

THE SNOWDEN FILES

The Inside Story of the
World's Most Wanted Man

LUKE HARDING



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THE MAN IN THE ROOM

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MACASKILL: 'What do you think is going to happen to
you?'

SNOWDEN: 'Nothing good.'

MacAskill whiled away the day taking the subway to Hong Kong Island, revisiting old haunts. It was hot and humid. Later that evening, Greenwald returned with his news – Snowden was plausible, if ridiculously young. He had agreed to meet MacAskill. They took a cab back to the Mira Hotel the next morning. Past its onyx entrance, they found Poitras in the lobby. She took them up to room 1014.

Inside 1014, MacAskill saw someone sitting on the bed. The young man was casually dressed in a white T-shirt, jeans and trainers. They shook hands, MacAskill saying: ‘Ewen MacAskill from the *Guardian*. Pleased to meet you.’ This was Snowden. His living conditions were cramped. There was a bed, and a bathroom; a small black suitcase lay on the floor. A large TV was on with the sound turned down. Through Snowden’s window you could see Kowloon Park; mums and dads were strolling with their kids across a flash of green; it was drizzling, the sky dull and overcast.

The remains of lunch were on the table. When he left Hawaii Snowden clearly hadn’t taken much with him. There were four laptops, with a hard case for the biggest of them. He had brought a single book, *Angler: The Shadow Presidency of Dick Cheney*, by the *Washington Post*’s Barton Gellman. It told the story of how Vice President Cheney secretly brought in ‘special programs’ in the wake of 9/11; the STELLAR WIND affair, part-exposed by the *New York Times*.

Chapter six, well-thumbed by Snowden, read: 'The US government was sweeping in emails, faxes and telephone calls, made by its own citizens, in their own country ... Transactional data, such as telephone logs and email headers, were collected by the billions ... Analysts seldom found information even remotely pertinent to a terrorist threat.'

The encounter with MacAskill went smoothly until he produced his iPhone. He asked Snowden if he minded if he taped their interview, and perhaps took some photos? Snowden flung up his arms in alarm, as if prodded by an electric stick. 'I might as well have invited the NSA into his bedroom,' MacAskill says. The young technician explained that the spy agency was capable of turning a mobile phone into a microphone and tracking device; bringing it into the room was an elementary mistake in operational security, or op-sec. MacAskill exited, and dumped the phone outside.

Snowden's own precautions were remarkable. He piled pillows up against the door to stop anyone from eavesdropping from outside in the corridor; the pillows were stacked up in half-columns either side, and across the bottom. When putting passwords into computers, he placed a big red hood over his head and laptop – a sort of giant snood – so the passwords couldn't be picked up by hidden cameras. He was extremely reluctant to be parted from his laptops.

On the three occasions he left his room, Snowden

employed a classic spy trick, updated for his Asian surroundings. He put a glass of water behind the door next to a piece of a tissue paper. The paper had a soy sauce mark with a distinctive pattern. If water fell on the paper it would change the pattern.

Snowden wasn't suffering from paranoia. He knew what he was up against. During his stay in Kowloon he had been half-expecting a knock on the door at any moment – a raid in which he would be dragged away. He explained: 'I could be rendered by the CIA. I could have people come after me – or any of their third-party partners. They work closely with a number of nations. Or they could pay off the triads, or any of their agents or assets. We've got a CIA station just down the road in the [US] consulate in Hong Kong. I'm sure they are going to be very busy for the next week. That's a fear I will live under for the rest of my life, however long that happens to be.'

He confided to MacAskill that one of his friends had taken part in a CIA rendition operation in Italy. This was almost certainly the 2003 snatch of Muslim cleric Abu Omar, who was taken in broad daylight in Milan, flown from a local US airbase, and subsequently tortured. In 2009 an Italian judge convicted the CIA's Milan station chief, Robert Seldon Lady, and 22 other Americans, most CIA operatives, of kidnapping. Lady later admitted: 'Of course it was an illegal operation. But that's our job. We're at war against terrorism.'

Snowden felt extremely vulnerable right up until the first story on the bulk collection of US metadata from the phone company Verizon was published. (Once articles based on his NSA revelations appeared, the search for him heated up, but he felt the publicity would also offer him a measure of protection.) Before publication, there were risks for the journalists too, obviously. What would happen to them if they were caught with secret material?

With Poitras filming, and Snowden sitting on the bed, MacAskill began a formal interview. He had asked for one-and-a-half to two hours. Greenwald's questions the previous day had been those of a seasoned litigator verbally slapping and bombarding a doubtful witness; the breakthrough moment came when Snowden talked about comics and gaming.

MacAskill, by contrast, was methodical and reporterly, his journalistic style complementing Greenwald's. He asked Snowden for the basics. Could he produce his passport, social security number, driver's licence? What was his last address? What was his salary?

