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Ex-agent for CIA defects

He 'wiped out' Moscow operation

From Inquirer Wire Services

MOSCOW — The Soviet Union said yesterday that it had given asylum to Edward Lee Howard, the former CIA agent whose defection "wiped out" the agency's Moscow operations in what has been described as the heaviest blow to U.S. intelligence in years.

Howard managed to elude an FBI search after being charged last year with selling U.S. secrets to Moscow. He reportedly received \$6,000 for the information, which led the Soviets to arrest and execute a Soviet CIA contact.

Howard, 33, vanished from his Santa Fe, N.M., home in September, just days before the FBI charged him with espionage. Reagan administration sources said in October that he was believed to have fled to the Soviet Union.

U.S. officials have described Howard's defection as the most serious blow to American intelligence operations in recent years. He was the first CIA agent ever known to defect, and the first American since the 1960s.

The official Tass news agency distributed a statement in English saying that Howard requested asylum because "he has to hide from U.S. secret services, which unfoundedly persecute him."

The government newspaper Izvestia published a brief announcement of Howard's defection on its back page. It did not say Howard was accused of spying and described him only as "a U.S. citizen [and] a former CIA officer." The statement did not say when Howard entered the Soviet Union or where he was.

"Guided by humane considerations, the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet complied with the request of Edward Lee Howard. He has been granted the right to live in the U.S.S.R. for political reasons," the statement said.

In Washington, CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson say she could not confirm or deny Izvestia's report. Assistant FBI Director William Baker said, "We certainly give a lot of credence to the Soviets' public remarks. We have no reason to believe they are untrue."

Details about the damage Howard may have caused U.S. intelligence are scant, but a former CIA official in Washington, who requested anonymity, said the damage "has to have been serious."

Howard, who had been in training to gather information from Soviet agents in Moscow, worked for the CIA from January 1981 to June 1983, when he was fired. U.S. officials said he flunked a polygraph test indicating that he had used illegal drugs while he was an agent and that he was guilty of petty thefts of money.

During his training, Howard was among the top students in classes in countersurveillance techniques. Embittered after his firing, he traveled to Austria in 1984 and met with KGB officers to betray details of the U.S. intelligence operation in Moscow.

The FBI charged in court papers that he met with KGB officials in St. Anton, Austria, on Sept. 20, 1984. U.S. officials said \$6,000 appeared in his bank accounts after that date.

Howard did not come under suspicion until nearly a year later, after U.S. officials interrogated Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko, described as a high-ranking KGB official.

Yurchenko, who later returned to the Soviet Union and denied that he was with the KGB, reportedly knew only the code name "Robert," but he supplied enough information to trace "Robert" to Howard.

Last month, the Los Angeles Times quoted unidentified sources as saying Howard sold the Soviets details of U.S. intelligence operations in Moscow that led to the execution of one of the CIA's prime contacts, identified as A.G. Tolkachev, an engineer.

"Howard disclosed virtually every active operation we had," it quoted a source as saying. "He wiped out Moscow station."

The Times also quoted a highly classified report as saying Howard had drug problems and was mentally unstable. A polygraph given Howard showed "continued and accelerated drug use, petty crime and all the bad psychological traits that had been overlooked before," a source told the newspaper, adding that "the guy was coming apart."

Two days before Howard disappeared, the KGB issued an announcement through Tass saying Tolkachev was charged with espionage. It linked him to U.S. diplomat Paul Stombaugh, who was expelled from the Soviet Union on espionage charges in June 1985.

At least two other American diplomats have been expelled on spy charges since then. KGB chief Viktor M. Chebrikov told the 27th Communist Party Congress this year that a "major" U.S. spy operation in Moscow had been broken up.

Just before disappearing, Howard quit a job with the New Mexico legislature's finance committee. FBI agents said his wife, Mary, aided his moonlit escape by placing a dummy in a car to make it appear that he was there.

She moved from Santa Fe on May 31, apparently to Minnesota, where her family lives. No charges were ever filed against her.