
Book Review

A lot of unanswered questions in the Walker-Whitworth spy case

by Nicholas F. Benton

Breaking the Ring

by John Barron

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- “The KGB regarded the Walker-Whitworth case as the greatest in its history, surpassing in import even the Soviet theft of Anglo-American blueprints for the first atomic bomb.”

- “The cryptographic data supplied by Walker and Whitworth enabled the Soviets to decipher ‘more than a million’ or ‘millions’ of secret American messages.”

- “The three principal officers who supervised the case received the highest Soviet decorations.”

- “One of the senior KGB officers . . . stated that in event of war, this Soviet ability to read enciphered American messages would be ‘devastating’ to the United States.”

This summary of the importance the Soviets placed on the John Walker-Jerry Whitworth spy ring, and the extent to which it compromised the national security interests of the United States, was given by the KGB’s Vitaly Yurchenko, during his abortive three-month “defection” to the United States in the fall of 1985.

John Barron gives a straightforward account of events in the Walker-Whitworth case, based largely on testimony provided by Walker himself during the trial.

John Walker, a communications watch officer on the Norfolk, Virginia staff of the commander of submarine forces in the Atlantic (COMSUBLANT), walked into the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C. in January 1968. He had been trained to repair cipher machines, and had top secret clearance. He brought with him 30 days of key settings for a cipher machine, and offered much more where that came from, in exchange for \$1,000 a week.

For the next 17 years, Walker provided much, much more to the Soviets—including keys, logics, and technical manuals for the most sophisticated cipher systems developed by the United States, systems restricted for direct communications between admirals and the President. All this gave the

Soviets the ability to decode virtually every top secret communication passing through U.S. military channels. In 1975, just before retiring from the Navy, Walker recruited Jerry Whitworth, a man who, like himself, was able to access top secret cryptographic materials as a trained “classified materials system custodian.” Whitworth went on to provide the same kind of top secret data, on a regular basis, which he passed on to Walker to give to the Soviets. Walker drew his son, Michael, and brother, Arthur, into the spy network, until months of prodding by his divorced wife and daughter compelled the FBI to arrest them on May 20, 1985.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger confirmed last April 16, in a speech before the Navy League in Washington, that the damage the spy ring had caused was as severe as Barron reports Yurchenko to have said.

Weinberger said, “The harm caused to our national security by the Walker spy ring is of the gravest nature. We now know that the KGB considered the Walker operation to be its most important in history. The information stolen by Walker enabled the KGB to decipher more than 1 million messages. Averaged over John Walker’s career, this equates to Soviet decryption of more than 150 messages a day.

“These documents provided to the Soviets the keys to our message encryption systems, which revealed to the Soviets our future plans, ship locations and transit routes, military operations, intelligence activities, and the information on which we based our intelligence judgments. The Soviets gained access to weapons and sensor data, naval tactics, terrorist threats, surface, submarine, and airborne training, readiness, and tactics. Most dangerously, they may easily have learned how we might plan to employ the U.S. Navy worldwide in the event of crisis or conflict.”

However, amazingly enough, the extent of the damage done may never have come to light had not Weinberger himself intervened to overrule Secretary of the Navy John Lehman in October 1985. Lehman, as Barron reports, did not want to cut any deals with Walker in order to get him to talk on the witness stand—ostensibly in righteous indignation over the crimes Walker had committed.

However, as the government prosecutors knew, their case against Whitworth was thin. He had provided even more

damaging materials to the Soviets than Walker had (Whitworth had access to most of the Navy's ultrasecret cryptographic and communications data.) They wanted to cut a deal with Walker, exchanging a less-than-life sentence for his hapless son, Michael, if Walker would incriminate Whitworth.

When Lehman refused, the prosecutors took their case to Weinberger, and Lehman came along. Barron relates that "When [prosecutor John L.] Martin told Weinberger that John Walker's cooperation was essential to ensure a conviction of Whitworth, Lehman interrupted and angrily declared, 'I don't care if Whitworth talks.' That was a mistake. Weinberger raised his eyebrows in surprise, then his hand in a signal for silence. 'Wait a minute,' he said. 'You mean you might not be able to convict Whitworth?'"

