

THE PHELPS DOSSIER

By John A. Small

MEMORANDUM TO: Win Scott Eckert, Chief Historian, New Wold Newton
Meteoritics Society
FROM: John A. Small, Executive Director, Small Talk Institute For Apocalyptic
Investigations
DATE: 9 June 2004
SUBJECT: IMF Agent James Phelps (deceased)
ENCLOSURE: One (1) copy of STIAI Report #06011963

Dear Win:

Although I have been advised against doing so by several mutual colleagues who have expressed concerns over possible public reaction, I have taken the liberty of forwarding to you a copy of my report regarding the fate of Jim Phelps. As stated during our previous conversations, this report was prepared at the request of certain high-ranking government officials who feel that the potential of political fallout is greatly outweighed by history's right to the truth.

It should be noted that some of the information contained in this report has been gleaned from various documents which, as of this writing, have not been officially declassified. These were made available to me by those aforementioned mutual colleagues, who in doing so have placed their careers - and quite possibly their lives - in peril. It is my fervent hope that history will ultimately judge their actions in this regard to have been for the greater good.

I trust you will see to the public dissemination of this material in your usual fashion. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,
John A. Small

SMALL TALK INSTITUTE FOR APOCALYPTIC INVESTIGATIONS
REPORT #06011963
SUBJECT: IMF AGENT JAMES PHELPS (deceased)

A. INTRODUCTION

It has become one of the most hotly debated topics in the annals of American espionage: the final fate of one Jim Phelps, co-founder and one-time leader of that elite branch of the Central Intelligence Agency known as the Impossible Missions Force (IMF).

Specifically: Did Jim Phelps truly, as has been reported, truly become a rogue agent? Did he turn his back on the ideals of his early years and betray both the unit he had helped to create and the nation he had loyally served for so many years?

Or - as has been suggested by some - was the man who died in that railway tunnel connecting England and France a plant, a doppelganger working for some rogue nation or organization who had somehow managed to infiltrate the IMF and impersonate its leader? [1]

This latter theory has been advanced by so many of Phelps' former comrades and supporters in recent years that a number of historians and officials have come to regard it as gospel. In their zeal to preserve the reputation of one of our country's best counterintelligence operatives - and with it, perhaps, the very concept of America's "moral authority" - they would rather foster the belief that this very same counterintelligence operative could have been captured, quite possibly killed, and replaced by a look-alike, than accept that said agent could have - of his own accord - turned traitor.

It is a patriotic point of view with which this writer is not entirely unsympathetic. However, as will be shown, available evidence would appear to disprove such speculation. Based on this evidence, this writer can only conclude that - for reasons which may never be fully known to us, although some of those reasons are discussed herein - Jim Phelps did indeed betray the IMF and the United States, and in doing so set in motion the chain of events which ultimately cost him his life.

It is not the purpose of this report to judge Jim Phelps. The information contained herein is being presented to the perusal of an enlightened public in the hopes of enhancing and illuminating the historical record. Before doing so, however, it is necessary at this time to briefly review the origins of the Impossible Missions Force.

B. THE CREATION OF THE IMF

The agency that came to be known as the Impossible Missions Force actually had its genesis in a Special Forces team founded in the 1950s and headed by Lt. Col. Daniel David Briggs. During the period ranging from the final months of the Korean War to shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, this special team undertook a variety of hazardous classified missions; due to the nature of those missions, the official military policy was to disavow any knowledge of the team's activities. [2]

Shortly after the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Briggs left the military and went to work for the Central Intelligence Agency; it was here that he made the acquaintance of fellow agent Jim Phelps, who had learned of the existence of Briggs' Special Forces squadron and soon enlisted Briggs' assistance in launching a similar unit within the Agency. [3] In the beginning Phelps oversaw IMF operations from the CIA's

headquarters in Langley, Virginia, where his duties included the recruitment of IMF field agents and determining what possible missions might best be suited to the IMF's special abilities, and was answerable to only the CIA director, the Secretary of Defense and the President himself. As the unit's field supervisor, Briggs was granted the authority to accept or reject any missions offered to the IMF for consideration; he was also given the responsibility of overseeing the planning of those missions, and selecting which agents would be best suited to a particular assignment.

