ford Ord.

"Two years ago we could not have gotten skilled men, but with the big military cutbacks we have plenty wanting to join up," Hamill said.

Two modest advertisements in newspapers servicing Fort Ord and Fort Carson, Colo., brought 10 applications from retiring U.S. soldiers for every available job.

Salaries range from \$1500 to \$1800 a month on an 18-month contract, with a bonus of \$2400 at the end. After 510 days out of the United States, they will get \$20,000 of their income tax free. In addition, all, as former U.S. soldiers, have healthy military pensions ranging from \$10,000 to \$14,000 a year.

Housing in Saudi Arabia will be provided free, and living expenses are so low that according to Vinnell executives, a prudent "executive mercenary" could bring home most of his salary.

Among key personnel already recruited is Lt. Col. George Gaspard, of Orlando, Fla., a 47-year-old veteran of Korea. He also served for 10 years in Vietnam and Cambodia as a special forces officer.

"I retired 18 months ago, and all I found to do was a real estate agent in San Francisco," said Gaspard, now chief of training aids for the Vinnell project.

Also recruited is James D. Holland, of Los Angeles, a former U.S. Army colonel who lost an eye in a mortar attack in Vietnam's Chuong Thien province and wears a black eye patch. He is in charge of scheduling.

"We have names of hundreds of men both out and nearly out of the Army," said training director Walby, a 49-year-old

ramrod-straight veteran of 30 years of Army service. "They are calling up from Fort Bragg and many other places. To select them, we are using the same criteria as picking NCOs and command officers in the service."

How do the men feel about training a foreign army under these circumstances?

"My brother was furious when he heard. He thought I had turned against Israel," said Holland. "But we have skills, with no market available other than this one."

"This is a professional thing," said Gaspard. "We are doing what we are trained for, to make money. The U.S. now has a great backlog of former soldiers than anywhere else. In the past the British, French and Germans did this. Now it's our turn."