

Frank Donner

THE CONFESSION OF AN FBI INFORMER

The case of William Lemmer, a tormented young Vietnam veteran who tried to oppose the war but instead betrayed everyone—his fellow dissenters, his FBI manipulators, his wife, and, most of all, himself



William Lemmer

ON THE LAST WEEKEND OF MAY this year, a long-deferred meeting of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War was held at the home of Scott Camil in Gainesville, Florida. Confined for the most part to veterans from the Southern sector of the antiwar group, the gathering was very informal: the twenty-odd people present included not only the group's Southern leaders but many local members and even a few nonmembers.

The discussion, in part, focused on how the group was to organize protest activities at the upcoming political conventions in Miami Beach. As talk swirled and eddied among the small, fragmented cliques clustered here and there about the house, one of the more prominent participants was repeatedly heard talking about shooting and bombing. According to many who were present, violent

proposals gushed from him almost uncontrollably. But, as one observer recalls, "The only response I heard was people telling him that shooting and bombing were not good things to do. I also remember someone saying, 'I don't think I could kill someone,' and similar statements."

The young veteran with the explosive rhetoric and violent schemes was William W. Lemmer, a twenty-two-year-old from Texarkana, Arkansas, who was then attending the state university at Fayetteville, Arkansas, on the GI Bill. His speech was matched by his appearance: flamboyant; deliberately, even excessively, unconventional, he seemed the very model of the gung-ho activist.

On May 29 when the last session was over, Bill Lemmer took aside the two VVAW leaders, and confessed to them that for the past nine months he had been an informer for the FBI. A week later, in Fayetteville, he expanded this confession in an eight-hour tape-recorded interview he gave to two other VVAW associates. On June 30, the tape turned up in the mail of the American Civil Liberties Union Project on Political Surveillance (which I head) at Yale Law School.

Shortly after I had the tape transcribed, a Florida federal grand jury began hearing testimony about a conspiracy allegedly conceived by the VVAW in April and developed at the Gainesville meeting in May. On July 13 indictments were returned against six VVAW leaders as conspirators and naming three others as unindicted co-conspirators. The grand jury charged the young veterans with plotting to disrupt the Republican National Convention. It said that they had conspired "to organize numerous 'fire teams' to attack with automatic weapons, fire and incendiary devices police stations, police cars and stores in Miami Beach"; that they intended to "fire lead weights, 'fried' marbles, ball bearings, 'cherry' bombs, smoke bombs by means of wrist rockets, sling shots and cross bows," and that they planned to "disrupt communications systems in Miami Beach."

In the course of the grand jury hearings, Special Prosecutor Guy Goodwin, the Justice Department's internal security specialist who has conducted most of the Government's grand jury probes of young radicals, subpoenaed the tape from Donald Donner (no relation) and Martin Jordan, the two VVAW members who had conducted the interview with Lemmer in Fayetteville. Lemmer testified before the grand jury, and there were reliable indications that he would be the principal witness in the Government's case against the VVAW leaders. The tape thus illuminated the complex and fascinating circumstances of Lemmer's life as an intelligence agent, his role as a provocateur, and his reliability as a witness on whose word the fate of the defendants in an important criminal case might well depend.

Lemmer's marathon confession was obscure in places, even after several readings of the 159-page transcript. For clarification and corroboration, my associates and I obtained further interviews from Donner and Jordan, as well as from Lemmer's estranged wife Mary, from his doctor, pastor, and personal friends in Fayetteville, and from his

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Army associates. This, then, is the story of Lemmer's career as a spy.

Under the gun

NO ONE KNOWS FOR SURE when William Lemmer first began to suspect that he was under surveillance by an Army intelligence unit. Possibly it was in the early fall of 1970 when he was initially caught up in the antiwar movement. He was in Japan at the time recuperating from an attack of acute bronchial asthma that put an early end to his second (and voluntary) combat tour in Vietnam. By the end of 1971, however, his suspicions had congealed into a fearful certainty. He was at Fort Benning, Georgia, an out-front activist now, cartooning for the underground paper on the base, signing peace petitions, testifying in Congress against the war, and "full of talk about destroying the Army and the Government."

This is the recollection of Regie Mullen, a slight young woman with red-gold hair and granny glasses who, as the wife of an antiwar activist on the base, knew Lemmer fairly well in those days. "Everything that happened to him," Mrs. Mullen went on to say, "was in his eyes part of a pattern of persecution, especially by Military Intelligence. Like that hole in his trailer. There was a hole in his trailer which he insisted was made by a bullet shot by MI."

Lemmer's wife also recalls that MI seemed to obsess him. A short, chubby young woman who would look like a little girl if it weren't for her quietly intense expression, Mary had been married to Lemmer for only a short time. She remembers that for long periods he would leave her alone in their trailer, and when she complained he would say he had to do it, that someone had to check on the spies.