Among the first agents to be recruited to the new team of operatives were two men who had served under Briggs in his Special Forces unit: Barney Collier, an engineer, electrician and ballistics expert; and Willy Armitage, a former Olympic weightlifter who, upon leaving the military, had found work as a circus strongman. [4] They were joined by master of disguise Rollin Hand and actress/model Cinnamon Carter, whose individual talents proved invaluable to the IMF on countless occasions. This group, along with Briggs, was the original core group - the "A Team," if you will - of the IMF; they were aided and abetted by a number of additional special agents over the years, and as time went on and the IMF went through a number of alterations (which will be discussed more fully later) they were eventually succeeded by other agents, including Collier's own son Grant and a young CIA agent named Ethan Hunt.

The senior CIA officials who entrusted all manner of special assignments to this unit considered the IMF little more than a sort of "suicide squad" - a team of ingenious daredevils, con artists and saboteurs who specialized in solving apparently unsolvable problems that other government agencies would not (or could not) dare to tackle. [5] The unit was aptly named, and while the CIA brass came to view the IMF's successes with a certain degree of pride, there was never any doubt that they had for all practical purposes written off the lives of the team's agents as soon as they were recruited. It was the mission that mattered, not the individuals; nobody ever tried to hide this, and more than one agent captured or killed over the years found themselves disavowed by the government they had served as a consequence.

One of those agents, apparently, was none other than Dan Briggs himself, who died under circumstances which to this day have never been revealed. [6] Rather than recruit a new field supervisor or promote from within, Phelps opted to assume Briggs' former duties personally. It was a position he would hold throughout the remainder of the 1960s and into the 1970s - when events played out on the public stage would have a deep and profound impact upon this most secretive of intelligence units, and possibly plant the seeds for Jim Phelps' eventual fall from grace.

C. SEEDS OF CHANGE

On June 17, 1972, five burglars were arrested for breaking into Democratic Party Headquarters located in the Watergate apartment and office complex in Washington D.C. The fallout from that break-in - the culmination of a sequence of political dirty tricks that had commenced in the fall of 1971 - mushroomed into a major political scandal

which the media came to call the "Watergate Affair."

The scandal would have far-reaching consequences. It ended the presidency of Richard M. Nixon, who on Aug. 9, 1974, became the first U.S. President to resign in disgrace. It resulted in prison sentences for a number of high-ranking members of Nixon's administration, who were convicted for their various roles in using unconstitutional, illegal, and illegitimate means to achieve the administration's ends.

Caught up in the backlash created by the scandal were Jim Phelps and the Impossible Missions Force – a government-sanctioned group of saboteurs authorized to lie, cheat, steal, falsify media, hold persons illegally, falsely incriminate, destroy the property of innocent people, kidnap, plot (though never personally execute) assassinations, and otherwise break any civil or criminal law that stood in the way of completing any given mission. [7] The IMF's existence - a well-guarded secret to this point – soon became a matter of public record and Jim Phelps, as its leader, was made a scapegoat by an America that had grown weary of government deception. The IMF was disbanded and Phelps was indicted on a variety of charges - including conspiracy, burglary, wiretapping and refusing to testify before a Congressional committee - and given a six-year sentence in a federal penitentiary. [8]

Shortly after his release from prison in 1980, Phelps consented to be interviewed by a television reporter named Rick Burns. Phelps would later say that he had hoped to use the interview as a means of justifying the IMF's actions over the years; but Burns proved a hostile interviewer, at one point referring to Phelps as "the last of the Watergate era." The resulting exchange, transcribed here, is still considered by many to be one of the most dramatic in the history of television news:

Phelps: It was different times. We did things for our country that, today, seem sort of radical. Everything I did - everything the IMF did - I believed was for the good of the country.

Burns: But you were violating people's civil rights, and intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries.

Phelps: I thought what I was doing had to be done, for the good of the country. [9]

Disillusioned and angry, Phelps nevertheless reluctantly agreed to aid the CIA in apprehending a rogue agent by the name of John Victor. Phelps managed to persuade Collier, Hand, and Carter in assisting him and a team of younger CIA agents; together they defeated the plans of Victor, who had masterminded the theft of an historical artifact from the Smithsonian Institute as part of a larger plot which endangered Sino-American relations. [10]

In gratitude for their services, the CIA created an all-new IMF and enlisted the services of Phelps and his former agents to act as consultants. Hand and Carter apparently rejected

the offer, but Collier agreed to stay on and help his old friend. Both men quickly became disillusioned, however, as they found this new IMF's activities hampered by exactly the kind of bureaucratic red tape the original team had been created to sidestep. In an angry exchange with some of his superiors within the CIA, Phelps is said to have referred to the recreated IMF as "a ponderous think tank" loaded with "accountants and attorneys and PhD candidates." [11]

