



i, spy

With James Bond celebrating 50 years, and *Skyfall* proving a blockbuster hit, the life of a secret agent seems like a glamorous affair, but what's it really like to work as a double agent? Former MI5 officer turned intelligence whistleblower, *Annie Machon* reveals the truth about life as a spy, admitting it's much harder for women...

“Oh no, it's MI5!” I said aloud as I opened the letter on a sunny May morning in 1990. I admit it was a strange response, especially as the letter was innocuous enough.

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It was on Ministry of Defence notepaper, and was responding to my application to join the British Foreign Office. It simply read: "There may be other jobs you would find more interesting."

Nothing more, except a telephone number to call – certainly no hint of espionage.

To this day I do not understand why I instinctively knew. I had no interest in the spy game, indeed in the prior decade MI5 had been involved in a number of unsavoury scandals and I would certainly not have accepted the invitation. However, my father

was in the room when I uttered the words; and he was not only a spy buff, he was also a journalist. Inevitably he encouraged me to phone the number to see if my suspicions were correct.

Two months later, I began my journey into the world of British intelligence, followed by a rapid exit as a whistleblower six years later.

It began blandly enough, in an unmarked and empty building in central London. I was interviewed for three hours by a 30-something-year-old woman with waist-length hair and a floaty skirt. She asked all sorts of question about my life from the age of 12. The interview covered various topics including education, politics, ethics and religion. About half way through I was asked why I thought I was there. Feeling somewhat foolish, I mumbled: "Hmm, are you MI5?" >

My hippy-chick interviewer smiled and thrust a piece of paper towards me, asking that I sign a notification of the rigorous terms of the Official Secrets Act. If I refused the interview would be terminated.

Thoroughly intrigued, I signed and the interview continued. I was called back to attend an intensive two-day course, and then onwards through a final selection board. At all times MI5 was at pains to say that they obeyed the law under the terms of the 1989 Security Service Act, that they had been misrepresented in the media and they were looking for a new generation of counter-terrorism officers, rather than people to work against the old Cold War and political targets.

I was warned at the first interview that I could not speak to anyone beyond my immediate family about my recruitment, and only then in the broadest of terms. So began the process of insulation from my old life. Friends knew that I was going to interviews in London, but I could tell them no more than "it's the Ministry of Defence".

The secrecy eased up briefly when I went through Developed Vetting – the highest level of security clearance. It's an intensive and invasive process: I had to nominate four friends from different phases of my life who were interviewed by MI5; they then had to nominate more people, and so the ripples of speculation spread. At least I no longer had to pretend I was applying to join the routine civil service. Left-wing friends disapproved, as MI5 was still

trailing a pungent reputation. Others were merely annoyed that I had kept my new life from them.

I eventually walked into MI5 to begin work in January 1991. I had no idea what to expect, other than my officer grade and salary. It soon became apparent that the work was the antithesis of the glamorous myth of James Bond. Rather than swanning around casinos drinking martinis, we were generally desk-bound, although did occasionally find ourselves at an office party clutching a plastic cup of cheap plonk.

So what does the work actually involve? As an intelligence officer you're assigned a target to investigate – be it a political group, a terrorist organisation or a country that sponsors terrorism. To investigate your targets you use both open-source material and more secretive techniques. The most well-known of those are communications intercept (SIGINT), the infiltration of agents into groups to report back (HUMINT) and physical surveillance. Running a successful operation requires sound judgment, team-working skills, coordinating secret investigative resources across many departments and building strong inter-agency liaison relationships.

My first few weeks within the service were surreal. I was sitting behind a desk, managing a team of people, but the material we were processing was coming from secret and invasive sources. Yet within a matter of weeks it became normal to be reading such product and monitoring private telephone conversations or the movements and meetings of people. Even more surreal would be travelling to safe houses to meet and debrief agents who had infiltrated target groups. I never knew their real names, nor did they know mine, but we would be discussing the intimate details of the lives and work of other people.

As I became more immersed in the secret world, it became harder to maintain old friendships, and I increasingly began to socialise with my colleagues. We all did. With outsiders we always had to be on our guard, but if it was only people from the 'office' at a dinner party, we could be ourselves, talk shop and have a good moan. Inevitably more than friendships developed: it was during my first posting that I met my former partner,

David Shayler, who in the late 1990s became a notorious whistleblower about the crimes and incompetence of the British spy agencies.