Then one day—no one knows when exactly, because, of course, he told no one—William Lemmer went to the FBI, and took the first step of what was to be a nine-month career as an informer. It was, he explained later, "a self-security type thing. I had security problems that I was worried about and for self-protection I used my position [as an informer] to cover a lot of people, myself included."

To see generosity in an act of betrayal requires unusual powers of rationalization, or an unusual susceptibility to delusion. William Lemmer was well endowed with both, but then he was an unusual sort of informer. Most undercover agents are motivated by the prospect of reward (as was the case of the Berrigan/McAlister spy, Boyd Douglas) or by political hostility (Tommy the Traveler)—or by some combination of the two. But Lemmer was drawn to the FBI by fear. He became and remained an informer not for money (though he was soon to find himself dependent on the Bureau's financial support) or defense of his political values (he seems genuinely to have shared the views of his victims) but rather in a terrified quest for a haven from his pursuing demons, a quest that the Bureau diverted to undercover surveillance.

But the unusual facets of Lemmer's story should not obscure its institutional and historical continuities. People who are recruited by intelligence agencies as plants are typically made of unpromising human materials; one has only to think of Judas, Titus Oates, Azeff, Mathew Cvetic, Paul Crouch—to cite five quite different examples. Spies

are very hard to come by—"A right-thinking man refuses such a job," as Judge George W. Anderson once put it—and the spy-master must make do.

For almost a quarter of a century, the FBI has "run" many thousands of political spies not as a casual or



optional matter but as chosen instruments for the collection of political intelligence, unrelated to law enforcement. The systematic subornation of betrayal is part of the Bureau's "mission," as the intelligence people call it. And the army of recruits for this mission is made up largely of damaged souls.

Lemmer's induction as a spy didn't happen right away, of course, not at that first meeting with the agents in Georgia. Lemmer was hooked, to use a term of the art, in September 1971. He was out of the Army by then, and he and Mary had returned to Fayetteville, where Lemmer was attending the state university. Then, late in September, Lemmer and some friends were arrested on a marijuana charge in Leavenworth County, Kansas, where they'd gone in Lemmer's car. Lemmer doesn't tell us his feelings as he sat in jail awaiting trial. After six days, however, he alone was released, and he was left in no doubt about who had intervened. "They brought me out," Lemmer recalled, "and said, 'Well, your bond has been posted . . . you know by whom.' And I was given instructions to contact the Bureau when I got back to Fayetteville. And everybody was really apologetic."

This is a common way of snaring an informer. He is rescued by the Bureau from a pending criminal charge, and for this he is presumably grateful. In Lemmer's case, for example, his confederates in the pot bust were sentenced to prison. If the recruit proves ungrateful and fails to "cooperate," by turning informer, the Bureau always has the option of reactivating the case. Lemmer's subsequent account of the interview that formally established his relationship with the Bureau is most revealing of FBI procedure in securing what it calls "informants." It also suggests the casually exploitive way in which it enlisted Lemmer's services:

They made contact with me and we sat down and ran through this shit. If I did work for them, what were my motives? This, that, and the other. By this time I had a pretty good picture of what they were up to . . . I didn't feel uneasy talking to them because of prior contact. Other people did. I told them payment on this thing is ridiculous because at that time I didn't see myself as being a representative of them but rather the representative, sort of the liaison, between ourselves and them—nothing sensitive would pass through.

From there they ran a check on me, and as part of that check there came out an MI dossier regarding an alleged conspiracy to steal weapons from the Central Arms Room in Fort Benning, Georgia. . . . They confronted me with this and said, "What's the meaning of this?" I put it down to an amateurish stunt by MI to get at me . . . I wrote that all off as being the work of amateurs. They seemed to like that word, amateurs, because they see themselves as being professionals . . . From there I cleared myself with MI and, using the Bureau again, I had something to fight back with.

After this, Lemmer became more deeply involved in the activities of the small Fayetteville chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He participated in meetings and demonstrations, first as rank and file, then as a leader. We have two descriptions of him at this stage in his career. The first is from Martin Jordan, a student and former VVAW state coordinator, and one of the two men to whom Lemmer would subsequently give his tape-recorded confession. Jordan is a striking-looking young man in his early twenties. Half Choctaw, he has deep-set eyes, a full beard, and long hair bound in a headband that also serves to disguise a receding hairline. An Oklahoman, he speaks softly in the accents of that part of the country.

Bill is about 5'9"-5'10", dark hair, weight about 175-180. No distinguishing marks on him, but when he gets in a bind or uptight he tenses up, and when he tenses up he turns almost white, his eyes get glazed . . . He's on some kind of downers for his asthma and as a counter-reaction of the downers, he takes speed. He's a very nervous person.

He considers himself to be an intellectual on any subject you bring up, and his ego is twofold to anyone I ever met . . . Other than that, he was more radical sometimes than most people I've met who have come out of combat and who were ready to settle down and help get peace back. His attitude was if they didn't go along with it, fuck it, we can kill them.

