

GREENWICH FIRM'S BLIMP TO KEEP EYE ON SUMMIT IN TRINIDAD

GREENWICH FIRM SUPPLIED AIRCRAFT FOR SECURITY NEEDS

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GREENWICH -- As world leaders gather this weekend on the Caribbean island of Trinidad to discuss the economic crises, energy policy and other issues affecting the Western Hemisphere, a Greenwich company is playing a role in keeping them safe.

A heavily equipped blimp built by Airship Management Services Inc., based on Soundview Drive, will patrol the skies during the 34-nation Summit of the Americas. President Barack Obama flew into Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, for the three-day event Friday.

While blimps are familiar sights over big sporting events, they are also valuable surveillance tools, said George Spyrou, Airship Management Services' chief executive.

"Everybody thinks, 'How cute, a blimp over the George Washington Bridge,' but they don't realize there are Secret Service taking a picture of a truck on the upper deck," Spyrou said.

The company's airships were used for security in New York City during the 2004 Republican National Convention and the summer Olympics in Athens that same year. The company also worked with the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard last year, doing surveillance missions off the Florida coast.

The 197-foot-long Skyship 600 patrolling this weekend's summit was built at the company's technical base in North Carolina and flown to Trinidad more than two years ago. The Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago leased the blimp and eventually purchased it. Airship Management Services operates it.

The airships normally sell for about \$6 million without equipment, said Spyrou, who wouldn't reveal what anti-crime unit paid for the Skyship 600.

The blimp is outfitted with surveillance tools, including high-powered television cameras and sensors, and skilled operators interact with security forces on the ground. Five Airship Management Services pilots rotate duties flying the airship, which carries Trinidadian security forces, during 12-hour stretches.



The Skyship 600 airship, owned by the Special Anti-Crime Unit of Trinidad & Tobago and operated by Greenwich-based Airship Management Services, will provide aerial security coverage for this weekend's fifth Summit of the Americas in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. The 197-foot-long blimp has been on station in the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago for more than two years. (contributed photo)

"People on the ground will see in real time what the ship is seeing and can ask the cameras to zoom in on a particular car," Spyrou said.

The group is busy during the event, which is getting attention because of Obama's new policy toward Cuba, the continuing tensions with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and concerns over narcotics smuggling.

Major Paul Brown, a contact person in Trinidad, answered his cell phone Friday afternoon but said he was too busy during a mission to talk.

There are no specific threats that the crew has been told to look out for during the summit, Spyrou said, but the blimp is there to provide basic security.

"Everyone's worried because you've got 34 bosses there," Spyrou said.

The company's blimps -- which are equipped with Porsche 930 engines -- also are used for advertising, sightseeing and as a quiet, stable base to film sporting events. They are able to stay in the air for long periods without refueling, consuming only 10 gallons of fuel per hour. It is these qualities that make blimps perfect for surveillance, Spyrou said.

It's also a good niche to serve during the economic downturn, because the company's revenues come from advertising clients and security agencies. Fujifilm has been a client, along with PepsiCo and Citibank.

Of the six blimps the company has, only two are in use.

"Right now, all the advertisers are pulling (back), but the security side of the business is picking up," Spyrou said.

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