Defense contractor is lambasted as bribery trial gets under way

by Greg Moran - CNS

SAN DIEGO, Calif. - Not long ago, Poway, Calif., defense contractor Brent Wilkes was an ordinary businessman heading a start-up company with one employee and few prospects for the future.

But in a few years, his company, ADCS Inc., was raking in millions of dollars in government contracts. Wilkes was living in a $2.4 million house, had a private plane at his disposal and stayed at resorts.

His rapid ascent to wealth was kindled by greed, fueled with bribes and fraud, and ably assisted by corrupt Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, a federal prosecutor said Wednesday as Wilkes' trial on bribery, conspiracy and wire fraud charges opened in Federal Court in downtown San Diego before Judge Larry A. Burns.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Phillip Halpern told the jury of five men and seven women that Wilkes "wove a web of bribery and corruption that literally stretched from coast to coast."

Halpern began to draw a picture of Wilkes as a single-minded manipulator who cleaved off huge chunks of pork-barrel dollars from the public treasury.

Wilkes, 53, has pleaded not guilty. During Halpern's PowerPoint-aided opening statement, Wilkes took notes, occasionally frowned, and several times shook his head in apparent disgust at Halpern's narrative as he sat next to his attorney, Mark Geragos.

Geragos will get his chance to speak to jurors and outline Wilkes' version of events when the trial resumes Tuesday, after Halpern finishes his opening statement.

It's the first criminal trial spinning off the Cunningham bribery scandal. The former Republican congressman from San Diego County is serving an eight-year four-month prison sentence, after pleading guilty in 2005 to conspiracy and tax evasion charges for accepting millions in bribes from Wilkes and others.

In exchange, Cunningham used his influence as a member of the House Appropriations Committee to funnel money and defense contract work to Wilkes. Cunningham is expected to testify and will be a key part of the case. Halpern mentioned his name often Wednesday, and his picture flashed on a large screen more than once.

The prosecutor minced few words when describing the arc of Wilkes' career, and underscored how the alleged bribery harmed the public treasury.

"(Wilkes) made this money by corrupting the system," Halpern said. "He made it by stealing taxpayer funds. And he made it by buying a politician."

Wilkes showered gifts on Cunningham that ranged from home computers, luxury trips, expensive meals and two personal watercraft. Cash payments, the prosecutor said, also were part of the pattern of bribes that spanned 1997 to 2004.

It paid off, Halpern told jurors. All told, Wilkes' companies received nearly $90 million in federal contracts, or about $1 million for every $7,500 of bribes and gifts to Cunningham, Halpern said.

He said a range of witnesses would testify about Wilkes' actions and what Cunningham did for him. They include Pentagon officials whom Cunningham pressured and sometimes browbeat to deliver programs to Wilkes.

Former Cunningham staffers also will testify, as will a nephew of Wilkes who was in charge of a $6.9 million document-scanning contract that Wilkes was awarded, although Wilkes had no experience in the business.

The trial is expected to last at least a month. Wilkes was initially indicted on 25 charges, but prosecutors pared down the case Wednesday, dropping 11 charges that mostly dealt with conducting unlawful monetary transactions.

The jury selected Wednesday included four people who said they were either retired or semi-retired. Two jurors work for companies that have defense contract work, and one juror is a government employee in Imperial County, Calif.

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