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The Secret World of General Secord

In the national spotlight after years under cover

His face may be unfamiliar, his name largely unknown. But when retired Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord takes the oath as the first witness of the House and Senate public hearings on the Iran-contra scandal this week, the lights and cameras will focus on a type immediately recognizable to anyone who reads spy novels or watches TV adventure series. He is the flyboy who pushes fighter planes to the limit in countless World War II combat dramas, the gung-ho soldier who volunteers for impossible rescue missions in improbable corners of the world. If Lt. Col. Oliver North is the scandal's master planner, Secord is the story's real-life James Bond, the can-do covert-operations expert whom North relied on to get things done.

Or at least that's the image Secord has managed to portray. In testimony that may run throughout the week, Secord is expected to willingly provide a detailed account of the contra arms-supply effort that began in 1984, long before the first arms-for-hostages swap with Iran was contemplated. "The general feels sincerely that he has nothing to hide and that he has done nothing wrong," committee chairman Sen. Daniel Inouye told reporters last week. Others on the committee say Secord may implicate President Reagan as an enthusiastic cheerleader and expose the administration's determination to assist the Nicaraguan contras even if it meant circumventing the law.

That Secord would be embroiled in a complex scenario involving secret shipments, hidden bank accounts and military derring-do comes as no surprise to those who know the general or have followed his career. Born 55 years ago in La Rue, Ohio (population: 867), Secord has spent nearly half his life engaged in covert operations. His first taste of the "black" world came when he went to Vietnam as an "adviser" to the South Vietnamese government, an innocent-sounding assignment that actually involved flying more than 200 secret combat missions in fighters. Later, Secord helped the CIA run its covert air war in Laos and advised the shah of Iran on how to build up his Air Force. Between his Southeast Asia and Iran assignments, Secord managed to win a Distinguished Flying Cross during a rescue mission in the Congo. Secord was flying a Belgian commando force to Stanleyville in a C-130 transport when a wing panel opened, causing an inflated life raft to foul the tail controls. Secord wrestled the plane down to an emergency, but safe, landing.

But the general hardly restricted his career to aerial acrobatics and behind-the-scenes maneuvers. Six years ago Secord was one of the Pentagon's rising stars, holding a series of high-level desk jobs that culminated in 1981 when he became the deputy assistant secretary of defense, a job in which he helped set U.S. defense policy concerning close to 40 countries. "They keep referring to me as a shadowy figure," complained Secord in a rare interview with the Chicago Tribune last January. "I've held some of the highest-profile jobs in government."

'Tar on his uniform': True enough. But it is Secord's involvement in black operations that has shaped the man who now stands before a congressional committee. The Iran affair is not the first time Secord has been dogged by scandal. In 1981 a "60 Minutes" story linked Secord to Edwin Wilson, the notorious rogue CIA agent who has since been convicted of, among other things, selling explosives and paramilitary expertise to Muammar Kaddafi. Though Secord denied any wrongdoing and was never charged

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DOD

North's operative: Patriot or crook?

with a crime, the investigation by the Justice Department was enough to poison his military career. Calling the incident "tar on his uniform," Secord retired from the Air Force in 1983. "No matter what I have done, I can't get rid of this shadow that's been hanging over me," he said during a successful libel proceeding against Douglas Schlacter, the former Wilson aide who made the "60 Minutes" charges. Now Secord is under an even darker cloud.

Secord's early years hardly signaled the notoriety that would later envelop the major general. Built short and wide like a fireplug, Secord was assigned to the "runt company"—comprised of cadets in the 5-foot-6 range—when he arrived at West Point in 1951. Secord's fellows called him "the Fat Man" and laughed at his habit of standing ramrod straight at parade rest, even while relaxed. According to the class yearbook, Secord dreamed "of becoming a special-services officer," a goal totally at odds with his later proclivities: special-services officers mostly run recreational events such as Bob Hope shows.

After a shaky first year at the academy during which he almost dropped out, Secord devoted himself to West Point life in earnest. Some friends attribute the newfound commitment to his tactical-training officer, a tough young captain named Alexander Haig. By the time he graduated, Secord had proved himself a scrappy boxer and had joined the German and drama clubs. Still, the future two-star general finished an unimpressive 193rd in a class of 470 in 1955. A notation in his yearbook cryptically reads, "His mannerisms will be with us always."

