The Life and Wrongful Death of Gregg David Wenzel: Clandestine CIA Officer Star 81

Sharon Levy Siegel, editor (First Edition Design Publishing, 2021), 217 pages, photos.

Reviewed by Mike R.

Gregg Wenzel was a junior CIA case officer who died in a car accident in Ethiopia in 2003, just two years after joining CIA. Assigned for his first tour to Addis Ababa, he was killed, along with an Ethiopian passenger, when his car was struck by a vehicle that had swerved to avoid a dead horse in the road. Gregg was soon thereafter added to the CIA Memorial Wall—as the title's eponymous 81st star—honoring those individuals from or detailed to the agency who gave their lives in the service of their country. This act, however, would mark just the beginning of his family's fight for fuller recognition and remembrance of their son. This included an extended effort to publicly acknowledge him as a CIA officer; until that happened, the space next to his star in the Book of Honor would remain blank and his affiliation classified. It also led to efforts to commemorate him in the broader community and to lobby for changes that would assist other families who have lost loved ones serving with CIA. This book is both a testament to Gregg's life and a recounting of many of these separate endeavors.

The Life and Wrongful Death of Gregg David Wenzel: Clandestine CIA Officer Star 81 is an odd amalgam, unlike anything else that has come before it. Authors have written about CIA officers memorialized on the wall. Witness, for example, Kai Bird's *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames* about the legendary Middle East expert who perished in the 1983 bombing of the US embassy in Beirut. Ted Gup's *The Book of Honor: Covert Lives and Classified Deaths at the CIA* paid tribute to a wide assortment of these stories. Never before, however, have family members of the deceased been the driving force behind such a work, and the tale is as much that of parents fighting for the legacy of a child as it is of the child himself.

Gregg's father, Mitch, and late mother, Gladys, who died in 2020, loved their son and were proud of his service. Although their lives changed forever on July 9, 2003, when they learned of their son's passing, they channeled their adoration into an unremitting push to carry his memory forward. *Star 81* took shape in earnest in 2016 when a woman offered to take on this literary project on their behalf. She completed a draft in late 2020 but months later succumbed to complications from the COVID-19 virus. Her sister took over editorial duties and made finishing touches, listing her sibling and Gregg's parents all as co-authors. A true labor of love, their affections practically pour out of the pages.

The final product, however, is a bit ungainly, a collection of many different pieces that do not always flow in a linear narrative. At its core, though, it reads like a funeral program in a book's clothing or the collected postings from an electronic memoriam site. Besides telling Gregg's story, it includes chapters devoted to "Gregg's Poems" and "Gregg's Words to Live By," inspirational selections from authors like Robert Frost and Rudyard Kipling, and letter and journal excerpts from various family members. It is some 200 pages, but large font makes it an even quicker read, and it has a homemade, self-published feel.

Star 81's intensely personal character also gives it a degree of poignancy. Gregg's story is noteworthy enough, but the parents' efforts to make sense of what happened add considerably to the saga. As they try not just to understand but to have an impact on the insular world of intelligence—in David versus Goliath fashion, even writing letters to CIA directors and the president to press the US government to do right by their son—one feels for them.

It almost hurts to see that the parents' knowledge heading into this journey was skewed from the start, however. When Gregg was still learning his trade, he tried to see that they gained a flavor of his work via film and book recommendations, but these selections might only have made matters worse: "Mitch and Gladys also read books to learn more about what CIA officers were trained to do. A classmate of Gregg's told Mitch that Lindsay Moran, an earlier CIA graduate, wrote a book, *Blowing My Cover*, which described their training in detail." (100) Capitalizing on mystique at the expense of message, Moran's work makes for a jaunty read but would have

done little to boost substantive knowledge—and probably would only have served to steer them away from the truth. The Wenzel book reflects an outsider's difficulty in grasping the profession through repeated use of incorrect lingo—referring to CIA officers as "agents"—and via such claims as the CIA credo matching something taken from the Oliver Stone film about the fugitive unauthorized discloser of secrets, *Snowden:* "Secrecy is security and security is victory." (99)

