

Vernon A. Walters



Silent Missionary

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Born in New York City in 1917, Vernon A. Walters grew up in Europe, attending schools in London and Paris where he learned French, Spanish and German. His language proficiency was to channel the course of his life. After enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1941, he felt that his education would allow him to make a greater contribution as an officer and he was commissioned after attending Officers Candidate School. He served concurrently as platoon leader and battalion S2 in the 85th Infantry Division. His position on the battalion staff entitled him to ride back from field exercises in the staff vehicles but Walters chose to march back with his platoon, a choice that tells us something about his commitment to leadership.

It was not long before he was transferred to the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. From there he would command a Special Missions Detachment (they called them the “missionaries” aboard ship) in the 9th Infantry Division which was embarking for fighting in North Africa. Walters was a journal-keeper and described his feelings about heading toward combat on foreign shores. “In the midst of all the excitement around me, I had come to the realization that I had found what I had been seeking in the Army, a life where I enjoyed what I was doing and felt that in serving I could also contribute to the things in which I believed very deeply.”

In his book, *Silent Missions*, he says that “there was a sort of quiet comprehension that I had found the path I was seeking. I knew now what I wanted to do with my life. Why and how I came to this realization under these difficult circumstances I cannot explain. I only know that on the eve of setting forth on a dangerous and long journey to an uncertain fate at an unknown place, I realized that I had found my place in life. I was not to lose this conviction in the thirty-four years that were to follow in the Army.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of those thirty-four years, his linguistic abilities would time and again prove to be of distinct value to the leaders around him. He was fluent in French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, and Russian. Walters interrogations of the French soldiers that were resisting, at the orders of the Vichy government, the American landings in North Africa, were often the only source of intelligence his commander had. His language skill so impressed General Mark Clark that the Fifth Army commander had him re-assigned as his aide during the time of the hard fighting for Italy.

Walters would be the interpreter for a number of American leaders and also gain recognition for his diplomatic skills. He was with General Mark Clark when the Fifth Army marched into Rome; he was with President Harry Truman at Wake Island when the president met with General Douglas MacArthur, the commander in chief of the warfighting effort in Korea; he was in Paris for the summit meeting that was scuttled by the U2 incident; and he was instrumental in arranging the secret Paris talks between Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese. He worked for presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Ford, and Reagan.

In May 1972 the general was sworn in as deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. At his first meeting with his new boss, Director Richard Helms, who would have preferred that someone within the CIA had been picked for the job, Helms asked him what experience he had in intelligence work. Annoyed by the tone of the question, Walters answered with some heat. “In 1942 I had led a special intelligence detachment ashore in an assault landing, had kidnapped some crane operators and had conducted extensive prisoner-

of-war interrogation. More recently I had conducted secret negotiations with both the North Vietnamese and the Communist Chinese in Paris without anyone in the CIA knowing anything about it.”<sup>2</sup>

It was while deputy CIA director that he once again became involved with a significant chunk of American history, this time a shameful chapter known as “Watergate.”

Shortly after the 17 June 1972 bungled break-in at the Democratic National Committee, Walters and Helms were summoned to the office of John Erlichman at the White House. They were asked about CIA involvement and replied that there was none. Haldeman joined them and insisted that the FBI investigation into the matter could stir up some Mexican CIA activity. Walters was told to meet with FBI Director L. Patrick Gray and tell him not to push the investigation as it might expose some CIA operations. The deputy director had three subsequent meetings with presidential counsel John Dean who pressured Walters to tell Gray to call off the investigation as it might interfere with CIA activities. Each time Walters refused. He knew by now that there were CIA operations in Mexico that were in danger of being compromised. He told Dean so and added that “any attempt to involve it would a grave disservice to the President, to the Congress and to the nation. The value of the CIA to the nation arose from the fact that it was a non-partisan organization. It did not support either of the parties. ...There was no agency involvement and I could not see any way in which it could be of assistance.”<sup>3</sup>

In testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, Dean would later describe these meetings with Walters.