When the details were described to Weinberger, himself a lawyer, he understood immediately, and the next day sent a message to Martin to "consummate" the deal. Two weeks later, Weinberger issued what Barron calls an "unprecedented rebuke" of Lehman, accusing him of making "several injudicious and incorrect statements with respect to the agreement."

Meanwhile, John Walker was angered to find that his partner in crime, Whitworth, had begun to have second thoughts and had made a feeble stab at exposing the ring himself. In the summer of 1984, he wrote some vague letters to the FBI in California under the pseudonym "RUS." This, and the offer of a reduced sentence for his son, was more than enough to open Walker up to telling the whole story on the witness stand.

Why Lehman tried to block all of this critical material from coming out in the trial is only one of the unanswered questions that the whole Walker-Whitworth case raised. How were Walker and Whitworth able to operate so freely over a 17-year period? Why hadn't the fact that the Soviets were deciphering so many top secret coded messages become obvious after awhile? Barron alludes to numerous instances in which Soviet responses to U.S. deployments seemed "uncanny" at the time, but he does not indicate that anyone ever undertook an investigation.

FBI does nothing

Why did the FBI sit on evidence of this massive breach of U.S. national security for almost a year? As Barron recounts, a guilt-ridden Whitworth began sending his "RUS" letters to the FBI in California in May 1984, a full year before the arrests. Barron notes that while some agents detected technical language in the letters that had ominous implications, no effective investigation was conducted, and the matter was "dead" by October.

Then, in November 1984, Walker's daughter, Laura, was moved by religious conviction to convince her mother, Barbara Walker, to go to the FBI. Barbara Walker had been divorced from John Walker since 1976, but had known her husband was spying for the Soviets almost from the begin-

ning. So did Walker's daughter, Laura, whom Walker had tried unsuccessfully to recruit to his ring in 1982.

But, as Barron reports, Barbara and Laura Walker's revelations to the FBI wound up in the "zero file." Months later, Laura recontacted the FBI to find out what had happened. It wasn't until March 1985 that the FBI recontacted Laura. This, according to Barron's account, occurred only because, when her file was revived and a copy of it sent to Washington, a duplicate copy was also forwarded to Norfolk. The copy sent to Washington was buried. The case was kept alive only because an agent in Norfolk picked up on the duplicate sent there, and began to bypass "normal channels" within the bureau to contact his friends to follow up the investigation.

Why did the FBI move in for an arrest of Walker at the first opportunity, rather than set up a counterespionage operation to flesh out the full extent of the operation? The May 20, 1985 arrest of Walker (which was coordinated with moves against Whitworth, Michael Walker, and Arthur Walker on the same day) came at the first opportunity the FBI had to catch Walker "in the act," passing material to the Soviets through an elaborate drop-off procedure along rural roads outside Washington. Was no consideration given to playing back into the operation, and thus revealing all of its components before blowing it? Such standard counterespionage tactics were not used in this case.

Thus, a final question also remains. Who else was involved? This one looms large. For example, among the things Barron does not report in his book is the assertion that Walker had convinced Whitworth he was passing secrets to the Israelis, not the Soviets.

In his final chapter, Barron notes that the U.S. reaction to the Walker spy ring was to make bold moves against known Soviet espionage operatives in the United States. In March 1986, the Soviets were told to reduce their staffing at the Soviet United Nations mission in New York by 105, but were given two years to do it, bit by bit. On Sept. 12, 1986, however, the Soviets balked on moving out the first 25, due to leave by Oct. 1. President Reagan reportedly blew up. On that day, he told advisers in the Oval Office, "I want to bloody the KGB!" FBI agent David Major, who was serving on the National Security Council at the time, leaned forward and said, "How about decapitation?"

Barron reports that Major then supplied a list of 25 men "who constituted the brains and sinews of the Soviet espionage apparatus in New York."

The United States formally expelled all 25, ordering them out of the country by Oct. 1. Then, on Oct. 21, another 55 Soviets, constituting the KGB and GRU leadership at the Soviet embassy in Washington and the entire KGB residency in San Francisco, were expelled. The United States had dictated an overall reduction of 179 KGB and GRU officers: 74 from Washington and San Francisco (55 expelled; 19 not allowed to return); 25 from the U.N. mission; plus 80 more who would have to leave the U.N. mission in stages by April 1, 1988.