

An Exotic Career

An Interview With John H. Waller (U)

(b)(3)(c)

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John H. Waller's long and distinguished intelligence career began when he joined OSS from the State Department in 1944, after which he was assigned to Cairo as deputy chief of the wartime counterintelligence section. Following a brief postwar sojourn in the private sector, he joined the Strategic Services Unit, a successor organization to OSS, in 1946; he then remained in the intelligence profession until his retirement from CIA in 1980.

Waller's career in the field in the Directorate of Operations (DO) was spent in places most Americans knew little about at the time: [redacted] including extensive service in [redacted]

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[redacted] His more important Headquarters assignments included stints as [redacted] (1963-1967), as Chief of Near East Division (1972-1975), and as Inspector General for the Agency (1976-1980). (S)

In the interview excerpts that follow, Mr. Waller provides a fascinating and amusing portrait of his early DO career in those distant lands, where not even the long arm of Headquarters could regularly or routinely reach. It was a time when, as Mr. Waller notes in the interview, "There were very few ground rules about what anybody did. You were on your own in places like that." (U)

Mr. Waller was interviewed on 24 May 1999 in McLean, Virginia. (U)

Iran

When I was hired, it was with the fact in mind that I would go open the new Station in Iran, which, indeed, I did. I got out there in February 1947. There were not many residual things to do to pick up from OSS days. Whatever they'd had sort of disappeared, so I was starting from scratch, and the area, at that time, was beginning to loom as a highly significant flashpoint in the postwar era. As the Cold War broke out, in effect, I think you could say it almost broke out over Iran, because the Soviets—slow to move out of Azerbaijan, as they agreed to do during the war, and slow to move out of Kurdistan in Iran—left behind vassal governments which were not beholden to Tehran any more. It bit off a strategic hunk of the Azerbaijan area between the Soviet Union and Turkey. In addition to its strategic importance, Iran's oil was vital to the British. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was the largest overseas investment in the entire British empire. (U)

Our Ambassador in Tehran, George Allen, was active in working with the Iranians to stiffen their backs to protest the Soviet move. It was a definite grab for part of Iran. The small team of Americans there, all of us young [redacted] (b)(3)(c) [redacted] worked

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well as a team. (b)(1)
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We had a fairly successful crash program to understand Iran beyond the borders of Tehran. I began my career as what you might call a specialist in the tribal areas which were interesting because they were not necessarily automatically loyal to the central government, and some, like the Kurds, were vulnerable to Soviet pressure.

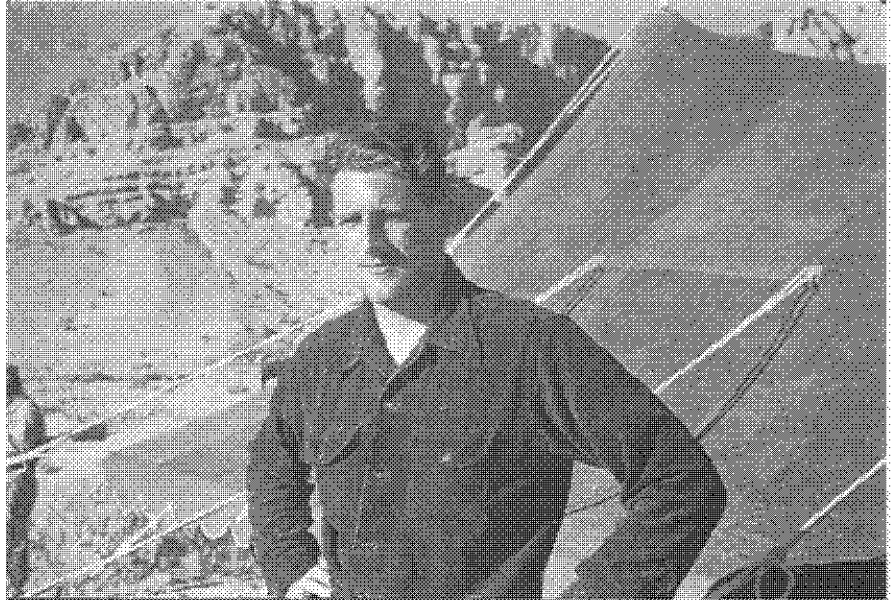
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I lived in Tehran, but I was on the road a lot. It was an exciting experience. It was nothing quite as romantic as camels and horses, but, in fact, I did do a lot of horseback riding once I got up there, and I had to run the gamut of Kurds running out and sacrificing sheep in front of me as a sign of friendship. (U)