Snowden explained that his pay and housing allowance in Hawaii before he joined Booz Allen Hamilton as an infrastructure analyst came to \$200,000. (He took a pay cut to join Booz. MacAskill conflated his former and current salary, leading some to wrongly accuse Snowden of exaggerating his income.)

Snowden anticipated he would encounter scepticism. He

had brought with him from Kunia a heap of documents. 'He had a ridiculous amount of identification,' Greenwald says.

MacAskill asked a series of follow-ups. How had he got involved in intelligence work? What year had he joined the CIA? He told MacAskill of his foreign postings in Switzerland and Japan, and of his most recent assignment in Hawaii. What was his CIA ID? Snowden revealed that too. Most bafflingly, why was he in Hong Kong? Snowden said it had 'a reputation for freedom in spite of the People's Republic of China' and a tradition of free speech. It was 'really tragic' that as an American he'd been forced to end up there, he said.

And when did he make the fateful decision to become a whistleblower?

'You see things that may be disturbing. When you see everything, you realise that some of these things are abusive. The awareness of wrongdoing builds up. There was not one morning when I woke up [and decided this is it]. It was a natural process.'

Snowden said he hadn't voted for Obama in 2008 but had 'believed' in his promises. (He voted for a 'third party', instead, he said, a reference to the libertarian Ron Paul.) He had intended to 'disclose' what he had found out, but decided to wait and see following Obama's election. What did happen, he said, was profoundly disillusioning: 'He continued with the policies of his predecessor.'

All of this made sense. But some of Snowden's CV was a little odd. Snowden said that he hadn't been to university, and had instead attended a Maryland community college. This set off alarm bells for MacAskill – how could someone as smart as Snowden achieve such a high-profile job so quickly without a degree? In his career as a spy Snowden appeared to have worked for practically everybody in a remarkably short period of time: the NSA, CIA and the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, either on contract or as a direct hire.

Snowden then mentioned that he had undergone basic training to join the US special forces, only to abandon the plan when he broke his legs. 'I thought, Christ, this sounds a bit like a fantasist,' MacAskill admits. 'The story was [like a] *Boy's Own* adventure.'

Yet gradually, MacAskill did become convinced that Snowden's account of his life was true, despite its unlikely and even picaresque moments. He moved on to a core issue: 'What you are doing is a crime. You are probably going to jail for the rest of your life. Why are you doing it? Is it really worth it?'

Snowden's answer was convincing to his questioner: 'We have seen enough criminality on the part of government. It is hypocritical to make this allegation against me. They have narrowed the public sphere of influence.' He acknowledged that 'nothing good' was likely to happen to him. But said he didn't regret his decision, or want to live

in a world 'where everything I do and say is recorded'. As he explained: 'The NSA has built an infrastructure that allows it to intercept almost anything. With this capability, the vast majority of human communications are automatically ingested.' Federal agencies had hijacked the internet, he said. They had turned it into a machine for spying on whole populations.

MacAskill had met leakers before from his time as a correspondent in Britain's House of Commons. For the most part these were politicians. Some spilled information for reasons of ambition; others out of vengeance; many had a gripe, felt slighted, or had missed out on promotion. The reason was usually a pretty base one. But Snowden was different. 'He had a sense of idealism. It was a patriotic act,' MacAskill says.

Snowden stressed his overriding belief that the internet should be free. On one of his black laptops was an indicator to his stance: a sticker from the Electronic Freedom Forum, a US group that campaigns for internet transparency. It read: 'I support online rights.' Another sticker was for the anonymous router Tor, which is used to disguise the origin of internet messages.

As a Washington correspondent, MacAskill understood some of Snowden's fervour. The Scot had covered Obama's 2008 election campaign. He recognised that for Snowden and other Americans, the US constitution is special: it enshrines basic freedoms. Snowden believed that the US

government's stealth attack on it was the equivalent of an attack that occupies land – a terrible and illegitimate invasion. He viewed his own deeds in explicitly patriotic terms. He saw his leak not as an act of betrayal but as a necessary corrective to a spy system that had grown dysfunctional.

'America is a fundamentally good country,' he maintained. 'We have good people with good values. But the structures of power that exist are working to their own ends, to extend their capability at the expense of the freedom of all publics.'

Critics would subsequently accuse Snowden of narcissism, claiming it was a desire for attention that had made him spill the NSA's beans. MacAskill formed another impression, of a diffident individual far more at home in front of his laptop than in the limelight. 'He was personable and courteous. His instinct is to be friendly. He is really shy,' he says. 'A lot of people are suggesting he was after celebrity status. He isn't.' When MacAskill took a few snaps of Snowden he was visibly uncomfortable. Snowden was in fact happiest when talking about the technical details of surveillance. 'He has got a real nerdy side to him. He's comfortable with computers. That's his world.'