MI5 states that it is an equal opportunities employer, with half its staff women. Plus it has had two female Director Generals in the last two decades. However, this rosy image can be slightly misleading – most female staff are clerical and support workers. Female officers who choose to have a family are

given support and flexi-time, but the need to juggle childcare obligations often means they miss out on the career-making posts such as agent running or operational planning. These roles require availability 24/7. Also, the old double standard can still apply – one office couple were caught in an amorous embrace in the office, not once but twice. The male officer was put on "gardening leave" for six months. The woman was sacked.

Personal security also ensures that there is a constant barrier between you and the normal world. If you meet someone interesting at a party, you cannot talk about what you do, and such reticence can appear off-putting. The cover story that MI5 officers use is that they work as civil servants at the Ministry of Defence; for MI6, it is the Foreign Office. This usually stops people from asking too much more, either through discretion or, frankly, ➤

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boredom. Once or twice, people have pushed me for more information, and immediately paranoia kicked in: why are they so interested? Were they spies, or even journalists?

As an intelligence officer, you quickly learn to be discreet on the telephone and in emails. Oblique conversations soon become the norm, and this bleeds into your personal life too, much to the frustration of friends and family.

Within MI5 officers move on to another area of work every two years. I had three postings during my time there: F2, the old, counter-subversion section that was a hangover from the Cold War and which I helped shut down; T5, investigating Irish terrorist logistics; and G3, investigating international terrorism.

In all these postings I, my partner and other recruits of our

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generation could see increasing problems with the clash of the older staff with the new. Perhaps this issue afflicts many organisations, but in MI5 in the 1990s it had disastrous consequences.

In 1989 MI5 had been put on a legal footing for the first time in its then 80-year history. Many older officers had trouble adjusting to the new legal requirements – they had matured in an era when the spies could “bug and burgle their way around London with impunity,” to quote famous 1980s whistleblower, and author of *Spycatcher*, Peter Wright.

Secondly, the focus of work had shifted: the older staff had cut their teeth on subversive and counter-espionage targets, which tended to be slower-moving and focused on gathering as much intelligence as possible – the old “knowledge is power” approach. However, our new generation was specifically recruited to investigate fast-paced terrorist targets, gather

evidence and put suspects on trial in front of a jury.

The senior officers had trouble breaking out of their Cold War mindset, responding quickly – and legally – to such threats, and running effective operations to gather the requisite evidence. Many counter-terrorism successes occurred during those years despite, rather than because of, the older officers. And when operations went wrong management’s knee-jerk response was to hide the evidence, learn nothing and lie to government.

Many of us had problems with this and resigned in disgust. David Shayler wanted to do more though. He had been specifically briefed about an MI6-funded plot to assassinate Colonel Gaddafi in 1996, using Islamic extremist proxies. The attack was illegal under UK law, it went wrong and innocent people died. He could not think of anything more heinous and felt moved to go public.

He blew the whistle in the summer of 1997. As a result we had to go on the run. We headed to Europe, using the knowledge we had acquired in MI5 to avoid detection. This was far more James Bond-like than the actual work we ever did.

We lived in hiding for a year in a remote French farmhouse, and in exile in Paris for an additional two years. Shayler went to prison not once, but twice: first when he was imprisoned in Paris in 1998, as the British government tried and failed to extradite him to the UK; second after he had returned voluntarily to the UK in 2000 to stand trial for a breach of the Official Secrets Act.

Inevitably he was found guilty for reporting the crimes of the British spy community. Those who commissioned the

crimes were never even arrested. Ironically, during the NATO-backed coup in Libya last year, MI6 provided assistance to the very same groups to topple Gaddafi – except this time they did it openly and there was no outcry.

As a whistleblower, you not only lose your career and livelihood, but a whole way of life. After Shayler went public, everyone in MI5 was threatened with prosecution if they talked to us. Despite this, some were brave enough to stay in contact, and one former colleague also went public in our support.

That said, it became difficult to trust anyone except each other – we knew our communications were intercepted, our home was bugged and some of our friends reported back on us. The years of pressure and paranoia eventually took their toll, and David Shayler and I separated in 2006.

The MI5 whistleblowing years seem distant now. But what I learned then continues to inform my thinking, work and life. I now speak and write about a whole range of interconnected subjects such as civil liberties, the use and abuse of intelligence, the control of the media, digital freedoms and secure communications, and human rights. Having worked on the inside and then been on the receiving end of an intelligence vendetta, these basic freedoms have become ever more precious to me.

Looking back, it seems the common thread in my life has always been to try to make a difference, be it as an intelligence officer, a whistleblower, and now a campaigner and writer. I have been called naïvely idealistic in each of these phases of my life by different segments of society.

I can live with that. ■