The southern tribes were important because of their proximity to the oilfields in the south, and the fact that for centuries they were traditionally against the Shah and the government.

(b)(3)(n)



John Waller in tribal territory in southern Iran, 1948 (photo courtesy of author). (C)

(b)(3)(n)

Right after the war and up through the death of Stalin, there was the prospect of another world war, this one with the Soviet Union.

(b)(3)(n)

I guess I started out a career not in the typical counterespionage mode, or espionage mode, for that matter. The events of the day required a paramilitary approach, and it was probably the first inklings of paramilitary [operations] that the United States (and CIA as CIA) had gotten involved with. (C)

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Later, in 1949, (b)(3)(c) came out to be Chief of Station. He was an able senior officer and an OSS veteran. I continued my tribal meanderings

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extended as far as the eye could see in all directions, was the center of opium for the world. Despite border guards, plowed earth, and fierce dogs that the Soviets used to patrol their borders, the tribesmen were risking their lives every day to smuggle opium across the border to their relatives on the other side. (U)

This was a strategic area of the Soviet Union, [redacted]
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There was almost a 19th century British "Great Game" ambiance. I was a pioneer as far as the Americans were concerned, but it was something the British had been doing for two centuries. But we were the new big power after the war—people looked to us. The name of the game, as I saw it, was first establishing the groundwork

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Here, again, we were at a time when war might have become a reality, and it was a long time before we would have much in the way of technological sensors, [redacted]

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broken out and it was decimating the cattle [redacted] (b)(3)(c) A request for US foreign aid received no response. Time was running out. The cows were dying. (U)

So, again, I found Sears Roebuck useful, and I ordered 12 Waring blenders to be sent by air. I told Sears Roebuck that I would pay an extra shipping fee if necessary, but to get them to me, personally. I paid for them with Agency funds. For all intents and purposes, Sears believed that some American wanted to make a lot of cocktails. It was a time when there were few ground rules about what anybody did. You were on your own in places like that. (U)

I did this after fully explaining to the governor of the province that I had found a way to help him. If the problem was emulsifying diseased livers from those cattle that had already died [to make the vaccine needed to protect the healthy cattle], there was nothing like a Waring blender as an emulsifier. I knew that because every evening I used to make cocktails for my wife and myself with a Waring blender. I was always impressed with how efficiently it ground things into liquid. (U)

So I lined up my 12 blenders and invited the town fathers, and we had a practice session in which I demonstrated the beauties of a Waring blender. It worked like a charm, and they did have something that could be injected into the cattle to save them. I became a hero in the province, the savior of the cattle industry. That was not necessarily what I was sent to do

Ops Opportunities From Opium

(b)(3)(c)ly stint [redacted] involved dealing in some regard with both the local fathers of the province and the tribes. There were Turkmen, a Mongoloid type; Azaris; local Kurds; and various tribal peoples who were interesting to me as an intelligence officer. Khurasan, with fields of white poppies that

Cocktails for Cows

It was hard to get into the tribal areas, particularly along the Soviet border. It made the Soviets nervous, and it made the tribesmen wonder what to do with you. But a terrible epidemic of rinderpest had

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Things were getting rough with the USSR. Stalin was still on a rampage. This was a serious time in history.
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up there, but it enabled me to be right up on the border to oversee my own do-it-yourself aid project, which was of great assistance to me for intelligence purposes. (U)

