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Story Behind the Book

'The Secret Team'



Credit: Harris & Ewing

On Tuesday, March 6, Jack Anderson began his nationally syndicated column: "The cloak-and-dagger boys at the Central Intelligence Agency are trying to get an advance copy of a book which is highly critical of the CIA's 'dirty tricks department.'"

The book was Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty's "The Secret Team," due from Prentice-Hall this month (*PW* Forecast, February 12).

A week prior to Anderson's column, *PW* received a telephone request for book proofs—purportedly from the same Sidney Kramer Book Store in Washington that Anderson had named in his column as having contacted him. Checking with the publisher, *PW* learned of other efforts by the CIA to get hold of the Prouty galleys by numerous other unsuccessful devices. (As a regular practice, *PW* returns galleys only to the publisher of a given book, on request).

Its curiosity about the book's author duly whetted, *PW* interviewed Colonel Prouty. Now 56 and retired from the Air Force since 1963 (he had served as a pilot in World War II), Prouty is currently employed in private business in Washington. Talking with *PW*, he proved forthcoming, both about the CIA and the genesis of his book.

"Since my retirement I've put in about eight years of work on my book," he

said. "I've never felt any CIA pressures on me concerning it, one way or another, although some old associates knew what I was doing. Actually I wasn't writing for a publishing house under contract when I started. It wasn't until 1970, when a Prentice-Hall editor, Bram Cavin, read an article of mine in *Washington Monthly*, that I was signed for the book by Prentice-Hall. That article was also called 'The Secret Team'—it got a good reception, no backfires.

"I was never an official CIA man," Prouty said. "So there was no question of my signing an oath that might have kept me from writing my book.

"But as an Air Force officer I was assigned to some of the CIA's earliest secret operations in other countries. When the Agency needed planes and special material for a mission, I was their man in the Air Force."

For nine years preceding his retirement, Prouty had his own office in the Pentagon, acting, among other things, as custodian of secret CIA military files.

"I'd say some 60 or 70% of the Pentagon Papers were in my files. The Department of Defense segregated the CIA-type papers from regular military papers—and I had them all, and knew what was in them. When Ellsberg gave the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*, I was struck by how many papers—the ones dealing with the CIA's secret overseas operations, not just intelligence—were simply not there. I doubt Ellsberg ever had them, and I think he may have been used innocently by the CIA when he worked on the papers at Rand."

In an early chapter of "The Secret Team" Prouty writes about some remarkable coup d'état activities in a Latin American country he calls "Gandia," (but which readers are free to identify as Guatemala) and later he describes the CIA as arming thousands of Tibetans in support of the Dalai Lama against invading Red Chinese forces (an action which a wary President Eisenhower terminated).

"I wasn't involved in the Gandia affair," Prouty said. "As a matter of fact, my description of that Latin American

P-JOHNSTON, ALBERT

P-ANDERSON, JACK

P-Prouty, L. Fletcher

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country is a composite of a number of CIA operations—but the individual episodes are real, they're accurate, they happened. As for Tibet, I was in on it." In 1959, according to Prouty, the year before the famous Gary Powers-U-2 incident that led Khrushchev to cancel his summit meeting with Eisenhower, a CIA spy-plane had been downed in Russia. Its crew, captured and then interrogated by Soviet intelligence, was later quietly returned to the U.S. (where James McCord, an ex-CIA man recently involved in the Watergate case, was among the debriefers). This earlier U-2 incident is one of Prouty's more astounding revelations in his book.

"I was control officer in charge of that plane's recovery," Prouty said. "I flew over the wreckage. And I was originally support officer in the Bay of Pigs assault—that was back in 1959."

But, Prouty says, so many Miami-based Cubans were involved then that the CIA's cover was compromised if not blown; and matters looked so dubious when Allen Dulles rushed invasion plans after JFK's 1960 presidential victory that, as Prouty put it, "I removed myself from the whole thing in a letter to the Secretary of Defense in January, 1961." Of all John F. Kennedy's intimate circle, Prouty told *PW*, "I think only Bobby Kennedy was beginning to see through what was happening."

Many of Prouty's old associates, he believes, some still active in the CIA, feel as he does now—that the CIA's operational as opposed to intelligence activities, notably from the Bay of Pigs onward, have seriously drained the nation's strength and eroded its prestige.

Prentice-Hall, beginning with a 10,000-copy first edition, is at this writing ready to start a second printing. Colonel Prouty is booked for a TV-radio tour. Meanwhile he is set to write his next book, about the period October through December, 1963, which saw numerous significant assassinations including that of John Kennedy, and which he feels may have been the most crucial brief period in modern American history.

ALBERT H. JOHNSTON

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