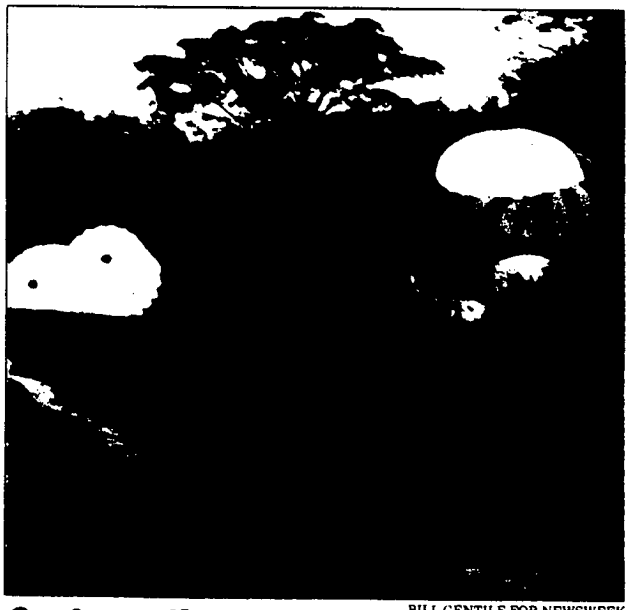
Retired Brig. Gen. Harry (Heine) Aderholt, Secord's commander in Southeast Asia, provides a clue to the remark. "I thought he was arrogant," recalls Aderholt. "He acted like a general when he was a captain. But he was the best goddam officer I ever had." Along with the arrogance came an aloofness that characterizes Secord to this day. Former West Point classmate Robert Soper recalls that years after leaving the academy, Air Force colleagues of Secord would ask Soper about the icy pilot. "People who flew with him never got to know him," says Soper. "He was then like he is now—a very private person. You had to know him a long time before he would loosen up." But few people ever got that far. "He was very close-mouthed," says a former Pentagon official. "A lot of people referred to him as the Buddha." While Oliver North, for example, obligingly poses for photographers in his station wagon, the general recently greeted a NEWSWEEK photographer near his home in McLean, Va., by shifting his Cadillac into reverse and rapidly backing down the street.

There are some similarities, however, between the buttoned-up Secord and the more flamboyant North. A classmate in flight school recalls how Secord once impressed his colleagues by outflying everyone during a mock dogfight. Later the student discovered Secord had gone up with partially emptied fuel tanks, which lowered the plane's weight and made it more maneuverable. "He has this tenacity," said a onetime racquetball partner. "Very intelligent, and very gutsy."

Sudsy trails: In 1966, after winning four combat air medals during his years as an adviser in Vietnam, Secord was bored. "He wanted to get closer to the war," recalls Aderholt, who pulled strings to get Secord transferred to an Air Force base in Thailand where he helped the CIA conduct its covert war in Laos. Here Secord had a flying experience to top his earlier struggle with the rubber life raft: the CIA asked him to drop a planeload of Calgonite dishwater detergent on the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the rainy season. The idea was to make the trail too slippery for the communists to travel. Secord not only carried out the mission, he did it in broad daylight so the CIA could take pictures.

Secord left the dirty wars in Southeast Asia with an unblemished record in 1968. His success there put him on a fast track that led to advanced training at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., and his first general's star at the age of 43. In 1975 Secord was put in charge of the 1,000-man Air Force military-assistance group in Iran, where he presided over the disbursement of billions of dollars in Air Force aid programs. Then it was back to the Pentagon, where he was promoted in 1981 to deputy assistant secretary of defense. In Washington Secord got to know Oliver North—then a young Marine working with the National Security Counsel staff—when the pair teamed up to lobby Congress for

WESLEY BOCXE—J.B. PICTURES



BILL GENTILE FOR NEWSWEEK

Contra action: On patrol and getting supplies

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approval of the sale of sophisticated AWACS electronic surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia. Secord was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his efforts; Secord's third star, a promotion to lieutenant general, seemed imminent.

