

CIA Spy's Life an Open Secret to Family



By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

David Phillips holds 4-year-old Todd. He is flanked by Bryan, 14, and Wynne, 10, outside suburban Maryland home.

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By Kathy Sawyer

Washington Post Staff Writer

Todd, the rambunctious blond 4-year-old who was born in Brazil, was hiding behind a chair in the corner of the living room, making odd noises. Two other youngsters were making snacks in the kitchen where suddenly could be heard a loud crash of dishes.

For their father, David Atlee Phillips—a fittingly dashing spy who saw Fidel Castro march into Havana, was

in Mexico City when Lee Harvey Oswald made his mysterious visit, and directed covert operations in Chile before the overthrow of President Allende—babysitting in his suburban Maryland home on a weekday afternoon was an adjustment.

He could have been any middle-aged father riding out a white-collar job lay-off during a national economic slump, except for a few clues: a mounted map of the United States peppered with

blue-headed pins; original art and artifacts from several Latin American countries, and a massive autographed volume of "Canto General" by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, opened to a selection entitled "La United Fruit Company."

After 24 years as a clandestine CIA operative of some importance, Phillips, 52, has left the embattled intelligence agency in order to help save it. His al-

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ready well publicized plans to defend it include personal appearances, a proposed book and the formation of the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers, whose locations across the country are marked by the pins in the U.S. map.

Because it is a point of honor for him not to be one of what he calls the "kiss-and-tell" boys, Phillips' public rhetoric so far has bordered on the mundane, remaining murky with unbrayed secrets.

What emerged from a recent and less guarded interview about himself, however, was a rare, detailed glimpse of the strange life of a spy who is also a devoted family man: a life of petty deceptions, strange inconveniences, social isolation, endured along with exotic experiences and typical fatherly pain and pride.

Phillips' decision to take an early retirement from "the cold" has drawn him at least partially out of that confused world and into a suburban landscape of dirty dishes and concerns over personal finances. His wife, Gina, a school administrator during the academic year, took a summer job at the Beauvoir School summer camp.

"The most difficult part was suggesting to my wife that we give up a healthy chunk of income," Phillips said. "She hesitated about two minutes after I told her what I wanted to do, and then she said, 'Go ahead.' As a result, she's out working today."

Phillips had been making \$36,000 a year as a GS-18 in the spy agency, and his retirement salary will be around \$18,000. He said the family will be able to stay in the comfortable ranch-style home at 6224 Stone Trail Dr. in

Bethesda, and keep their 1964 Kharman Ghia and the 1970 Oldsmobile station wagon.

"But we will have to make a few changes," he said. "We haven't been out to dinner in two months, for instance."

Phillips said pointedly that "my lecture agent told me I'd probably make between \$5,000 and \$10,000 on the circuit next season, between September and April. But he said if I would make anti-CIA talks I'd be able to get \$50,000 to \$100,000."

Acknowledging the moral dilemma posed by institutionalized secrecy and stealth in a free society, he said he had undertaken his crusade "out of frustration born of a belief that our country needs an intelligent service and a recognition that there are tough times ahead for any secret organization after Watergate."

A more personal—and possibly more compelling—motive for his actions ambushed Phillips on his own hearth. Over the years, he explained, like most clandestine agents, he has had a special talk with each of his children as they reached their teens, breaking the news that "Daddy is not with the State Department and he is not a businessman. He is an intelligence officer."

A spy.

"In the past this has been pleasant and exciting," Phillips said. But a few months ago, when he made the announcement to 15-year-old Debbie, the fifth of the seven children, Phillips explained, her response was: "But that's dirty."

Relaxing in his sun-clapped living room in an embroidered "guayabera" shirt of the sort that is handmade in Guatemala, ("this one is actually a

drip-dry from a factory in Manhattan," he said), Phillips embodied all the elements of the popular conception of James Bond: lean, tall, tan and with a jutting chin. He, in fact, used to be a professional actor.

He had tried acting in New York before and after World War II, part of which he spent in German prison camps after his B-54 was shot down. After deciding that he was a "bad actor," Phillips went to Chile "to take advantage of the GI Bill and write a play."

Soon afterward, he bought a dying English language newspaper there, The South Pacific Mail, along with all its debts. All it lacked was its own printing press.

"The day I purchased the press, the chief of station (CIA) there called me," Phillips said. "The combination of a 'clearable' American with a printing press was too much for him to resist."

