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SPY SAGA

BY

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Last year a Texas grave was opened and the body exhumed. A medical panel determined that the badly decomposed corpse was that of Lee Harvey Oswald. It was the real Oswald, not an imposter as some had claimed. Still, after nearly twenty years of official and unofficial investigations, of factual revelations and sensationalist speculation, the question remains: who was the real Oswald? Was he a Russian or Cuban agent, a Mafia pawn, an American intelligence agent, or simply a confused Marxist stock boy?

From such sources as Warren Commission records declassified in the 1970's, the House Assassinations Committee investigation of 1976-1978, the findings of journalists and researchers, and from bits and pieces of the Oswald puzzle buried in mountains of FBI and CIA documents, emerges a striking pattern of evidence as to Oswald's real identity. He was not the drifting, impulsive ideologue that the Warren Commission and the House Assassinations Committee thought he was. He was a skilled, fairly sophisticated spy. Whose spy was he? Consider the trail of intrigue along which Oswald progressed toward historical infamy in Dallas.

In 1974 a Warren Commission executive-session transcript classified as Top Secret was pried loose by a lawsuit initiated by a private researcher. The document contains a reference by Commission Chief Counsel J. Lee Rankin to the Commission's efforts " . . . to find out what he [Oswald] studied at the Monterey School of the Army by way of languages." The Monterey School (the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California) was, and still is, the linguistic West Point for American military and intelligence personnel who need training relative to their official assignments.

Oswald was stationed in California in 1959 while in the Marines. In February of that year he flunked the Marine proficiency test in Russian, but

only a few months later he could not only understand this complex language but speak it fluently. Oswald claimed to have achieved this remarkable progress by listening to Radio Moscow. But Radio Moscow is not noted for talking slowly and in Berlitz-style prose. His sudden mastery would be impossible without tutors of some kind. The Marines did not provide them; the Monterey School may well have.

Within months after learning Russian, Oswald put his newfound linguistic skills directly to use. He defected to the Soviet Union in October 1959, after receiving an early discharge from the Marines based upon a phony "hardship" story. When he defected, he boasted that he "might know something of special interest" to the Russians.

Indeed he might have. Oswald had been stationed at Atsugi Air Force Base in Japan where he worked as a radar operator in the very tower which controlled the flights of the ultra-secret U-2 spy plane. He had been seen walking around Atsugi carrying a camera. His squadron stored its gear in the U-2 hangar.

En route to Russia to defect, Oswald's passport showed that he landed in London and was in Helsinki two days later. He had to have traveled by air, yet there was no commercial flight that could have gotten him there that fast. He used private or military aircraft of unknown origins. The entire trip cost at least \$1500. Oswald's known savings were \$203.

The year before Oswald's defection there were more American defections to Russia than in the previous three decades--four. The Soviets were understandably suspicious that American intelligence might be planting phony defectors. The suspicions were correct. Despite repeated requests from the State Department, the CIA and military intelligence would not reveal which defectors were real and which were American agents. According to a former chief security officer for the State Department, State decided to conduct its own study of defectors to

try to determine for itself which ones were real. One of the cases still being pondered in October of 1963 was Oswald's, and with good reason.

Oswald possessed information relating to the U-2, yet the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency did not conduct a net damage assessment when he defected. Such assessments, designed to discover what secrets a defector might spill and how to contain the potential damage, were standard procedure and had been conducted in the cases of enlisted men whose potential threat to American security was nothing compared with Oswald's. Was the Defense Department incredibly incompetent, or did American intelligence know precisely what Oswald would and would not tell the Soviets?

The question becomes even more significant in light of subsequent events. Six months after Oswald defected, the Russians managed to shoot down Francis Gary Powers' U-2, capturing plane, pilot, and the world's most advanced espionage technology. Even so, when Oswald had an ideological change of heart and returned to America, the CIA claimed never to have debriefed him about anything, not even about his possible disclosures to the Russians. This despite the fact that twenty of the CIA's U-2's continued to soar through unfriendly skies.