Apparently some of those superiors agreed with Phelps' assessment of the situation. Phelps and Collier were given quiet approval to train a new team of covert operatives which would operate very much as the original IMF had. According to recently declassified documents, this new team was first pressed into service after the CIA learned of a terrorist plot involving the threatened detonation of a neutron bomb. [12]

Collier and Phelps both retired a few years after this, following a mission to rescue a kidnapped nuclear scientist and his family from a group of Middle Eastern terrorists. [13] A Phelps protégé, Tom Copperfield, was named as the IMF's new field supervisor, and Barney Collier's son Grant was recruited to take his father's place as the team's resident engineer and electronics expert. Several operational changes were instituted during Copperfield's short-lived tenure - one of the most important being the creation of multiple IMF teams, which allowed for the handling of multiple assignments at once. [14] It was a change that Phelps had always fought against during the early years of the IMF.

Phelps' retirement was destined to be a short one – he was pressed back into service to assist the IMF in capturing the assassin who had murdered Copperfield, and at the conclusion of that mission agreed to make his return a permanent one. [15] Not long after this mission, Phelps enlisted his new team of agents to assist in rescuing Barney Collier from a prison in Istanbul after Collier was framed for murder while visiting that country. [16]

Quite unbeknownst to all but a very few even within the U.S. government, the IMF had regained its status as the most effective team of clandestine operatives of the post-World War II period. But once again events beyond Phelps' control conspired to undo whatever good he had accomplished.

D. FALL FROM GRACE

The FBI's apprehension of Aldrich Ames in 1994 led to perhaps the most damaging scandal in the CIA's turbulent history. Ames, a career CIA official, was arrested in February 1994 after spying for the Soviets - and later the post-USSR Russian government – for nine years from inside the CIA. He was later sentenced to life in prison.

Public and Congressional reaction - which focused primarily upon the failure of the CIA itself to detect Ames' duplicity for almost a decade - was harshly critical of the Agency. If the spy agency couldn't even detect such activities among its own staff, critics asked, how could it be effective in the rest of the world?

In the CIA's final damage assessment of the Ames scandal, formally presented to Congress in late 1995, the agency determined that Ames' betrayal was far more devastating to American intelligence than had previously been reported. More than 100 agents or potential agents - Russians recruited by the CIA to spy for the United States - were betrayed by Ames; many of them were turned into double agents by the KGB, feeding disinformation back to the CIA. What was worse, some midlevel CIA officials knew that their agents inside Russia had been doubled - and still passed on their information to the president and other policymakers. Leaders of the House and Senate intelligence committees agreed that this was by far the most explosive allegation to emerge from the damage assessment. [17]

Coupled with the radically altered international environment of the post-Cold War era, the Ames scandal prompted the most thorough review of U.S. intelligence needs since the CIA's founding. That review led to changes throughout the Agency, including the IMF; though not disbanded as it had been in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the IMF was stripped of its relative autonomy and placed under the direct supervision of Eugene Kittridge, a career CIA man who was given the assignment of "cleaning up" the CIA's covert operations. Kittridge allowed Phelps to continue as the IMF's field supervisor, and even allowed Phelps to retain the right to turn down any assignment he felt uncomfortable with. But Kittridge assumed operational oversight of all IMF operations - an arrangement which did not sit well with Phelps, who undoubtedly still harbored some resentment over having been treated as something of a patsy in the fallout from Watergate. [18]

It was during this period that Phelps met the woman he would eventually marry. Jim and Claire Phelps met when he recruited her from Interpol to assist with an IMF sting operation against a Libyan arms dealer. This meeting marked another turning point in Phelps' life; although he had formed several close professional relationships among certain IMF agents over the years, and had forged a personal friendship with Barney Collier, he had for the most part managed to avoid entanglements of a more personal nature. Maintaining such distance became especially important to Phelps following the deaths of his protégé Copperfield and, a short time later, of Casey Randall, a young agent Phelps would admit to having come to regard as being like a daughter to him. [19]

But his advancing years, his frustration with Kittridge's role as his new "boss," and a growing feeling that his own dedication to the IMF had resulted in an empty life, apparently combined to create a change in his attitude about such things. The ordinarily aloof Phelps began to develop feelings for Claire; by the time he had been able to admit to himself that he had fallen in love with her, she had grown to reciprocate his feelings. They were eventually married in Belize. [20]

Claire continued to work with her husband even after their marriage, and she was apparently instrumental in helping Phelps to recruit an idealistic young CIA agent named Ethan Hunt to the IMF. The trio soon formed a strong professional and personal bond - but the aging Phelps apparently had difficulty accepting the friendship between his wife

and Hunt, who was much closer to Claire's own age than was Phelps himself. This nagging sense of jealousy may have been just one more element which helped to eventually push Jim Phelps over the edge. [21]