...I reported back to Erlichman that Walters had informed me that any involvement by the CIA in this matter was impossible. I recall that when I reported this to Ehrlichman, he very cynically said, “Very interesting.” He told me that I should talk with General Walters further and push him a little harder to see if the CIA couldn’t help out, particularly with regard to the necessary pursuit of investigative leads. I also recall Ehrlichman saying something to the effect that General Walters seems to have forgotten how he got where he is today.”<sup>4</sup>

The contrast between these White House leaders and General Walters is inescapable. Haldeman, Erlichman and Dean were driven by the pursuit of political power. Dean entitled his book about the affair *Blind Ambition*. Walters on the other hand was a dedicated military man who had built a career on values like integrity and duty. He could not be persuaded by the most powerful men in government to take actions he believed to be harmful to the nation. In fact, he and Gray both felt they would resign before caving in to the pressure to thwart the investigation.

Walters retired from the Army in July 1976, but continued a career as a diplomat after being appointed Ambassador-At-Large in 1981, and in 1985 becoming a cabinet-rank officer in the government as the Ambassador to the United Nations. Along with Lieutenant Generals Daniel Graham and Sam Wilson, he founded the National Military Intelligence Association which held its first meeting at Fort Huachuca in 1974.<sup>5</sup>

Vernon Walters said that a “knowledge of history” is “important to the defense of our cause. ...This enables us to rebut falsehoods and place truths in proper perspective. ...I regret that in some of our service schools there persists the illusion that all a graduate requires is technical and specialized training. If we are to survive we must have defenders who know more than small-unit tactics, nuclear propulsion plants and delta wing structures.”<sup>6</sup>

He called intelligence the oldest profession, explaining that “Many people think that there is one profession which is older but before that one came to be, you had to know where it was available and what

were the rates.” Remarking on the lack of recognition for success which is a distinguishing feature of the intelligence profession, he was reminded of the words of John F. Kennedy who said, “You are condemned to have your successes passed over in silence and your failures trumpeted to the world.”<sup>7</sup>

When asked in a 1986 interview what he would tell the young intelligence officer, he answered, “I would say that you bear a larger portion of responsibility for preserving our way of life than most people recognize. It is a rewarding, fun profession. You have the opportunity to contribute vitally to the things that make our life worthwhile. ...You need to spread among the American people a better understanding of the selfless and dedicated service rendered to them by all those who fight on the invisible battlefield which is silent but never quiet.” He encouraged the intelligence professional to “sell” intelligence, telling them that they were “doing the Lord’s work.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

1. Walters, Vernon A., *Silent Missions*, privately published, 1971.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 586.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 591.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 598.
5. Walters, Vernon, interview with Rear Admiral Tom Brooks, Scott Palmer and Amanda Werner, published in *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, June 1986, pp. 7-10.
6. Walters, pp. 619-21.
7. Michael Handel makes the same point [*Intelligence and Operations*, p. 33]. He says “it could be argued that in no other occupation during the war did so few achieve so much and receive so little appreciation. (No one receives medals for preparing accurately cross-indexed cards of German units or signals.) Victories in modern warfare, however, are won as much in laboratories and code-breaking rooms as on the battlefield.” From my vantage point, however, at Fort Huachuca, the home of the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame, I see ample appreciation for the work of intelligence soldiers over the years. From the Purple Heart pinned by George Washington on Daniel Bissell’s tunic to the National Security Medal and the Medal of Merit presented to William Friedman for his work in the deepest black recesses of the Signal Intelligence Service and National Security Agency, Army intelligence personnel have been decorated for their services. Many servicemen in the locked rooms of World War II were awarded citations for their diligent checking, rechecking and cross checking. In her partial list, Anne Bray notes well over 400 Bronze Star Medals alone awarded to Counter Intelligence Corps people in World War II. That intelligence professionals are as highly decorated as other Army branches and corps, can be seen from a perusal of the biographies appended to this volume. At last look, the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame recognized 147 individuals. Playing a supportive role to the combat arms soldier and having a far smaller population in wartime, the MI troops can be expected to have a proportionately smaller number of awards. The need for secrecy in their work will only mean that the narrative part of their awards will be couched in vague terms. While the sweat and tears are copious in intelligence work, the blood flow in no way compares to that on the battlefield where the victories must, in the end, be won. MI people receive their fair share of appreciation from their leadership, if not public acclaim. History, too, will grant them their due.

8. Walters interview.