The parents walk a fine line in their relationship with CIA and the intelligence world. Nothing brings people together like tragedy, and CIA embraced Mitch and Gladys upon Gregg's death; it hosted them at a memorial service soon afterward and regularly invited them to the annual ceremony for all of those remembered on the Memorial Wall. The parents make clear that they hold the agency in high esteem and have felt honored to be included. Yet they have also pushed against bureaucracy in their fight for their son, resulting in repeated references to perceived CIA foot-dragging in waiting to publicly recognize Gregg. That said, this concern gives way to acknowledgement at various points that CIA might have been holding on this action precisely to allow the parents to pursue a potential lawsuit in Ethiopia against the alleged offender. The parents also note the importance of allowing sufficient time to take measures to ensure that anyone who might have been dealing with Gregg in professional capacity does not come to harm based on his affiliation. Regardless of the reason for delay, once the parents decided that they had taken potential judicial action against the driver of the other vehicle as far as they could and were ready to move on, wheels moved quickly. In 2009, Gregg's CIA employment was acknowledged. His name was added to the Wall's accompanying Book of Honor, and he was celebrated publicly as a fallen CIA officer.

One issue that remains unclear is the degree to which the authors put stock in a contention that Gregg might have been murdered instead of being the victim of a random car accident. They revisit this theme numerous times in varying degrees of directness. At one point, the father expresses general concerns: "As Mitch once told *The New York Daily News*, he felt the circumstances surrounding Gregg's death were murky. What really transpired will always remain a mystery." (105) Later, one of the mother's more pointed diary entries is quoted: "They say your death was an accident. Either the whole story is true or there was a cover-up. I don't know if we will ever find the truth." (129) And elsewhere a friend from Ethiopia writes, "I have no doubt in my own mind…that Gregg was killed and it was no accident." (92)

The "wrongful death" allegation takes on bizarre and convoluted overtones when the parents discover a suspicious blog entry on the www.dailykos.com website, "Book of Honor: CIA Agent Killed in 2003 by Plame Leak?" It alleged that Gregg might have been caught up in the public outing by columnist Robert Novak—five days *after* Gregg's death—of Valerie Plame, a CIA officer under non-official cover. (168) Plame's husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, went to Africa in 2002 at CIA's request to investigate reports of Iraqi attempts to purchase uranium and found no such evidence. However, unhappy over President George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech in which he referred to these acquisition efforts, viewed by Wilson as providing impetus for the Iraq war, Wilson wrote an opinion article alleging that the administration had twisted intelligence to justify the invasion. His article appeared in *The New York Times* on July 6, 2003, three days *before* the Ethiopian incident.

Like many aspects of *Star 81*, readers are left to sort out for themselves what to make of the claims about Gregg's demise. The book has a tendency to sprinkle in curious tidbits seemingly at random and then move on to other topics. They often are uncorroborated and, as with the years-long effort to win public recognition for Gregg, can be contradictory. That said, they all help create an impression of the confusion and uncertainty that no doubt has been a major undercurrent in the parents' lives following the loss of their son.

Gregg is frequently portrayed as exemplifying the spirit of the post-9/11 CIA—a member of the agency's first class of clandestine service officers to graduate after the attack. While technically correct—the class graduated in December 2001—the terrorist events of September were not his motivation for joining, as he had already started with the CIA. His service naturally aligns with this most recent generation of recruits, but Gregg's story is bigger than that. His motivations were classic ones that have echoed throughout the ages. Then Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet cited an excerpt of Gregg's application at a memorial service in his honor the month after his passing: "First, without question, the opportunity to serve my country. Second, to live for a purpose greater than myself." (49)

Gregg had already demonstrated a commitment to public service through his work for several years as a public defender in Florida, and his strong Jewish upbringing instilled a similar ethos. A rabbi celebrated him in death as a "Truly righteous person in hiding," saying Gregg "did not announce all of his good deeds, he did things quietly." (97) Service above self, sacrificing glory for the good of others—those have been guiding principles for countless CIA veterans. In this sense, Gregg represents so many who came before him. However, the watershed moment of 9/11 created in many peoples' eyes a division between the old and new generations, and the subject of this book is that rare breed who transcends this barrier. In his enthusiasm and patriotism, he is emblematic of the post-9/11 influx of intelligence volunteers, even if preceding them in time slightly, but one could make a case for Gregg being a poster child for CIA writ large.