It is important at this point to consider the man Jim Phelps had been, and to compare him to the man he had become. A veteran of the Korean War who worked briefly for Pan Am Airlines prior to being recruited by the CIA [22], the young Phelps had been an idealistic patriot who believed that the end always justified the means. The passing years had gradually eroded this youthful idealism; certainly his imprisonment - the unexpected fallout from the Watergate scandal - had left him embittered and angry, feelings that his subsequent returns to a drastically different IMF had done little to alleviate. And after a lifetime of avoiding personal relationships, he had allowed himself to fall in love and marry a fellow agent; however, any happiness he might have derived from this union was tainted by his feelings of jealousy over his young wife's relationship with another agent closer to her own age.

By any reckoning, Jim Phelps was a much angrier man during the final years of his life than he had been early in his career. And it was this anger and disillusionment which no doubt ultimately led Jim Phelps to turn his back on what he had been, and on the sense of right and justice he had spent so many years nurturing and protecting.

Just what it was that finally transformed this man from loyal American to rogue agent remains a matter of conjecture. It is known that he had openly complained about changes in his profession, brought about by the end of the Cold War; former colleagues would later recall hearing Phelps refer to himself as "an obsolete piece of hardware not worth upgrading." [23] Perhaps he simply felt the world owed him something for the years he had devoted to the service of his country - years he apparently now considered to have been a waste.

The particulars of the mission which culminated in both the revelation of Phelps' betrayal and the deaths of Phelps and his wife are still, for the most part, classified for security reasons. What is known is that Phelps apparently allied himself with an illegal arms dealer who operated under the code name "Max," and that the pair had concocted a scheme in which Phelps would receive a substantial monetary payment in exchange for the delivery of certain classified information. He persuaded Claire to assist him, and the plot apparently involved efforts to incriminate both Kittridge and Hunt - both of whom Phelps had come to resent personally, and whom the aging Cold Warrior had come to view as the personifications of his own perceived obsolescence - but both he and Clair ultimately lost their lives in the ensuing confrontation with Hunt. [24]

It was a tragic ending to an illustrious career.

E. CONCLUSION

The best of men are but men at best; it is an unfortunate fact of human nature that good

men – for reasons that often cannot be explained or understood - sometimes go bad. For some all it takes to push them into the dark is a gentle nudge; others may struggle for years, waging a private battle against all manner of frustrations and disappointments, until their weary spirits can finally withstand no more.

Clearly - and tragically - Jim Phelps falls into this latter category. But to accept and acknowledge the circumstances that led to Phelps' fall from grace in no way negates the good he accomplished over a long career of service to his country. Although history may never fully record the role he and his agents played in so many of the most important events of the latter half of the 20th century, there can be no denying that Jim Phelps was, for all but the very end of his career, a patriot in the truest sense of the word. And it is with a certain sense of optimism that some of us choose to recall the patriot that he was, in the hopes that the good man he had been will continue to inspire those good men and women who serve after him.

"The world," former IMF agent Cinnamon Carter once remarked, "is rarely what it seems to be... A little paranoia can be very useful sometimes." [25] Jim Phelps made a career out of exploiting the paranoia of evil men for the greater good; the tragedy of his life is that, in the end, this good man became as much a victim of paranoia as those he had brought to justice.

END NOTES

[1] The debate over whether the rogue Jim Phelps portrayed by Jon Voight in the film version of "Mission: Impossible" was the same character played for so many years by Peter Graves in the original television series was a real one. Graves himself had a lot to do with this, having angrily denounced the film and what it did to his character when the movie was originally released in 1996. Some fans of the series (including several of my fellow members of the NWNMS) later put forth the "doppelganger" theory - a standard plot device in espionage literature and films - as a means of explaining Phelps' apparent turn to evil; although the original Phelps character had been one of my childhood heroes, I felt this was too easy an explanation. It was this debate which eventually prompted my decision to research and write this article.

[2] This description comes from an early treatment for the series written by "MI" creator Bruce Geller. At this point the series was scheduled to have been titled "Briggs' Squad," after the lead character. In this original treatment this character was known as Lt. Col. David Briggs; in the final version of the series that was sold to CBS, Briggs' first name was changed from David to Dan and his squad was changed from a special military unit to a team of secret agents.