Lemmer's energy, compulsive grandstanding, and boastful buccaneering style startled or repelled most of the local vets; but he soon earned a following among a few radicals, nonstudent hippies, and street people. One of the latter is Mike Damron, who had been in and out of Vietnam for five years when he first met Lemmer. Damron is something of a character in Fayetteville. A Thoreauvian village anarchist, he is respected for the purity of his commitment, even though his different drummer sometimes marches him to disorderly-conduct arrests. Damron paints a more sympathetic picture of Lemmer than Jordan does, but it is in no way inconsistent.

One thing that impressed me about Bill [was his] enthusiasm, his willingness to do something, to be into where things were going on. Like it was Bill's idea to organize outside of Fayetteville, and it was the first time that this had been attempted in Arkansas.

I knew he was egotistical and all this, but I wrote a lot of it off to the fact that he hadn't been back from Vietnam too long, and a lot of people tend to be that way . . . Bill was willing to get in there and do things; that's why I liked him.

The ties that bind

WITHIN A SHORT TIME after his induction interview at the local FBI office, Lemmer developed a close relationship with his controller, Dick O'Connell. Lemmer was flattered by the way Agent O'Connell seemed to take him into his confidence, talking candidly about people whom the Bureau suspected of organizing local disturbances, asking Lemmer's help in locating radicals, commenting paternally, tolerantly, on the failings of some of the younger man's associates. Such treatment did more

than lubricate Lemmer's cooperativeness with the Bureau; it enabled him to reshape reality to conform to his inner needs. His former persecutors, Military Intelligence, seemed for the moment at least to have been neutralized, but the role they had played in his psychic drama was now being filled by the local police, the "pigs," as Lemmer called them, who seemed always to be there at the demonstrations and marches organized by the VVAW. And the logic that had led him, back in Georgia, to seek protection from MI in the more "professional" FBI worked equally well when the enemy became the police. As mentor and protector, Dick O'Connell was indispensable.

He also became financially useful. Both in his taped confession and by outside report, Lemmer was extremely sensitive about the matter of compensation; accepting money from the FBI violated his benign conception of his role as guarantor of VVAW safety (and his own). In his confession he makes a point of the fact that he attended a VVAW National Steering Committee meeting in Kansas City "out of my own money." But after that, he recalls:

First of all I tried refusing money, [but] you can't do it . . . I told them, "No. First of all I'm not working for the Bureau. I'm VVAW and this is what I'm doing." And I didn't give [the FBI] anything there that I thought would be a compromise. And that's when they said, "It wouldn't hurt for us to reimburse you for the expenses." And I got so tired of going back and forth and back and forth. I needed the money too. And so I finally just said, "Fine. Reimburse me."

From then on, the Bureau would pay his expenses on out-of-town jaunts, the enormous phone bills on his credit card (the number of which he freely gave to other VVAW people), and the installment payments on his car. O'Connell also took care of Mary's emergency household bills.

In return, during his frequent sessions with O'Connell in Fayetteville, Lemmer would identify people in photographs, describe the roles and behavior of VVAW activists, and hash over the group's internal politics. On the many occasions when he left town to attend VVAW meetings and rallies in other areas, he would eventually be debriefed back in Fayetteville. But Lemmer also always brought with him on these trips the name and phone number of a local Bureau agent. For him, this information represented security from the local police. For the Bureau, of course, it meant detailed intelligence on their surveillance targets.

Throughout the winter of 1971-2, Lemmer found himself more and more caught up in antiwar activities. And as his participation escalated, inevitably and unconsciously he crossed the almost invisible line that separates the informer from the agent provocateur. Lemmer had been trained in Special Forces, and the experience left him with a taste for dramatic tactics, guerrilla warfare, exotic weaponry, and violence. He knew, of course, that instigating violent acts was against the FBI's rules, as well as against the law. Nevertheless, he was always looking for ways to indulge his proclivities without the Bureau's knowing about it. The VVAW interviewers who listened to his confession specifically asked him how he justified some of the wild exhortations to violence that burst out of him at planning sessions. Lemmer replied:

I was Special Forces. I had schooling in weapons. My God, I know weapons. I had three years and four months

of weapons, and this is what I know. Of course, if there's a discussion, I'm going to enter into it. I was talking about weapons. I was talking about frags.

There were at least two occasions, even in Fayetteville, when Lemmer went beyond merely discussing these matters. One of these was a threat to bomb a building if Dean Rusk were permitted to speak on the University of Arkansas campus. The local newspaper received a letter, composed in good kidnap fashion with words snipped from printed publications, to the effect that a left-wing group on campus (not the VVAW) would carry out the bombing. According to Mike Damron, however, it was Lemmer who conceived the whole scheme in order to discredit the rival group. Mike Damron was later arrested and indicted for his part in the bomb threat. William Lemmer has admitted to having tipped off the FBI.

