

Lucien Conein, 79, Legendary Cold War Spy

By TIM WEINER

WASHINGTON, June 6 — Lucien E. Conein, one of the last great cold war spies, whose swashbuckling tales of war and death and sex, almost all of them true, form an enduring legend at the Central Intelligence Agency, died Wednesday of heart failure in Bethesda, Md. He was 79.

He ran agents behind the Iron Curtain in the early 1950's. He was the C.I.A.'s contact with friendly generals in Vietnam as the long war took shape there. He was the man through whom the United States gave the generals tacit approval as they planned the assassination of South Vietnam's President, Ngo Dinh Diem, in November 1963.

He was the chief of covert operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration in the 1970's — a job he imperiled by publicly declaring his honorary membership in the Corsican Brotherhood, a syndicate said to be skilled in smuggling certain controlled substances.

He was decorated by four nations and recruited by the Watergate burglars (he turned them down, and later boasted, "If I'd been involved, we would have done it right.")

Mr. Conein also told fellow spies and more than a few journalists that he had served in the French Foreign Legion, which may or may not have been true, and that he had lost two of his fingers on a dangerous secret mission. In fact, he lost them fixing the engine of a car carrying him and his best friend's wife to an assignation, so the story had a basis in truth.

These stories were often told in a smoky restaurant at a table holding empty wine bottles and a dwindling flask of pear brandy, said Stanley Karnow, the historian and author of "Vietnam: A History" (Viking, 1983), who spent 70 hours interviewing Mr. Conein (pronounced conein) for a proposed biography. The project was abandoned when Mr. Karnow decided that his subject was beginning to resemble Somerset Maugham's fictional spy Ashenden, a man so consumed by espionage that he cannot sort out his cover stories from the story of his life.

"He was out of his time," Mr. Karnow said. "He was the swashbuckling soldier of fortune — the guy



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Lucien E. Conein

who has ceased to exist except in fiction. A marvelous storyteller. Whether the stories were true or not was beside the point. They were almost always almost entirely true."

Born in Paris in 1919, Mr. Conein was sent to Kansas City to live with an aunt, a French war bride, in 1924. He raced to enlist in the French Army when World War II erupted in 1939. When France fell in 1940, he made his way to the United States and joined the Army, which assigned him to the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime spy service.

The O.S.S. trained him to parachute behind enemy lines. In 1944, based in Algiers, he was dropped into occupied France to rendezvous with the Resistance. In Algiers, during a different liaison, he conceived his first child with a Frenchwoman who later became the first of his three wives, Mr. Karnow said.

With France liberated, the O.S.S. sent Mr. Conein to southern China to join a French-Vietnamese commando team assigned to attack a Japanese post in northern Vietnam. He formed an attachment to Vietnam, an affair that ended badly for both.

When the C.I.A. was begun in 1947, Mr. Conein was on board. He infiltrated saboteurs into Eastern Europe and trained paramilitary forces

in Iran. In 1954, he was sent to Saigon, where he laid down caches of arms — in coffins, buried in cemeteries — for anti-Communist uprisings that never came. He also met and married his third wife, Elyette.

He returned to Saigon in 1962, with the rank of lieutenant colonel, as the C.I.A.'s liaison between the American Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, and South Vietnam's top generals. In that role, he delivered a message that the generals read to mean that the United States would not object if they assassinated the President, Mr. Diem.

"Few secret agents are ever given the opportunity to scale the professional summit by arranging the overthrow of a government," Neil Sheehan wrote in his book, "A Bright Shining Lie" (Random House, 1988). "Conein was transmitting the power of the United States to influence these generals to do its bidding."

The war did not go well for Mr. Conein. He was increasingly unhappy as a small covert operation grew into a huge military disaster. He retired from the C.I.A. in 1968 and contemplated a war-surplus trading venture in Vietnam. In 1971, he declined an offer from E. Howard Hunt, another retired C.I.A. officer, to join President Richard M. Nixon's "plumbers," the secret team that bungled the Watergate burglary.

From 1973 until 1984, Mr. Conein ran secret operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration. Much about these missions remains secret, although Mr. Conein became a public figure of sorts in 1975 by candidly testifying about his role in the Diem killing to a Senate committee investigating the United States role in the assassination of foreign leaders. His own role, he testified, "was to convey the orders from my Ambassador to the people who were planning the coup, to monitor the people who were planning the coup, to get as much information so that our Government would not be caught with their pants down."

Mr. Conein, who is survived by his wife, Elyette, six sons, one daughter, 11 grandchildren and one great-grandchild, will be buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery on July 14, Bastille Day.