Oswald's return trip to America was as mysterious as his departure. His passport did not bear the stamp of the West German checkpoint where his Russian-born wife Marina crossed from East to West, though they supposedly traveled together. Thus it is unknown as to where or when Oswald passed through the iron curtain.

Lee and Marina also made an unexplained stop on their way home--a stop which bothered the Warren Commission. They spent two nights in a private apartment in Amsterdam. They supposedly had no purpose there, no acquaintances there, and so little money that the State Department graciously loaned them enough money to get home.

The pattern of intrigue continued in America. Oswald arrived in New York with five suitcases taken out of Russia. There were direct flights from New York to Dallas, but he booked one that made a brief stop in Atlanta. The Oswald's had no known friends or associates there. The couple arrived in Dallas with only two suitcases. The whereabouts and contents of the missing suitcases remain a mystery. Either Oswald was careless with his baggage or he had a delivery to make.

The paraphernalia and modus operandi of espionage were a constant in Lee Harvey Oswald's short but eventful life. He used several aliases--"O. H. Lee," "Osborne," "A. J. Hidell" (the name used to mail order the rifle found in the book depository). And others used his name as well. While he was in Russia, a man affiliated with an anti-Castro group which had strong ties to the CIA ordered ten pickup trucks from a New Orleans dealership. The man implied that the trucks were for a special cause--very likely part of the buildup for the forthcoming Bay of Pigs invasion launched by CIA-trained Cuban exiles. The name printed on the order form was "Lee Oswald." Oswald would not return to America for another sixteen months.

In the notebook found on Oswald the day of the assassination were several scrambled addresses. In the form in which he wrote them, they were nonsensical; when the numbers and streets were switched around, they produced the correct addresses of two prominent anti-Castro leaders in New Orleans.

A Russian novel found in Oswald's Dallas apartment, a book which he brought back from Russia, was discovered to have had a series of single letters exised from it--a classic technique for sending espionage messages. The National Security Administration could reach no conclusion as to whether the missing letters had been used for coded communication.

In Dallas Oswald once again crossed paths with the U-2, as he had at Atsugi

and in Moscow. Prior to taking a job at the book depository, he worked at a photo-optics firm which had a contract with the U.S. Army Map Service to process photographic data obtained from the CIA's U-2 spy planes. The firm possessed sophisticated equipment for photographic reduction. One of Oswald's fellow employees recalls that Oswald once explained how micro dotting worked. No one at the Dallas firm knew what micro dot was, except Oswald: it is a technique for storing and transmitting intelligence data. By means of photographic reduction, large amounts of data are condensed into tiny spots the size of a period and concealed ^{within} the text of a letter or document. It is possible that some punctuation mark in one of Oswald's many letters could reveal a wealth of information about the real Oswald.

Among his Dallas possessions, police found a very spooky, very expensive cache of equipment that seemed out-of-place for a stock boy with a meager income. There were two telescopes, two pairs of binoculars, camera filters, a lens hood, a flash assembly, four cameras, a pedometer, a compass, and what the FBI labeled as an "unknown electronic device." Whether the device is "unknown" because it defies identification or remains "unknown" to us precisely because it was identified is an open question.

One of the cameras was a Minox, commonly called the "spy camera." Several rolls of exposed Minox film were found, but not until 1978 (after a suit filed under the Freedom of Information Act) were any of the pictures released. The FBI released twenty-five pictures. There are surely more (or there were more). What was in Oswald's spy camera? Most of the pictures appear to have been shot in Europe. Five seem to be of military facilities located in Asia and Latin America.

Also among Oswald's effects was his Russian diary. In 1964 the CIA analyzed it to determine whether Oswald's activities in Russia were strange or sinister:

did the Soviets give him special treatment, try to turn him into a KGB spy? Using the diary as a baseline, then CIA Deputy Director Richard Helms assured the Warren Commission that there was nothing troubling about the Soviets' handling of Oswald. The diary's pigeon-English style troubled a lot of people, but not CIA. The tortured syntax was unlike anything that Oswald had ever written and seemed to have been written by someone who had just begun studying English.