I got a little carried away with it because it was so successful. I got in touch with the one remaining Soviet official, a caretaker in (b)(3)(n) whom I did not know. I said I was the (b)(3)(n) and that we had just had a lot of success in putting down the rinderpest on our side of the border. I said, "I understand you have it on your side, and I'd be delighted to help you if you need any help." The answer was a grumpy "no." That was the end of that. I guess it was unrealistic to hope that I might have been able to get into the Soviet Union long enough to see what was going on. (U)

Good Medicine

Another thing I did was to make a friend of the French surgeon in charge of the official Iranian hospital. He was a former Foreign Legionnaire. On retirement, he was assigned by the French Government to do this. For all I know, he was in French intelligence. We worked well together, and he and I suddenly and for different reasons (he for medical, me for getting to know the natives) had the idea to travel around the province. With my heavy-duty truck and his medical services, we went on medical tours, stopping in every village to hold a clinic. (U)

I had done that once on my own in the south with the Qashqais. The

year before I went (b)(3)(c) I had found a poor lad on the road who had been hit by a truck and left to die. With the help of a how-to-do-it medical journal left over from a World War II first-aid kit, my radio operator and I set the boy's leg. It was all that could be done, and we then put him on a truck to be taken to a hospital another two days away. I believe he lived. When it was all over, the tribes gathered around and sort of gave us standing applause, and then the chief asked me to run a clinic for him for a week because there no doctors in the outlying provinces. (U)

I wanted to do what I could. With a large medical kit I had, I held a clinic and rejected people who had things beyond my ken. But, if they were only suffering from malaria, constipation, or common diseases, I could cope with the medication I had. I think I did some good, and it made for great public relations. (U)

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After a year, (b)(3)(n)

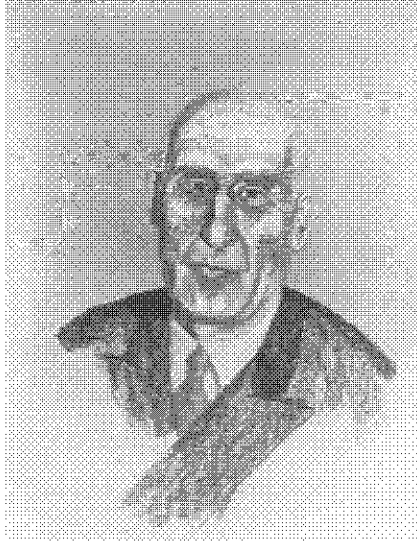
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(b)(3)(n) We then started down the road to major problems. (S)

Project AJAX

Things were getting rough with the USSR. Stalin was still on a rampage. This was a serious time in history. We realized that the Soviets, having been thrown out of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, and then later out of Meshed, had decided to go after the central government of Iran and get hold of the whole country. We needed assets and information to bear on this problem. (U)

The Soviet threat was getting worse by the day, and it finally culminated in 1953 in the so-called Project AJAX. That began the Agency's first real paramilitary operation. Just before Kim Roosevelt came out to run AJAX on the spot, I went back to Headquarters to be



Sketch by John Waller of Mohammed Mosadeq (©John Waller). (U)

in charge of AJAX on that end, working directly in [DDP Frank] Wisner's office. (U)

The chain of command for purposes of secrecy eliminated everybody except the DCI and Wisner. Dick Helms was Chief of Operations, and he was out of the loop. My division chief was also out of the loop, even though we all knew a little about it, but I knew all about it. It was embarrassing to have to deal with people directly rather than go through the chain of command. This probably was not a smart thing to do, but it is significant how compartmentation and secrecy in our first paramilitary overthrow became a "holy" project for all of us. At any rate, it worked like a charm. (U)

A Countercoup

It is maddening to see revisionist history say that Project AJAX was

the root of all problems with Iran. It is the worst kind of revisionism. What is forgotten by most historians who are talking about it today is that it was not a coup. It was a countercoup. In other words, the Shah had every right in his constitution to remove a prime minister who defied his instructions. He tried to remove him, and the man who went to deliver the removal order was arrested and put in jail, and long-time liberal politician Mohammed Mosadeq took over as Prime Minister. It was clear that the Shah had better get out of town, which he did. (U)