Another incident was the attempted bombing of Old Main, a landmark on the Arkansas campus. Lemmer, in



his confession, admits to having told a seventeen-year-old student, Mark C. Vanceil, how to make the bomb ("ether would be better than gasoline"). He also admits that the next day he picked up the materials and helped place the bomb in the building. The student was caught by waiting FBI agents, arrested, and convicted.

Apart from Lemmer's unsuccessful struggles with his provocative inclinations there was a certain flair or *brío* about his spying. He was fertile with suggestions for the Bureau in its efforts to influence VVAW policy for its own purposes. At one point it sent Lemmer to New York to revive a rejected plan for a visit to Hanoi by a VVAW delegation. The Bureau was eager to contribute financially, if money was the problem, and to insure Lemmer's selection as a delegate. When that seemed unlikely, Lemmer proposed to the FBI that only those who were "airborne qualified" (as he was) be chosen to go. Despite the Bureau's best efforts, the plan ultimately foundered.

Fear and dependence

IN A MIND LIKE LEMMER'S, every form of engagement with the world ultimately becomes a cage of fears. In a weird kaleidoscopic sequence, commitment becomes hate, and hate dissolves into fear. This process explains a behavior pattern of acting out fantasies of violence (striking at "them" before "they" could get at him), followed by a swift retreat to a protective haven that in turn becomes a new source of anxiety. And so, as Lemmer intensified his antiwar commitment, he began to pay a terrible price in fear of retaliation. His confession is filled with allusions to his growing dependence on the Bureau for protection.

At Fort Hood, Texas, for example, he was planning a peaceful demonstration when he spotted two of his apparently indefatigable pursuers, MI agents who were listening to what was going on. "That night," he recalls, "I broke away and made a phone call and I told them

[the Bureau] specifically there will be no firearms and no explosives, nothing. We were coming in with leaflets." The FBI, evidently, was to call off the military agents on the ground that Lemmer's intentions (this time) were entirely nonviolent.

Later, he was in New Orleans for another "action," and he heard that bombs had been placed (possibly by the Minutemen) in the VVAW cars.

And so I got on the phone then and told Dick, "Hey man, they're bombing the coordinators' cars." And he got really bent out of shape. His reaction was, "Oh fuck." [He] wanted to know immediately if I had an alternate place to park mine. And I told him no. So he got on the phone and called New Orleans and found out that they weren't bombed. They were trashed, that's all. He put me at ease [about] the possibilities of further bombing and said no bombs were involved. So they had knowledge of the fact that the cars were trashed.

At the Fayetteville office O'Connell did nothing to allay his informer's fears. According to Lemmer, the agent would call his home several times a week to inquire about his safety. At the same time, O'Connell carefully nurtured the young veteran's reliance on the Bureau, reassuring him that so long as he continued to cooperate nothing would happen to him. For several months these talks with his controller giped nicely with Lemmer's own grandiose sense of himself to produce feelings of invulnerability, an invulnerability that, moreover, he could bestow on his associates like a blessing. Lemmer had it all worked out in his mind: as a Bureau spy he was immune to arrest. But if, in a group of demonstrators, he alone was spared, his cover would be blown. Thus, no arrests for anyone. Even after he surfaced to tell his victims that he had betrayed them we find him clinging to this curious view of himself as a protector:

As a result of my presence the police more or less gritted their teeth and walked on by and didn't start harassing us with bullshit arrests. First of all, whenever I'd go into some place, the police there were made aware of the fact that someone in that group of people was working with them [the Bureau], and they really don't get into the idea of plucking one of those people out on some loitering charge or jaywalking charge and putting them in jail.

If there were no arrests, Lemmer took it as proof of the protective power of his role. If there were arrests or something went wrong, he blamed it on the fact that the Bureau was not aware of his presence or had failed to communicate with local authorities.

The spy spied upon

SOMETHING SOON PLACED a formidable strain on this soothing dialectic that converted betrayal into protection, and ultimately it transformed his security into a nightmare. This was Lemmer's deepening commitment to the goals and style of the group he was betraying and his growing identification with fellow members. Simultaneously, he felt the full impact of a fact he had surely known all along but had somehow been able to ignore: he, William Lemmer, was not the only informer in the VVAW. According to his confession, his own balance of terror began to tip against the FBI and in favor of the VVAW at

a meeting in Denver in early 1972 when he became an Acting Regional Coordinator:

By the time of Denver . . . I had to provide something [for the FBI] as far as [the VVAW] scenario was concerned [and] at the same time to provide some amount of security for the people there. I started running into conflicts when I would leave out a point in the scenario, or switch it around, and they'd turn it right back to me.

And Denver got me thinking in terms of other people [informers] that were there. It began to make my head pound . . . And I wondered exactly who the other people were, and I was becoming more and more security conscious at Denver.

