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Double Agent Under Watch When He Fled

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 2 — A former officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, identified as a double agent working for the Soviet Union, disappeared while under surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, law-enforcement officials and intelligence sources said today.

The sources said that the former C.I.A. officer, Edward L. Howard, used the cover of a moonless night to elude F.B.I. agents watching his home in a remote area of Santa Fe, N.M. Officials said Mr. Howard was identified as a double agent by a Soviet intelligence officer who defected to the West in July. A double agent is planted in the intelligence organization of one country while actually working for that of another.

However, one official of the Reagan Administration said tonight that Mr. Howard did not begin providing information to the Soviet Union until after he left the C.I.A. The official said such actions could be damaging, but would not be as serious a security breach as the recruitment of an active C.I.A. employee.

Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation said tonight that a warrant had been issued for Mr. Howard's arrest charging him with espionage in conspiring to deliver "national defense information" to a foreign government. The F.B.I. said Mr. Howard worked for the agency from January 1981 to June 1983.

It was not clear how Mr. Howard learned he was a suspect in the case.

One law enforcement official familiar with the case said the bureau's surveillance on Mr. Howard was not intended to "contain" him or prevent his flight because no legal proceeding had been begun against him at the time he first came under surveillance.

"This man was a trained agent," said the official. "It was a moonless night and he carefully picked his time to leave."

"It was a loose surveillance," the official said. "There was no moon out. To imply that this was a muff is not accurate. These men were not under orders to stay with him at all costs."

While some C.I.A. employees have sold stolen classified documents to Soviet intelligence operatives, there is no record of a C.I.A. employee working on a continuing basis for Soviet intelligence. Double agents who spend years establishing themselves in a rival intelligence agency are called "moles" in espionage jargon. The question whether the C.I.A. has ever been penetrated by a Soviet mole has long been a subject of heated dispute in the American intelligence community.

Meanwhile, the District Attorney of Santa Fe, Chet Walter, said that Mr. Howard had probably fled to Texas shortly before a team of F.B.I. agents moved in on his home Saturday. Mr. Howard, he said, had flown late last month from New Mexico to Austin, where he disappeared.

An intelligence source said earlier this week that Mr. Howard was thought to have fled the country after he abruptly resigned from his job as an economics aide to a legislative finance committee in the New Mexico legislature on Sept. 22. He took that job after he left the intelligence agency.

His former employer in New Mexico said he believed that Mr. Howard may have fled to Mexico, which intelligence officials say has long been a connecting point for Soviet espionage activities directed at the United States.

Friends and co-workers said they were stunned by reports that Mr. Howard had provided intelligence information to the Soviet Union. They described him as a politically conservative, hard-working family man whose only major mistake was his arrest last year on charges of aggravated battery.

The arrest came after Mr. Howard threatened three men with a gun following a confrontation in a New Mexico bar, officials said. He was convicted and placed on probation for five years. According to associates, Mr. Howard was a gun enthusiast.

Administration officials have said that Mr. Howard held an "operational" post with the C.I.A. According to The Associated Press, State Department records show that Mr. Howard was assigned to the United States Embassy in Moscow where his cover was a job as a budget specialist.

The State Department has historically provided diplomatic cover for C.I.A. operatives working in hostile capitals. According to an intelligence source, the fact that Mr. Howard was assigned to Moscow meant that he was an officer of the Soviet Division of the agency's Directorate for Operations — the clandestine service of the C.I.A.

Meanwhile, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was briefed today on the defection of Vitaly Yurchenko, the Soviet official who is said to have identified Mr. Howard and at least one other former American official as a source of information for the Soviet intelligence service.

Concerning the double agent dispute, Senator Malcolm Wallop, a Wyoming Republican who is a former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said in an interview that Adm. Stansfield Turner, the former head of the C.I.A., had said in 1979 that it would be impossible for the Soviets to place a "mole" in the agency.

Mr. Turner could not be reached for comment. In his book, "Secrecy and Democracy," he criticized James J. Angleton, a former chief of counter-intelligence at the agency. Mr. Turner wrote that Mr. Angleton had shown "excessive zeal" in his pursuit of a "mole" within the C.I.A.

But Mr. Wallop said the committee has been urging William J. Casey, director of the C.I.A., to put more emphasis on ferreting out double agents.