This was Mosadeq's coup, but, from a practical point of view, he had lost most of his backing from the mullahs and from the bazaar (the business community), which was historically in league with the mullahs. He had the poor people in south Tehran because of their religiosity and the mullah connection. He had the National Front, a secular, modern group of politicians—idealistic, perhaps, but able people. He had various others, including the few fragments of the labor group that were outside the Communist labor movement. And he had the Communist Party. (U)

We [redacted] got serious (b)(1) but this when the mullahs (b)(3)(n) defected from Mosadeq, including Ayatollah Kashani, the top mullah—the Khomeini of his day. Once Mosadeq had lost the National Front, and, particularly its important labor group, he was left with himself and the Communist Party. The Communists then moved in and said, "We're your only friends, and we can get a crowd on the

street," which they did regularly, "to campaign visibly." The crowds were getting more and more rough; they were tearing down statues and things like that. (U)

The problem was that here was a man who was not a bad man—we all liked Mosadeq, and we were willing to back him. We did not do anything about him when he originally took over the British oil. We were upset because we were allies with the British, but we did not have any plans to do anything ourselves. That was not the *casus belli* solution for us. Although a lot of people claimed that we also wanted the oil, that was not our nation's policy. We had all the oil we needed in the south. (U)

Increasingly Isolated

With only the Communists supporting him, Mosadeq faced a wavering Army and an angry Shah. It was a messy situation, one which would have led to Mosadeq's calling the Army in and saying, "Get back with me, or I'll get the Soviet Army in, because the British are against us." Remember what the Soviets did in Afghanistan some years later. There was no doubt that, in the middle of the erupting Cold War, Iran would go to the Soviets if action was not taken. [redacted]

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lems." Kim was prophetic in realizing that every president that was faced with a nasty little problem that did not merit going to war over would turn to covert action. The best example is the Bay of Pigs, which was a catastrophe. So there were a lot of lessons to be learned that were not. (U)

(b)(3)(n) **Tibet**

After my stint at Headquarters as head of the Iran desk, I was transferred [redacted]

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the adventures we had there were more, I suppose, identical to what intelligence is. You recruit spies, you worry about the Soviets, you worry about the Chinese, you worry about the usual things our Agency is supposed to worry about. [redacted]

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[redacted] The goal [redacted] [redacted] was to receive the Dalai Lama covertly and to give him aid and assistance in whatever way we could. This would help cement our relationships with some of the local tribesmen and others who had supported the Dalai Lama and helped him come out and who were still fighting the Chinese. (S)

With China becoming rapidly one of our more serious Cold War enemies, it was a problem that lent itself to operations with China's peripheral countries. China has a minority system, a federation of all kinds of countries that are not Chinese but have been in the empire for a long time. Historically, when an emperor in China falls, it is usually because of pressure from one or the other of the peripheral countries. So China is very conscious of its Tibets, its Manchurias, and whatever else it has. [redacted]

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Strange Bedfellows

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The first time this became known as a CIA covert action operation was when President Eisenhower mentioned it during a speech he gave in Seattle. He had been eager to show how his foreign policy had run well. The centerpiece for this was Iran, and he spilled the beans and took credit for it, in effect. The reason I remember that so clearly was that I was still proud of the operation but also proud that it had been kept secret. It gave me a sinking feeling to see that it was no longer a secret, that our President had blown it. In retrospect, I do not blame Eisenhower; it would have come out anyway, eventually. (S)

In his message to Headquarters after Mosadeq was ousted, Kim said that, "This worked wonderfully, it cost virtually nothing in terms of money, and few lives were lost. But the danger of this operation is that all of us [in CIA] will be emboldened to try this frequently as a quick fix for all kinds of prob-

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you had Soviet, Chinese, and Bloc personnel. It can be argued that (b)(3)(n) they are more accessible. Everybody knows everybody else, and you can approach them sometimes because they are unhappy in those places.

