Ex-KGB Spy Meets Press, Shows He Can Keep Secrets

■ **Intelligence:** Ex-colonel says he saw only one POW in Vietnam. He met Oswald but refuses to give details.

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MOSCOW—Oleg Nechiporenko is a man who should have many interesting tales to tell.

A retired colonel from the KGB, the Soviet intelligence service, Nechiporenko worked for much of his career at infiltrating the CIA, and with a smile and twinkle in his eye, he says, "We had some successes."

Always probing for a CIA vulnerability, Nechiporenko questioned a CIA operative captured by North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Later, he reviewed Vietnamese interrogations of other American prisoners to see whether the KGB could use the information, presumably to recruit agents in the CIA and U.S. military.

"We wanted to know what headquarters did, what the stations did, what responsibilities the agents had, ties with the military; the structures in short," he said. "And we did learn some things."

Even earlier, Nechiporenko was one of three KGB officers who met with Lee Harvey Oswald less than two months before Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. It was a pity, Nechiporenko said, that no one from the American government has ever asked him about those conversations.

But Nechiporenko is also a man who keeps secrets, and on Thursday, he was really saying very

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little.

Speaking at a press conference arranged by the Russian Intelligence Service, the KGB's successor in foreign espionage, Nechiporenko denied that, contrary to allegations this month by a former colleague, he had interrogated American personnel held by the Vietnamese, other than the single CIA agent.

He gave a precise date for that 2½-hour meeting in January, 1973, just after the Paris Peace Treaty was signed, and he categorically rejected allegations by Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, the KGB's former counterespionage chief, that he had interrogated American prisoners as late as 1978, long after the war ended and all prisoners were declared to have been repatriated.

Nechiporenko's motive is clear. He wanted to absolve himself, the KGB and Russia from suspicion that Soviet agents interrogated a number, perhaps dozens, of captured American pilots to learn about their aircraft, their tactics and the broad U.S. strategy during the Vietnam War—and then had them killed so that the United States would not learn of Soviet involvement.

Senior Russian diplomats feel that the charges, raised recently in the Los Angeles Times Magazine, could seriously harm the relationship that Russian Federation President Boris N. Yeltsin hopes to forge with Washington; they hope that a display of openness and cooperation will help lift the growing suspicion.

"The problem is very great," Nechiporenko commented, earnest in tone, dapperly dressed in a blue blazer and gray slacks and with a white goatee to help mask his emotions. "It requires an approach from a very responsible position. . . . Although people have already died, there are some [Americans] who believe that their dear ones are still alive."

The Russian Foreign Ministry had just announced the formation of a joint Russian-American parliamentary commission to investigate the fate of U.S. servicemen who were captured or declared missing in action during the Korean and Vietnam wars and who, it is thought in the United States, might have been brought to the Soviet Union.

"We treat the concern of Americans regarding the fate of their countrymen with deep respect, and we are prepared to do all we can to help," Tatyana Samolis, the spokeswoman for the Russian Intelligence Service, said.

But Nechiporenko undermined the intended message of shared concern and openness with what he would not say.

He acknowledged that he spoke only of his own personal experience, and only because Kalugin, the KGB's former chief of counterintelligence, had identified him in recent interviews with U.S. news media.

He could not speak, Nechiporenko said, of the activities of Soviet military intelligence, which was far more likely than the KGB to be interested in what could be learned from the downed pilots and which had better working relations with their Vietnamese counterparts than the KGB did. Nor would he speak about the activities of other KGB agents in Vietnam because he did not believe in passing on "secondhand information."

Nechiporenko castigated Kalugin for "transgressing ethical borders" in discussing cases of which he had no personal knowledge and said the former general was now "suffering from delusions" in describing him as a POW interrogator.

And even after underscoring the importance of his information on the Kennedy assassination, he refused to reveal what Oswald had told him and the other KGB agents in the Soviet Embassy in Mexico on Sept. 27-28, 1963.

In Los Angeles, Kalugin stuck to his account in an interview Thursday with editors and reporters at The Times.

Visiting Southern California on a promotional tour for a book produced by Cable News Network concerning the collapse of Soviet communism, as well as his own yet-unpublished memoir, Kalugin emphasized that he knew that Nechiporenko had talked to "two or three" Americans, including a CIA agent, in or near Hanoi between 1976 and 1978.

The KGB, he said, hoped to enlist

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the men as operatives.

"There was an appearance, as if they were willing to cooperate in future," Kalugin said. At least two of the Americans interviewed by Nechiporenko returned to the United States, but attempts by the KGB to locate them later failed, Kalugin said.

"At least a half dozen" KGB members were privy to the knowledge of those interviews. Records of the encounters should exist and be stored at intelligence headquarters in Moscow.

Kalugin discounted theories often voiced in the United States by POW-MIA groups that American prisoners were transported and held inside the Soviet Union. Kalugin said that, to his knowledge, no such American POWs were transported to the Soviet Union.

As for Oswald's Mexico visit, U.S. investigators had concluded—based on surveillance of the embassy and telephone taps—that the assassin was seeking Soviet help to get a Cuban visa, as well as a visa to return to the Soviet Union.

Nechiporenko suggested, teasingly, that there was much more to the conversation, enough to ask Oswald back for a second meeting.

"Really, this is important, and we have never been asked by the Americans what Oswald said and what he did at the embassy in Mexico City," he said. "The problem of the Kennedy assassination involves three countries—the United States, Cuba and the Soviet Union—and what happened in the United States is not only an element of U.S. history but a blank spot for world history, as well."

But the retired KGB colonel again lapsed into silence. "What Oswald told us is our commercial secret," he said. "We would like to discuss that in certain form, to publish it, and if I gave it without the consent of my colleagues it would be a breach of contract."

Times staff writer Scott Harris in Los Angeles contributed to this report.