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Ex-spies go to bat for the CIA

By JOE FROLIK
STAFF WRITER

Lewis F. Lewton was recalling the time he was down near Montego Bay and got invited to observe the filming of "Live and Let Die." That's the James Bond movie in which Her Majesty's Special Agent 007 was captured by the bad guys and dumped at a crocodile farm, presumably as a snack for some future Gucci handbag.

William Hood looked up from his tuna melt and let loose with a rumble of gravelly laughter.

"Ah, yes, the crocodile farm," he said. "Used it all the time. Great way to get rid of pesky newspapermen. And other provocateurs."

William Hood tells no war stories. He admits he was in the CIA for nearly 30 years and was stationed mostly in Western Europe. He will concede he was in counter-espionage, trying to quash KGB efforts to snatch military and technical secrets from the United States and its allies. Beyond that, you're on your own.

Was he ever a CIA station chief?

"That's what the (New York) Times says."

Was he really executive director of counterintelligence when he retired in 1976?

"That's what the Times says."

Hood will talk in general terms about why a world power needs reliable intelligence about what is going on in other countries. He will talk about why a democratic society must sometimes engage in activities that fall in the "gray area" between diplomacy and war.

But his answers come in carefully clipped sentences and broad generalities. He apologizes that he sometimes must sound "either dumb or constipated." It's part of the old CIA hand's code not to discuss sources or methods, part of the old operative's constant worry about letting some habit of information slip out.

Sometimes can't remember if I read something in the Times or in a classified briefing paper five years ago," Hood said. So he says very little.

Hood was in town Friday to speak at the

annual dinner meeting for area members of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFOI). The group was formed in 1976, when a series of newspaper articles, whistle-blowing books and congressional hearings into allegations of CIA misconduct drove the agency's public reputation and its internal morale to a nadir. Former CIA personnel felt they had to rally to their old employer's defense.

"There's a tremendous misunderstanding about the intelligence community," said Lewton, a Cleveland and former agent. "We're trying to speak out, within the guidelines and limitations imposed on former agents, about the need for intelligence. It's work that sometimes requires you to get down at the level of the other side."

Hood glanced across the sitting room of the downtown club and frowned.

"We never get down to their level," he admonished.

"Of course," Lewton said. "It's a misunderstood, complex thing, and the people who have left the intelligence community feel they can speak out and give you the other side of the coin."

Ties between the agency and its alumni are tight. AFOI holds its annual convention in Virginia, usually within shouting distance of CIA headquarters in Langley. Its membership includes former directors William Colby and Richard Helms, though not Stansfield Turner, the Jimmy Carter-era chief who many old hands believe left the agency crippled, or James Schlesinger, who was so despised during his brief tenure that his portrait was disfigured with a hastily scrawled mustache. Former President Gerald R. Ford sits on AFOI's board of directors.

The group's big moment came in 1978, when its members descended on Capitol Hill to lobby against a proposed CIA charter they considered highly restrictive. They succeeded in tempering some elements of the legislation and, perhaps, in making possible the agency's resurgence under President Reagan and incumbent Director William J. Casey.

Since then, they've taken it upon themselves to educate legislators, reporters and students about the importance of the CIA.

And it is important to have a strong,

effective CIA. Just ask William Hood.

"I think the common wisdom is the biggest threat to world peace and stability is an uninformed president," said Hood. "Intelligence keeps us from making mistakes. Good intelligence. It's a very complex world, and nobody can stay on top of the whole thing."

Since he quit the agency, Hood has earned his living as a writer. His 1982 book, "Mole," about a Soviet counteragent, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. He has a novel, "Spy Wednesday," due out next winter. He writes extensively on intelligence matters, usually from a strongly pro-CIA perspective.

Though he spent only a year at a Maine junior college, Hood's style is Ivy League casual: Blue blazer. Striped shirt. Blue tie. Gray slacks. Black wingtips. He drinks Tanqueray martinis, very dry, with a lemon twist. At 64, his goatee and hair are graying, and he carries a spare tire.

He has lived in some of the world's most sophisticated cities and done high-level political analysis. Yet at the bottom line, he sees East-West struggles in near black-white terms. He describes the Soviet Union and its political system as a monster that must be contained.

"It's not so much we're smarter than they are," he said, explaining why he thought the CIA was more effective than the KGB. "It's that we have a stronger society. An open society is stronger than a police state. People in an open society have more at stake. You don't have to be very smart to see the differences."

Which is why, Hood said, the KGB so often has to pay its informants and rely on what he calls "cash-and-carry" spies.

"Chances are people who collaborate with any Western security service tend to be more sympathetic," Hood said. "I'm sure no Western service turns its back on a mercenary. But usually, motivations are complex. There's no one element."

Hood's motivations for getting into intelligence work were not terribly complex. He pretty much drifted into it until he was so deep he couldn't get out.

He enlisted in the Army at the outbreak of World War II and was put in an armored artillery unit. But, he said, he never really

CONTINUED

2

got the hang of firing a big gun at a target he couldn't see. So in 1943, when the Army was looking for intelligence specialists, Hood volunteered and was accepted. He figured his schoolboy French might get him an assignment working with the Resistance.

Instead, he was stationed in Northern Ireland in 1944 when another call went out: Volunteers were needed for a dangerous mission. Hood blithely said he couldn't imagine anything more dangerous than going to battle with the unit he was in, so he again volunteered.

He ended up working first for Gen. William (Wild Bill) Donovan at the London headquarters of the Army Office of Strategic Services (OSS), then for its Switzerland chief, Allen Dulles. Dulles later became director of the CIA.

When the war ended, Hood stayed on in Switzerland. He was out of the Army, but still in the OSS. So were many other intelligence operatives. They were holding tight, waiting for what they believed would be the inevitable decision to form a permanent intelligence-gathering agency. When Congress created the CIA in 1947, they went on its payroll.

Thus began the secret life Hood can't discuss. It wasn't marked, he said, by any crusading spirit; it was more an extension of wartime service — nothing more, really, than an interesting job he and his colleagues considered important, though not especially glamorous.

"People get the James Bond picture of the agency," he said. "But I think the important part is the analytical staff. Those are the guys who know economics, who know political science. History. Physics. Nuclear engineering. I think it was President (John F.) Kennedy who said you could staff a pretty good college from the CIA. He wasn't talking about the spies; he was talking about the guys in the back rooms."

Hood said he thought it was irrelevant to talk about CIA covert operations. How, he grumbled, can you run a covert operation in Nicaragua or anywhere else if newspapers are writing about it and the Senate is debating it in public? And, he said, the fact is that with all those brainy desk jockeys and some good counterespionage work to keep "the other guys's hand off our national treasure," you could probably get along without any spies.

But that won't happen, because neither side wants to surrender any potential edge. Besides, Hood said, since we know the Soviets are spying on us and they know we're spying on them, "we'd be damn fools not to do it."