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I was invited up to the mountains once in a helicopter for a review of this Tibetan army, where its men went through their marching and their various target practices. It was quite impressive. I was their guest of honor, sort of a visiting colonel of the regiment. It was something that was kept quiet. They knew that I was a senior officer, but they did not know who I was. (S)

(b)(3)(n)

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I had never lived in a small town in America, but I knew what it meant to live in one after I was (b)(3)(n). After I got off the plane, we put our bags in a hotel, and I went out to buy something I needed in a store. A man behind the counter looked at me and said, "It's very nice to see you, Mr. Waller," before I introduced myself. "We've been expecting you here." Then, within a couple of weeks, some gentleman came up and said, "We have a Rotary Club here, Mr. Waller, and, as you know, we like to have a person from every profession, and our intelligence man, an Englishman, just left, so we're in the market for a new one. Would you like to be it?" I explained that I really was not into Rotary matters. (U)

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A Small Town (b)(3)(n)

After leaving (b)(3)(n), spent six months learning Arabic and was geared to go to some Arab country. (b)(3)(n)

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That sort of thing gets you off to a funny start, but, on the other hand, it was a country where, despite some reputation for (b)(3)(n) (b)(3)(n) I met were kind and gentle. I literally knew almost everybody in town, and, when I left—after two years—all my (b)(3)(n) friends came to the airport to say goodbye. This was a little embarrassing (b)(3)(n)

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(U)

It was interesting and, I believe, a successful tour

(b)(3)(n)

I found that the local service was one of the most genuinely cooperative foreign services I had ever dealt with. We did not pay them anything, they just thought it was their duty to be helpful. (S)

Being Up Front

(b)(3)(n) one somehow could operate a little more openly in dealing with politicians than in many countries where the emotions run high between the ins and the outs. I went to the liaison people with whom I was dealing, and I would say, "Look, I do not want to play games, I am not going to try to fool you. Let me just tell you in advance that I am going to be seeing as many people as I can in this country, including your opposition. I am here to interpret this country to my country. I am an intelligence man. So, unless I see them in the flesh and talk to them, how will I know what it is all about? If, at any time, you do not want me to, tell me, and I will not. I am asking your permission to see everybody, because that is the way it ought to be done." And, of course, they said, "Oh, go ahead," realizing that the people in power had all gone to the same grade school and high school with the people not in

power. They were all the close friends of their opposition. I reasoned, and it turned out to be true, that it was hard for them

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to say, "Oh, you cannot go see my good friend, so and so." Because that puts it on a personal basis. He knows, I know, and he knows everybody knows. (S)

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Sacrificing One's Stomach

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Every Sunday, we had breakfast together, at his request, because he liked to get a Westerner's view of what's going on in the world—sort of his newspaper, if you will, which I found useful. I could get his views on things without exerting myself any more than telling him what I read in *The International Herald Tribune* that morning or knew from my sense of geography, because he was an insular man—but bright. My

only problem at the breakfast was that he served

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But it was not my way of beginning the morning. I did it bravely, and got no diseases. He sensed that was not enough, though, so he also gave me Wheaties. After about a year of this, one Sunday morning I was disturbed to learn that, about 20 minutes after I had left him, he died. I soon had an equally good relationship with his son

(b)(3)(n)

We saw each other frequently, and it was a warm relationship. (U)

Bagging a Bag Man

As I mentioned earlier, we knew there was equipment passing (b)(1) (b)(3)(n) It was sent by the Chinese, probably, or sometimes the Soviets. We enlisted the help of our liaison to try to stop that, and they did. They caught some boxes at the port and broke them open, and instead of sugar there were guns and that sort of thing. It was going on all the time. (S)

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I have many other fond memories of Third World countries in the 1960s as they tried to become democracies. We were competing for influence with the Soviets and Chinese and also with the British, French, and Belgians For me, it was an exhilarating and gratifying part of my career. (U)

