

The Secret Missions of Vernon Walters

How America's Lone Operator Saved Kissinger's Paris Talks

By Benjamin Welles

AIR FORCE ONE was halfway across the Atlantic, en route to Europe, when the first warning signals flashed: hydraulic brake trouble. It was April 3, 1970.

On the presidential jet was Henry A. Kissinger, with two aides, heading for ultra-secret meetings with the North Vietnamese delegation at its dingy hideout in the Paris suburbs. Separate meetings with the Chinese Communists — also safe from prying eyes on the fringes of Paris — were expected to start any day. On these two-track meetings, months in preparation, hung Richard Nixon's hopes of extricating the United States from the Vietnam morass, and on his vehement orders they were being kept secret from the U.S. press, the Congress, the State and Defense Departments, even from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Hour after hour, messages from the crippled jet poured into the White House as the flight engineers struggled in vain to correct the malfunction. With each message, rushed to Nixon in the White House by Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, the tension rose. As time passed, the grim probability loomed that Air Force One might have to be diverted from Bourges, an obscure military airbase in central France where Kissinger was scheduled to disembark secretly, to Frankfurt's Rhine-Main airport, which combined sophisti-

cated electronics, U.S.-installed arresting gear in event of brake failure and a U.S. Air Force unit on the scene.

But Rhine-Main was also one of Europe's busiest airports; even if the great jet were saved, Kissinger's unannounced arrival in Europe almost certainly would be spotted, leading to intense press speculation. The North Vietnamese, suspecting duplicity or — worse — bungling, might well break off the painstaking negotiations on which Nixon's foreign policy hopes rested. Barely controlling his temper, Nixon swung around.

"Tell Walters," he snapped to Haig, "that I want him to touch every base and save this thing no matter how! He's the only man I know who can do it."

IT WAS 8 p.m. in Paris and Maj. Gen. Vernon A. (Dick) Walters, senior defense attache, was alone in his office. His secretary had left for the day. Since morning, he and she had been coding and decoding the flood of panicky White House messages forecasting that Air Force One

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might have to be diverted — although no one seemed to know to what field.

Walters sensed that a crisis was building. "I can't possibly cover every airfield in Europe!" he had finally told the agitated Haig. "Tell me as soon as you can where it is finally going to land, and I'll see what I can do."

Then came the grim message: Rhine-Main. Walters sat pondering for a long time. Then he left and hurried through the crowds on the Rue St. Honoré until he reached the Elysee Palace, residence of President Georges Pompidou. Moments later, his credential checked, Walter entered Pompidou's serene office.

Smiling, Pompidou welcomed him and pointed to a chair. They knew each other well, and Walters wasted no time outlining the drama then unfolding as Nixon's jet roared closer to Europe. They had, at most, two hours. Pompidou listened closely, occasionally nodding. He had been made privy to the meetings, despite Nixon's and Kissinger's initial resistance, after Walters had warned that French intelligence surely would get wind of the talks sooner or later and, if un-nuzzled, might leak them. Pompidou had kept the secret among a tight group of top diplomatic and intelligence aides, and so far it had held. As Walters finished, Pompidou reached for his private telephone.

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An hour and 6 minutes later, Walters was taking off from Villacoublay airport, outside Paris, in Pompidou's private Mystere 20 executive jet. A half hour later they picked up Air Force One circling around Rhine-Main and followed it as it let down cautiously onto the great field, coming miraculously to a safe halt at the far end. Emergency fire crews were already moving in, and the huge craft was bathed in floodlights.

Barking orders in German to cut the lights, Walters raced up the steps to find Kissinger slumped in his seat. He gave Walters a weak smile. "Jesus Christ, am I glad to see you," he muttered. "What the hell do we do now?"

There was no time to argue; at any moment airport officials and reporters might begin arriving. Walters snapped out instructions: Kissinger was to take off his tell-tale glasses, roll up his coat collar, put on a hat and walk swiftly to board the Mystere waiting a few yards away. His two young aides, his bags and Walters would follow. Nine minutes later they were airborne again, this time bound for Paris, with Kissinger's presence in Europe still a secret.

Driving in Paris with Walters at the wheel of an unmarked rented car, Kissinger began slumping lower and lower at each red light. "Someone is sure to recognize me," he grumbled. "Why are you coming this way?" Walters had been up since dawn, coping all day with the rising White House frenzy. He felt, not unreasonably, that he had performed a minor miracle.

"Dr. Kissinger," he replied tensely, "why don't you just go on running the world — and let me handle infiltrations and exfiltrations? I know more about them than you do." There was a brief moment before the explosion came. "No one," said Kissinger, "talks to me that way!" An uneasy silence fell again until, minutes later, Walters swung the car into the garage of his apartment in Neuilly, near the Bois de Bologne, and led Kissinger up the stairs to the sitting room.

Emotionally and physically exhausted but at last safe, Kissinger began to thaw. He looked contritely at Walters. "I know, I know," he said, "no one else does for me what you do." Walters' face broke into a broad smile. "Dr. Kissinger," he answered softly, "you are so right!"

WALTERS IS one of the last of a disappearing breed: the individual — as distinct from the team — intelligence operative. In a career stretching from World War II until his retirement 18 months ago as deputy director of the CIA, he has been aide-interpreter, or political undercover man — sometimes both — for Harry Truman, George C. Marshall, Mark Clark, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Averell Harriman, Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, Gerald Ford and Kissinger.

At various times over the past 30 years Walters has been entrusted with messages to foreign leaders, both friendly and hostile, that succeeding presidents have considered too sensitive for either State Department or CIA cables. These leaders have included, among others, De Gaulle, Tito, Mossa-

degh of Iran and Chou En-lai.