At his debriefing after the Denver meeting, he told O'Connell that he suspected another VVAW member of being an informer:

I was more convinced that he was working for someone and it didn't seem right . . . If he was working for an accredited national agency, then who the hell was he working for? . . . I wanted to know who he was and the Bureau wouldn't give an answer.

As Lemmer lurched back and forth between the Bureau and the VVAW in alternate spasms of fear and guilt, he began to look for a way out. Gradually, as he traveled around to VVAW meetings and "actions," he formed a number of apparently platonic relationships with women in which he would confess to being an informer and then usually seek assurance of their protection if trouble came. These women became a healing refuge, a compromise between an unendurable deception and a full confession to the targets themselves. As he explained on the tapes:

I wanted someone to tell. All I could do was, from time to time, let someone completely neutral know, to take the pressure off my head. Like living a deceit is a hell of a thing, particularly when your head is into trying to organize and at the same time knowing that you're restricted because there are people like yourself around you. If it weren't for these [women] that I choose one at a time, then the pressure of what I was trying to do, it would become unbearable.

He had to make sure, however, that his confidantes were truly neutral and would not denounce him either to the Bureau or to the VVAW. And what better way to establish their qualifications than by asking the Bureau? Early in his relationship with O'Connell he had worked out an arrangement that ostensibly permitted him to "check out" the Bureau's files on particular individuals. It is unlikely that he was really accorded this extraordinary privilege, but his illusion was part of the Bureau's "protective" strategy in dealing with Lemmer—to encourage him to feel that the full resources of the Bureau were at his disposal to insure his safety.

But if it was easy to get information on his female friends, quite the opposite was true when he tried to find out what other infiltrators were reporting on his own conduct and proposals:

I asked them [the Bureau] who the hell R _____ was, and they didn't come back with anything . . . And I kept pressing for something on R _____ and I pressed and pressed and pressed and finally dropped it because they wouldn't come back with anything. They couldn't even get a service record back on him.

After a while Lemmer concluded that whenever his agent reported to him that the Bureau had no record on a

man, he was almost certainly another FBI informer. He was probably right in this, but the knowledge gave him little peace of mind and made the Bureau seem even less reliable as a source of protection. It also quickened an emerging resolve to confess all to his colleagues in the VVAW.

No place to hide

LEMMER'S FEELING OF SAFETY from arrest or harassment may or may not have been well-founded when he was operating in Arkansas. Elsewhere, he recalls:

I had to deal with local and state police on my own, and if I got busted, then the only thing that I could do is make a phone call and then call one of the agents. That's if I had a number for one and, if not, I'd just tell them, "Why don't you locate the FBI for me. I'll talk to them but not to you."

Things could easily go wrong in this game, however, and they did in April 1972. Lemmer was arrested in a demonstration at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City and, together with others, jailed. He told the local authorities to call Fayetteville and tell them he was in custody. After spending the next five days in jail, he alone was offered release on his own recognizance by a United States marshal. Despite the risk of exposure, Lemmer accepted. "I don't see that much advantage to staying in jail," he said later.

He was wrong. The suspicions stirred up by his release were soon verified by more substantial evidence. One of the officials who had seen to Lemmer's release described the veteran to his son and told him in respectful tones that the veteran was "undercover FBI." Local VVAW members, and through them an ACLU lawyer, learned of it when the son, who apparently didn't share his father's admiration for the Bureau, promptly contacted some VVAW people.

The Tinker demonstrators, who were tried and convicted last August (eight men received jail sentences; four women were placed on probation), insist that it was



Lemmer who originally proposed that they penetrate the base—the heart of the criminal charges against them. This claim is supported by the testimony of a Government witness, the arresting officer, that Lemmer was "a potential troublemaker." He was apparently unaware that Lemmer was a spy; indeed, the Government itself claimed at the trial that Lemmer was not acting as an informer "in the instant case," an implausible contention in view of the fact that, although charged with the same offense as the others, he was never brought to trial and was quickly whisked off by the Bureau on informer business elsewhere.

While the news of Lemmer's exposure was percolating down from Oklahoma City to Fayetteville, Lemmer, after briefly touching home base, whirled off on a VVAW circuit that took him to Washington, D.C., New York City, back to

Washington, and then, finally, to the rendezvous in Gainesville.

Lemmer's Washington experiences again illustrate the way he was squeezed between the Bureau and the VVAW. On his first visit he was rounded up in a mass arrest. On his second he was "trashed" in a Pentagon demonstration. "I was one of the people that they knocked down the stairs. I was one of the people that they threw tear gas on, and it exploded on." How could they do this to him? After all, he was the one who was out there to tell them "which way the wind was blowing." And it was, as he later put it, "my presence at demonstrations like this that offered protection and tolerance as far as the police go. The police weren't going to let anything happen to a group of people in which there might be someone that was working for the federal government."

