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How Prime carried on spying because of security breakdowns

by Nick Anning and Linda Melvern

RUSSIAN spy Geoffrey Prime avoided detection because of repeated failures of the internal security system at the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham. GCHQ - the centre for Britain's worldwide electronic intelligence gathering - has strict security regulations detailed in an internal handbook. These cover the handling of documents, use of photocopiers and computers, travel restrictions, and building security.

However, former employees at the headquarters say that highly classified documents frequently went missing, personnel were not subject to rigorous identity checks and foreign travel was not carefully monitored.

The assessment of damage caused by Prime, set out in the security commission's report, remains in a classified appendix. An American intelligence source has told us, however, that Prime's activities amounted to the worst-ever compromise in the field of signals intelligence and the source added last week: "I don't think the depth of the damage has yet been fully realised. Certain kinds of systems are no longer secret and could cost billions of dollars to repair."

As the Sunday Times disclosed shortly after the Prime trial, at which he received a total of 38 years, Prime gave away details of the most sophisticated satellite surveillance system the west had ever developed.

The security commission, under Lord Bridge, acknowledges the security problems at the communications centre. But it fails to highlight the repeated lapses of security procedures at the base. The report says: "No-one responsible for operating the (security) system can be blamed for the ease with which Prime carried secret documents in and out..."

Prime was able to take home and photograph classified documents which should have been returned to a security vault at the end of the day with no fear of possible detection. He was

also able to use an internal photocopying machine at will, in breach of stringent rules that copiers should be used only by designated operators.

Although the gates at the Cheltenham headquarters are manned by security officers, the report says that no searches, regular or random, were made of personnel. Prime was able to carry secret documents home in spite of detailed regulations which should have been in force covering spot checks of the whereabouts of top secret and secret documents.

The commissioners say that the "vast volume of documents



Prime: easy access

handled... made it quite impossible for any system to be operated which required the presence of every document to be accounted for... The volume of material was "enormous", and individual officers had to transport documents on trolley.

For several years, attempts were made by the special branch and a number of MPs to pinpoint lax internal security at the headquarters. Senior staff gave repeated assurances to ministers that their house had been put in order. An internal inquiry in 1980 by a senior Home Office official, Sir James Waddell, remains unpublished. No complaints is made in the security commission report.

There are several indications in the report that the security services are still sceptical about Prime's information. The commissioners admit that it has only been possible to ascertain the precise nature of his spying from his own account and says that after thorough investigations there appears to be no reason to doubt the account is "substantially accurate".

Mystery still surrounds the spy's sudden resignation from GCHQ in September, 1977. Prime said he left because of pressure of work and personal problems. The commission reports that unsuccessful attempts were made to try to persuade him to stay. Our information is that there was only one attempt.

The report also fails to explain why, after his arrest - which was five years after his sudden, unexplained resignation - part of his espionage kit was still in his waller including details of radio frequencies and a top secret memorandum. He claimed to have given up spying after leaving his senior post at Cheltenham and yet the police found a powerful radio and 26 envelopes pre-addressed to East Berlin at his home.

The reason given by Prime for his final meeting with the Russians in Potsdam in November, 1981, is described as "implausible" by the commissioners. Prime said he was worried telephone calls from Russians would raise his wife's suspicions.

Prime had not worked for GCHQ for over four years when this visit took place. Yet his controller considered the meeting vital enough to fly from Moscow to meet him. Further, at this last meeting he was paid more than ever before - £4,000 - although the report states "we may not have the full story of what he was paid".

Two of Prime's seven charges carried 14 year sentences. One of these was for information he passed to the Russians in 1980 - a long time after he had left his job.



AS electoral mud-slinging begins, the undisputed cowpat hurling champion of Great Britain today faces the greatest challenge of his career. After seven years lobbying dung across the Surrey landscape to record-breaking effect, Colin Compton must now compete under new rules which purists fear could ruin the sport.

Following heavy rain in April and May, which led to The Great Cowpat Crisis, Surrey Young Farmers have been forced to amend the regulations so that the bovine waste integral to the sport may be thrown in plastic bags.

"It will be a bad day for cowpat hurling," lamented Compton, a local farmer who has done much to pioneer the art in this country. Right up till yesterday, the defiant Luddite was moulding the Compton cowpat, "a mixture of sheep and cow dung," and hurling it several hundred

Gunmen raid

by Simon

THE News of the World found itself yesterday in the middle of an unwelcome crime exclusive when two armed men raided its cashiers office in London. The men, one of whom was armed with a sawn-off shotgun, threatened to shoot a cashier unless he opened the office safes.

By late afternoon, several hours after the robbery the News of the World was still trying to calculate how much money had been stolen. Initial reports suggested the figure might be as high as £100,000 but the newspaper's own crime staff suggested this was probably an over-estimate.

Two masked ambushed Dorset cashiers, as his office. They understood there would be one on a Saturday casual worker due the next Saturday night. Cass was for safes and was News of the World correspondent, hoping to before leaving races, then a