

UNDERCOVER IN MI6: WHAT'S IT LIKE TO WORK AS A SPY?

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I was recruited by the secret service during the cold war. It was very much like a [John] le Carré novel. I was in my final year at Oxford University when my tutor came to me one day and said: "What are you thinking of doing with your career?" I told him I was thinking of the police or the army. He stood there and replied: "Have you ever thought of working for your country?" I had no idea what he was talking about, but I just said: "Yeah, sure." After that I got an envelope in my pigeonhole from an anonymous government department inviting me up to London for an interview.

I knew the job wasn't going to be James Bond but I was curious to know more. I knew very little really. I didn't even know the difference between MI5 or MI6. It just hadn't come across my radar at all. But one interview followed on to the next and I was sent on a training course. I thought even if I move on from this, it's got to be a once in a lifetime opportunity and it will be interesting to find out what the job is really about.

I was recruited in that old fashioned way, but of course these days the service has a website and a recruitment team which goes round universities and run open evenings at various places. The net is now thrown much wider, though you can still get the tap on the shoulder at university.

There is no "spy type" that secret service recruiters look for. They look for independent, self-driven people, who do not fit into a particular pigeonhole. You would be laughing if you could look around a room, point and say: "That's the type, that's the person." The idea is that you get as many reasonably intelligent and varied men and women into the job as possible.

I am not entirely sure what they liked about me, but I have always had a good memory for small details. I can forget people's names two minutes after being introduced to them, but I retain a lot of seemingly unimportant details which can be terribly important when dealing with a mass of paperwork on your desk or when you are out in the field trying to remember what your brief was.

The job of a spy can be very lonely. The buzz is taking part in a world that nobody else knows about – often you are aware of things happening behind world events that other people don't know and possibly will never know. When I joined a long time ago, we were encouraged not even to tell your partner. That is the old service though. All that has changed since the 1990s. The trouble is that even though the rules have been slightly relaxed now – certain members of your family are allowed to know – you can never discuss details of operations or what's happening with particular agents.

Knowing someone else was imprisoned, tortured or killed because you didn't do your job properly is a terrible burden. When you start off as a young recruit, you think, 'Fine, that suits me.' But it is emotionally crushing for officers in the secret services and you can never really share that guilt with anybody. You always carry that around with you. That does grind people down over time. But you have to balance that out with the buzz of working in the secret world.

Despite perceptions, working for the secret service is not a very dangerous job. In the US it is slightly different because they see themselves as semi-military and put themselves in danger in a way that British officers don't. Normally what happens in the services is that the risks are run by the agents – the people you, as an officer, recruit. For example, if I wanted to find out about Iranian nuclear production tomorrow I couldn't wander into a facility in that country, no matter how good my cover was. But I can recruit a scientist who is already there. Of course, if the operation goes tits up, the person who is going to suffer is the agent, not me.

A good operational officer has a number of different cover stories. Let's assume that you are based in your home capital. You could get called out anywhere and your target could be anyone. So a good operational officer will have six or seven, possibly more, covers and there are specialist departments within those intelligence services whose job it is to maintain those covers. In my day, however, you could simply print a passport, hop on a plane and arrive. Now advances in technology mean maintaining people's covers has become a specialist area and it is a much more sophisticated operation.

A lot of being a spy is terribly mundane. The trouble with any operation is that there is a great deal of preparation and research that has to go into it. Even as an operational officer with a lot of support behind you, there is a lot of waiting for stuff to happen and trying to find out the most basic level of information. Now and again, the work of the secret service really counts and they are the moments you look for. In between that, there is a lot of mundane routine work, setting up agents, pottering round and going to meetings that don't come to anything. You have to find the resilience to get through those periods.

Joining the secret service is not just necessarily a young man's game. There is an increasing tendency to recruit people who are older, not just to take them fresh out of university. More and more now, the secret service looks at people who have established themselves in other careers and are looking for a change. This is for a number of reasons – it improves your value judgment and it helps your cover because you have obviously done something before. If you go to the secret service website, which is the starting point for anybody thinking of joining, you will see they ask for proven experience in another field. Once your life is stable and you have done other things you are going to make a much better agent and operational officer.

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