

Conspirator Quietly Buries Myth of the Superspy

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 24—The Watergate hearings, once the hottest ticket in town, reopened today to less than capacity crowds.

It was the same setting as before, the marble-walled Senate Caucus Room whose dated grace is defaced with television cables and lights. It was, in essentials, the same cast, from Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the committee chairman, to the anonymous but vaguely familiar underlings who scurry for glasses of water and the Capitol police who guard the corridors and doorways.

The crowds were different. There were fewer people than during the hearings' S.R.O. period, which happened to coincide with the height of Washington's summer tourist season. There were fewer family groups, almost no age children and, presumably because of the weather, not a single bare midriff. After the lunchtime recess, for the first time in the memory of one faithful spectator, there were more empty seats than occupied ones at times, and space between the standees.

But the crowd was still large enough to stir and murmur when the rather slight man in a wash-and-wear tan suit came in with an escort of lawyers and marshals and two of his children before the Senate Watergate hearings at 10 A.M.

It was E. Howard Hunt Jr., the day's first and only witness, perhaps the only man in the room whose face did not show a trace of exposure to the late-summer sun. In his day of testimony, to be continued tomorrow, Hunt, who pleaded guilty in the Watergate conspiracy, quietly demolished the superspy myth that has sold so many paperbacks—including some 40 of his own invention.

Hunt, a true believer, stated with what might have been pride and was certainly not apology: "To put it unmistakably, I was an intelligence officer—a spy—for the Government of the United States." But there was no resemblance between this almost fragile figure and the superspies of fiction, whose exploits he celebrated under such pen-names as David St. John.

Sitting straight in the witness chair, he twiddled a pen or laced his fingers under his chin and said, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and kept his light, rather high voice deferential to his questioners. He repeatedly put on his tortoise-rimmed half-glasses and took them off again.

The photographers "dis-tracted" him as they clustered like flies around the witness table waiting for his long pale face with its downward-canted mouth to assume some revealing expression. His counsel asked that they be moved

to the sidelines, where they crouched behind their lenses, still waiting.

Two of Hunt's four children sat behind him, among the lawyers and marshals; Lisa, 22 years old, who wore turquoise polish on her toenails and fingernails, and St. John, 19, whose shoulder-length hair was held back with a barrette and who wore a blue and white button that said, "Watergate" on his lapel.

They were among those listening as the witness read, without emotion but with a fluency and timing that bespoke rehearsal, a brief outline of the life and times of E. Howard Hunt Jr., 55 years old, 21 years with the Central Intelligence Agency, briefly a special agent for the White House, and for the next 30 years, according to his sentence, a prisoner.

He spoke of what he had done as "a duty to my country," and later of his belief that Daniel Ellsberg was a traitor, that perhaps the Democratic National Committee was receiving funds from Hanoi, and that somehow all this made it all right. He was Walter Mitty rewritten to Graham Greene, who could still graciously autograph one of his books for a spectator as the hearing broke for lunch.

His language had the blandness that has been

characteristic of Watergate witnesses. People "indicated" and "responded" and a break-in was "an entry" to him. A "sterile telephone" was one that could not be tampered with—but there emerged from his matter-of-factness the notion that he believed no human being was above reproach.

When Hunt was asked whether it had been necessary to buy off a guard or guards in the Watergate complex to make the conspirators' "entry" into the Democratic headquarters there, he replied in the tone of an efficient second-in-command reporting to his superior: "No, sir, but there was money to do so."

Hunt's is a trade that, notoriously, demands entire obedience, which by his account he gave: "Having spent 21 years in the C.I.A. following orders without question," he said, "it never occurred to me to question that legality, the propriety of any orders of the Attorney General of the United States."

It is also a trade that, notoriously, repays failure with the harshest penalties.

"I cannot escape feeling that the country I have served for my entire life and which directed me to carry out the Watergate entry is punishing me for doing the very things it trained and directed me to do," said E. Howard Hunt Jr.

NYT 9-25-73