Then came the tar on his uniform. Edwin Wilson was a former CIA agent turned private entrepreneur who made millions as a weapons dealer while brazenly representing himself as an agent of the U.S. government. Secord's fall from grace began genteelly enough, at Mount Airy Farms, Wilson's lavish country estate in the Virginia hunt country. At a time when he was making do on a modest government salary, Secord, like former CIA men Theodore Shackley and Thomas Clines, became a weekend visitor of Wilson's. The three men knew each other from the secret war in Laos. Clines is said to be Secord's best friend, and Wilson—who is now in prison for shipping explosives to Libya—claims he taught Secord about turning government experience into private profit. "If I wasn't in jail," Wilson told NEWSWEEK, "I'd have headed up this operation."

During this period Clines and an Egyptian partner set up EATSCO—the Egyptian American Transport & Services Corp.—to ferry arms to Egypt following the Camp David accords. In 1982 the federal government accused EATSCO of bilking it of $8 million in shipping charges. Wilson claims that Secord, Shackley and Secord's superior at the Pentagon, Erich von Marbod, were silent partners in the firm. All of them have denied Wilson's charges.

Lie detectors: In 1982, after Justice Department officials began investigating Secord's alleged involvement in the EATSCO case, the Pentagon suspended the general from his post. When prosecutors asked Secord to take a lie-detector test, he agreed at first but set the condition that the prosecutors drop their criminal investigation if he passed the test. The prosecutors refused, and Secord declined to be polygraphed. The Justice Department investigation got nowhere, Secord was never charged with a crime and Defense Department official Frank Carlucci, now Reagan's national-security adviser, offered to reinstate him to his Pentagon post.

In 1983 EATSCO pleaded guilty to the illegal billings and paid $20,000 in fines; the Egyptian partner paid $3 million in restitution. By then Secord had chosen to retire from the Pentagon, his once fast-track career derailed.

But the very same month that he retired from government service, Secord went to work for a private firm linked to Wilson—the very man he says helped form "the shadow that's been hanging over me." Secord teamed up with arms dealer Albert Hakim, owner of Stanford Technology, a Silicon Valley firm that Wilson once represented as a salesman. Together, Secord and Hakim formed a subsidiary called Stanford Technology Trading Group International, located in Vienna, Va., a suburb of Washington.

By most accounts Secord and Hakim had an unproductive partnership when it came to traditional arms deals. Hakim was supposed to provide the business acumen, Secord the connections. The two pushed hard to win a $100 million aircraft-shelter deal in Abu Dhabi for Marwais Steel Co. of Larkspur, Calif., but despite contacts with relatives of the ruling sheiks there, another company handily outbid them. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, helped Secord get an exception to the bidding deadline for a project in the kingdom, but that, too, fell through. "Secord may be a very good pilot, but he doesn't have the brains or the guts for business," said a Sudanese businessman who dealt with him. During the early 1980s a visitor to Secord's Stanford Trading office said, "You got the sense that there was no trading going on. It made you wonder how they were able to make money."

Activity picked up with the advent of North's private-aid network. Secord and Hakim's Stanford Trading has been linked to the network—most notably last October. Following the shooting down by Sandinistas of a contra supply plane and the capture of one of its crewmen, Eugene Hasenfus, telephone records of the safe house where the crewmen lived revealed that they frequently called Secord's home and his office at Stanford Trading. But that supply operation, U.S. and contra officials have estimated, cost no more than $5 million. Congress and the special prosecutor are taking a hard look at where the rest of what may be as much as $30 million in diverted money went. Secord is expected to tell Congress that he made no money and that only $1 million or so got to the contras.

If indeed Secord was involved in any illegal activity, friends and colleagues assert that he was motivated by patriotism, not greed. "Any portrait that would be painted of him as a profiteer would be absolutely erroneous," says Secord's lawyer, Thomas Green. "Hakim and Secord felt like they were doing the Lord's work." Perhaps now, with television cameras trained to his every word and facial expression, the American public will be able to judge for themselves.

ROD NORDLAND *with* RICHARD SANDZA *and* DAVID NEWELL *in Washington,* ERIK CALONIUS *in Miami and* CHRISTOPHER DICKEY *in Cairo*

NANCY MORAN—N.Y. TIMES

WEST POINT MILITARY ACADEMY

UPI

A career of covert operations: Cadet Secord graduated to secret wars in Laos (above) and secret rescue missions in the Congo (below)