Just as public relations, advertising, and recruitment efforts need occasional refreshes, the book's publication in the run-up to CIA's 75th anniversary in 2022 might present an opportunity to reflect upon how to represent the CIA workforce in the modern public consciousness. Langley touts demographics, but statistics only say so much. Sometimes the public needs a more tangible connection. Far from a Yale pedigree traditionally associated with the agency's founding generation, Gregg attended the State University of New York at Binghamton and the University of Miami Law School, where he was at times an average student. His devout Jewish faith also flies in the face of lingering perceptions of a WASP-dominated culture at the CIA.

Physical attributes drive this message home as well. Gregg did not match Hollywood's version of a CIA officer. Making light of his "short and stocky" build, he called himself a "Coke machine." (73) But coworkers described him as the fittest person they knew. He was in fact a marathon runner and Ironman triathlete. In the Navy SEALs, it is not the biggest or strongest who necessarily makes it through the grueling training to don the famed trident. Many who become SEALs do not look the part on the outside; it is what is on the inside that matters. In this way, so, too, CIA employees might be indistinguishable from one's next-door neighbor.

Thanks to Mitch and Gladys's efforts, the reader learns how their son has already become an everyday hero in ways that have never occurred before for a CIA almnus. On top of a number of scholarships, awards, and runs established in Gregg's name, the book celebrates some unique recognitions in his hometown of Monroe, New York. In 2009, the year of his public acknowledgement on the CIA Memorial Wall, the town rechristened a street as "Gregg Wenzel Drive." Then in 2015, an Act of Congress renamed a local post office the "National Clandestine Service of the Central Intelligence Agency NCS Officer Gregg David Wenzel Memorial Post Office." This marked the first—and thus far only—time in US Postal Service history that a CIA officers's name was given to one of their facilities: just one out of more than 1,500 since Congress began the naming practice in 1967.

Most recently, in 2019, the Wenzels succeeded in yet another initiative many years in the making when Congress passed a law that broadened death benefits for CIA officers. Originally limited to those killed in hostile circumstances, such moneys also were payable only to dependents of the deceased. In situations like Gregg's where the official cause of death was an accident and the victim had no dependents, no benefits were distributed to the parents, and their case was not unique among surviving families of the deceased. The book ends by noting that on December 15, 2021—two years after the bill's passage and some 18 years after Gregg's death—CIA notified the father that the law was finally being implemented; the Wenzels and other afflicted families would now be entitled to these benefits.

In his life, Gregg was, in the words of someone who trained with him, "the spirit and soul of our class" – "a pillar of professionalism, patriotism, humor, friendship, and compassion." (83). He also challenged conventions. Having joined a profession in which subtlety and discretion are watchwords, he had a larger-than-life profile; a colleague described how he could be perceived in Ethiopia's capital as akin to "the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man in *Ghostbusters* thundering through Manhattan." (86) In death, Gregg has achieved a higher calling. Those who tell his story and honor his legacy have achieved that which CIA has long struggled to do. They have made the agency more accessible and real to a public long accustomed to it being out of reach and either nameless or known only via select sensationalized stories. *Star 81* and its protagonist are far from perfect – but this very imperfection and ordinariness are their strength and help humanize CIA and its workforce.

At the post office dedication, a rabbi drew comparisons between the Postal Service and the nation's defenders, including intelligence officers. He said they shared a dedication to mission and cited an advertisement that the Postal Service ran after 9/11 that rang of familiarity while speaking to the latest threats. In such words, more commonality might be found than many would admit. Centuries ago, long before the United States existed, European postal services were enmeshed in spying, secretly unsealing letters and reading codes on behalf of their monarchs. And the CIA, rather than a collection of James Bonds, is in reality staffed by dedicated faceless servants who carry out their duties in much the same spirit as the postal carriers:

> *We are mothers and fathers. And sons and daughters. Who every day go about our lives with duty, honor, and pride. And neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, nor the winds of change, nor a nation challenged, will stay us from the swift completion of our appointed rounds. Ever. (187)*

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