Greenwald and MacAskill were internet bumpkins who knew little about how the web actually worked (although Poitras's technical skills were formidable). The two men

struggled to make sense of many of the PRISM slides. Snowden talked them through the complex diagrams. He explained acronyms, pathways, interception techniques. He wasn't patronising but patient and articulate, MacAskill says, in his element among double-barrelled NSA program codenames. To outsiders they were gobbledygook, an impenetrable alphabet spaghetti.

Because he was British, MacAskill asked, almost as an afterthought, whether there was a UK role in this mass data collection. It didn't seem likely to him. Most Britons' benign mental image of GCHQ was of boffins in tweed jackets, puffing on pipes, cracking wartime Nazi codes and playing chess.

MacAskill knew that GCHQ had a long-standing intelligence-sharing relationship with the US, but he was taken aback by Snowden's vehement response. Snowden said: 'GCHQ is worse than the NSA. It's even more intrusive.'

It was another piece of sensational information.

Each time MacAskill and Greenwald went to visit Snowden they expected him to have gone, to have been arrested, press-ganged and taken to a dark modern gulag.

The following day, Wednesday 5 June, Snowden was still in place at the Mira Hotel. That was the good news. No one had grabbed him. The bad news was that the NSA and

the police had been to see his girlfriend back at their home in Hawaii. Snowden's absence from work had been noted, an automatic procedure when NSA staff do not turn up. Snowden was calm, as usual, but outraged at the treatment of Lindsay Mills. He thought the police were badgering and intimidating her.

He had so far said little about his personal life; his focus was the story and what it said about the US surveillance state. His mother, Wendy, worked as a clerk at the district court back in Baltimore. Since he had vanished on 20 May, she had been trying to contact him. She realised something had gone wrong.

Now he agonised: 'My family does not know what is happening. My primary fear is that they will come after my family, my friends, my partner. Anyone I have a relationship with.' He admitted: 'That keeps me up at night.'

The NSA's unwelcome house call was hardly surprising. And as he was now on their radar, the chances of Snowden's Hong Kong hideout soon being busted seemed much higher. He had, after all, exfiltrated many thousands of the agency's most secret documents. MacAskill felt sympathy towards Snowden. Here was a young man in trouble. His future seemed bleak. Snowden was almost the same age as MacAskill's children. 'I would not like one of my kids to be in that predicament,' he says.

But the CIA hadn't found him yet. This was one of the

more baffling aspects of the Snowden affair: why did the US authorities not close in on him earlier? Once they had spotted his absence, they might have pulled flight records showing he had fled to Hong Kong. There he was comparatively easy to trace. Snowden had checked into the £200-a-night Mira Hotel under his own name. He was even paying the bill with his personal credit card, now practically maxed out, and another source of worry for him: Snowden feared his pursuers might block it.

One explanation is that the US was reluctant to act in communist China. Another is that the US authorities were less omnipotent than they appeared. This view – bureaucratic ineptness rather than a Sino-US impasse – seems the more likely explanation in the light of the White House's subsequent bungled attempts to extradite Snowden from Hong Kong.

The experience of flying half way across the world, meeting Snowden, and then working on a set of extraordinary stories created a close bond between three journalists who were quite ill-assorted: a disputatious gay American, an intense Oscar-nominated film-maker and a Brit professional reporter and mountaineer who said 'Aye' rather than 'Yes', just like Scottie from *Star Trek*. It was a camaraderie born out of something thrilling and uncertain. All three felt they were involved in a joint endeavour of

high public importance, with a large degree of risk. MacAskill had climbed the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc and the Jungfrau. His calmness now stood him in good stead.

Poitras's earlier antipathy to MacAskill vanished. She grew fond of him. 'Ewen meshed into the team so seamlessly and perfectly and instantly,' Greenwald says. Rusbridger dubbed the triple working partnership 'a lovefest'.

That evening, Greenwald rapidly drafted a story about Verizon. Snowden's classified documents showed that the NSA was secretly collecting all the records from this major US telecoms company. The trio intended this story to be only the first in a series of seismic disclosures. But they feared that time was not on their side. MacAskill and Greenwald discussed the text until late. They sat in Greenwald's room in the W Hotel, overlooking the harbour and the hills of the Chinese mainland. The view took in skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island and the bridge towards the airport – a crowded, twinkling cityscape.

Greenwald would work on his laptop, then pass it to MacAskill. MacAskill would type on his computer and hand Greenwald his articles on a memory stick; the sticks flowed back and forth. Nothing went on email. The journalists lost track of the hours. MacAskill went to bed for a while. When he got up, Greenwald was still working. Snowden told the *New York Times's* Peter Maass, 'I was particularly impressed by Glenn's ability to operate

without sleep for days at a time.' (In fact, Greenwald would crash out in the afternoons.)

They sent their final version of the story over to Janine Gibson in New York. Its appearance would certainly start an unprecedented and unpredictable uproar.

But the question now was whether the *Guardian* was actually prepared to publish it.