Details of Walters' secret assignments appear in his new book, "Silent Missions," published last week by Doubleday. During the Nixon administration, for instance, he was dispatched on an unpublicized mission to Spain in 1971 to discuss with the ailing Franco Spain's political future in the event of Franco's death. In 1974 he flew secretly to Buenos Aires to confer with Juan Peron; the Argentine dictator's violent anti-Americanism began noticeably easing before his death later that year.

Walters also helped negotiate with Kings Juan Carlos of Spain and Hassan of Morocco the peaceful withdrawal in late 1975 of Spanish forces from the territory then known as the Spanish Sahara and its eventual absorption by Morocco and Mauritania.

One of Walters' most sensitive presidential missions, and one about which he will still say little, took place soon after Palestinian terrorists had seized the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Khartoum, the Sudan, on March 2, 1973, assassinating U.S. Ambassador Cleo A. Noel Jr. and the departing U.S. chargé d'affaires, George C. Moore. Walters, alone and unarmed, met Palestinian delegates in a country which he will identify only as "sympathetic to their cause." Though unable to speak Arabic, he had, prior to the meeting, closely studied the Palestinians' political aims, their literature and even their poetry. One can surmise the message that he transmitted on behalf of Nixon and Kissinger: Leave our diplomats alone — or face all-out U.S. retribution.

"We were able to communicate," says Walters cryptically, "and there were no further acts of blood between us." Since that day no U.S. diplomat has been attacked by Palestinian militants.

IN 1971, BACK FROM setting up Nixon's visit to Peking, Kissinger wrote a rare thank-you letter to Walters, whose role in the arrangements has never been fully disclosed. "If I'd said you'd done it uncomplainingly," wrote Kissinger, "you'd think I was deaf — or a liar. All kidding aside — I know that under that gruff exterior there beats a heart that is gruff."

It was Richard Nixon who had brought Walters and Kissinger together at his pre-inaugural headquarters in New York's Pierre Hotel soon after his 1968 election.

Nixon and Walters had formed their close personal friendship in 1958, when Walters, then an Army lieutenant colonel, accompanied the then vice president on his tumultuous trip around South America. On May 13 that year, a date they still commemorate annually as their "rock and roll" day, the two men were trapped in Nixon's car between the Caracas airport and the Venezuelan capital as anti-American demonstrators closed in, pounding on the roof with clubs, shrieking obscenities and hurling rocks. Walters still keeps as a souvenir, encased in plastic, an ugly fragment of window glass that flew into his mouth that day, drawing blood.

After Nixon's inauguration, Walters and Kissinger spent days devising the intricate scenario to conceal from the

The Walters Missions



United Press International

In 1945, Gen. Mark Clark, left, met Brazilian President Getulio Vargas, with Walters as interpreter.

MEN WHO SPEND the bulk of their lives serving the powerful without wielding power themselves tend to attract criticism — and Walters is no exception.

The Army, which he reveres, has never quite regarded him as one of its own. Many senior contemporaries regard him as a brilliant oddball whose rise has been due more to his linguistic talents and ability to please his superiors than to any demonstrated skill in the professions of arms.

“He is a membrane,” says a veteran colleague, “relaying diplomatic and political chitchat to the top brass, who tend to love it. I never got much sense of a profound philosophy.”

“He will never let a superior sense that he doesn't like him,” says one cabinet-level official. Some who worked with Walters at the CIA regard him as an indifferent administrator — “poor on paper” — although brilliantly articulate. Some hold that he occasionally lets rapid intuition run ahead of his judgment; that, for instance, he insisted that the Communists would take over Portugal.

Walters is sensitive to charges that his army career has been spent largely in such glamorous quasi-diplomatic posts as Rio de Janeiro, Rome, Washington and Paris. This accounts, in part, for his insistence in 1967 on being allowed to spend two months with the fighting forces in Vietnam prior to taking up his assignment as senior defense attaché in Paris. Without first-hand knowledge of conditions in Vietnam, he protested, he would lack “credibility” in dealing with the French armed forces, virtually all of whose senior officers had served in the losing French struggle in the former colony.

WALTERS' military background, his vociferous support for the Vietnam war and particularly his close ties with Nixon isolated him at CIA when he became deputy director in April, 1972. Richard Helms, then the CIA's director, and many top officials had long written off Vietnam as a losing cause.

Moreover, they suspected Walters of being Nixon's in-house spy. He found himself accordingly shunted away from the chain of command, relegated to glad-handing visiting foreign intelligence chiefs and frequently detached by Nixon and Kissinger for “silent missions” so secret that not even Helms, his nominal superior, knew of them.

It was a trying time — and to make it worse, 6 weeks after being named deputy director, he found himself ineluctably drawn into the Watergate scandal. Though later cleared of any wrongdoing, he is still defensive about his role in temporarily halting the FBI's investigation of the “laundering” of Watergate funds in Mexico.

Walters to this day contends that Nixon showed merely “bad judgment” in covering up and lying to the nation to protect his staff. Fiercely loyal still, Walters telephones and visits Nixon periodically at San Clemente.

Since retiring, Walters has become an international consultant for U.S. companies, mainly petroleum and mineral firms, which pay him handsomely for his advice. He is essentially a global contact man, not a negotiator. Financially independent thanks to a recent legacy, he divides his time between a condominium in Palm Beach and his split-level home in Arlington where autographed photographs of a half-dozen presidents line the walls and a large U.S. flag flutters outside on the lawn. He still skis, occasionally pilots light planes and has recently begun writing a novel.