Naturally, after this he checked back with his local agent to find out what had gone wrong. Everybody in the Bureau was sorry and unhappy, he recalled; it was simply that they hadn't been notified of his presence. The same foul-up had been responsible for the Tinker Air Force Base fiasco. Nevertheless, the Washington trashing disturbed Lemmer deeply. It further convinced him that he had more to fear from the FBI than from the VVAW. But more than that, it furthered his resolve to surface and tell all to his brothers.

The Gainesville trip was the first Lemmer undertook not as a matter of choice but as an order. On his way he picked up Barbara Stocking, a Quaker and a graduate assistant in philosophy at Boston University, whom he had met on one of his visits to Washington: she had tended his dog—a large Dalmatian named Pasha—while he had marched. Miss Stocking was glad for the lift because she was planning to visit relatives in Orlando.

On the road, Lemmer once again felt an overpowering need to unburden himself. The fragile universe of dominions and powers that had precariously sustained him for the past few months was beginning to come apart. Everywhere he looked enemies were converging on him, dark emissaries from an all-embracing reign of terror, and his mind was working frantically to comprehend its name. According to Miss Stocking, he talked almost incessantly for the better part of the two days they spent together driving to Gainesville. He spoke of the trouble he had had in the Army, and of the "hassling" he was now getting from not only the FBI but the CIA and the ACLU as well.

Lemmer told her not to go to the Miami conventions because there was going to be fighting, shooting, and rioting, and the whole VVAW leadership would be picked up and taken out of circulation.

This last prediction was a variation of a theme much discussed in VVAW and other activist circles earlier that spring. To many of these young men, it seemed that Nixon's escalation of the bombing in North Vietnam and the mining of Haiphong harbor would be the prelude to a nationwide mass crackdown on antiwar groups. In Lemmer's imagination this sinister prospect had become a certainty, and for a while prior to the Gainesville trip it seemed to him that the enemy's visor had lifted at last. It was not the FBI or the VVAW who was seeking his destruction, but a shadowy all-powerful megastructure, a "phantom government," as he put it. The accelerated vio-

lence in Vietnam would trigger a crackdown by the "invisible power" in Washington, and this would be followed by a revolutionary confrontation. He alerted his friends to pack their bags and be ready to move. He told his wife Mary that the revolution that was supposed to occur in '76 was going to break out now, any day.

This scenario was not entirely displeasing to Lemmer. He came to believe that he and his friends would be driven underground where they would break up into cells. The cells appealed to him because, on the one hand, being constantly observed by his cellmates, he would have a perfect excuse for not calling the Bureau, while on the other hand, VVAW members in other cells would be protected from informers because the informers' movements also would be easy to monitor. He may have thought too that communications among the cells would be so difficult that rumors of his being an informer would die down.

The fact that no domestic upheaval followed the escalation of the war did nothing to reduce Lemmer's fears. The date of the roundup simply shifted to some time after the Miami conventions. Then too, of course, he was still hooked by O'Connell, and the agent milked the young veteran's nightmarish fantasies:

I was told [by O'Connell] to prepare a list of movement people around Fayetteville who I could count on should I have to go underground. He confirmed that possibility. Openly at one of our meetings, in fact, the last of our meetings. To the point that we discussed alternate identification for myself so that I would have the ability to move around the country.

Lemmer named everyone, not only VVAW activists but other movement people as well. But, as he would later be at pains to tell his confessors, he put his own name at the head of the list. All this was unbearably weighing on his mind as he drove down toward Gainesville.

The first confession

THAT A SPY IS SUSPECTED by his targets rarely makes him confess. Lemmer was aware that he had blown his cover in Oklahoma, and he had waited, terrified but nonetheless expectant, for his fellows to denounce him. They never did. But the strain forced him at last, after so many rehearsals with well-disposed neutral confidantes, to denounce himself.

The list of activists that O'Connell had told him to draw up undoubtedly helped drive him to confession. Thinking of himself as a soldier, he couldn't help thinking of his comrades as buddies. They were all in combat now, and in combat it is simply unthinkable to betray one's buddies. To Lemmer, however, on his way to Gainesville, it may have seemed that he had time to retrieve the situation and redeem himself in the eyes of the VVAW leaders he expected to meet there. There was one problem, and it tormented him. This was the prospect of FBI reprisal, the crushing fear that another Bureau informer would report his confession. The tapes record his memory of the agony:

I didn't know who the hell I could trust. Things I would say as passing comment would shoot back [to the Bureau] quick as shit, so I really didn't know who was safe. [But] I knew who the Government was worried

about, and this is what I had to count on. These were the people I had to talk to . . .

Miss Stocking is among those who remember that when they arrived at the house of VVAW leader Scott Camil in Gainesville, Lemmer continued to talk wildly of shooting and bombing. To her mind, he seemed to be acting as an agent provocateur. But the weird and reckless nature of Lemmer's proposals at Gainesville—topping even his customary theatrics—is more fully explained by his bitter rage at the Bureau for its failure to protect him from being “trashed” at the Pentagon, and by his eagerness to demonstrate a kind of exemplary militance for the benefit of the leaders to whom he was planning to confess in private at the end of the session.

