

NAVY CONTRACTOR WORKERS CHARGED WITH IMMIGRATION VIOLATIONS

By ELLIOT SPAGAT, Associated Press
September 24, 2003

SAN DIEGO - A dozen employees of a Navy contractor who have access to military installations and vessels were arrested Tuesday on immigration charges, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement said.

The suspects worked in San Diego for Southwest Marine Inc., which maintains and repairs Navy ships at six sites nationwide, the bureau said. Their jobs included welding, mechanics and painting.

They either lacked proper immigration records or were legal residents with prior criminal convictions, the bureau said. Most presented false documents as proof of eligibility to work or used someone else's valid immigration documents.

"People who have access to these types of facilities - particularly those who work around weapons, ammunition and classified material - must be worthy of the trust the public places in them," said Michael Turner, special agent in charge of the bureau in San Diego.

The arrests followed a three-month investigation of Southwest Marine, which employs about 3,500 people, including 1,100 in San Diego. As part of its probe, immigration officials reviewed employment records of about 1,000 employees.

One suspect, a Mexican national who has been deported before and has a felony record involving drugs, theft and robbery, will be prosecuted on felony charges of re-entry after deportation, the bureau said. The other 11 face deportation proceedings.

Eleven of those arrested are Mexican and one is Canadian.

The bureau said the suspects had access to "sensitive" military installations but didn't elaborate in a press release. Spokeswoman Lauren Mack declined comment.

Southwest Marine's shipyard in San Diego Bay includes four piers and two floating docks. Company officials said they were cooperating fully and were not aware the company was hiring illegal immigrants.

"We, as employers, have no way of knowing that documents are counterfeit," said spokeswoman Jackie Kreisler. "How would we know?"

Southwest Marine also has facilities in Norfolk, Va., San Pedro, Calif., San Francisco, Ingleside, Texas, and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. It is part of United States Marine Repair, a unit of United Defense Industries Inc., based in Arlington, Va.

Last year, Southwest Marine won a contract valued at more than \$12 million to perform work on the USS Lake Champlain, whose home port is in San Diego.