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South African's Spying Seen as Painful Blow to West

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A slowly unraveling episode of Soviet espionage involving a South African Navy commodore jailed for treason is being characterized by intelligence officials as one of the most painful blows against the West in the last 20 years in its "looking-glass" match with the Soviet Union.

Commodore Dieter Felix Gerhardt was detained by the FBI 18 months ago on a flight from Syracuse, N.Y., to New York City and immediately taken to Cape Town where he and his wife, Ruth, were charged with treason. After a secret trial, he was sentenced in December to life imprisonment, his wife to 10 years in prison.

At the time of his arrest, Gerhardt was commandant of the Simonstown Naval Station in South Africa where he had routine access to the secret underground Silvermine communications center. The South Africans alleged that he had worked for the KGB, the Soviet secret intelligence service, since 1965.

"Gerhardt is no ordinary spy. He is, in fact, the first flag officer of any country with ties to NATO who has been turned by the Soviets since the start of the Cold War," one ranking U.S. intelligence official said. "Gerhardt has been a member of 'the Club' where there is a lot of camaraderie and information exchange to which he had access. There is no telling what this man might have picked up over the years" for the Soviets.

During his naval career, Gerhardt is said to have had access to most of NATO's electronic intelligence, almost all of the surveillance information pouring out of Silvermine and secrets of NATO military and computer codes and when and why these codes were changed.

Gerhardt also is said to have had access to the newest weapons being put into service by the British Royal Navy, pointing up a relative-

ly new phenomenon of Cold War espionage: when a potential enemy hurts one western country, he can hurt all.

One U.S. naval intelligence official calls Gerhardt's "one of the most extraordinary careers in modern espionage history."

What follows is a narrative of how Gerhardt became a Soviet spy, how he rose through the ranks of the South African Navy. Although incomplete, the story has been pieced together from interviews with current and former U.S. naval intelligence officials, British and South African intelligence authorities and sources close to the National Security Agency, the CIA and the FBI.

Gerhardt, born in 1936, entered the South African Navy at 20 as a commissioned officer and was posted to the Royal Navy's Engineering College at Plymouth, England, where he showed skill in electronics and apparently was first contacted by the KGB. The South Africans claim that he was "turned" by the Soviets in 1965, a year or so before his marriage to "Ruth," an alleged KGB agent whom he married to help his cover.

Gerhardt served as South Africa's naval attache in London and frequently visited naval bases in Britain and the United States to learn the latest developments in all phases of electronic sea warfare.

In the early 1970s, because of South Africa's apartheid racial policy, NATO imposed an arms boycott, the U.S. Navy stopped making ports-of-call in South Africa and the British limited their access to Simonstown Naval Station.

Just before becoming commandant of Simonstown in 1981, Gerhardt served on the planning and operations staff in Pretoria, where he was privy to all South African military communications, including those that would reveal South African military operations against Angola, whose Marxist government openly had enlisted Soviet and Cuban military aid.

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