"I was to be a 'dangle.' Word was to be leaked out in Chile that I was chief of American intelligence there. Sure enough, a KGB agent soon began to cultivate me. I was at that time being paid \$50 a month for my services. When that Soviet showed up, it occurred to me I should be getting more." In 1965, Phillips became a full CIA staff officer.

His undercover assignments took him to Guatemala, Cuba, Lebanon, to Washington ("I was involved in the Washington end of the Bay of Pigs"), to Mexico City, the Dominican Republic, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia in Brazil, and to Caracas, Venezuela.

In the summer of 1973, Phillips said, he returned to Washington as chief of Latin American Operations, where he directed the agency's hotly criticized

Soviet activities in Chile that preceded the overthrow and death of President Salvador Allende.

(Phillips said that, after he heard rumors of the planned coup, some five months before it occurred, he sent cables ordering CIA agents to "cut off contracts with people who are planning coups," and that consequently there were no agents in the groups that carried out the coup.

Phillips was in that post when he retired. Through most of those twists and turns, he was married and raising a family. He and his first wife, "who had met me when I was a bad actor," had five children before their divorce in 1967.

"It's very tough in that respect," Phillips acknowledged. "It's the kind of life that shows on a marriage."

A year after the divorce, he met Gina, an energetic and spy-wise blonde, also divorced, who was then an employee of the National Conference of Catholic Charities. Her former husband was an agent, and the friends who introduced her to Phillips were agents.

They married and combined families—his four surviving children (one died in a car accident) plus her three—and were off to Brazil, where they soon added Todd. They moved four times in four years, uprooting all the children from schools. "There were often long periods of separation," Phillips said, "but she made all the basic moves with me."

"Of course it was difficult moving the kids around," Gina Phillips said. "And it's difficult for a wife to work at her job in a foreign country; you're there on a diplomatic passport and you need special papers. And I had to give

a lot of toys and do all the things expected of a diplomat's wife.

"Actually, life in Latin America was great. The cover was life in the diplomatic service, so we had a maid, someone else was paying our rent, the kids went to local American schools. It was beautiful.

"Then one comes back to Washington and puts one's feet back on the ground."

One of the most difficult aspects for the family, the couple agreed, is endemic—the lack of visible status in the agent's life. "Oh, sometimes the kids will say something like, 'Why don't we get a Cadillac with the flags flying, like Mr. Smith? Daddy's as smart as him.'"

"Why isn't Daddy going any further?" I would just say I don't know. Some day."

"When your buddy who thinks you're with the State Department says to you 'Hey, you've been in the business 20 years. Aren't you ever going to be chief of mission?' you just bite your lip," Phillips said.

Sometimes, the cover has led Phillips to antic extremes. "A fellow who lives down the street thought I worked at a government department downtown," he said. "He had this old chunker of a car that wouldn't start half the time. So he tended to come over and knock on my door in the morning and say, 'How about a lift, since our offices are right next to each other.'"

"Well, I'd drive 45 minutes through traffic all the way to the State Department and let him out, and then drive back to CIA headquarters, which is 15 minutes from my house. I did that a dozen times.

"One day I finally just told him, I said, 'I've got some news for you . . . ' He laughed and was surprised, and said he wouldn't bother me anymore."

Really close friends had usually known the nature of new husband's work, if not the substantive details, Gina Phillips said.

"After you get to a certain point in your career where you've been 'burned' (exposed) a number of times, it's foolish to try to fool people," Phillips said. "Especially in the last three years, many of my close friends have known."

Over the long haul, he said, his social life had been divided in two. "Say you want to have a dinner for six. You say, 'Yeah, but if we invite so-and-so we won't be able to talk about such-and-such.' Intelligence people just naturally congregate socially in order to talk more freely."

Phillips is, of course, aware that some skeptics figure his new career is simply an extension of the old one—that is, he is still a clandestine operative on the CIA payroll, sort of a covert, quasi-maverick PR arm.

"Here, I'm drawing on my experience as newsmen as well as an intelligence officer. There are many similarities between producing news for newspapers and intelligence for an intelligence service.

"And in either, it takes a while to decide if your source is credible. Over time, as what I say proves out, I hope to establish credibility."

In fact, Phillips thinks he might eventually go back to that other kind of intelligence gathering. He thinks he might like to run a small newspaper, in the Catskills perhaps.