He told them everything, beginning with Fort Benning when he had enlisted the FBI, as he saw it, as a shield against the sinister surveillance of Military Intelligence. He told them how terribly hard it had been for him to serve both the FBI and the VVAW, but how necessary as well. And finally he told them about the list of people he had given O'Connell. He ended by proposing that he become a double agent, using his FBI connections to finance VVAW activities. This was Lemmer's first confession, and all we know of it is contained in the tape-recorded account he gave later in Fayetteville. Thus we don't know how Camil and the others reacted. We do know, however, that he himself felt no relief afterward, only a fresh charge of fear at the possibility of FBI retaliation.

The crack-up

LEMMER DID NOT RETURN directly to Fayetteville. Instead he slowly made his way to Texarkana, his hometown. He made the trip in near constant terror, perceiving swarms of FBI agents on the road:

There were brand-new Fords all over the road, sitting in exits, driving past me, all the same people. I say all the same people, the same looking people, all with the uniform sunglasses, all with uniform haircuts . . . I was observed all the way.

Reaching Texarkana at last, he immediately had his beard shaved off and his hair cut. This, of course, was to throw the FBI off his trail. But he may also have thought that the mass crackdown was beginning. He then called his wife in Fayetteville to arrange for her to drive down to Texarkana. He happened to reach her while Donald Donner was at their apartment telling her about Lemmer's being an informer. Mary confronted him with the news over the phone and, according to her later account, he fell to pieces. He recovered sufficiently, however, to speak to Donner and ask him to meet him in Texarkana.

Reluctant to see Lemmer alone, Donner recruited Martin Jordan to join him, and they arranged to go down with Mary the following day. But Lemmer's mind was now shot through with fear. When he learned that Donner was bringing Jordan, he became convinced that they were coming to kill him and that Mary was also in danger. Panicking, he called her around midnight on Thursday, June 1, and told her that he was sending someone over to bring her to him in Texarkana. Mary has described what happened when she arrived:

Bill was terrified. He was afraid the VVAW was after him, that the FBI was after him because the FBI knew that the VVAW knew that he was [an informer]. I tried to tell him that [Donner and Jordan] weren't going to hurt him, but he had petrified his mother, my parents, anybody that knew us, aunts, uncles, everybody, that whenever these guys call tell them no, we haven't seen him.

Eventually, Lemmer's wife succeeded in calming him, at least to the point of agreeing to meet with Donner and Jordan over the weekend. His confession was recorded in two separate meetings, but once again the admission of what he had been doing brought with it no release. After the second session, he learned that Mary had left him. He was sure the FBI had abducted her to get back at him for his recantation. Her explanation is simpler: “I was mad at him for doing all this shit [informing], and I just decided that I was going to do it, and I left.” She recalls that afterward, when she briefly went back to their apartment to fetch her things, she found the walls covered with Lemmer's macabre drawings and a series of index cards reading “PVS [Post-Vietnam Syndrome] Kills.” Other witnesses testify that during this time Lemmer carried a pistol and slept with weapons at his side. He was so fearful of the FBI that when Dick O'Connell called him at home, Lemmer asked a friend who had answered the phone to say that he was out.

This changed, however, on June 8 when Lemmer was officially informed that his wife was bringing a divorce action against him. The news quickly drove him back to the Bureau for help. After advising him that there was no ground for a kidnapping charge, agents persuaded him to report her as a missing person. Still, he could not break with the VVAW, though his behavior was becoming more and more bizarre. According to Martin Jordan, Lemmer would wake him up in the middle of the night to say that the FBI was on the way over, that they were searching for Mary, and that if Jordan knew where she was, he had better tell her to do something.

Shortly thereafter, on the basis of several affidavits testifying to Lemmer's around-the-clock gun toting and threats to kill himself and others, the young veteran was placed in custodial confinement pending a sanity hearing. On Friday, June 16, Dr. Robert Hoard told the court that he did not feel that Lemmer was a threat to either himself or others, but he strongly urged that he seek psychiatric help once he was released.

Lemmer failed to take the doctor's advice; instead he fled to Oklahoma and shortly thereafter wrecked his car in a collision with a horse and rider that left the horse dead and the rider seriously injured. A few days later, on June 29, his wife received a letter demanding her return and insisting that they move away and change their identities. The letter adds:

Today I have gone to meet with the Asst. Attorney [sic] General of the U.S.—very soon, people will begin to feel the results of this. Do not pass this along to them, unless you want to see them try to kill me—they would*

*This may have been when Lemmer provided the testimony that later led to the indictment of the VVAW leaders at Gainesville for conspiracy to break up the Republican Convention.

of course die trying. I am tired but your friends are making me run a bit more. When I stop, they will have more trouble than they can handle.

