

Former spy shares tale of his secret life in the CIA

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Speaker James Olson says no one knew truth about him and spouse.

Imagine living a lie for 31 years.

That's what James Olson and his wife Meredith did while spying for the CIA.

Olson, a former chief of CIA counterintelligence, was the featured speaker at an annual meeting of All Points Cooperative Jan. 8 at Monsanto's Water Utilization and Learning Center.

"We couldn't say where we were or what we were doing," he said. "Our parents and friends didn't even know we were CIA officers."

The United States needs spies, he said, to protect the country and its vital interests.

Spying for his country was the furthest thing from his mind when Olson, a farm boy from Iowa, received a mysterious phone call.

At the time, he was in his last year of law school, studying to take the Iowa bar exam and job hunting.

The voice said, " 'We think we have a career opportunity for you,' " Olson said and told him if he was interested, he was to meet two men at a Des Moines hotel.

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As a member of the Naval Reserves, Olson said he thought it was someone from the Navy who had called.

When he showed up at the hotel and discovered the men were from the CIA, Olson said he almost fell on the floor.

If interested, Olson was invited to Washington D.C. under the guise of interviewing for a lawyer job with the U.S. Department of Commerce.

They also needed his word of honor that he wouldn't reveal details of the visit to anyone.

Once he arrived in D.C., Olson was whisked to a safe house where he underwent aptitude and polygraph tests and psychological screening among other tests.

Finally he was offered a position in clandestine service and accepted it.

After finishing law school and passing the bar exam, Olson traveled to a location in Virginia called "The Farm" where he had two years of training—much of it paramilitary—that included such things as how to jump out of airplanes, work with advanced weapons, a different kind of hand-to-hand combat and intensive education in four foreign languages.

Tools of the trade included how to write secretly, tap phones, bug rooms, open letters, pick locks and more.

"If you read spy novels, it's part of the everyday skill set," he said.

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While there, Olson met future wife Meredith who was one of the first females to go through the training.

“Today counterintelligence is much stronger because it’s totally diverse with as many young women as men,” Olson said. “Meredith was a real pioneer.”

Shortly after they married, the couple traveled to Paris where Olson’s cover was international banking.

After a full day’s job of banking, he would spy at night and on weekends as did Meredith.

“The implications it has on a spouse and family are hard,” Olson explained, noting that he never knew where Meredith was or when she would return and vice versa.

Fictional identification and other documents were hidden in concealment devices in the couple’s apartment.

Other covers Olson used while spying in various places included such occupations as a journalist, travel agent, book publisher and fertilizer salesman.

“I changed jobs so often, it looked like I couldn’t keep a job,” he said with a laugh.

Once they had children, the couple had CIA-trained nannies.

“We love our kids but they complicated our line of work,” Olson said, noting that the CIA left it up to the spies whether or not they told their children what they did.

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Olson said they told their three children when they were older and could better understand.

While the children were still at home, Olson was a counterintelligence station chief in Vienna, Austria, and received a death threat against him and his family from a terrorist.

“I wasn’t worried about Meredith because she’s really dangerous,” he said.

However Olson said they then told their oldest son Jerry about their work and asked him to watch over his younger siblings.

Olson said they served in many countries, including the Soviet Union during the Cold War, before they retired.

“It was a wonderful journey and we’d do it all over again,” he said.

Olson now teaches courses on Cold War intelligence, U.S. National Security and international crisis management at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service in College Station, TX.

He is the author of *The Ten Commandments of Counterintelligence* and *Fair Play: The Moral Dilemmas of Spying*.

Olson said the global war on terror affects everyone and that the country needs to know that the United States will be hit again within its borders.

“It will be horrific with weapons of mass destruction and we’ll win or lose depending on how good our intelligence is,” he said.

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The CIA, he said, is on the front lines of war with much debate now about what its role should be.

“It’s a world that most Americans know little about,” Olson said.

During a question-answer period, he said the CIA is involved in heavy recruiting since “we’re less safe today in the war on terror than a year ago.”

Intelligence shows spies from 50 countries in the United States with the Russians and Chinese as big threats.

“China is the biggest threat,” Olson said. “They’re stealing technology and interfering with the political process.”

China also poses the biggest cyber-security threat, he said.

Olson described North Korea as dangerous as well as Iran.

Both are sharing technology about weapons of mass destruction with terrorist groups, he said.

Before he finished his talk, Olson shared a counterintelligence operation he was involved in during the Cold War in the former Soviet Union.

It involved eluding the KGB and receiving highly classified information from someone named “Misha.”

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“Misha” turned out to be KGB agent who hated Communism and wanted the CIA to get him, his wife and family out of the Soviet Union.

“He turned out to be probably the best source we ever had and we got his family out,” Olson said.

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