In 1978 the House Assassination Committee's panel of handwriting experts made an interesting discovery. The "diary" did seem to be in Oswald's handwriting, but it had been written in two sittings, not over the period of two and one half years that Oswald was in Russia. In 1964 such fabrication should have aroused deep suspicions about Oswald and about the Soviets. Did the CIA's expert analysts (who could ferret out cunning forgery, invisible ink, and micro dots) fail to discern that the diary was a sham, or was American intelligence secure in its knowledge of how and why the diary was concocted?

Behind the facade of a confused, volatile Marxist lurked the cool demeanor of a trained agent. John A. McVickar, who was at the American Embassy in Moscow when Oswald defected, recalled that the young Marine seemed to be following some "pattern of behavior in which he had been tutored by person or persons unknown, that he had been in contact with others before or during his Marine Corps tour who had guided him and encouraged him in his actions."

A New Orleans radio host who interviewed him about his ostensibly pro-Castro activities described him as ". . . very conscious about all of his words, all of his movements, sort of very deliberate . . . the type of person you would say would inspire confidence." A New Orleans policeman who interviewed Oswald following his arrest for a street fight that ensued from his pro-Castro leafletting recalled him as "answering questions in a mechanical manner, much like a machine that could be turned on and off."

And what was Oswald programmed to do? The summer before the assassination he opened up a one-man chapter of the pro-Castro Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) in New Orleans. Ignoring the written warnings of the national headquarters, he engaged in a series of activities which discredited the organization--leafletting ending in a street brawl; a radio debate in which he assured the audience that there was absolutely no Russian-Communist influence upon the FPCC, then revealed that he had lived in the Soviet Union; a letter to the American Communist Party stating that he was using the FPCC as a front to foster Communist ideals. Oswald never recruited any other members, but his one-man political horror show made the FPCC appear to be a militant, subversive entity controlled from Moscow.

A clue as to the possible genesis of his mission is provided by a 1963 FBI memorandum which states that the Bureau was advised by CIA in September of 1963 that CIA was "giving some thought to planting deceptive information which might embarrass the Committee [FPCC] in areas where it does have support."

Oswald's eerie demeanor was noticed by Dallas officials after he was arrested. Dallas police chief Jesse Curry and Assistant District Attorney William Alexander recalled their most famous prisoner in 1977 interviews with British assassinologist Anthony Summers. Said Curry: "One would think that Oswald had been trained in interrogation techniques and resisting interrogation techniques." Said Alexander: "I was amazed that a person so young would have had the self-control he had. It was almost as if he had been rehearsed, or programmed, to meet the situation that he found himself in."

Oswald seemed to have been trained to observe as well as to comport himself. Dennis Ofstein, a co-worker at the Dallas photo-optics firm, told the Warren Commission about Oswald's detailed observations of Minsk and Moscow--details not about culture or workaday things but about military and security arrangements.

Oswald described Soviet military disbursement as inferior to America's: the Soviets did not intermingle their armor, infantry and air units the way America did. Oswald reported never to have seen a jet vapor trail where there were tanks. The Soviet method was ineffective, said Oswald, because the time needed to integrate various forces detracted from a quick military response.

Oswald also described the Minsk headquarters of the MVD, the Russian counterpart of our FBI, and the security surrounding a military headquarters in Minsk. Evidently the young man who entered Russia in search of the perfect worker's state had spent a lot of time searching for tank tracks and jet trails.

Spies seem to have a thing about spy novels. One recalls E. Howard Hunt writing pulp spy-thrillers while working for the CIA. A Warren Commission document analyzing Oswald's reading habits bears the hand-scrawled notation "Destroy, not used, 9-12-64" on each of its six pages. The document survived. It shows that the genre read most frequently by Lee Harvey Oswald the summer before he allegedly shot the President--the summer in which he was ostensibly working in New Orleans on behalf of the Castro cause--was not communism or Cuba, but spy novels. There was not a single book on Castro or Cuba, but there was Thunderball, Moonraker, and--not without irony--From Russia With Love, as well as five non-Bondian spy novels.

