

Special ops troops using flawed intel software

March 26 2015, by Ken Dilanian

Special operations troops heading to war zones are asking for commercial intelligence analysis software they say will help their missions. But their requests are languishing, and they are being ordered to use a flawed, in-house system preferred by the Pentagon, according to government records and interviews.

Over the last four months, six Army special operations units about to be deployed into Afghanistan, Iraq and other hostile environments have requested intelligence software made by Palantir, a Silicon Valley company that has synthesized data for the CIA, the Navy SEALs and the country's largest banks, among other government and private entities.

But just two of the requests have been approved, in both cases by the Army after members of Congress intervened with senior military leaders. Four other requests made through U.S. Army Special Operations Command in Fort Bragg, North Carolina have not been granted. The Army says its policy is to grant all requests for Palantir, while special operations officials say they are working through the requests on a case-by-case basis.

Email messages and other military records obtained by The Associated Press show that Army and special operations command officials have been pressing troops to use an in-house system built and maintained by traditional defense contractors. The Distributed Common Ground System, or DCGS, has consistently failed independent tests and earned the ire of soldiers in the field for its poor performance.

"You literally have these old tired (bureaucrats) stopping the war fighter from getting what they know works," said Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-California, a combat veteran and armed services committee member who wants to cut off funding for DCGS. "This is mind-boggling."

Another armed services committee member, Democrat Jackie Speier of California, said in a statement that DCGS systems built for both the Army and for special operations troops have "failed the warfighter and the taxpayer. ... It's a shame that the Army won't give the troops technology that works and is less expensive when lives hang in the balance."

Special operations units have used Palantir since 2009 to store and analyze intelligence on information ranging from cultural trends to roadside bomb data, but has always been seen by top Pentagon officials as an interim solution until their in-house system is fielded. There is an Army version of DCGS and a separate system for special operations, although Army troops can use both. Those who have used the systems say neither one has delivered on its promise of seamlessly integrating intelligence.

Intelligence officers say they use Palantir to analyze and map a variety of intelligence from hundreds of databases. Palantir costs millions, compared to the billions the military has been pouring into DCGS.

Pentagon officials say DCGS, despite its flaws, has broader capabilities than Palantir, and that in some cases it complements Palantir. Special operations officials say their version of DCGS has some widely used and successful capabilities, including a system to sort through electronic intercepts and another that analyzes drone video. But all six of the special operations units that requested Palantir said the existing systems did not meet their needs.

In a statement to AP, special operations officials said Palantir had been "extremely successful" in Iraq and Afghanistan and they are working to expand access to Palantir for units deployed in the fight against the Islamic State group. But records and interviews show a history of internal pressure against making and approving such requests.

One veteran special operations intel analyst, who is on his seventh deployment in 12 years, said his recent request for Palantir for a unit heading to Iraq had met with "pushback" both from his own headquarters and from bureaucrats who favor DCGS's analytical component at the Pentagon, special operations command headquarters in Tampa, and Army special operations in Fort Bragg. Another special operations officer also used the term "heavy pushback" in an email about his request for Palantir.

Like most active duty Army personnel interviewed for this story, they declined to be quoted by name because they feared speaking out could put their careers at risk.

In their statement, special operations officials said their questions about Palantir requests should not be interpreted as resistance.

The failings of the Army's version of DCGS has received significant public attention in recent years. The version tailored to special operations troops has even less capability, special operations command acknowledges in its records. Another version being offered to special operations troops working in remote areas, called DCGS-Lite, has received mediocre reviews from intelligence analysts, Army records show.

Intelligence officers say Palantir is easier to use, more stable and more capable than DCGS, which sometimes doesn't work at all.

The Pentagon system is difficult to master, the veteran intelligence analyst said, while it takes him about 30 minutes to train a new analyst on Palantir.

Another officer wrote in an email that with Palantir, his analysts were able to easily mix open-source intelligence gleaned from social media or Web searches with classified reporting. DCGS makes that much harder, he said.

In February, an intelligence officer for the 5th Special Forces Group wrote in an email, "We still want Palantir because we think it is the best tool to meet the needs of our mission," which includes operations against the Islamic State group in Iraq and training rebels in Syria.

The only reason the unit is using DCGS, the officer wrote, was because it came with much-needed laptops. "We do not plan to use any of the DCGS apps or tools for our mission," the officer wrote. The person who provided the email asked that the author not be identified to spare him or her from retaliation.

All the commercial interests in the dispute have political clout. Palantir employs a bevy of lobbyists to press its case in Washington, as do the defense companies behind DCGS, such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Booz Allen Hamilton, which have longstanding relationships with Pentagon buyers.

In addition to the professional lobbying, some members of Congress have been contacted by special operation officers who complained that they were being denied the tools they needed to do their jobs.

In December, Speier wrote to Gen. Joseph Votel, the special operations commander, raising concerns that special operations command "has yet to provide tools to the warfighters in Afghanistan and Iraq despite

spending six years and nearly \$150 million to develop" the special operations version of DCGS.

In January, Votel responded to the congresswoman that the system was delivering "critical" capabilities through "numerous, highly capable components."

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Citation: Special ops troops using flawed intel software (2015, March 26) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-special-ops-troops-flawed-intel.html>

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