In a second letter to her, written the same day, he seems to be trying to placate his friends in the VVAW, for he now claims that 95 per cent of what he told Donner and Martin was lies. At the same time, he goes on to say that he, their former protector, has become an avenger:

If you choose to stay with those people you call beautiful, remember who they are playing with. I am not a goddamned leg infantryman like them. I am an elitist fucking paratrooper, a Special Forces type ranger. If you must tell them anything, tell them to keep one eye over their shoulders at all times. Because one evening soon, they'll see the satisfying [sic] smile of mine. But only if they're fast . . . Let them now walk softly, lest they fall. Tired people make mistakes. Tell them to sleep lightly.

I can no longer do anything on their behalf. They have destroyed my desire to do so. They will soon know what can come down from having me for an enemy in place of a friend.

Who are the victims?

THIS ACCOUNT OF William Lemmer's career as an informer for the FBI would be incomplete if we left it as the story of one tormented man who may indeed have been, as he himself seemed to sense, yet another of the victims of PVS. His history does point up the consequences of the war, in men and institutions, but it also illuminates very clearly just how far the FBI is prepared to go in carrying out its mission of protecting the security of this country.*

The Fayetteville resident FBI agent investigated Lemmer's Army record before recruiting him as a spy. He must have known, then, that Lemmer had experienced difficulties in the Army requiring psychiatric treatment, that by Lemmer's own admission on the public record he had been offered a discharge on psychiatric grounds. Added to this formal medical history was Lemmer's plea for protection from Military Intelligence, a function grotesquely beyond the Bureau's competence. Yet the Bureau recruited him. Whether Lemmer was a psychiatric casualty of Vietnam or whether his service precipitated latent paranoid tendencies cannot be determined. What is beyond dispute is that he desperately needed help. that when he came to the Bureau he was drowning in fear and sought rescue.

After the Leavenworth County marijuana arrests, the Bureau "developed" this frightened twenty-two-year-old college dropout, probably already tagged as a PSI (Potential Security Informant) as a result of his prior contacts with the Bureau, into a full-fledged spy with extraordinary privileges. Lemmer's unusual relationship with O'Connell can be explained in part by the immediate intelligence payoff to the Bureau—but only in part. To a

certain extent, it reflected a conscious effort to tighten his dependence on the Bureau by pandering to his hunger for power as a defense against his phantom enemies. The Bureau did not merely ignore Lemmer's illness; it knowingly ratified his fears and exploited them for its own purposes. It made Lemmer its creature by fostering the delusion that as long as he served as a spy he was invulnerable, beyond the reach of the law. Despite the Bureau's formal strictures against provocation, it made Lemmer a provocateur by offering him a risk-free outlet for his undischarged aggressions.

The most troubling example of this manipulation emerges in connection with his obsession that the "invisible government" was preparing to pursue and destroy him and his fellows. The Bureau, far from disabusing him of this fear, actually played on it and harnessed it to an intelligence objective, the compilation of a complete list of area radicals and activists. In using Lemmer's terror to induce him to betray his friends, the Bureau sharpened already unbearable conflicts and brought him in from the cold.

But the fear that made the Bureau his ally ultimately made it his enemy when it proved unable to keep up its end of the bargain, which was to protect him. No agency could have done this. But in his eyes, the Bureau not only failed to shield him from harassment but also—through other informers—replaced MI as a watcher and persecutor. It turned out to be the hated old authority figure in a new guise: there was no place to hide—except in underground cells where he could finally "range out freely." The Bureau tried to manipulate Lemmer into projecting his fears and hostility on his targets, but in this it was thwarted by his personal regard for the VVAW leaders and his involvement in their cause. The confessions, first at Gainesville, then at Fayetteville, were really a triumph of this war-scarred GI's commitment, flawed and phobic to be sure, over the Bureau's cynical exploitation of his illness. Whatever patriotic or paternalistic justifications the Bureau may offer, the hard fact is that it debauched—there is no other word for it—a young veteran and drove him deeper into the shadows.

Tales about an informer usually end at this point; there is no room left for an evaluation of the impact of his betrayal on his victims. But Lemmer's story is really incomplete without at least a glance in the direction of his targets. Just as suspicion and fear set Lemmer on the informer's road, so trust and the need for community bring people together to give meaning to shared concerns. Erik Erikson has pointed out that the life cycle of the mentally healthy individual is grounded in a "sense of basic trust . . . an essential trustfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one's own trustworthiness." Whether considered as an inner state or as a way of behaving, this sense of trust is also the essential precondition for healthy social and political relationships. The price we pay for the political informer is ultimately not merely the invasion of this or that formally protected right, but the undermining of our common life. □

*It may be that, like many informers' confessions, Lemmer's account of his Bureau relationships is subjective and self-justifying. But independent factual evidence corroborates much of his narrative, and supplies convincing support for the whole of it.

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