

TOP SECRET//COMINT//SI

(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) A Spy Like Us: Ronald W. Pelton

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- **Caller:** Ah, I have something I would like to discuss with you I think that would be very interesting to you.
- **Soviet Embassy:** Uh-huh, uh-huh
- **Caller:** Is there any way to do so, in, ah, confidence or privacy?
- **Soviet Embassy:** I see....
- **Caller:** I come from - I, I, I am in, with the United States government.
- **Soviet Embassy:** Ah, huh, United States government.... Maybe you can visit.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Thus began the 5-year spying career of Ronald Pelton. An NSA employee from 1965 to 1979, he sold information on U.S. SIGINT efforts against the Soviet target to the KGB from 1980 to 1985. Except for William Weisband in the late 1940s, Pelton was the most damaging spy NSA ever faced.

~~(S)~~ His NSA career began normally enough. He was born and raised in Benton Harbor, Michigan. After graduating from high school in 1960, he joined the U.S. Air Force and was sent to Indiana University for Russian Language training. He served as a Russian language intercept operator. [REDACTED] After four years in the Air Force, Pelton joined NSA as a civilian.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Once at the Agency, he continued to work on the Russian problem. Pelton was involved with collection technology and collection management, eventually moving into jobs connected with cryptanalysis. His almost photographic memory and communication skills impressed his superiors [REDACTED] and he was very highly regarded. By 1979 he was a respected staff officer and had written a manual describing Soviet cipher systems.

(U) Starting about this time, unknown to NSA, Pelton began having serious financial problems. His failed attempt to build an expensive new home for his family in Howard County, Maryland, led to bankruptcy in April 1979. He resigned from NSA two months

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later. For the next six months, Pelton drifted from job to job, unable to earn a steady income. Desperate, on January 14, 1980, he made that fateful telephone call to the Soviet embassy.

~~(TS//SI)~~ According to the Wall Street Journal, Pelton first met with the Soviets the following day. At first, they thought he was some sort of FBI trap, but after Pelton showed the Soviets some sort of NSA certificate with his name on it and began his amazing story, they listened closely [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] they realized that Pelton was genuine and would be an extremely valuable information source.

(b)(1)
(b)(3)-18 USC 798
(b)(3)-50 USC 403
(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

~~(TS//SI)~~ Over the next five years, Pelton met with Soviet agents several times in Washington, DC, and twice in Vienna, Austria. In over 100 hours of interviews, Pelton

[redacted]

[redacted] For this tremendously damaging information, Pelton received \$35,000.

(U) At the same time, Pelton's life continued in a downward spiral. He remained unable to hold a steady job. He left his wife and children and lived with a girl friend. She and Pelton drank heavily and used illegal drugs.

(U) Pelton's spying career began to collapse with the defection of KGB colonel Vitaly Yurchenko. Although Yurchenko could not remember Pelton's name, he described a former NSA employee who was providing valuable information to the Soviet Union. It took a few months for the FBI to identify Pelton as the spy, but once they did, they initiated 24-hour surveillance on him. Then Yurchenko defected back to the Soviet Union.

(U) Afraid that Yurchenko would tip Pelton off, the FBI moved quickly. Although there was evidence that Pelton and his girl friend were breaking the law, there was still no proof that he was spying for the Soviet Union. In a desperate move, FBI agents convinced Pelton to meet with them at the Annapolis Hilton. After several hours of interrogation, thinking a deal could be struck, Pelton admitted he had committed espionage and signed a confession. He was immediately arrested.

(U) Up until this time, for fear of compromising intelligence assets, the U.S. government was reluctant to prosecute espionage cases such as this. However, NSA director LTG

William E. Odom and the director of Central Intelligence were determined that Pelton would be different. The court case opened on 27 May 1986. In a stunning move, NSA sent William Crowell, the chief of A Group, to explain SIGINT to the jury and how damaging Pelton had been to the American effort against the Soviet target. This, combined with Pelton's confession, led to conviction. Pelton is currently serving three consecutive life terms plus ten years in Lewisburg Penitentiary in Pennsylvania.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Very few of Pelton's compromises ever became widely known, and little [redacted] [redacted] was ever revealed to the American public. To the individuals outside of NSA, unaware of the damage caused, Ron Pelton was a rather unimportant spy. The press called him as a "minor functionary at a relatively low salary level." His unpleasant personality and habits kept the American people from taking him seriously.

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~~(S//SI)~~
~~(U)~~ inside the Agency, he was viewed differently. Although reviled, like all traitors, Ronald Pelton was something more. Until June 1979, Pelton was an ordinary NSAer, building a fairly successful career. The information he sold the Soviets [redacted]

[redacted]
The people who knew him must have felt a great sense of betrayal knowing he undermined their work. He was one of them, and he sabotaged their efforts.

(U) You never think that the person who sits next to you could become a spy.

Sources:

(U) Carley, William M. "How the FBI, Tipped by a Russian, Tracked an Intelligence Leak," The Wall Street Journal, March 17, 1987.

(U) Johnson, Thomas R. *American Cryptology during the Cold War, Book IV*. Fort Meade, MD: National Security Agency, 1999, 409-416.

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