

(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) Betrayers of the Trust

(U) Joseph Sidney Petersen went to prison in 1959 for four years for his crime of giving classified information to officials of a foreign government (see our earlier Almanac article). During the four years after his release from prison, three more NSA employees betrayed their trust for various reasons. None were ever tried. These three were William Hamilton Martin, Bernon Ferguson Mitchell, and Sergeant First Class Jack Edward Dunlap. SFC Dunlap will be the subject of a later Almanac item.

(U) In the Case of William H. Martin and Bernon F. Mitchell

(U) In discussing Martin and Mitchell with people who knew them, the most common words used in characterizing Martin was “arrogant,” “not wholly normal,” and “rather irresponsible”; Mitchell was described as “naive” and “perverted.” Both men, however, were recognized as “brilliant.”

(U) William Martin was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1931, but his family moved to Washington State when he was fifteen. He was a brilliant student, and consideration was given to his skipping high school completely and entering a program for gifted children at the University of Chicago. His principal recommended against this, however, and Martin went on to complete three years of high school in two years. After a year of college at Central Washington College of Education in Ellensburg, he joined the Navy and was cleared for work in cryptology.

(U) Bernon Mitchell was two years older than Martin and was born in Eureka, California, on the Northern California coast. After graduation from high school, where he displayed an interest in science and mathematics, he entered California Institute of Technology. After a year and a half of college, he enlisted in the Navy, where he was cleared for cryptology.

(U) The two men met when they were assigned to cryptologic work at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan and, during their four-year tours there, became firm friends. At the end of his tour, Mitchell returned to the U.S. and studied mathematics at Stanford University. Martin stayed on in Japan, working for the Army, then returned to major in mathematics at the University of Washington. The two were approached separately by NSA in early 1957 and were hired as GS-7 mathematicians, reporting for duty in July 1957. After attending NSA training in the summer, both men studied at George Washington University in the

autumn. On 27 January 1958 both reported for duty to the Office of Research and Development (R&D).

(U) Martin so distinguished himself in his work that the head of R&D approved him for a one-year graduate scholarship at the University of Illinois. This was later extended for another year, and he commenced his studies at Illinois in September 1959. Later that year, in violation of NSA regulations, the two men travelled to Cuba. Martin had associated with a communist at Illinois, and both Martin and Mitchell had been known to express strong anti-American political feelings. There have been reports that both men had been members of the Communist Party since at least 4 February 1958, when membership cards were allegedly issued to them. While in Mexico, the two men visited the KGB officer at the Soviet embassy and offered their services. They agreed to work in place at NSA, but within a few months requested exfiltration to the Soviet Union.

(U) In June 1960, after Martin returned from Illinois, both men applied for annual leave for June 24 to July 11 to visit their parents on the West Coast. In fact, they purchased one-way tickets to Mexico City on Eastern Airlines Flight 305, leaving National Airport on 25 June. From Mexico City they flew to Havana on 1 July, and then went on to Russia, apparently on a Soviet trawler. On 26 July the Office of Personnel was notified that they had apparently disappeared. On 1 August the Department of Defense announced their unauthorized absence and admitted a few days later that they had probably gone behind the Iron Curtain.

(U) On 6 September, at a very high-profile press conference at the House of Journalists in Moscow, the two men stated that they had renounced their U.S. citizenship and had received Soviet citizenship. They stated that they had defected as a result of their objections to U.S. intelligence methods, including the intercept and decryption of the communications of U.S. allies. They went on to say that they had elected to come to the USSR because their own values seemed to be shared by a greater number of people there. In addition, they thought that the higher status enjoyed by women in the Soviet Union would make Soviet women more desirable as mates.

(U) These statements by the defectors, along with the details they provided to the world concerning NSA organization and operations and their description of NSA's methods of SIGINT targeting of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, electrified the intelligence community, the Congress, and the public. For many in the public, it was the first time they had heard of NSA. As a result, the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 87th Congress, conducted an investigation into "Security Practices in the National Security Agency" which severely castigated the Agency for its security lapses.

(U) As a result of the House investigation, NSA adopted a number of corrective measures.

A full battery of screening techniques was instituted, including examination of an applicant's professional qualifications and mental attributes, polygraph, national agency check (NAC), medical examination, aptitude or achievement tests, and full field background investigation. All job candidates had to pass all of the above except the background check before receiving conditional appointments and were not permitted access to sensitive cryptologic information until the full field investigation had been completed and evaluated. Previously, interim cryptologic clearances could be granted on the basis of just the NAC and the polygraph. Another new requirement was that the Office of Security Services and the Office of Personnel Services be notified of any unexplained absences of employees within two hours of the time the absence without official leave was known.

(U) It is believed that there was very little damage to NSA and the U.S. intelligence effort as a result of the Martin and Mitchell's actions. Most of the information on organization and operations against the USSR and the PRC was undoubtedly already known to the Communists. Since cryptosystems cannot usually be replaced quickly, there is no evidence that the revelations concerning NSA's attacks on the systems of U.S. allies had any effect. The Communist spymasters would undoubtedly have preferred Martin and Mitchell to remain in place as moles, since their information was dated as of the moment they left NSA.

(U) According to the most recent information available, within a year both men asked to leave Russia, but no country would accept them. William Martin died in 1986, and Bernon Mitchell's fate is unknown.

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