

Vernon Walters— Renaissance Man

In Memoriam

Henry R. Appelbaum



"An honest patriot of enormous talent, his was an exceptionally rich life of service to country and humanity. A natural leader; he rose to excellence in every profession he entered—soldier, intelligence officer, diplomat." —From a statement by DCI George J. Tenet, February 2002

Lieutenant General Vernon A. Walters—a bluff, jovial, astonishingly talented man who served from 1972 to 1976 as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence (DDCI)—died in Florida on 10 February 2002 at the age of 85. Walters' multi-faceted professional life included several interrelated careers. He was a fast-rising military officer; a respected intelligence expert; a savvy US ambassador; a globe-trotting presidential envoy; and an

accomplished author. Walters was also a gifted linguist and translator, talents that played an important role in his rise to prominence. And his friends knew him as a highly entertaining mimic and raconteur.

Early Years: Vernon Walters was born in New York City on 3 January 1917. His father was a British immigrant and insurance salesman. From age 6, young Vernon lived in Britain and France with his family. At 16, he returned to the United States and worked for his father as an insurance claims adjuster and investigator.

Education, Language Prowess: The future general's formal education beyond elementary school consisted entirely of a few years at Stonyhurst College, a 400-year-old Jesuit secondary school in Lancashire, England. He did not attend a university. In later years, he seemed to enjoy reflecting on the fact that he had risen fairly high and accomplished quite a bit despite a near-total lack of formal academic training.

Among his most remarkable achievements were mastering some six West European languages, learning the basics of several others, and later becoming fluent in Chinese and Russian. Throughout his professional life, Gen. Walters enjoyed drawing a crowd by engaging in impromptu cocktail-party linguistic "battles of wits" with other multi-lingual people. In one version, a person would engage two others in conversation. Each time a participant's turn came to respond, he or she had to speak in a different language. Apparently the game went on until only one of the participants had an unused language left in which to converse. Walters no doubt fared well in such encounters.

Military and Civilian Achievements: Walters joined the Army in 1941 and was soon commissioned. He served in Africa and Italy during World War II, earning medals for distinguished military and intelligence achievements. His linguistic skills helped him obtain prized post-war assignments as an aide and interpreter for several Presidents:

- He was at President Truman's side as an interpreter in key meetings with America's Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin American allies.
- His language skills helped him win Truman's confidence, and he accompanied the President to the Pacific in the early 1950s, serving as a key aide in Truman's unsuccessful effort to reach a reconciliation with an insubordinate Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the Commander of United Nations forces in Korea.

- In Europe in the 1950s, Walters served President Eisenhower and other top US officials as a translator and aide at a series of NATO summit conferences. He also worked in Paris at Marshall Plan headquarters and helped set up the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe.
- He was with then-Vice President Nixon in 1958 when an anti-American crowd stoned their car in Caracas, Venezuela. Gen. Walters suffered facial cuts from flying glass. (The Vice President managed to avoid injury.)
- His simultaneous translation of a speech by Nixon in France prompted President Charles de Gaulle to say to the US President, "Nixon, you gave a magnificent speech, but your interpreter was eloquent."

Diplomat and Special Envoy: In the 1960s, Gen. Walters served as a US military attaché in France, Italy, and Brazil. Two decades later he was a high-profile US Ambassador to the UN and then to West Germany. He also served as a roving ambassador, performing sensitive diplomatic missions that included talks in Cuba, Syria, and elsewhere. He was sent to Morocco to meet discreetly with PLO officials and warn them against any repetition of the 1973 murders of two American diplomats in the region. (In a much earlier visit to Morocco, he had given a ride on a tank to a young boy who later became King Hassan II.)

While serving as a military attaché in Paris from 1967 to 1972, Walters played a role in secret peace talks with North Vietnam. He arranged to "smuggle" National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger into France for secret meetings with a senior North Vietnamese official, and then smuggle him out again. He accomplished this by borrowing a private airplane from an old friend, French President Georges Pompidou.

Senior Intelligence Official: President Nixon appointed Gen. Walters as DDCI in 1972. (The General also served as Acting DCI for two months in mid-1973.) During his four years as DDCI, he worked closely with four successive Directors as the Agency—and the nation—confronted such major international developments as the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the subsequent oil crisis, the turbulent end of the Vietnam conflict, and the Chilean military coup against the Allende government. According to a close colleague, Gen. Walters also "averted a looming catastrophe" for the CIA in connection with the Watergate scandal:

Despite numerous importunings from on high, [Walters] flatly refused to...cast a cloak of "national security" over the guilty parties. At the critical moment, he...refused to involve the Agency, and bluntly informed the highest levels of the executive [branch] that further insistence from that quarter would result in his

immediate resignation. And the rest is history.

Gen. Walters himself reflected on those challenging days in his 1978 autobiography, *Silent Missions*:

I told [President Nixon's White House counsel] that on the day I went to work at the CIA I had hung on the wall of my office a color photograph showing the view through the window of my home in Florida...When people asked me what it was, I told them [this] was what was waiting [for me] if anyone squeezed me too hard.

Later Life: During the 1990s, when he was no longer a public servant, Gen. Walters worked as a business consultant and was active on the lecture circuit. He wrote another notable book, *The Mighty and the Meek* (published in 2001), which profiled famous people with whom he had worked during his eventful life.

This tribute was drafted by **Henry R. Appelbaum**, an editor at the Center for the Study of Intelligence. He drew on a conversation he had with Gen. Walters in 2001; the recollections of an associate of Walters; a debriefing after one of the General's sensitive diplomatic missions in the 1980s; and open-source US government and media reports.

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