

INQUIRY

Family Questions CIA Role in Scientist's Bizarre Death

Frank Olson allegedly killed himself in 1953 during an LSD mind-control experiment. Survivors reject official explanation.

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7/94

FREDERICK, Md.—As the sunlight glinted off Frank R. Olson's coffin for the first time in nearly 41 years, Eric Olson's last memories of his father came rushing back.

He recalled seeing the dark, hardwood casket at the funeral. He remembered watching his father walk across the front yard to catch a ride to work one Monday morning. It was the last time anyone in the family saw him alive.

On Nov. 28, 1953, Frank Olson plunged to the pavement from the 10th floor window of a New York hotel. His death, ruled a suicide, was later linked to mind-control experiments conducted on Olson—and others—by the CIA. But many questions surrounding his demise are still haunting his family.

On June 2, a team of forensic scientists exhumed Olson's remains from his grave in Frederick Memorial Park Cemetery, hoping to shed new light on the cause of his death. While it may be little more than a tragic footnote in the history of the CIA, renewed interest in the incident is dredging up old anxieties about the actions and integrity of the intelligence community during the Cold War.

After World War II, military and intelligence experts began looking into a new generation of chemical and biological agents, ranging from deadly toxins to truth serums. CIA scientists, fearing the Soviet Union was developing advanced "brainwashing" drugs, began testing substances for possible use in interrogations, including LSD, a potent hallucinogen.

Some of those tests involved unsuspecting subjects. Frank Olson was one of them.

Olson, a biochemist who headed the U.S. Army's Special Operations Division before his retirement from active military duty in early 1953, was one of the first military officers assigned to the Pentagon's biological warfare program. On the evening of Nov. 18, CIA officials gathered Olson and a handful of other scientists for a working retreat at an isolated log cabin near Deep Creek Lake, Md. The next evening, the scientists shared a drink of Cointreau. Twenty

minutes later, the CIA officials told Olson and the others that the liqueur had been laced with LSD.

Olson displayed a negative reaction almost immediately, according to CIA documents later provided to the family. He became agitated, paranoid and despondent. Several days later, he was flown to New York to consult with an allergist who had been testing LSD and who had CIA security clearance. A CIA scientist assigned to monitor Olson said that in the early morning hours of Nov. 28, he was awakened by the sound of Olson crashing through the drawn shades and closed window of their hotel room.

Eric Olson keeps a faded green scrapbook full of newspaper clippings about his father's death. Article after article states that he "fell or jumped" from room 1018 A of the Statler Hotel. That was the same explanation the Army gave the Olsons in 1953.

Not until 22 years later, when the Senate issued a landmark report detailing the CIA's drug tests, did the family learn that Olson had been deceived into taking LSD. Ten years ago, Eric spent a night in the hotel room, and noted the presence of a large radiator in front of the window. "It would have been very difficult to fall or even jump out," he said in a recent interview. "You'd have to take a flying leap and dive through it."

Even more unsettling was a phone call the hotel's operator reported overhearing Nov. 28. Olson's CIA monitor allegedly called another CIA official and said: "Well, it's over," minutes after Olson's death. "That's too bad," the voice at the other end replied and hung up, according to the operator.

The 1975 Senate report did not identify Olson by name, but it described how an Army employee had been tricked into taking LSD, stating that he "jumped from the 10th-floor window of his room and died as a result." The study indicated that the CIA experiments were part of a larger program aimed at developing new methods of controlling human behavior.

Congress awarded the family a \$750,000 settlement in 1976. But more recent findings, including any new forensic evidence, could lead to further



Olson's family learned, 22 years after he fell to his death from a hotel window, that he had been tricked into taking LSD.

legal action, Eric Olson said.

Last year, Eric and his brother Nils asked George Washington University Prof. James E. Starrs, a forensic scientist, to look into their father's death. Although the results are not in, Starrs said he suspects Olson might have been pushed out of the window because his knowledge of the CIA's clandestine activities and his reaction to the LSD experiment made him a security risk.

The original autopsy was inadequate because the examiner did not check for foreign substances or chart Olson's injuries, Starrs said. A cursory examination of Olson's remains at a police crime lab this month found multiple fractures in both lower legs, with little apparent damage to the head. The forensic team plans to test Olson's hair and brain tissue for traces of LSD, and expects a final report within 30 days.

Robert V. Lashbrook, the retired CIA scientist who shared the hotel room with Olson, denies that foul play led to Olson's death. Reached at his home in Ojai, Calif., he criticized Starrs' speculation about CIA involvement. "I don't recall anyone at the CIA suggesting that, just because he flipped his lid a bit, that that's a security risk," he said.