[3] Peter Barsocchini's novelization of the film version of "MI," published in 1996 by Pocket Books, states that Jim Phelps was "a former government operative" who "decided to run his own show by starting the IMF." (Barsocchini, pg. 21) On the original series, the character of Briggs was written out of the show after the actor who played him,

Steven Hill, was fired at the end of the first season and replaced by Peter Graves as Phelps.

[4] The characters of Barney Collier and Willy Armitage were the only members of the Briggs/Phelps IMF team who had been originally included in Geller's original treatment for "Briggs' Squad."

[5] This description of the team is adapted from a paragraph contained in the first chapter of the original "MI" novel by John Tiger, published in 1967 by Popular Library as the first in a series of tie-ins with the TV series. (Tiger, pg. 9)

[6] Briggs' death is a matter of conjecture on my part, as a means of explaining the TV producers' decision to replace Briggs with Phelps. On the series the change was made with no explanation whatsoever as to what might have happened to Briggs.

[7] This description of the IMF's activities is taken from Patrick White's "The Complete Mission: Impossible Dossier," an excellent 1991 book detailing the series' history. I keep hoping White will release an updated edition including the movies, but to date no such edition has been released to my knowledge.

[8] This situation would have been depicted in a planned - but never produced - TV reunion movie entitled "Mission: Impossible 1980," written by George Schneck and discussed in White's book. The script opens with Phelps' release from prison following his six-year sentence.

[9] This exchange between Phelps and Burns is taken verbatim from Schneck's unproduced script, as reported in White's book.

[10] This is a slightly altered retelling of the main plot of Schneck's script. In the film, John Victor would have been revealed to have been the unseen voice on the self-destructing taped messages Phelps had received for all those years; this plot point proved a primary factor in the decision not to make the telefilm, according to White.

[11] These lines are taken from Harold Livingston's teleplay for "Mission: Impossible 1981," a second attempt at a reunion TV-movie which Paramount commissioned after rejecting Schneck's script. Ultimately Livingston's version was likewise never produced.

[12] This constitutes the major plot of Livingston's teleplay.

[13] This, in essence, was the plot of a script by Sy Salkowitz entitled "Good Morning, Mr. Phelps," Paramount's initial (and ultimately rejected) attempt to bring "MI" to the big screen in the mid-1980s. Unlike the earlier planned TV reunion movies, this project had been ready to be filmed before being scuttled by a change in studio brass.

[14] The existence of multiple IMF teams was first revealed in "The Golden Serpent," a two-part episode of the 1988 "MI" revival series. Multiple teams were also shown to be

standard procedure in the first "MI" theatrical film in 1996.

[15] Phelps' retirement and the murder of Tom Copperfield were plot points of the premiere episode of ABC-TV's "MI" revival in 1988.

[16] As shown in "The Condemned," a 1988 episode of ABC's "MI" revival.

[17] - As reported by Los Angeles Times reporter James Risen in a newspaper story published on Nov. 1, 1995. Though I have no proof, I can't help thinking that the Aldrich Ames affair may have helped to influence the producers of the first "MI" theatrical film to portray Jim Phelps as a traitor.

[18] - The character of Eugene Kittridge was introduced in the 1996 "MI" theatrical film; the explanation of how Kittridge came to head the IMF is derived from Barsocchini's novelization of the film.

[19] The death of IMF Agent Casey Randall was depicted in "The Fortune," episode 12 of the 1988 "MI" revival.

[20] As explained in Barsocchini's novelization.

[21] This, again, is taken from Barsocchini's novelization. Barsocchini indicates that Hunt had been a member of the IMF prior to Phelps' first meeting with Claire, but it is my opinion that Claire's membership actually predates Hunt's and that she helped to recruit him.

[22] This bit of background was, according to Patrick White, actually developed by actor Peter Graves when he was hired to play the role of Phelps. It was never specifically mentioned in the series, which as a rule devoted very little attention to the personal lives of the IMF agents.

[23] This is a line uttered by the Phelps character in the 1996 "MI" theatrical film.

[24] This paragraph is a brief encapsulation of the storyline of the 1996 "MI" theatrical film.

[25] This quote is taken from a 1997 episode of the TV series "Diagnosis Murder," entitled "Discards," which featured an appearance by actress Barbara Bain reprising her "MI" role as Cinnamon Carter - the first time she had played the role since leaving "MI" at the end of its 1968-69 season. Some fans consider Cinnamon's appearance on "Diagnosis Murder" to have been a far more faithful sequel to the original series than either the 1988 TV revival or the subsequent Tom Cruise films in 1996 and 2000 - and we will not debate this profound wisdom at these proceedings.

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