Oswald continued his reading habits in Dallas. The same document quotes a Dallas associate of Marina and Lee's as telling the FBI that "Oswald read some books about how to be a spy." But the evidence suggests that Oswald knew very well how to spy long before he arrived in Dallas.

The loner label fits Oswald, but much more so on the political left than the right. He had no known contacts or associations, much less friendships, with any persons who would seemingly be his ideological brethren--communists, pro-Castroites, socialists. But he did associate with persons having strong CIA connections.

In Dallas his closest friend, and patron, was George de Mohrenschildt, who had worked for a CIA-funded subsidiary of the Agency for International Development (AID). AID became notorious as a cover for CIA clandestine activities abroad. De Mohrenschildt traveled extensively with no visible means of support. In 1957 he was kicked out of Yugoslavia for allegedly sketching military facilities. On his return to America, he was debriefed by the CIA in both Washington, D.C. and Dallas and provided the data for no fewer than ten separate intelligence reports.

And there was David Ferrie. Victor Marchetti, who served as Executive Assistant to the Deputy Director of CIA, claims to have observed that then CIA Director Richard Helms and his top aides became disturbed when Ferrie's name surfaced during the JFK assassination investigation conducted in 1967 by flamboyant New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. A CIA colleague told Marchetti that Ferrie had worked for the Agency as a contract agent.

Ferrie was very active in CIA sponsored anti-Castro activities and reportedly flew dozens of missions against Castro's Cuba. So virulent was his anti-communism that he once wrote a letter to the Air Force offering to "train killers" to "bomb the hell out of every damn Russian, Communist, Red or what-have-you." An FBI report also indicates that Ferrie admitted to saying of President Kennedy: "He ought to be shot."

Ferrie was Oswald's Civil Air Patrol squadron leader in New Orleans in 1955, before Oswald joined the Marines. Ferrie and Oswald were seen together only two months before the assassination, in the small town of Clinton, Louisiana. Numerous and credible witnesses (including the mayor, town marshall, and registrar of voters) saw the pair. Ferrie and Oswald were apparently observing a voter-registration drive being conducted by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Oswald even went through the motions of trying to register to vote, standing

for hours in a line composed of poor blacks (while Ferrie and a third man observed from a car).

The civil rights movement was as worrisome to the CIA as to Hoover's FBI. A CIA memo obtained by the Washington Post in 1978 indicates that the CIA perceived black power groups as hostile toward the Agency and as presenting "a new threat" to its operations abroad. The nature of the threat was never made clear, but the CIA had a penchant for believing that the American left was communist controlled. As a result of this diffuse fear, the CIA targeted blacks for extensive domestic spying in the 1960's--infiltrating and monitoring black political groups and activities, even using teachers in the Washington, D.C. school system to spy on young blacks. And CORE was of such particular interest to the CIA that the organization was singled out in 1967 as one of ten "bellweather" groups selected from among several hundred for concentrated surveillance and infiltration under project MERRIMAC.

In 1967 when David Ferrie was about to be hauled into court to testify in the Garrison investigation, he was found dead in his apartment. The coroner ruled death by natural causes, but there were two suicide notes near the body. Presumably, authorities deduced that the notes were left by Ferrie to signal the onset of his naturally caused hemorrhage. Both notes were typed, and so were the signatures.

In March 1977 the House Assassination Committee finally located George de Mohrenschildt in Florida, after having some difficulty in tracking him down. In a morning phone call, the Committee staff made its first contact and arranged for an interview. That afternoon de Mohrenschildt was found shot-gunned to death. The coroner ruled suicide.

Officially, neither the Warren Commission in 1963 nor the House Assassination Committee in 1978 were willing to view Oswald as anything but a

disaffected leftist with no ties to any intelligence agency, domestic or foreign. Perhaps this is why neither investigation provided credible conclusions about the assassination of our thirty-fifth President. If the historical view of the alleged assassin is completely inaccurate in terms of his motives, activities and involvements, then it is very likely that the assassination itself is not what it appeared to be.