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'A grotesque smear say top spy masters

by Barrie Penrose, David Leitch and Phillip Knightley

AGENTS of Britain's two secret services, SIS and MI5, emerged from the shadows last week to defend Guy Liddell, former deputy-director of MI5, who has been accused of being a Soviet mole. Liddell is the most recent and most high-ranking secret service officer to come under suspicion in the wake of the Anthony Blunt affair.

The agents are Sir Dick Goldsmith White, who was uniquely head of SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) and earlier head of MI5 (the security service), and William Skardon, the crack MI5 interrogator who broke the atom spy Klaus Fuchs. Both spoke to The Sunday Times on the record to denounce accusations against Liddell as "grotesque, preposterous," and to defend their services against what they see as sinister attacks.

This move by White and Skardon is unprecedented. Normally, British secret agents, even retired ones, do not make public statements. The fact that two such eminent officers were prepared to speak out for Liddell — and had top-level clearance to do so — shows how seriously the intelligence establishment views the attacks.

Suspicion about Liddell has been revived by Andrew Boyle whose book *The Climate of Treason* hinted that art historian Anthony Blunt was a Soviet spy before Mrs Thatcher unmasked Blunt in a statement to the Commons. Boyle first heard about Blunt's work for Russia from Goronwy Rees, a friend of Guy Burgess. Boyle now claims that just before Rees died he told him that Liddell was part of the Blunt-Burgess homosexual clique and was also a Russian agent.

But accusations against Liddell go back much further. When Harold Wilson was prime minister, one of his security advisers told him that a former deputy director of MI5 had defected to the Russians. The adviser said that it would have been damaging to the national interest to have brought the man to trial, so he had been prematurely retired.

Liddell was not mentioned by name, but the clues pointed to him. He had a distinguished career in MI5 during which he rose to be deputy director and was widely tipped to become the next director-general. Then Liddell was prematurely retired in 1953 after the Burgess-Maclean scandal and given the token post of security adviser to the Atomic Energy Authority. He died in 1958.

Sir Dick White, who wrote Liddell's obituary in The Times, was director-general of MI5, 1953-56, head of SIS, 1956-69, and co-ordinator of intelligence and security in the Cabinet Office, 1970-73. He said last week:

"The three Liddell brothers all won the Military Cross in the First World War. That was the sort of family Guy Liddell belonged to: very patriotic.

"I knew him very well. He was very industrious, a devoted servant of this country. Throughout the Second World War he hardly left his desk. To label him a Soviet spy is a grotesque charge. Accusing him may have possibly been a way of deflecting accusations against others. It is unforgivable that Guy Liddell's name should be blackened in this way."

William Skardon, who had been a detective in the CID, joined MI5 in 1940 and worked with Liddell until Liddell retired. Skardon said last week: "I knew Guy Liddell extremely well. He was a wonderful man and any suggestion that he was a traitor is preposterous. I'm at one with Sir Dick White and others from the service who will stand by Guy Liddell's record and his memory. The libel laws should cover the distinguished dead as well as the living.

"The only explanation I can find for these suspicions about Guy Liddell is that there was a coterie of people in which Burgess, Blunt and Liddell moved. They had common artistic and cultural interests. Their names became associated with each other and some people have made Guy Liddell guilty by association."

Although Skardon is best known as the man who broke Fuchs, he also dealt with William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw), the Krogers, Gordon Lonsdale, and a string of other spies, some whose names have not yet been revealed. In his interview with The Sunday Times he went on to recall highlights of his 21 years as MI5's top interrogator.

Interrogation techniques: "My instructor had a remarkable method. He would ask a question and ignore the answer. Later he would ask the same question as if he had never heard the first answer. He would do this over and over, irritating the suspect into indiscretions. For example, he had asked Nunn May several times what he had handed to the Russians, and each time he ignored Nunn May's denials that he had handed over anything. Then for the tenth time he said, "Now, Mr May, you've handed over a sample of er, er... Nunn May lost his patience and said 'Uranium, Uranium... Uranium 235.' Then my instructor pounced. 'I don't see why that's very serious,' he said. 'The Russians were our allies during the war.' Nunn May agreed, then went on to tell him everything.

Anthony Blunt: "I went to see him at the Courtauld. I wanted to learn if he could tell me anything about Burgess and Maclean. I learnt only one thing from him. While I was questioning him I noticed a Degas pastel drawing. I do a bit of painting myself and I'd copied this particular Degas pastel. I told Blunt I thought I'd got the colours just about right but the only difference was that my drawing was on cardboard. 'So was Degas's,' said Blunt."

Surveillance: "I ran the surveillance team for the Krogers and Lonsdale whom we arrested in 1961. It was a wonderful time, full of anxieties. We had 50 or 60 cars, our own radio station, aircraft — all of them MI5. You need them. For a proper surveillance job for two people, you need at least a dozen experts for each 24-hour period. We watched the Krogers from a house opposite. That was a great thing. I never had any problems in MI5 with the British people. They would co-operate in every way. Give you a bedroom in their house, if necessary, for

Red Orchestra: "It is not generally known that this Russian spy ring had a British section, but I caught one of them after the war. He was a Jewish refugee and he confessed that he had been recruited at the Albert Hall. He named several prominent people who had worked for the Red Orchestra in Britain, some of them quite prominent. It was decided not to prosecute them. I know their names, but I'm not going to tell you."

Today Skardon follows the quiet life of a comfortable pensioner living by the sea. He spends his days playing indoor bowls, his evenings painting or playing bridge. Incensed by the accusations against Liddell, he is thinking about writing his memoirs. Meanwhile, Sir John Balfour, Liddell's cousin, has organised a protest by Liddell's family and friends. A group of them, advised by Lord Justice Stephenson, are writing about their feelings to The Times.