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By JOE TRENTO

WASHINGTON — The night John Paisley disappeared from his sailboat on the Chesapeake Bay, says his estranged wife, he was "a stone's throw" from the CIA hideaway he had been spying on.

It may have been a coincidence, but the mystery surrounding John Paisley's last known voyage on the sloop Brillig and the unanswered questions about his relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency have left his wife Maryann embittered and frustrated.

For the first time since her husband vanished more than a year ago, Mrs. Paisley is talking about the case. And for the first time, people who knew John Paisley are saying he was a spy — not the "ordinary analyst" the CIA still claims he was.

His wife, colleagues at the CIA, FBI officials and eyewitnesses paint a picture of Paisley directing a secret operation to track down the theft of American spy satellite secrets in the final days before he disappeared.

The CIA, for the most part, has been silent on the Paisley case, and understandably so. If the final mission given 55-year-old John Paisley was to find out what the Russians were doing with U.S. satellite secrets, then the CIA would hardly want to discuss it or the dangers it posed to those involved.

Paisley was last seen Sept. 24, 1978, sailing alone on the Chesapeake Bay near a CIA "safehouse" he suspected was used by a double agent to transmit information to a Soviet compound 60 miles up the bay.

To support her contention that her husband was a spy, Mrs. Paisley gave the Sunday News Journal a number of files she recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. The files listing Paisley's activities during his 21 years with the CIA are not complete — 15 years are blacked out.

Further, Mrs. Paisley says she believes the CIA is lying about her husband's retirement. She is angry that the true story of what John Paisley really did for his country is not being told.

The CIA contends that Paisley retired in 1974 and never did any spying. After he left, the agency says, Paisley did some routine consulting work off and on until he disappeared.

Mrs. Paisley said that her own experience as a CIA employee and her relationship with John gave her "many people to go to for information." She says those sources told her Paisley "retired from overt work in 1974 but was continued on the covert (spy) payroll."

The Sunday News Journal was able to confirm Paisley's covert role with two of his colleagues. Both men asked not to be identified. They said they were compelled to come forward because of damage done to Paisley's reputation by the CIA's lies about what he did for the agency.

"It is true John Paisley was an expert on strategic weapons and the Soviets, but his expertise was used to plug leaks, prevent security violations. John was a spook. He spied on his colleagues," said one of his former assistants in the Office of Strategic Research.

Mrs. Paisley said a close friend of her husband's in the agency told her that "John was made for covert work. He loved it."

Interviews with Mrs. Paisley and her husband's colleagues and searches of documents suggest that Paisley's final CIA assignment was not the benign contractual arrangement the agency makes it out to be.

Pieced together, those bits of information tell a story of espionage and intrigue.

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in the security guarding the U.S. spy satellite program. The assignment was a direct result of the arrests of Christopher John Boyce, and Andrew Daulton Lee, who sold thousands of pages of satellite secrets to the Soviet KGB between 1975 and 1977. When the two men were arrested in early 1977, the CIA, National Security Agency and the Air Force realized they had lost almost all ability to find out what was going on in Soviet strategic weapons research because the Russians had the ability to avoid the prying satellite sensors.

Boyce and Lee were sent to jail, and Paisley was given full authority to investigate the damage done to satellite secrecy. He was given portable equipment to detect interception of U.S. satellite transmissions.

In the spring of 1978, he was assigned to Mitre Corp., a think tank trying to determine if the Russians had been able to crack the satellite secrets lost through Boyce and Lee.

At Mitre, Paisley learned that the Soviets needed more information to make use of what they already had. According to his colleagues, Paisley thought there had to be another leak.

Paisley was issued more electronic equipment and began working in May 1978 under a new cover at the Washington office of Coopers & Lybrand, a large accounting firm that had longtime CIA contacts. Paisley's friends found it laughable that he worked for an accounting firm: "John couldn't balance a checkbook," one said.

Paisley wasn't balancing checkbooks. He was looking for ways satellite secrets might have been removed from the CIA and what was being done with them.

Working with the FBI, Paisley took an apartment at 1500 Massachusetts Ave. to monitor the KGB agents who lived on the eighth floor.